DAMNED IF YOU DO, DAMNED IF YOU DON’T

(Psychology of Solid Waste Management – the Mackenzie Experience)

Geoff Hemm, Tasman Regional Manager, Streetsmart Ltd, P O Box 59 041, Mangere Bridge, Auckland.
(geoffh@streetsmartltd.co.nz)

Abstract

Statutory body governance in New Zealand requires a high level of public consultation. Prior to 2002, when the Mackenzie District Council set about planning its new solid waste system, it signalled its intentions, and sought public input. Every eventuality that could be anticipated was discussed and addressed. A blueprint was developed, consulted on and adopted. A majority of ratepayers and residents were happy.

Subsequent to this consultation, communication with the public at large was maintained to explain the workings of the new system and provide feedback. This was a classic democratically evolved system. But despite this thorough approach, the history that unfolded has shown that do what you might with the very best of intentions, you cannot see what lurks in the human mind. Council staff are mindful of the requirement to be proactive, to anticipate and to plan even to the extent of one decade hence. However, it is in the detail that the devil lurks and the convolutions of the human brain provide place a plenty for a devil or two.

The psychological and behavioural response of members of the community to the Mackenzie waste system is discussed. This is not the result of an in-depth survey across the whole community, but a record of what was personally observed. It reports on individual and small group dynamics. Specific cases and examples are cited. Through this, it is hoped to gain a better insight into successfully engaging the community being served.

Waste management is as much psychology as it is commerce, engineering, technology and environmental awareness. For those not accommodating the ethereal contents of the human cranium, proceed at your peril. The path is strewn with curved balls and mixed metaphors.

Introduction

Commonly, one of the maladies of local government is public apathy. Talk about drainage, piping, roading, finances and long term planning and most people stifle a yawn. But mention rubbish and everyone becomes animated. Everyone seems to have a passionate interest in it and holds strong opinions as to how it should be dealt with. What is it about this lowly commodity that elicits such reaction?
It is claimed we are hard-wired to respond with revulsion to waste matter. We are sensitive to the “yuk” factor. In evolutionary terms this makes good sense. Waste usually means bacteria and other infectious organisms. Not having the constitution of a vulture or crocodile, avoidance of waste promotes health and enhances survival. The only exception to this seems to be a parent’s tolerance of nappy changing, a compromise nature has had to make. Thus it is, that what we are eating one moment becomes a source of revulsion the next. A plate of food on which a fly has settled, or which has been regurgitated or which has been thrown in a bin or which has passed through the digestive process, ceases to be attractive. And by extension, this applies to all other waste, albeit with decreasing intensity as one moves from putrescible waste through other organic wastes to solid inorganic matter. As people produce waste, so they seek to distance themselves from it.

This is where the likes of us come in. Traditionally, we are the undertakers of the yuk, either burying or cremating it. The public demand the services we offer and have certain expectations of us. However, the role they see for themselves in this is often not quite what one would expect and our attempts to move away from these two “classical” disposal methods elicit some interesting responses.

There is a wide spectrum of public opinion about waste. Because the population of the Mackenzie is so small, the staff involved in solid waste management, interact with the public on a one to one basis and get to hear and observe first hand how members of the community regard waste. And that relationship is not as straightforward as one might expect.

**The Old Way is Bad – Agreed?**

Prior to May 2002, the Mackenzie District Council threw all co-mingled solid waste into three landfills which were no more than holes in the ground. Interestingly, this way of doing things was not held in affection by anyone. The landfills harboured rats, mice and cats and attracted hordes of gulls. Surreptitious visitors such as ferrets moved in and despite valiant attempts at regular spreading of cover, the wind whipped up clouds of dust and plastic bags that once aloft, floated away to distant paddocks much to the annoyance of remotely located farmers. Raucous squabbles were commonplace, not only amongst gulls and between cats, but between grumpy supervisors and the public because instructions to “dump between the drums” were being disregarded. Fires periodically broke out, producing plumes of acrid smoke and rendering areas unsafe because of subterranean burning. There was almost a universal disdain of the facilities and there was general consensus that it was shocking how much good material was going to waste.

