

"The Townsville Plan – An update"

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Introduction:

The Townsville region is divided into two separate local authority regions, Thuringowa and Townsville. The combined population is approx. 150,000, with just on 100,000 living in Townsville. Townsville is widely regarded as the capital of North Queensland and has recently experienced an economic explosion with new industry, people and ideas moving into the area. This rejuvenation has had spin offs in all aspects of life in Townsville including how we manage the affairs of Council.

Townsville currently has 17,000 registered dogs and we employ 7 local laws officers to deal with the issues that are created from these animals. As the name suggests, our officers not only deal with animal management related incidents, but all aspects of Local Laws.

History;

In late 2001, our council was besieged by irate residents of the area regarding our implementation of local law 10. What we were doing had not changed significantly at that time, but due to expansion in the city, a number of residents from your councils were attracted to our region and brought with them expectations gained from other councils. What they could do in other cities, they could not do in ours. Things such as: running dogs off leash, not picking up after your dog, having animals effectively enclosed and restrained and dogs being unregistered. All these things we were told could be done in other local authority areas. That was the story they told us.

All incidents pointed to newer residents of our area not being aware of the laws we had in place. It also appeared apparent that the small amount of information we released to the public was too little and not distributed wide enough for the public to act on.

After we pondered these thoughts for a number of months, it was decided to address this issue from a perspective of educating residents as well as enforcing our local law. This was achieved by enlisting the support of a public relations company who specialized in community consultation.

We had several discussions with the consultant and it was decided that if we were going to solve the problems of our community, we needed to enlist the support of other experts in the animal management field. A fairly intense session was held with experts in the field from Adelaide, Sydney, Brisbane and of course Townsville. In that session it was identified that animal management issues of significance in Townsville had a recurring nature in other states and in other local authorities. This is where the notion was hatched that if we were to identify a solution to some of the bigger issues of animal management and could prove that it worked, these solutions could be used in other local authority areas with some success.

The group identified 10 recurring issues of animal management, of which we elected to address the top 6 with an overarching issue of responsible pet management which would then bring the six together. These issues were

Barking,
Straying,
Aggressive dogs,
Restraint,

Pet litter,
Registration,
Responsible pet ownership.

The public relations company then used these issues to build a matrix on how they could be addressed. The thinking and ideas were simple;

1. All people are not going to be interested in all of these issues, however, we had to make the information available so that it would intersect with the people who wanted the information at the time they wanted it. For example: Residents of your area are not going to want to read a brochure on barking dogs at a time that they don't live beside a dog that continually barks. However when such a person moves beside their place and the dog starts barking and creates a nuisance, then that person immediately wants to know where they can get information on what they can do.
2. The information had to be developed to target specific sectors of the community. Information relevant to where leash free areas were needed to be directed to those dog owners who wanted to use them. Registration messages needed to be targeted to those who had not registered their animals, and to emphasise the advantages of registration.
3. The entire campaign needed to be simple, but positive, in its approach.

A substantial document was developed which outlined the entire thinking behind the campaign and addressed the tools and tactics to be used through a range of channels to reach our target audience.

The campaign needed to be linked by visual stimuli. This was done by the use of colours and design (swirl on each of our promotional items). However our council was keen to keep with a corporate look across all of councils departments. With this in mind, a new look has been developed for all aspects of Environmental Health and a specific one for animal management.

This new look was rolled out in July 2004 and will be reflected in all promotional materials. During the visual presentation of this data, I will show the old and new versions of our promotional materials.

A brief update on what has been occurring over the past twelve to 24 months is as follows.

Surveys

A series of surveys were developed to be implemented at different stages of the campaign. The surveys were to identify a number of issues;

1. Was the information being seen by residents of Townsville?
2. Was the information soliciting some changes in the way residents acted in relation to specific issues?
3. What medium were the messages being seen in. (TV, radio, newspaper)?
4. What parts of the campaign needed to be tweaked?

The surveys were very successful in giving us a significant amount of information on the performance of our campaign to date. It also gave us a mid term report card on how we were doing. I won't labour on this point as the next presentation will go into this side of things in far greater detail.

Allies campaign.

This campaign was set up to enlist the support of those people in Townsville who had like mind-sets in relation to animals. This included vets, vet nurses, breeders clubs, obedience clubs, Delta dogs, RSPCA, animal welfare groups and all groups that have vested interest in ensuring dogs are managed responsibly. This component of the strategy existed to provide these people and groups with all the up to date information on what we were doing with our campaign. We wanted them, as pillars of the community, to undertake to assist us in selling the concept of responsible pet management. This was not hard for them to accept and involved our officers having regular meetings with these guys to maintain contact with them, providing information about the program, and most of all making them feel a part of the process. This campaign continues to be a success with approximately 100 extra people in the community that are actively assisting Council to sell the ideas of responsible pet management.

