

Charleroi: Changing Consumption Patterns

Background information

Located in the southwest of Belgium, the city of Charleroi is the biggest city in the Walloon Region (the French-speaking part of Belgium) and the third-biggest city in Belgium. In the last decade, environmental improvements have transformed Charleroi from a post-industrial environmental time bomb into one of Belgium's best examples of a progressive sustainable city.

In fact, since 1991, Charleroi has been devoted to a city project defining its strategy for sustainable development. Additionally, in 1994 it passed the "Charleroi 21" charter, which defines the essential qualities of a sustainable city. In this Charter, Charleroi outlines its plans to be a metropolitan city, a place to live well, mobile, with low pollution and good health, a city of learning, one that works and innovates.

The Analysis - To define a concrete waste management information plan.

To accompany the sustainable development of the City, the Charleroi district (ICDI - 416.000 inhabitants – 14 municipalities- 1999) has included among its policies a waste management information plan. This Plan has been developed in concert with the Brabant-Wallon county council district (365.000 inhabitants – 27 municipalities - 2001) and a local NGO specialising in environmental management - "Espace Environnement".

Waste issues are traditionally among the most pressing concerns for the general public as the effects of waste management are often strongest at the local level. The pollution caused by illegal deposits, the unsightliness of landfill sites, and the concern over emissions from incineration plants, these are debated in local areas on a daily basis. When one also considers that the costs of collection, treatment, and final disposal are borne by local taxpayers the importance of waste management becomes clear for all to see.

With this in mind the authorities in Charleroi decided to tackle one of the principal sources of waste, namely packaging waste. To do this they set about building a partnership and systematic communications campaign with local citizens, and most interestingly, with a network of major supermarkets.

The aim of this partnership was twofold. First, the authorities wanted a reduction in the environmental impact of the waste burden. Secondly, they realised that a decrease in the costs of waste management, and in their own expenditure, was only possible if they could also reduce the amount of household waste. This in turn required a change in the local consumption patterns. For the plan to be successful the authorities needed to persuade the public to:

- Avoid extra waste production;
- Reuse products and materials;
- Compost and recycle as much as possible.

The Results

Fulfilling the Objectives and Overcoming the Barriers to Communication

Given that persuasion requires subtlety, and also recognising that the public can be mistrustful of information that comes solely from official sources, the authorities in Charleroi developed a communication plan involving the supermarkets and the environmental NGO – "Espace-Environnement". Together they launched a communication initiative that addressed waste prevention from both the top-down and bottom-up. Their first step involved compiling a proper overview of the true state of waste production in Charleroi. The resulting comprehensive waste audit provided them with the data they needed to develop the right tools and target the campaign.

The results highlighted:

- A lack of knowledge on the basic elements of waste management policy. This was addressed by providing a detailed explanation of the general principles of waste management, both at the regional level in Wallonia, and also emanating from the European level. (from prevention to final disposal);
- A lack of understanding of the true costs of waste management. The authorities sought to address this by outlining the direct cost to every citizen, via municipal and regional taxes, for the collection and treatment of waste;
- A lack of dialogue and participation. This was addressed by developing a dynamic system of citizens groups or fora to facilitate dialogue and to involve the population in discussions on waste prevention. Participants in these citizens' fora included representatives from the public authorities, the private sector, schools, and environmental NGOs.
- An awareness of the problems caused by the waste burden but a lack of information on the solutions. This was addressed by providing more information on measures designed to reduce the amount of waste production;
- In addition the waste audit highlighted the need to change the behaviour of producers in order to reduce the growth of the waste burden.

Based on these results the authorities in Charleroi determined that the best way to reduce waste was to target consumers in the shops as they were making their choices. While they recognised the importance of providing general information to households, they discovered that much of this information is forgotten when the purchasing choices were actually being made.

The ensuing partnership with supermarkets enabled the waste programme to operate in more than 170 supermarkets in both the city and the province. Shoppers were actively invited to think about the environmental impact of their purchases, particularly the impact of packaging. In addition shoppers were encouraged to buy goods with less packaging.

The promotional work undertaken by the supermarkets was varied. It involved:

- The distribution of information leaflets on waste minimisation and packaging. These information leaflets were made available at the checkout counters in each participating supermarket. In an attempt to maximise visibility, the leaflets were promoted actively for one week at a time on a total of three different occasions in one year. Unused leaflets were taken back for recycling and those that were distributed were counted to monitor their impact.
- A new system of product labelling was introduced, which provided information on products with minimal packaging. The "Less waste" labels were applied for a period of two months under each product that was deemed to generate less direct packaging waste. The decision on which articles to label was a collaborative venture between supermarket managers and their staff. This ensured that the workers themselves also benefited from environmental education. The labelling was checked on a bi-weekly basis to ensure that all of the information remained correct and relevant. The in-house public address systems were used every half hour to guide consumers to the low impact products and to offer them advice on their purchasing choices.
- "Minimisation week" was used to launch and spearhead the campaign. During this week the labelling and leaflets were backed-up by articles and posters in shop windows around Charleroi.
- Supermarket visits were organised with adult groups. During these visits, members of the general public were taken through the supermarkets step by step and provided with detailed information on the available low-impact products.
- A product sales analysis was carried out to evaluate the impact of all of this promotional work.

The active and honest participation of the supermarkets was crucial to the success of this project, partly because the customers were responding to their advice and guidance, and partly because the ongoing evaluation of the project depended on figures provided by the supermarkets themselves.

When all of the data was finally collected the results seemed very encouraging. A significant increase in the sales of products with less packaging and so less environmental impact was the first positive sign. This project is now entering its third year and so far the net result has been a reduction of 7kg of waste per inhabitant for the year 2001. A similar figure is expected for 2002.

This action in supermarkets is intended as a long-term initiative with constant evaluation. Of course it is not designed to be the main pillar of the waste management strategy but rather a complementary way to stimulate the involvement of citizens. Having said that there is no doubt

that the reduction in packaging waste in Charleroi is directly related to the twin approach of direct communication at the point of purchase coupled with the information campaign on posters throughout the city and the province. Their combined impact was to educate the general public, thus enabling greater environmental awareness and protection. In addition, by providing ready-made solutions to the general public, this project highlights the positive contributions they can make to protect the environment.

The success of this project is now the subject of an INTERREG project linking the city of Charleroi, the Province of Brabant-Wallon, and the French city of Lille (1.2 million inhabitants).

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