**Evolution of the new Mackenzie System**

As the expiry of consents for the landfills was looming, Council had to decide how it would manage the District’s waste. With consensus over the undesirability of the old landfills, a process of wide public consultation was initiated. The aim was to keep the
public on-side. Through their participation, it was hoped to get their approval, support and compliance with a new system. The situation looked promising. A Waste Working Party was appointed to involve community members in the identification and assessment of possible options, consultative public meetings were held and later, once the new system had been decided upon, ratepayers were consulted on the location of the new facilities. The National Waste Strategy provided a broad view of the road ahead.

Majority support was gained for the new system, but two other phenomena emerged through the democratic process:

- During consultation, some people with strong personal hobby horses tried to impose their vision on the process and/or tried to manipulate the outcome to open business opportunities for themselves.
- Some of those whose views were not accepted, set themselves in opposition to what was adopted and some maintain their stance to this day, sniping from the sidelines and refusing to accept the legitimacy of the process.

A great deal of fortitude was needed to keep the process on track, but it was essential to ensure community acceptance. A fully comprehensive new system was launched in May 2002 in a “Big Bang” approach i.e. the old landfills were closed one day and the new Resource Recovery system was opened the next. This is a point often debated: in introducing a new waste management system, should one phase in the changes over an extended period, or should one do it all at once? Mackenzie opted for the latter, having flagged its intentions and widely advertising the fact. Change was delivered in one dose, and any resultant unhappiness was voiced and addressed in one episode. The public tend to be change adverse, particularly in the Mackenzie, and the “Big Bang” avoided incremental change requiring on-going community adjustment. However, there are some who decry the decisive nature with which the system was changed claiming that gradual adjustment would have worked better. Whatever is done, there will always be those who challenge the outcome.

What’s in a Name?

Quite a lot, in terms of public perception it would seem. In the Mackenzie, the facilities provided were called “Resource Recovery Parks” (RRPs). The public see this as very PC, and delight in calling the RRPs dumps or tips. These terms are used with glee, not because of any chaotic state of the facilities but because the RRP label is seen as puffed up and requiring deflation. Invariably an ill-tempered response is expected but a laugh and joke at our own expense serves the situation better.

In the same vein, it is interesting to observe the word “rubbish” has been subject to recent rehabilitation. At the time the new Mackenzie system was set up, “rubbish” was not a term favoured by the cognoscenti of our profession. Rubbish was a term attached to “misallocated resources”, the argument went, and the public needed to see such resources as having value. The use of the word was not seen to promote this. While one can see the well-intentioned rationale, trying to redefine words makes the public feel uneasy, and in
the event, “rubbish” has since been re-embraced to apply to “residual waste”, a nuance for which some of the public have yet to develop an appreciation.

We have other terminology that does not sit well with the wider world. A personal favourite is “putrescibles” because it is a genuinely useful word of very precise meaning. It has, however, proved to be a real tongue twister, even eluding being mastered by some councillors. But before pleading guilty to all charges of terminological inflation, there is one deceptively simple word over which many people stumble. The word is “refuse”, which frequently comes out as “refuge”. (Perhaps we will have to initiate a new exercise in the schools – “Say after me: We refute that we refuse refuse that is refused by the refuge for reformed refugees”.)

There is clearly a lesson to be learned – jargon, like rubbish, has to be disposed of.

**The National Sport of Council Bashing played with the Waste Management Ball**

Residents love to hate Council. This is not peculiar to the Mackenzie and is probably a world-wide phenomenon, but with the frontiersman mentality of the high country, it is particularly strong locally. Council is seen as the enemy and when any unpopular decisions are taken, and in most instances these have nothing to do with waste, people hit back. They strike at the most obvious and accessible part of Council, the weekly kerbside collection.

When Council made an unpopular decision regarding development in Tekapo and on another occasion announced their desire to scrap the community board, non-compliance with waste on the kerbside skyrocketed and the RRP operator was treated in a decidedly uncivil manner. Receiving flak for something that has nothing to do with you is a professional hazard.

**Shenanigans at Kerbside**

As the frontier between ratepayers and local authority, the kerbside is the scene of many a skirmish. The commonest cause of friction is the putting out of non-compliant waste and this occurs not only between council and resident, but extends to stouches between neighbours and includes a ménage a trois including the contractor.

