

2004 New Zealand post Management Excellence Awards

Award Category: New Zealand Post Community Relationships Award

Project title: Get Involved

Project Background

This is the second year that the Auckland Regional Council (ARC) is sending rates directly to regional ratepayers as set out in the Local Government Act 2002. Last year's implementation of direct regional rating sparked widespread controversy and intensive media coverage.

The 2003 rating experience highlighted an overall lack of awareness and understanding by ratepayers of the ARC planning process as well as the misconceptions about regional rating in general and the policies the ARC had adopted. Collectively, it all contributed to intensive media coverage and public criticism of the ARC.

The "Get Involved" campaign, running along-side the formal Long Term Council Community Plan submission process, was an initiative that aimed to increase public participation in Local Government decision-making, as well as to raise the overall awareness of the ways that the public has the ability to influence decisions that impact them. The Long Term Council Community Plan 2004-2014 (LTCCP) was communicated as the ARC's Draft Regional Community Plan. The campaign was designed to highlight key issues and provide a platform for the people of the Auckland region to have their say about regional rates.

The Campaign

The campaign faced considerable challenges with 456,000 ratepayers and 1.3 million people across 4 cities and 3 districts. Not to mention that in the same time period all the Territorial Authorities in the region were going to the public with their own draft plans and encouraging participation.

The goals of the campaign were:

- 1) To gain positive public participation in local government decision making – specifically regional rates.
- 2) To inform the public about the planning process.
- 3) To provide easy ways for the public to communicate their view.

The main communication channels were:

- 1) **Print:** The April 2004 issue of Regionwide (the ARC's regional publication sent to 450,000 households inserted in local newspapers), was dedicated to explaining the various rating issues and options proposed for this year in addition to outlining the formal submission process. The publication also provided a questionnaire for people to fill out and return freepost (Appendix 1).
- 2) **Web:** A dedicated web site (www.getinvolved.co.nz) with an online version of the questionnaire in Regionwide.
- 3) **Phone:** A call centre providing the opportunity for people to communicate their responses.
- 4) **Advertising:** Concentrated advertising, coinciding with the delivery of Regionwide and the release of the draft plan, encouraged people to take part in local government decision-making by filling in the questionnaire, with the message: '*The ARC draft Regional Community Plan will affect your rates. Give us your point of view*'. The advertising consisted of:
 - Radio advertisements.
 - TV commercials
 - Newspaper advertisements

- Bus stop and bus posters (Appendix 2).
 - Posters in community centers and libraries
- 5) **Face to Face:** Public meetings in each Territorial Authority in the region. Meetings were to inform and encourage participation through the survey and formal submissions.
- 6) **Media Relations:** Regular communication and contact with the media was key to the campaign.

The Need and Expected Benefits of the Project and How it Furthered the Council’s Vision and Strategic Direction:

The Local Government Act 2002 set the framework for encouraging public participation in decision-making. The “Get Involved” campaign worked to position the ARC as a listening agency, and to move the ARC towards a more participatory democracy.

The ARC has a mission of “Working in partnership with our regional community to achieve social, economic, cultural and environmental well being”, and has a resulting vision of “The Auckland Region - a great place to live” . “Get Involved” invited and created positive community participation in the decision-making process (via submissions and comments on the draft plan) for the region. The campaign allowed the ARC to reach the diverse macro-audience of the region, informing Aucklanders that they can be involved in the decisions that impact on and effect their daily lives and the region as a whole.

With traditionally a relatively low participation rate in formal processes the expected benefits of the “Get Involved” campaign were:

- An easier way for people to participate
- A more democratic process
- Wider influence over decision making
- Greater awareness of the ways to participate
- Greater awareness of key issues and decisions
- Greater awareness of the connection between the draft plan process and rates

Effective Project Management Techniques:

The success of “Get Involved” was due to early and effective planning and strict project management throughout the duration of the campaign, the overall aim to keeping things simple.

