

Taking science out of the

How do you get taxi drivers talking about your science? By meticulous planning. Marie Cowan explains.

Public relations professionals often get a bad press. If I asked for words to describe PR people I might get: spin doctors, smart suits, gin and tonics, fake tan, hair straighteners and long lunches, thrown back at me. This perception can make scientists cringe when they consider the business of communicating science. But this is the story of a highly successful, inspirational science outreach programme which built the foundation for a countrywide mapping survey, reaching an audience of three million and winning three awards in the process. This is the sort of story that might change scientists' perception of science communication and even encourage them to take their work to a wider audience.

How can you communicate ethical and social issues?

Research Councils UK are sponsoring a scheme for scientists to design and exhibit posters based on ethical and social issues at the 2007 British Association Festival of Science. The winner receives £750 and the opportunity to give a press conference at the festival, held at the University of York in September. This is an opportunity to meet all the leading science correspondents from Britain's national newspapers and broadcasters.

Deadline 16 May
www.the-ba.net/perspectives



In May 2004, the Geological Survey of Northern Ireland (GSNI) started an ambitious three-year geological mapping programme, the Tellus Project, that would cover the whole of Northern Ireland and bring significant economic and environmental benefits. We wanted to produce new maps to extend and deepen our knowledge of the geology, soils, natural resources and environment of Northern Ireland. This information would support exploration of mineral resources and oil and gas reserves, as well as informing land-use planning and providing a country-wide environmental baseline.

We needed to collect 22,000 geochemical samples of soils, stream sediments and stream waters across the country and in urban areas of Belfast and Londonderry. More importantly we needed to do an extremely low-level airborne geophysical survey over the whole region, the first for Northern Ireland since 1959. The plane would fly just 56 metres above the ground.

We recognised the huge communications challenge presented by this project. Many people could potentially see our work as intrusive,

particularly in rural areas where for many years they have borne the irritation of low-flying army helicopters. We wanted to make sure we did not lose expensive and limited survey time sorting out local objections to either the land or aerial surveys through a lack of understanding or suspicion on the part of the general public.

In collaboration with a public relations consultancy, Weber Shandwick, we developed a strategic communications plan to explain the wide range of local and national benefits that would result from the surveys. The communications strategy had to find the right channels to transform suspicions and negative mindsets. In essence, we sought to create understanding and acceptance, and even enthusiasm, for this unique project.

Worldwide, most airborne geophysical surveys are flown over largely deserted areas, so there is little scope for causing disturbance. In Northern Ireland there was a real risk that the low-flying survey aircraft could alarm the public and frighten livestock: we needed to alert and advise local farmers, landowners and other rural workers. Within this community higher risk groups included horse-riding

lab and into the streets



Improve your communication

Experience first hand how journalists report science by spending 3-8 weeks on a summer placement gaining experience of working within a media organisation. The BA Media Fellowships are intended to create a greater awareness and understanding of the workings of the media among practising scientists, clinicians, social scientists and engineers. The fellowships provide placements with the national press, broadcasters or internet media outlets.

Deadline 18 April
www.the-ba.net/mediafellows

obscure but wonderful endorsement was the fact that taxi drivers were talking about the project to visitors to Northern Ireland.

We thought all this interest in geology was too good an opportunity to miss so the team capitalised on the educational aspect of it by developing a series of events that let us evangelise about Earth science to primary and secondary schools.

The team organised a series of events to mark Irish Geology Week and National Science Week. These included a gold panning day for families, a Tellus open day at host airfields, an open day at the Geological Survey of Northern Ireland, an 'A' level schools' scientific debate, an educational roadshow, and 'School Challenge Days'.

All this work paid off. The Tellus Project won a PR excellence award from the Public Relations Institute of Ireland. This was presented to us by Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern at Mansion House in Dublin, equivalent to going to Number 10. Tellus was the only winner from Northern Ireland, and a first for any government department in the province.

If this was not enough, in Belfast in November 2006, the Tellus Project won two Gold Awards for PR Excellence from the Chartered Institute of Public Relations* in the Integrated Campaign and Public Sector categories. This will now take the Tellus Project through to the UK finals later this year.

**Planet Earth won 'External magazine of the year' in July 2006.*

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schools and stables, stud farms, chicken farms and herds of thoroughbred cattle. Other groups and industries requiring specific attention included quarries, airports, hot-air balloonists, parachutists and pigeon-fanciers. Not to mention the police, ambulance and coastguard services, the army and the local hospitals. In addition, the airborne survey would fly up to five kilometres into the Republic of Ireland so we had to contact government departments on the other side of the border.

For the sampling surveys we contacted every landowner or tenant farmer where we planned to sample. With the recent foot-and-mouth crisis and current restrictions aimed at controlling the spread of tuberculosis and brucellosis, keeping local farmers on-side was paramount.

We sent 80,000 letters to landowners outlining the value of the work and how we were doing it. Other forms of outreach included posters, web postings, articles in specialist magazines, and public information notices in regional and national newspapers. From the response to this campaign, the Tellus team created a risk database including Ordnance

Survey maps, a landowner address database (41,000 entries), and details of responses from the public. Weber Shandwick operated a telephone information line throughout the survey period and we tried to comply with any request to avoid a farmer's property. The team recorded such requests in the database and we used the information for day-to-day planning of both the airborne and ground surveys. The team relayed all this information to the flight team or ground crews and we telephoned each high-risk landowner prior to survey. In most cases landowners were very cooperative and willing to take the necessary precautions, such as stabling their horses or rescheduling quarry blasting.

And then came the presentations. The Tellus team addressed government departments, district councils, farmers' unions, agricultural shows, companies, universities, schools, and general interest groups. We held two technical seminars and gave three presentations to ministers.

Our media campaign secured 158 articles, seven radio and three television interviews. Analysts estimate this media work reached three million people. An