Initially, as a concession to enable residents to get used to the three bag collection system, a liberal attitude to non-compliant waste (waste in unofficial bags, rubbish in recycling bags, waste in boxes, etc) was taken while residents continued to be plied with publicity explaining the system and urging co-operation. The response came in two forms: some residents saw this as an opportunity to get away without complying while on the other side, compliant neighbours were outraged that the slackers were being treated so leniently for not putting in the same effort. Interestingly, this anger was never directed at the non-compliant neighbours but always at Council. When zero tolerance was adopted,
non-compliant waste was stickered and left where it was. The offenders often just ignored
the rejected bags. In instances involving holiday houses, the offenders had left and were
not around to do anything. The response to this by neighbours was yet again one of anger
directed not at the errant householders, but at Council. Council was blamed for the
rubbish lying there. None of the complaining residents held the non-compliant residents
responsible nor did they contact them to encourage a more community minded approach.
Neighbours, it seems, fear falling out with each other and will rather tackle Council. Note
the conundrum: Council must not collect non-compliant waste; Council must not leave
non-compliant waste on the street. (Council’s response to this situation is discussed
below).

In Twizel, a few variations on the theme emerged, but luckily not in any widespread
form. In a few instances, non-compliant waste was carefully sorted to remove any
evidence of ownership and then placed out in front of someone else’s house. This was
evidently done to either get rid of it without taking responsibility or to annoy and
discredit disliked neighbours. Neighbours from hell, one might venture.

Yes, it is a Game

Some people go to great lengths to avoid paying for the dumping of their waste. Official
black bags cost a dollar each, but some people would rather take three bags worth, drive 8
km out of town, dump it under some secluded trees and pride themselves on the savings.
Their understanding of transport economics is decidedly lacking, or is the thrill of
illegality priceless?

Backyard burning is another favourite, particularly in hot windy weather where one
presumes the offender thinks the conditions will mask the misdemeanour. All they
succeed in doing is smoke out the neighbours, inhale carcinogens and take more time
stoking the drum (the apparatus of choice) than the value of the Council bags required to
dispose of what they have. Burners, it may be observed, have a love affair with this
activity, and relinquish the habit very reluctantly.

For those courting adventure, there is always the dump and run strategy. Waste is
dumped at the RRP gate, usually first having had incriminating documentation removed.
For the beginner, this is done after hours. The perpetrator may then advance to cruising
past the RRP to peer in and see if it is still open, often making two or three passes before
the facility is safely closed. But the ultimate, achieved only once, is to place the rubbish
in the boot of the RRP operator’s car parked in the street outside.

The creativity and expense in playing this game far outweighs the cost of using the
council waste system. Perhaps the participants sit in the darkened corners of pubs and
compare notes on how they’ve avoided paying. After all, it’s preferable to pay the oil
companies generously for their fuel rather than let the local council have a dollar or two.
Anonymity of Waste – When Privacy Goes Bad

When dealing with the public over waste, it very soon becomes clear that when people bring in their own rubbish and recyclables, they invariably do a good job of it. Fronting up with one’s waste removes the anonymity and such people take responsibility for what they do. Other people use the cover of anonymity to try and hide non-compliance and sloppiness.

In the Mackenzie, when the issue of “abandoned” rejected bags on kerbside arises, the strategy is now to collect the offending bags and confirm with neighbours which household put them out. The offending property owner is then sent a personalised letter and/or receives a visit from the education officer, detailing the problem and requesting compliance in the future. This has proven remarkably successful mainly because people are shocked to be linked to their waste. They know what they did wrong and to be caught out makes them uncomfortable. In most instances, they decide compliance is better than embarrassment.

Pests and Predators – Are our Detractors’ Enemies our Friends?

In running resource recovery operations, a basic aspect of good housekeeping is the control of vermin. In the Mackenzie, rodents are an ever present pest requiring on-going control. Feral cats, sly indolent creatures surviving on gorging putrescibles during rushed forays into the storage hopper when left open for a few minutes, are a seasonal problem and require culling. Neighbours, one would think, should welcome this.