- **Teamwork:** At the planning stage a cross-functional team was established which included ARC personnel from the Strategic Policy, Secretariat, Finance, Community Relations and Call Centre departments of the council. Due to the sensitive nature and scale of the project, and the vulnerability of ARC over the rating issue, once the project once launched it was tightly managed with daily team meetings to ensure consistency of message, meeting advertising deadlines and minimising risk. Weekly updates were given to Councilors and the ARC Management Team.
- **Simplification:** A significant effort went into simplifying the complex planning processes to the community. The Long Term Council Community Plan (LTCCP) was communicated as the ARC’s Draft Regional Community Plan 2004-2014. Once developed, the “Get Involved” plan was peer reviewed by external specialists.

For ease of communication and understanding five key issues were narrowed down and explained in the April issue of the ARC publication Regionwide (Table 1). These provided the information necessary for the completion of the included questionnaire titled “Get Involved – give us your point of view”. Free post return of the questionnaire (Appendix 2) was provided for ease of participation and response.

Table 1: Five Key Issues Highlighted In Draft Plan.

- We propose an average rate increase of 3.2% per ratepayer for 2004/05.
- We want to know from you: should the ARC create a dedicated fund to buy more parkland? \$10.00 per ratepayer is the suggestion.
- We propose extra rates payment options.
- From July, there will be changes to ARC’s transport role.

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- **Communication:** Communication was imperative during the campaign to keep the public informed and involved as it moved through the process. Existing relationships with media were utilised and strengthened to encourage accurate media coverage of the campaign and to encourage informed debate within the media.

Preparation of information was critical to the campaigns success. Detailed communications material (fact sheets etc) for each of the rating options were prepared and were made available through ARC’s web site. Strategies were developed to identify and manage any communication gaps, ensuring pro-active response to phone and email and to prepare databases for respondents.

- **Timing:** The campaign’s timing was crucial to ensure that all aspects of the campaign were temporally aligned and coincided with the release of the draft plan. The campaign ran for one month – the duration of the draft plan submission process.
- **Monitoring:** Phone surveys carried out by Research Solutions provided public response to and effectiveness of the campaign. People were asked ‘*Have you seen any advertising about the Auckland Regional Council’s Draft Regional Community Plan, how it affects your rates, and how you can provide your suggestions to the Council?*’ The campaign effectiveness was shown with around a 30% awareness of the campaign.

A Participatory Approach to Communicating with and Getting ‘Buy-In’ from Stakeholders Associated with the Project

Ratepayers were identified as primary stakeholders. While the ARC has always rated (through the Territorial Authorities), direct rating has brought this relationship to the fore. The entire campaign was designed to encourage participation in the democratic process and decision-making that affects their lives. The diverse medium and simple message to “Get Involved” were chosen as a means of striking a cord with each stakeholder.

Innovation And Originality In The Specific Award Category Area

The “Get Involved” campaign was innovative and original in that this was the first time such an approach has been used by a local government agency. Historically, local government agencies have never demonstrated a willingness to know what the

broader community thinks (particularly on such contentious issues such as rates). By pro-actively seeking individuals' points of view across an entire region and then feeding these into the decision making process, the regional community was able to effect policy outcome.

Specifically, the use of a website by local government as a lobbying tool in the democratic process is a first. In addition, the scale and combination and multi-faceted approach (radio, television, posters, meetings and Regionwide) encouraging feedback from a macro-audience was unprecedented as a local government initiative.

An innovative added-extra to this website was link for respondents to make a formal submission. The site also contained a link to the ARC website where respondents could make comments on any general rates issues, and could download the draft plan, Regionwide and the questionnaire.

Successful Results – Financial and Non-Financial

- **Successful financial results (Table 2)**

We consider the campaign was a huge financial success in that:

- 1) This campaign achieved awareness of 30% of the population for under \$400,000.00. This is a huge success given the size of the audience we needed to reach (1.3 million).
- 2) It cost 30c per head of population (1.3 million).
- 3) It cost 85c per ratepayer (450,000).

