The approach to litter in Belgium: a never-ending story

Isabel De Buyscher
Adriaan Lowet

Contact

- Isabel De Buyscher,
  Fost Plus
  Martinus V straat 40, 1200 Brussels
  T +32 2 775 05 65, F +32 2 771 16 96
  isabel.debuyscher@fostplus.be

- Adriaan Lowet
  Fost Plus
  Martinus V straat 40, 1200 Brussels
  T +32 2 775 03 57, F +32 2 771 16 96
  adriaan.lowet@fostplus.be

Executive summary

Every country struggles with litter. The different strategies adopted vary widely, but they frequently have one thing in common: the trial and error aspect. At the ISWA/APESB World Congress 2009 we wish to feed the debate on the litter phenomenon based on our actual situation in Belgium in addition to several years’ experience of campaigning, plus the knowledge acquired from recent qualitative research.

Every anti-litter action and initiative has been initiated and coordinated for the past couple of years through consultation between the government and Fost Plus (private sector). The approach to the litter issue is supported by three pillars which aim to form a powerful weapon through their mutual complementary reinforcement.

The main objective of advertising is to place litter on the agenda and simultaneously to emphasise the absurdity of this behaviour. A number of challenges have to be overcome in the context of litter: low involvement, the heterogeneity of the target group, the person’s own individual behaviour and collective perception, the influence of external factors, etc.

The infrastructure pillar also merits attention: providing the citizen with the required infrastructure in order to prevent litter is a basic prerequisite for winning the battle against litter. Cooperation with local authorities is also an important factor requiring attention.
Finally, enforcement is the keystone. It must be possible to fine offenders and they must know and experience the fact that littering cannot go unpunished. The legal framework is in place in Belgium, but there is no evidence yet of practical implementation in the field.

To prepare our future strategy and based on the realisation that litter is a complex and often elusive factor, we organised a qualitative study. The question of sociological and psychological drivers and the external factors which cause littering were the central starting point. The findings form a valuable contribution to the strategy for the coming years.

The most important causes are as follows:

- Person-related factors: individuals attach more importance to their own immediate gain above the interest of society. When a person is pursuing a goal, a particular mood and atmosphere prevail. It then becomes a personal advantage to discard irritating waste quickly.

- The standard for litter is not powerful enough to gain the upper hand and is perceived as counter-productive.

- Environment-related factors also have an important influence. Anonymous and/or dirty environments all too often generate the feeling that littering is possible and permissible.

The research also shows that—ideally—the three existing pillars are enriched in the future by two complementary aspects.

The material environment has a strong influence on littering behaviour. Unoccupied premises, graffiti, and dirty districts or squares combined with anonymity ensure that inhibitions disappear.

There is a need for initiatives to encourage local community work/participation and where the focus is not only on litter but rather on a more far-reaching goal, a meta-goal.

A direct consequence of the above analysis means that there is a pressing need for cooperation with a range of parties who must play a role within the defined pillars. The focus will tend to centre more on tailored work and a sector-oriented approach. An integrated approach will be a critical success factor in the battle against litter. But how achievable is this approach, that’s the big question.

Introduction

What is Fost Plus?

Fost Plus is a non-profit association that was founded in 1994 on a voluntary and proactive basis by the private sector to offer a global and sustainable solution for managing household packaging waste in cooperation with all of the stakeholders (the business community, consumers, local councils, inter-communal bodies, recyclers, etc.).

Fost Plus is the only body recognised by the government in Belgium (recognition for 5 years, at present from 2009 to 2013) for the recovery obligation covering household packaging.
Fost Plus fulfils the legal obligations relating to household packaging waste borne by companies which place packaged household products on the market. Fost Plus is fully financed (via the Green Point) by its 5,644 members who together currently represent 92% of the Belgian market for household packaging.

Fost Plus’s activities entail promoting, coordinating and financing selective collection, sorting and recycling household waste, in order to reach the recycling and recovery objectives stipulated by the legislation. In recent years, Fost Plus has acquired a great deal of expertise in the organisation of selective collection, the associated framework communication and auditing execution.

What is litter?
Litter is defined as small, solid waste left scattered around by people through negligence at a place not intended for it. It is an annoying phenomenon that arises from a lack of discipline. Moreover, the problem is growing along with the population, mobility and consumption outside the home. We understand litter to include cigarette butts, chewing gum, organic waste, packaging, etc.