But no, some critical neighbours avow that our sharp-shooting of cats amounts to cruelty and the removal of the natural agents of rodent control. With pest control, we are legitimately criticised if don’t, vociferously criticised if we do.

The Whiff of Compost, Reverse Sensitivity and Hidden Agendas

In rural areas where life can be slow and uneventful for some, council waste facilities offer an ideal opportunity for a cause celebre. When the Twizel RRP, including the composting plant was first established, the site was chosen because it was zoned industrial and it was remote from the residential parts of town. Most people agreed its location offered convenient accessibility with minimum possibility of offending anyone. That was three years ago.

In the meantime, adjoining rural property has changed hands and been subdivided into residential sections. The developer and purchasers of the sections were well aware of the RRP but happily became neighbours of it as the property boom took hold. Most were
frequent visitors to the RRP and were familiar with its operations. But as their numbers increased, some discovered a newfound zeal to uplift the status of the neighbourhood and decided a waste facility was neither a salubrious nor opulent enough neighbour. “Odour, wasps, vermin and undesirable people” they cried publicly, while privately some honestly admitted they were merely doing what was necessary to enhance the value of their investment. Two residents of the industrial area having actually decided to live there, and being sullen in nature, added their protest. Council staff, genuinely concerned that they wanted the RRP to be a good neighbour, offered full co-operation to eliminate any odours, and led futile wasp and vermin hunts to demonstrate these were not issues. Their co-operation was not welcomed nor taken up. Total closure and re-siting was demanded.

Were this to happen, the ratepayers would be faced with a horrendous bill and where would the park be relocated? “Not in my backyard” goes up the chorus from elsewhere as the property developers consider their options. The lawyers meanwhile, smile patiently.

**When is too Much too Little?**

In terms of population, the Mackenzie District is very small (3 717 residents). Three RRP s serve the towns, with the Twizel facility officially open for 14 hours/week spread over five days including weekends. Unofficially, the open time is double this on account of the staff being prepared to help the public outside official hours. During the peak of the summer season, the park is open 10 hours a day, seven days a week. The service levels are generous, one might conclude, but some ratepayers feel this is not good enough and berate staff at 7-00pm for having closed the gates. A case perhaps of Council bearing the brunt of residents’ other frustrations? Or just high expectations?

**When is too Little too Much?**

Modern waste management cannot be superimposed on a community and be expected to be embraced without extensive pre-publicity. Its adoption has to be done in tandem with sustained education and promotion to get people to understand it, support it and practise it. The message needs to be explained and repeated to get it across. At least five times it is claimed, to get it to stick. Otherwise people are quick to claim, “Oh, but I didn’t know about it.”

Typically then, the scenario goes something like this: with gusto the education is taken to the community, despite the ever present budgetary constraints of Council. Effort is put into varying the message and packaging it in different ways. As one permits oneself a sigh of progress, the response comes back –“We’re sick of it. This waste business is all we hear.”

Sorry people, we were only trying to keep you informed.
A “Hero” of the Frontier

Just as organisms evolve to occupy a specific environmental niche, so politicians, activists and other self-styled leaders find niches to provide identity and a platform from which to promote themselves. In the Mackenzie, one such individual has set himself up as an opponent of the government, championing the cause of the common man in the face of the dastardly council. He shouts rounds of beer at the pub, ridicules council, breaks by-laws with reckless disregard and champions the burning and burying of rubbish. His behaviour is seen as colourful and endears him to many. Counteracting such “champions” is an interesting unanticipated challenge.

There are None so Blind as Those That Will not See

With the old landfills held in such low esteem, one would have expected almost universal acceptance of the era of resource recovery. While majority support has been gained, one often ponders the rationale behind opposition. People who question costs, operations and policies are contributing to democratic debate and their input should always be welcomed. But there are those who resist change and reason, primarily it appears, so as not to upset their own preconceived ideas. These are the uneducatable, and provide the biggest challenge to promoters of modern waste management.