While it linked the allies in with our work, it also had an interesting off shoot, as the allies then began to get us involved in some of their work such as Puppy pre schools, education session, public sessions on veterinary care etc. We have already been invited to events that before this campaign commenced it would have been unrealistic to expect an invitation.

How many times at BBQ's, parties etc, do council and their animal management programs cop a bagging. I am not suggesting that this will stop, however, if it does occur in Townsville, there will be more people in the community that can speak with some authority and direct the person to the correct answers. Our surveys did find that about 20% of animal management ideas are found from parties or similar locations, via word of mouth.

Development of Fact Sheets

Our initial surveys found that a vast majority of residents were keen to have information available that they could sit down and read. Certainly brochures are the ideal way of doing this, but are extremely costly and can get dragged behind the times if ideas and concepts change. We have developed two brochures, but they are both very general and act as a teaser and point readers to more specific information.

This specific information is contained in our fact sheets. These are printed onto pre printed letterheads. These fact sheets can be developed rapidly to reflect what the community requires. They are cheap, simple to put together and we have found them to be extremely good in getting detailed information to a vast array of our target audience.

Our fact sheet range now include;

- Barking
- Straying
- Registration
- Leashes
- Restraint
- Pet Litter
- Responsible pet management
- Dog off leash areas
- Cats

These fact sheets are widely distributed via our allies, front counters of councils departments, web sites, events (Million Paws Walk), neighbourhood fun days and every other opportunity we get to provide them. All fact sheets not only have a consistent look, but also have a consistent approach to how they are set up on the document. This ranges from the same font and style of heading to paragraphs settings, spaces between words, size and location of pictures etc. All this information has been provided in a detailed attempt to make these facts sheets easy to read.

Press Advertisements

We have found that residents do read newspapers and do look at press advertisements, however they only tend to read the information if it is relevant to what they are doing. An example of this is that a resident is not going to read an article on how to deal with a barking dog if they are not affected by such an incident. Our strategy to address this was to place simple catchy messages in front of people who may be having such problems and point them to where they could find information on how to deal with the problem.

Effectively the press ads caught the attention of readers with short pieces of information. If further info was required, the add refers them to a contact number or web site for more detail.

We have found consistently in the past that residents have seen the advertisements and when problems occur, they go back to past papers to find out where they can get further information. We know this because they tell us when they ring to lodge an action request.

Media releases

Issues of significance are constantly evolving in the field of animal management. This was identified in our strategy and part of the plan was to develop media releases and place them constantly in the path of the media. This campaign has also been very successful as the media are always looking for a positive story. We now have an extensive library of media releases which are recycled every 12 – 15 months. I am told that a journalist can only remember stories back 6 – 9 months ago and the public can only remember stories back 3 – 6 months ago. Given this, we now have our media releases prepared for any twelve month period.

Television advertising

Seven television commercials were produced which used our very own Local Laws Officers as talent. They have now lifted our guys to almost super hero status. The two officers regularly get comments and feedback on their appearance on the television.

This has been the most costly component of our campaign and while it appears to be successful, our strategy suggested that we steer away from this broad scale advertising and concentrate on our niche markets where we can get more bang for the buck.

Web site.

Our web site contains all of our resources, including fact sheets, lost dogs photos, press releases, newspaper stories on animal issues, radio commercials, television commercials and all other events that we are involved with.

The site has changed significantly in the past twelve months and now enjoys the crisp new corporate look of council with the flair of environmental health.

The site is managed by our Information Technology department, but provides direct and immediate access to all information by our management. Effectively we can change information on our site at a moment's notice, which allows complete control over our destiny.

We also have the ability to review the hits to the site and to graph how many people are accessing our information.

The site also has a number of entries, commonly known as the front door and the back door. The front door www.townsville.qld.gov.au brings users into the front page of the Townsville City Council. As our council is a large council, there is a significant amount of information that needs to be processed on our front page before you determine where you want to go. Our solution to this was to purchase another website and name it www.environmentalhealthtownsville.com.au This provides a back door link straight to the environmental health front page and there you have immediate access to our animal management pages. All of our promotions push the direct link via the back door.

Promotional materials

These materials have undergone a transformation to reflect the new corporate branding. Effectively we have the same materials, but with different graphics on them. They still include rubbers, rulers, pens, pencils, dog leads, water bottles, magnets etc.

These tools are directional aids, as they all point residents to our web site and our phone number.