A clear distinction must be made between litter and illegally dumped waste. After all, illegally dumped waste is the result of evasive behaviour vis-à-vis a compensation arrangement, and often inspired by profit: the citizen pays in proportion to the quantity of waste that is submitted in Belgium.

Link between Fost Plus and litter
Although Fost Plus believes that litter can’t be identified with packaging waste, the business community has made a proactive commitment to participate actively and financially with the affected parties in developing and implementing a litter strategy that strives to effect a change in behaviour.

The little data available indicates that, of the items of litter encountered, packaging accounts for one-third. However, the cause of this phenomenon does not lie with the packaging or packaged product, nor with the party who has placed the packaged product on the market. The citizen is the cause and ironically enough, it is the citizen who is irritated by it.

The first consideration must be a change of attitude, which over time evolves into a change of behaviour. In other words, littering must be viewed as socially unacceptable behaviour, both among other people and by the individual himself.

The past

Three pillars
The literature analysis that was carried out on behalf of Fost Plus in 2001 included the recommendation to tackle the litter problem via a multi-track policy: awareness must go hand in hand with enforcement and be supported by the necessary infrastructure.

- Communication, awareness-raising and education: realisation of absurd behaviour
- Infrastructure: sufficient empty and well-located litter bins, sweeping rounds, maintenance, etc.
- Enforcement: administrative penalties, sworn public officials, etc.

These pillars must be built on simultaneously and consistently, so that they reinforce each other in a complementary way.

1. Advertising
The ‘inthelitterbin’ baseline (‘indevuilbak’) forms the common umbrella for all types of actions and initiatives. The campaigns are all multimedia and address the target group on various fronts.

An attempt is being made to achieve general coverage (all citizens), with a specific focus on a specific target group (young people/drivers and public transport users/cyclists, etc.) in addition in each campaign year.

The advertising campaigns that have been carried out since 2006 have already evolved completely. Permanent feedback-seeking (a qualitative survey, pre and post testing) on the ‘type of campaign’ and especially the ‘tone of voice’ to be used has resulted in constant fine-tuning of the form and message. Experience has taught us that advertising about litter demands a specific approach which must stray from traditional paths if we wish to ‘reach the target group emotionally’ (low involvement).

As an illustration, we have included some examples from the 2008 and 2009 campaign in Flanders in the annex.

2. Infrastructure
Optimum infrastructure is essential to allow the citizen to reach the conclusion during the awareness-development process that the solution is at hand: ‘inthelitterbin’. After all, any shortcomings at the infrastructure level can be used as an excuse for unacceptable behaviour.

Supporting local authorities in their battle against litter is a fundamental element of the ‘inthelitterbin’ campaign. Each year the campaign offers logistical and financial support to local council initiatives to raise the public profile of their local actions. Moreover, the campaign also provides subsidies for the purchase of street litter bins and other infrastructural features so that the litter problem can be tackled locally.

3. Enforcement
All of the previous initiatives are virtually pointless if no method is planned for calling stubborn citizens to account. It must be possible to identify and penalise offenders. Given that environmental enforcement is a regional competency in Belgium, the various regions do not necessarily act at the same speed.

In Wallonia, the region has started to subsidise officials who are competent to record environment-related violations.

In Flanders, the environmental enforcement decree entered into effect on 1 May 2009. This decree gives local councils legal power to impose sanctions for contaminating the public road and publicly accessible areas.
Action can also be taken in Brussels by local council, regional and inter-council officials for leaving dangerous and non-dangerous waste in public or private locations.

**Approach to target groups**
Just as there is no such thing as the profile of the polluter, there is also no question of ‘the approach’ in the litter dossier. When launching the litter project, a strategy was devised based on a target group approach. The priority groups that were pushed to the front were young people, drivers and public transport users, as well as holidaymakers and day-trippers. Each year, the campaign was aimed particularly at a specific target group, without losing sight of the remainder of the population in the process.

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**An outstanding survey**

**Assignment and plan**
The assignment for the research was to diagnose the sociological, psychological and other factors which prompt littering behaviour. One hundred and forty consumers participated in this qualitative survey, which involved a mix in terms of gender, age, habitat, professional activity and social class.

