2017 SWANA
EDUCATION PROGRAM EXCELLENCE AWARD ENTRY

Category: Education Program

Entrant: OC Waste & Recycling

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Title of entry:
OC Landfill Tour Program – A Revitalization Guided by Strategic Outcomes

Jurisdiction: County of Orange, California

Population: 3.1 million

Cost per household for the project: About 5 cents

Approximate budget:
$21,000 for first year; $1,000 in subsequent years
This entry focuses on the formalization, standardization and revitalization of OC Waste and Recycling’s (OCWR) Landfill Tour Program is 2016.

Our landfill tours provide an opportunity for education and public engagement with the agency’s mission, which includes waste disposal and environmental stewardship. Tour guests include the general public; students/youth groups; science teachers; related industry professionals; current and future engineers, biologists and environmentalists; and business and civic organization members.

A standardized, professional tour experience better satisfies the needs of guests, better ensures the safety of guests and guides and helps deliver consistent public messaging. A better-informed public can help keep recyclable materials out of the landfills, which preserves capacity and helps maintain a safe and healthy community for current and future generations. Opening up the landfills to the public offers transparency and helps them see their role in waste disposal. Moreover, they see first-hand that a landfill is not a “dump.”

OC Waste & Recycling manages Orange County’s (Calif.) solid waste disposal system, including three active landfills and four Hazardous Household Waste Collection Centers. It provides an essential public service for the region’s 3.1 million residents in 34 cities and 14 unincorporated areas and its businesses.
The specific catalyst for this revitalization and standardization was the behavior of a particular tour guest, demanding things from a landfill staff member well beyond the scope of what’s reasonable for a tour. However, at the same time our agency was launching strategic initiatives throughout that would professionalize and make consistent a number of programs, events and activities and also would incorporate safety concerns.

Research showed us that the tour program formalization and revitalization would address the need for consistency, standardization, and professionalism in communication and safety practices.

Gaining an understanding of the tour program status quo was the first step. Other than tallies of tour guests, there was nothing codified or documented about the program, so discussions with staff provided virtually all the primary research.

Tours started informally in the 1990s; there is no record of when the first tours happened. Groups or individuals would contact OCWR to request tours based on their interests in the environment, engineering or other topics. Since the early days, tours have gained in popularity and the residential landscape near the landfills has grown dramatically.

The tour content was relevant and interesting, but it lacked organizational, strategic communications and educational outreach input as well as standardization. It also lacked integration with diversion messaging – basic recycling and organics.

Coordinating and scheduling tours was a labor-intensive process full of exceptions rather than standards. This resulted in inconsistencies and occasional high volume of tours at some times of the year. We researched how another local essential public service agency, OC Sanitation District, handled tours and managed reservations. We learned that it purchases a commercial software app. We concluded that an online reservation system would be a meaningful component to the revitalized program, then researched all varieties of event scheduling/reservations platforms.

There was no strategy in place to guide distribution of educational materials. Nor was anything formalized to allow for OCWR to take and use photos or protocols to allow guests to shoot photos and video and/or interview guides on camera.
The problems addressed by the tour program are based on public perception. The general public thinks of the landfill as a “dump,” and most laypersons do not realize that the sites are highly engineered environmental protection operations. Also, tours help educate landfill site neighbors about the actions and regulations in place to mitigate odor and traffic issues.

The needs addressed by tours include being responsive to our wider community, including college engineering and environmental science students, K-12 students and teachers, youth groups, public officials and others who have specific or general interests.

Tour guides are not trained public speakers or professional communicators. They include biologists, operations specialists and engineers. The standardized materials and pre-tour video and general script address their primary need, which is “what should I say?”
The Landfill Tour Program is an important element of one of OCWR’s organizational strategic goals: To ensure outstanding stakeholder relationships and customer service. Even though we technically do not do business directly with the general public, residents are as much stakeholders in the waste disposal system as are our haulers, jurisdiction representatives, industry partners and vendors.

The revitalization was based on a strategic vision that the tour program must:

- Ensure the safety and security of guides and guests.
- Serve to preserve and advance the agency’s reputation.
- Follow best-practice standardization and operations.

See Planning Process here.

Revitalization effort objectives:

1. To support tour staff by automating the scheduling, providing a suite of materials and key messaging through a video.
2. To provide a more meaningful tour experience with subjective customer satisfaction results measured via a survey.

Audiences – Tour guests include the general public as well as students of all ages; youth groups and organizations; science teachers; and current and future engineers, biologists, environmentalists; select County employees and city officials; and others, such as real estate agents and developers and professionals within the waste management industry.

Operating cost – All costs are part of the operating budget, which includes insurance, printing, collateral materials and promotional items. Tours are led by existing landfill staff (biologists, operations specialists, engineers) and considered part of their job responsibilities, so no additional costs are expended.

