

CASE STUDY: Helping Bay Area Communities Prevent Costly Sewer Backups

ABAG PLAN – ABAG, Oakland, CA

Background

- Sewer backups represented a major cause of loss for communities around the San Francisco Bay. Essentially internal actions – training, maintenance and infrastructure investment – and limited public outreach such as bill stuffers were not reducing the problem.
- Both the frequency and cost associated with sewer backups were skyrocketing – a multi-million dollar problem.

Challenges

- Research revealed that homeowners – the last line of defense in backup prevention – were not engaged in combating the problem and were unaware of the risk of sewer backups and what they might be doing to prevent them and protect their homes.
- Sewer backup prevention was a complex and somewhat foreign subject that needed to be communicated to diverse audiences

Goal and Objectives

- Reduce the frequency and severity of sewer backups by:
 - Making risk-diagnosis and back-up protection info available to target homeowners.
 - Generating awareness of homeowner responsibilities related to backup prevention.
 - Achieving installation of backup prevention devices on at-risk connections.
 - Attracting the participation of partners or sponsors to the public service campaign.
 - Setting the stage for an ongoing phased public awareness program.

Strategies

- Build and brand the campaign around a smart and cost-effective Website, www.sewersmart.org.
- Offer homeowners easily understood information about their sewer connections; their responsibility related to them and tips for maintaining a problem-free connection.
- Engage homeowners through an interactive Web-component, a five-question risk assessment test -- to evaluate their need for taking preventive measures.
- Drive target audiences to the Website by integrated components including a kick-off proclamation and demonstration, extensive media outreach, a television PSA and an internal information program.

Results

- ABAG launched the campaign by proclaiming November “*Be Sewer Smart -- Prevent Sewer Backups this Rainy Season*” month in the Bay Area. (2005-2014 ongoing)
- Campaign reached thousands of target-audience homeowners prompting them to take the risk assessment test and request, and install, free backup prevention devices.
- Sewer backup claims decreased by 75% over the first three years for ABAG PLAN members
- Program won prestigious Northern California Silver Anvil Award for Public Affairs Program