Data was collected both through group discussions and via one-to-one conversations. The latter involved conversations with individuals who had been caught red-handed littering. A collection and investigation of a range of domestic and foreign publications and research reports on the issue of litter were carried out in parallel and a number of expert interviews were conducted.

**Results**
What prompts individuals to litter? We outline the three major clusters of factors which can trigger littering.

1. **Intrinsic/person-related factors**
The large volume of litter appears to be generated by individuals who attach more interest to their own immediate gain above that of any other general societal interest.

The dominant factor for this broad group of individuals is that when outside their homes, their thoughts are primarily focused on their own activity and goals. They are on the road from somewhere to somewhere. They have their own plan. And certainly when they move in a group they find themselves in a self-constructed bubble of a mood and atmosphere. All of this leads to a type of tunnel vision whereby standards must be extraordinarily strong and imperative if they, as a social standard, aim to gain the upper hand over an immediate personal gain. This immediate personal gain is nothing other than to discard occasionally dirty and annoying waste quickly and effectively, and to stay comfortable within one’s own bubble and flow of activities.

It is by no means conscious or carefully considered behaviour. The behaviour which individuals adopt is both egocentric and regressive. Egocentric, because the personal subjective interest and advantage occupies a central position. Regressive, because the littering
behaviour is developed in order to achieve and maintain forms of pleasure, conviviality and a pleasant atmosphere.

It seems like childish or teenage behaviour. But despite the fact that young people and teenagers belong to this subgroup to a significant degree, it essentially appears to involve a group of individuals that is constantly changing in size, with constantly changing behaviour, depending on the circumstances. Principled and law-abiding individuals also appear to submit occasionally to this sub-group’s own dynamic and engage in littering behaviour despite themselves.

2. **The weight and operation of the standard**

The research carried out clearly reveals that the litter standard as such is not powerful enough to have an effective impact at the level of individuals who are in their bubble and flow of activities, so to speak. This is in contrast to other legal or decency standards and rules which individuals easily appear to comply with outside their homes, such as the rules of the road.

The standard also appears to be seen and experienced as quite imbalanced: the litter offender assesses the impact of possible wrong personal behaviour as quite low in contrast to the scale of a potential punishment, and asserts that there is a lot of pressure and fuss surrounding what is merely a small or frivolous error…just think of each butt or piece of chewing gum that you throw away yourself.

And it is primarily a standard where compliance can have a counter-productive effect and contains or may contain risks for the individual: the majority of individuals perceive and experience a situation at this moment where proper disposal of small waste in the litter bin produces exactly what the person wishes to avoid by simply throwing something away immediately: contact with something that is dirty and filthy, contact with something that is annoying and harmful.

3. **Peripheral/environment-related factors**

Initially this involves what is often faulty infrastructure: litter bins frequently appear not to be appropriate for their environment and the type of public that predominates there, are poorly maintained, overfull, or dirty and unattractive.

The principle of ‘litter attracts litter’ also plays a role, in combination with the experience of anonymous environments. At locations where litter lies and builds up, individuals easily acquire the feeling that littering is possible and permissible. In environments which individuals also perceive and experience as anonymous, and where they feel that no one worries about the space or it belongs to no one, possible inhibitions or forms of concern and responsibility disappear completely.

**Future strategy**

How do we motivate individuals to litter less frequently at the very least?

**From three to five pillars**

The three original pillars remain relevant, but can be further enhanced as a result of this research.
1. Advertising and awareness-raising

It is absolutely vital to keep putting litter on the agenda and to denounce it (a never-ending story). The citizen must be informed about why litter is not permissible. To this end, the standard for litter must be clearly defined. It must be clear that nothing can be left on the ground and everything belongs in the litter bin.

This also leads to the right choice of the baseline: ‘Litter in the litter bin and nowhere else’.

It must also be ensured that the style and tonality of the advertising is not mainstream but, in view of the low involvement, sufficiently accessible, and must simultaneously make a genuine impact. We always endeavour, in current and future campaigns, to ensure that the message is clear and well-defined. We are more than ever convinced that the citizen must be addressed directly. By taking advantage of specific contexts (street, park, platform, beach, etc) we also wish to bring the problem closer to everyone’s individual environment.