No Slack Cut Here

Owing to its remote location, Mackenzie cannot recycle glass economically. Many other districts are in exactly the same position. Removing glass from the waste stream is still highly desirable as the cost for it to be sent to landfill in Timaru is high ($215-00/tonne). Considering the public do a very good job of separating glass and taking local conditions into account, the common sense approach is to treat the glass as clean fill. Financially and environmentally this is a win all round. Or so one might think.

This solution is saving the ratepayers considerable amounts of money and leaves options open for future use of glass, yet there are those who roundly criticise it as not being “real recycling”. If the glass was sent to Auckland, Council would be pilloried for losing money. Those who know better, it seems, will always be with us.

Bizarre Bazaar Behaviour

The comprehensive composting of organics in the Mackenzie is producing a particularly high quality compost. When this became available for sale, the price was announced as
$75-00/m³ and pro rata less for lesser amounts which would be loaded into any container the purchaser chose. Residents were outraged that they were being charged such an “excessive price”.

To facilitate handling and marketing, it was then decided to supply compost in 40 litre bags (the retail standard) at $4-50/bag. Residents thought this was a great price and criticism over the cost ceased. Simple arithmetic reveals that the “excessive” cost amounted to $3-00 per 40 litre and no secret was ever made of this. A valuable lesson in marketing indeed.

**The Chameleon Class**

The knockers and detractors will always be with us, and quite a few of them have nothing good to say about resource recovery. To them, it is a “politically correct fad” - until they see something they want. The most ardent critics in the Mackenzie have bought: one house lot of roofing tiles, second hand wire netting, numerous lengths of scrap iron, electronic spares cannibalised from scrapped electronic ware and copious quantities of compost. Will their hearts yet melt or are they just schizophrenics?

**In Denial and the Porker Capacity**

In running a waste system, never underestimate the ability of people to lie straight faced and with direct eye contact. The shysters evidently also read Desmond Morris and other literature on body language. The Mackenzie waste education initiative has at various times inundated residents with information about the solid waste system. Information gets sent out with rates demands, by mail drops and by advertisements. Yet some people deny ever seeing such information, despite the fact that they partially comply, begging the question, where did they get that partial information? Most brazen of all, is the behaviour of some who try to reduce dumping fees by hiding residual waste amongst recyclables, or who, when they bring a load into the resource recovery park, authoritatively declare that they have only eight bags of rubbish, confident that you will accept this self assessment. When the eight bags are revealed as fourteen bags, somebody else, one is told, added to the trailer by slight of hand. The waste industry is not for the naive.

**Silence of the Lambs – Why do our supporters say so little?**

An abiding mystery. Does satisfaction and approval sap one of passion? By far and away the majority of residents support modern waste management and comply with its requirements. If they didn’t, the system would have collapsed. Their co-operation is appreciated on a daily basis and staff have now learned to be happy with that. In the end, it is, after all, actions that count. But a little bit of positive comment would go a long way towards letting council know it is not without support.

**Education begins at home**
While one is mindful of the need to educate the wider community, it is easy to forget about those who control the purse strings. District councillors are busy people with lots on their minds who tend to forget past decisions. They need to be educated on an ongoing basis as much as, if not more than the public. They also require motivation and encouragement to neutralise the negative nagging to which they are subject. They need to be kept focused on the road ahead. They are also apt, while exercising fiscal discipline, to come up with bright ideas to improve operations. These ideas invariably cost money which they have cut off. Be gentle in pointing this out.

**The Worm can Turn in Mysterious Ways**

Obviously not all is doom and gloom in the waste game. Some of one’s most vocal critics can be turned. A Twizel couple, who considered modern waste management unworthy of support, took off on an overseas holiday. While in Europe they met some locals who, on finding that they came from the Mackenzie, enthused about the great recycling system they had discovered there while they were holidaying in New Zealand. The Kiwi couple found themselves taking credit for this enlightened system and returned totally reformed. Epiphanies are still to be had, Hallelujah.

**Conclusions**

Notwithstanding all these observations, one must not gain the impression that the Mackenzie is a rogue community unable to embrace modern waste management. As has already been pointed out, the majority of residents participate positively, but their involvement should never be taken for granted.

In general terms, engaging a community in any contemporary solid waste system requires attention to detail in accommodating human needs, none more so than the psychological ones.