In addition they are part of our positive approach to animal management. They provide positive incentives for dog owners who are doing the right thing, and our officers don't have to continually fine people for doing the wrong thing but can instead reward residents for doing the right thing. This has had a very positive spin off for not only our staff, but is widely discussed at BBQ's etc. This links back into the 20% of people who find out about animal management information from word of mouth.

The positive incentives component of our campaign is one of the many aspects of the new campaign that has both provided stability within our workforce and has allowed this campaign to be such a success.

School campaigns.

Our officers are thrilled at giving presentations to schools and community groups, however at the beginning of this campaign we have taken the tack that these campaigns need to be managed very carefully if we are to achieve a given goal. With this in mind, it was an uneconomical use of our resources to develop a school program when there were a number of developed programs in existence. Also, for such programs to be considered in schools, they need to address the criteria laid down by school curriculum.

We elected to enlist PetPEP which has been developed by the AVA and is currently being implemented in Queensland by the RSPCA. Townsville were one of the original councils that became involved with this program a couple of years ago. Effectively someone else does the co ordination of councils, vets, RSPCA and Breeders group to attend a school. Effectively all we do is turn up and do what our officers enjoy doing without the pain and effort of organizing the event. There are fees attached to this service, but for us, it is a fee well worth spending.

All of our resources are used extensively during these visits.

If these programs were addressed consistently over a period of time, effectively a generation of people who are aware of what it takes to be a responsible animal owner would be created. How easy would the world of animal management be if this were to occur.

Schools involved with the PetPEP program have increased by 300% in the three years we have been running.

Events

Our department is involved with numerous events which have a focus on animals. They include the Million Paws Walk, neighbourhood fun days, and more recently we sponsored the second Animalmania in Townsville. This event attracted over 20,000 people over two days to look at a range of animals. The event is nothing but a positive spin on animals and allowed us to infiltrate into the pet owners market which we are addressing.

Awards

Our staff are very proud of our work in this field, so much so that we have provided our work to be judged for a number of awards. To date, we have been successful in

- Winner of the 2003 Qld RSPCA Animal Friendly Town award.
- Runner up in the 2003 Queensland Awards for Excellence of the Public Relations Institute of Australia for "Comprehensive Communication"
- Runner up in the 2003 Golden Target Awards for the Public Relations Institute of Australia for "Comprehensive Communication"
- Runner up in the 2003 South Pacific Awards for Public Relations in the category of "Public Sector"
- Invited to submit to the International Public Relations Institute awards in the category of "Public Sector" which will be decided in September 2004.

These awards are highly complimentary to what we are doing in that our original goal was to better educate residents of Townsville on the seven aspects of responsible pet ownership. These awards have acknowledged that the ideas we are using are ones that have been accepted by public relations experts to be leaders in their field.

Where to from here – Update

At the 2003 conference in Caloundra, I made an offer to all present about providing all details about our program to councils for a very minimal charge, which was subject to some reporting mechanisms that could guide others in the better use of this material.

It was my intention to provide a detailed assessment of who was involved, how they had developed their program, what effects they have had, has it been successful in other areas, but unfortunately change takes time to implement.

Twelve groups have taken me up on this offer. They included

- Liverpool City Council (NSW)
- Brimbank City Council (VIC)
- Woollahra Municipal Council (NSW)
- Maitland City Council (NSW)
- West Tamar Council (TAS)
- Maribyrnong City Council (VIC)

- City of Unley (SA)
- Newcastle City Council (NSW)
- Port Stephens Council (NSW)
- Adelaide Hills Council (SA)
- Torrens Valley TAFE (SA)
- Caloundra City Council (QLD)

Information has been provided to these groups on CD which includes

- A full copy of the strategy
- All icons and logos
- All television commercials
- All radio commercials
- All press advertisements
- All press releases
- Permission to use any or all of the materials in their own local authority area.

Unfortunately with any new idea it takes time to infiltrate new ideas into old and existing structures. All councils I have contacted have given a positive response, but time, money and enthusiasm at all levels of councils is sometimes not there when you want it to be there.

I would urge officers and councillors who may have the opportunity to read this paper and wish to become involved with this work to contact me.

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Gavin Hammond is employed by the Townsville City Council as the Principal Environmental Health Officer. One of the tasks of this position is to oversee the supervision and implementation of the Local Laws unit. Gavin qualified as an Environmental Health Officer in 1984 from QIT in Brisbane and has furthered his qualifications by completing a Graduate Diploma in Management in 1996 and a Masters of Business administration in 2002. Gavin has worked in seven local authorities in his career, all in North Queensland that range from very small to large. In his time he has worked at all levels of Local laws ranging from catching wayward puppies and dog attacks to developing policy on local laws issues.