In addition to content and form, the carriers of advertising are important. There must be a broad presence but always with the same consistent message and visual world.

2. Infrastructure

This must go beyond merely making infrastructure available. It means offering individuals the opportunity to dispose of their waste effectively and conveniently. It covers everything related to the installation, design, conspicuousness and even the attractiveness of litter bins. This implies cleaning and maintaining these. It involves tailored work depending on the environment, location, the dominant profile of individuals who pass by, and their type of activity and consumption.

3. Enforcement

Enforcement is and remains important. However, it must be more visible, systematic and continuous. The feeling must be created that there is a real likelihood that the offender will be seen. It is extremely important here to work towards forms of reasonable punishment, in order to avoid expressions of blind resistance.

In addition to the continuing work on the above three pillars of awareness-raising, infrastructure and enforcement, attention to the environment and the principle of participation must –in theory–be included in the policy in the future as the fourth and fifth pillars.

4. Material environment

There is a need for actions and initiatives which intervene in the material environment as such: work must be done on and concern allocated to a clean and decent environment. This entails more than keeping streets, squares or parks clean, preferably by manual means. It also involves tackling inoccupancy and other examples of neglect, flowers and green spaces, street lighting, safety or residence. Locations and environments must be clearly claimed.

Individuals must acquire the feeling that public space belongs to someone and consequently that littering is unacceptable.
5. Community work/participation
There is a need for actions and initiatives where work is done to foster community work/participation and where the litter issue is placed in the framework of a more far-reaching goal (meta-objective).

This implies that a multitude of different parties will have to cooperate on this problem on clearly defined objectives and depending on clear emphases within each of the five defined central topics: awareness-raising, infrastructure, enforcement, the environment and participation.

Approach more from the environment than from the target group
The research reveals that initiatives with tailored work must be oriented towards specific locations and environments and the type of public located there. This implies an approach which is not target group oriented, unless the group can be linked to a specific environment or definite activity.

Follow-up path

Quantitative research
The qualitative study has raised various questions which require further research. This research aims to validate which section of citizens falls into a specific category (segmentation) and whether links exist with certain socio-demographic factors. The study will also gauge knowledge and an assessment of the litter standard. It is important for this research to be repeatable so that certain attitudes and trends can be monitored via this tool. The final report on the quantitative research will be ready in the autumn of 2009.

Strategy for 2010-2013
The broadest possible platform of the affected players is a critical condition for success for an adequate approach to litter in the future: public transport, operators of motorway restaurants and car parks, specialists in city marketing, cities and local councils, local community workers, education, youth movements, senior citizens’ associations, catering, etc.

The objective then has to be defined clearly: on the one hand a reduction in (the quantity of) litter and on the other, an improvement in perceptions of litter. From there an attempt will first be made to effect a change in attitude which evolves over time to a change in behaviour.

Conclusion
Litter is an irritating phenomenon that has always existed but which is increasing with modern lifestyles and consumption patterns. The citizen is responsible as the polluter; the local council is responsible for enforcement and tidying up; the private sector/business community is prepared to participate actively and financially with all of the affected players in educational and other campaigns which strive to modify perceptions and behaviour.
However, at the same time nothing is as difficult as getting a grasp of the litter phenomenon: everyone litters sometime, but not everywhere and all the time. Person-related and external factors can clearly play a facilitating role in littering behaviour. The future approach also demands – as best as possible and within reason – tailored work focusing on specific locations. This implies the involvement and necessary contribution by and cooperation with a range of other parties. The government alone cannot resolve this, nor can the business community. An integrated approach where numerous players make their contribution is recommended. This means a broad social base or platform which aims to formulate a coordinated action plan from the same objective. The 5 pillars always form the reference framework for these actions:

1. Communication with a genuine impact
2. High-performing infrastructure
3. A real likelihood of penalties, enforcement
4. A claimed and well-maintained material environment
5. A comprehensive approach that goes beyond a mere focus on litter

References

Mythos (2009). *Studie van de sociologische, psychologische and andere motivatoren naar littersgedrag* [*Study of the sociological, psychological and other motivators for littering behaviour*].

Annex

Advertising 2008: normal content is polluted by litter.

Advertising and outdoor 2009: to-the-point and directly addressing
Guerilla on street 2008 and 2009: oversized litter obstructs pedestrians.