Table 2: The “Get Involved” campaign cost:

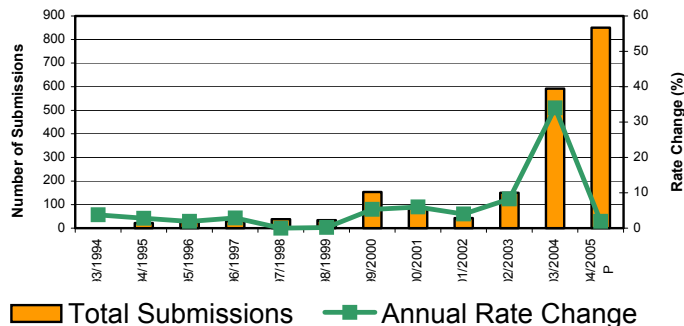
| | |
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| Advertising - media placement, production, fees | \$320,700 |
| Website development and reporting | \$24,500 |
| Regionwide – extra copies | \$3,500 |
| Professional support | \$6,300 |

- **Successful Non- Financial Results**

- 1) **Increased Submission Rate:** Historically the number of submissions to local government agencies annual plans is very low. At ARC over the past 10 years the total number of submissions has a linear relationship with the percentage of rates increase ($R^2 = .97$ (Appendix 3). This correlation includes the introduction of direct rating in 2003 with its 34% rating increase (despite the public criticism and media frenzy at the time). This year the proposed rate increase is 3.2 %, yet 850 people made formal submissions as a result of the campaign (Figure 1). This level of public involvement in the democratic process is a unique result for ARC and local government as a whole and was achieved through the inventiveness, creativity, novelty and imagination that captured the attention of the regional ratepayers and motivated them into action.
- 2) **Public Participation:** We sought both a public response and public participation in decisions, at the time when decisions were being made, versus when the rates bills were posted, and we got it - through both the

formal submission process and through the “Get Involved” campaign. Figure 2 illustrates the scale of public participation compared with previous years. This is a successful result, at odds with the historical trend, and indicates the overall impact of the campaign. In addition 4,300 people responded to the campaign questionnaire. ARC’s rating policy was altered to reflect public feedback demonstrating the council achieved public participation in the regions decision-making.

Figure 1: Public Participation- ARC Annual Planning Process



- 3) **Awareness:** The phone survey by Research Solutions’ carried out during the campaign identified that 30% of the respondents were aware of the campaign, but had chosen not to. Research Solutions’ advice was that the response rate [from the “Get Involved” questionnaire survey] of 4,300 against a population of 1.3 million is high and that if a survey of that size was scientifically conducted, it would have a high level of statistical significance. A survey of 4,000 people against a population of 1.3 million would result in a very low margin of error of 1.5%.
- 4) **Media:** Relationships with the media have been further strengthened and resulted in an increase in accurate reporting of council activities and issues.
- 5) **Future Practice:** Lessons were learned about effective consultation practices in reaching macro-audience. The “Get Involved” model provides the template for future opportunities to reach the wider Auckland region.

The Project Was Good, Sensible and Right Thing To Do

The “Get Involved” project as a whole was a sensible, successful and inclusive campaign. The Council was in a position where it needed to proactively position itself as a listening, participatory, open-minded organization that is committed to developing positive two-way relationships both with regional ratepayers, and with residents from throughout the region.

The Council also felt that, following the public attention on regional rates and the ARC in 2003, there was a real need to both build understanding, and participation in the decision-making process.

The “Get Involved” campaign has succeeded in making it easier for people to get involved in the decisions and policies of the Regional Council, as well as building overall awareness of the Councils roles and responsibilities.

The campaign has also provided a solid foundation that the ARC can build on to further improve levels of participation in the future.