Capital cost – There was a one-time cost of $20,000 to create the pre-tour video. Other expenditures include printing of a “Treasure Hunt” document and pencils that we give to youths to keep them engaged in the tour; promotional giveaway items that are part of our educational outreach, including reusable lunch bags and beverage bottles; and our Anatomy of a Landfill poster. Cost of these items is $800.
annually. All vehicles used are part of the landfill sites’ fleets and absorbed in their operating budgets.

Costs that would be incurred by a county attempting to replicate the program – In addition to the above, potentially liability insurance, if current policy does not allow for non-County persons to ride in County vehicles. Depending on how the county wanted to structure the program, it may consider hiring a community educator professional to lead the tours as opposed to using existing staff.

Time frame for development and implementation – March-October 2016

- Revitalization effort planned March-April 2016.
- Roll-out May 2016.
- Updated PowerPoint presentations completed May 1.
- New materials, handouts and safety protocols in use by May 15.
- Online reservation system operational in July.
- Video completed and incorporated in October 2016.
- Surveys sent to recent tour guests continuously.
We developed a landfill tour program strategy that included input from the guides and site managers. We rolled out the plan provided tour program binders to the staff.

The tours provide a real-time, guide-to-guest experience. A new online reservation system has professionalized the handling of tour requests. The loop is closed with a post-tour online survey sent to every group.

The Landfill Tour program includes:

- Online reservation system with support as needed from dedicated staff
- Set, standardized routes with designated stops; safety protocols
- Tour handouts – route sheets with facts about each featured stop, overview aerial maps with designated stops marked and landfill “at-a-glance” fact sheets, “Treasure Hunt” game and pencils for youth guests.
- Uniform talking points for tour guides
- Pre-tour Power Point presentation for technical audiences
- Pre-tour video for all audiences. The five-minute pre-tour video features footage of areas that guests cannot see on the tours, including drone and time-lapse footage. – CLICK TO VIEW VIDEO
- Post-tour online survey
Tour handouts:
At a glance fact sheet, tour stops, route map, “treasure hunt” game and Anatomy of a Landfill poster. Click here to see full-size versions of the materials.
Program Objective 1:
To support tour staff by automating the scheduling, providing a suite of materials and key messaging through a video.

Results:
All guides have expressed they feel more comfortable and confident dealing with the public by being armed with communication tools the revitalized tour program provides. The online reservation system sets specific times that tours are available, making it easier for guides to manage their schedules, as guiding tours is an “add-on” responsibility, not a formal part of their job responsibilities. The video in particular hits all the strategic messaging points, allowing the guides to focus on the engineering, biology and operations.

Program Objective 2:
To provide a more meaningful tour experience with subjective customer satisfaction results measured via a survey.

Results:
Click here to view survey results online.
The post-tour survey is optional. To date, we have received responses from 26 out of 48 tours, for a response rate of 54 percent.
Key findings include:

- 85 percent of respondents rate the guides as Excellent; 12 percent as Very Good.
- Of those who used the online reservation system, 58 percent rate the system as Excellent; 33 percent rate it as Very Good.
- 88 percent rate the handout materials to be useful and/or informative.
- 81 percent rate their overall Landfill Tour experience as Excellent; another 12 percent rate it as Very Good.
- 96 percent say they would refer a Landfill Tour to someone they know.

Representative comments provided on surveys that support reflect our customer satisfaction and meaningful tour experience objective:

- “It was great to actually get to know what Orange County does to ensure the landfills are sanitized and properly managed. Being able to see that in person was incredible and definitely worth touring!”
- “The guides were very knowledgeable and able to share their knowledge in an easy to understand manner.”
- “I appreciated the fine-tuning of the power point and the video was a nice touch. It aligned well with what I am teaching my students.”
- “Thank you, I cannot say enough positive things about experience!”
The formalization of the landfill tours has allowed for greater efficiency and more control of administrative and landfill staff time, minimizing the impact on landfill operations. These efficiencies include the reduced time to schedule the tours, which are now scheduled online; limiting landfill tours to certain days of the week and times of day; and smoother handling of tours because of clear direction and engaging collateral materials.

Implementation of the revitalized program has established an efficient infrastructure for the scheduling of tours as well as meaningful and relevant experience for visitors.

In particular, the EventBrite scheduling platform met our needs and offered the benefit of being a customizable open-source product, meaning it was free. We made each landfill site its own venue and built a page within the platform that explained the tour program requirements. It also allowed OCWR to offer availability of specific days and hours at each landfill—another way to standardize and reduce impact to everyday operations at the landfills. This feature, alone, has reduced staff time significantly.

The guides have expressed appreciation for the standardization, reporting that it makes them feel more comfortable and supported. Giving these tours is an add-on to their “real” jobs they are biology and engineering specialists.

Other landfill operators could easily adapt the structure of the OCWR tour program to their facilities.