

Awards for Excellence in Public Relations 2006

Category: F Public Information **Name of Entrant:** Weber Shandwick
Name of Client: The Geological Survey of Northern Ireland (GSNI)/Department of Enterprise, Trade & Investment (DETI) – **THE TELLUS PROJECT**

A. THE BRIEF

In May 2004 the Geological Survey of Northern Ireland embarked on an ambitious three-year geological mapping project that would cover the whole of Northern Ireland. This project is designed to bring significant economic benefits to Northern Ireland. The project involves staff taking soil samples at regular intervals across NI, with an aircraft flying at very low altitudes of between 55-90 metres across NI using electromagnetic equipment. The aims of the project are two-fold:

- To understand and contribute to the sustainable development and management of NI's natural resources
- To measure and assess the environmental well-being of NI using mapping techniques

DETI recognised the huge communication challenges presented by this project, which had the potential to be perceived as intrusive and may have stirred very negative public reaction given the legacy of low flying army aircraft transporting troops and conducting surveillance in Northern Ireland. It was essential that expensive and limited survey time was not lost as a result of local objections to either the land or aerial surveys through a lack of understanding or suspicion on the part of the general public.

DETI engaged Weber Shandwick to develop and manage a strategic communications programme. The communications strategy had to find the right channels to transform suspicions and negative mindsets. Ultimately, the communications aim was to create understanding and acceptance and where possible enthusiasm for this unique, state-of-the art project.

B. STATEMENT OF OBJECTIVES

- To position GSNI and The Tellus Project positively to the Northern Ireland public
- To stimulate awareness, understanding and support for the rationale and methodology of project among key influencers during survey period
- To ensure location and community specific understanding of and support for the project
- To ensure that no survey time was lost due to lack of understanding about why the project was taking place
- To potentially explain the benefits and promote proof positive of its results

C. PROGRAMME PLANNING AND STRATEGY

Upon appointment in June 2004, Weber Shandwick identified the key challenge as preparing GSNI's stakeholders for the commencement of the ground and aerial surveys.

Stage 1: Define core programme messages with the Tellus and DETI teams

- This programme will serve and enhance the interests of the whole community
- The benefits of the project will be manifold and help protect and develop our assets for local communities, the environment and the economy
- The Tellus Project is open and transparent about its work
- The results of the project will be made available for the good of everyone
- This programme provides a vital community service

Stage 2: Create brand identity

The project was given the title 'Tellus' after the Roman goddess of the earth. The title formed the underlying theme for all communications activities: "Tellus - Understanding Underground: A Countryside Mapping Project."

Stage 3: Identify audiences

Groups/organisations with the potential to be disrupted by the survey work, e.g.:

- Landowners e.g. National Trust
- Farming Community
- Equine, avian and aeronautical organisations

Potential third party 'champions':

- Agricultural / rural bodies
- Political and community representatives
- Schools and colleges
- Media

Stage 4: Agree key messages

- Tellus serves and enhances the interests of the whole community
- The project will enhance sustainable economic development for the good of everyone in NI
- The project will help maintain and improve the quality of our environment
- The land and aerial surveys will be unobtrusive and cause minimal disruption.
- The information gathered will help shape decisions on aspects of NI's future for many years to come

Stage 5: Create a communications strategy

- **Develop influencer programme, covering politicians, local councils, other Government agencies, relevant lobby and interest groups**

(i) Politicians and Local Councils

The Tellus team made considerable effort to ensure that public representatives and relevant officers at local councils were fully briefed on the aims and potential impact of the project.

Politicians were briefed at Council meetings with Antrim, Ards, Ballymena, Banbridge, Belfast, Castlereagh, Derry City, Fermanagh, Lisburn, Newtownabbey, North Down and Strabane.

The team also sought to keep key council officers informed about the project including Countryside Managers, Environmental Health Officers and Parks and Open Spaces Managers.

The following government bodies were briefed as part of the influencer programme: Department of the Environment including Environment and Heritage Service, Department for Agriculture and Rural Development including Central Policy Group Veterinary Service and Forest Service, Department for Education including the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), and Department of Regional Development, Department of Finance and Personnel, Department of Health.

(ii) Lobby and Interest Groups

In recognition of the importance of the co-operation of the farming and agricultural community the Tellus team briefed the Ulster Farmers Union and the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association (NIAPA) on the benefits and potential impacts of the project.

- **Develop targeted educational programme**

The Tellus team had a remit to develop an interest in geology and science amongst secondary level schools. This was achieved through:

- Hosting a gold panning day for families in Mourne area
- An open day at GSNI premises, providing presentations and guided tour and hands-on approach to discovering 'what's underground'
- Organising and sponsoring of a Northern Ireland secondary schools' scientific debate
- An educational road show to mark National Science Week
- Articles published in ES2k magazine (Earth Science 2000) throughout year
- Creation of a real life tribunal for secondary school pupils, in association with Northern Ireland's centre of scientific excellence W5

- **Create a focused public and community outreach programme including a clear "customer" relations and complaint handling systems.**

The team created an effective community outreach programme that included sending letters to all land owners informing them of the benefits of the project as well as seeking permission to sample soils and survey their land from an aircraft. These letters were well received throughout the community. Queries and issues regarding more information were handled through an especially dedicated Tellus Project Information line organised and staffed by the Tellus team and staff at Weber Shandwick.

Over 60,000 letters were posted to landowners and keepers of susceptible animals. These letters advised individuals with specific concerns to contact the Tellus Information line, which was managed by Weber Shandwick. Over 600 calls were taken by the helpline and only twelve incidents were reported none of which produced negative publicity. Results of this community outreach are detailed in Table 1 below. A risk database was compiled by the team which geographically located contactees and facilitated contact throughout the airborne survey.

- **Design an events roll out plan**

In 2005, a ministerial launch was organised at Newtownards airport and a subsequent regional launch in Enniskillen to communicate the benefits of the survey and launch the first airborne phase of flying. Key stakeholders and media were briefed and given tours of the aircraft. The launches were covered extensively in the local and regional press.

Findings from the first phase of research were presented to key stakeholders at a briefing in Belfast's Ramada Hotel late 2005. The second airborne phase was communicated to key stakeholders in 2006 via a ministerial launch hosted at Northern Ireland's Science Park.

- **Create a pro-active media strategy supported by a rapid rebuttal and issues management plan**

This was an essential part of the work of the Tellus Team. The media strategy was aimed at keeping public and key stakeholders aware of the progress and developments of the project. The strategy involved targeting all national and regional papers. Articles were supported with public information notices that outlined the areas to be surveyed and communicated the information line details.

Journalists were invited to observe the survey aircraft in flight from a second aircraft, which generated premium aerial photography and broadcast outputs. Out of 172 media hits generated only 4 were not positive and none were outright negative stories:

Media	Hits	Positive	Not Positive
Press	158	154	4
Broadcast	14	14	0

- **Issues Management and Media Training**

Weber Shandwick prepared a questions and answers document outlining potential 'issues' that might arise. This was followed by the creation of a crisis management programme and a contingency plan for a complaint or emergency reported during the airborne survey. Key managers from the Tellus team also received specially designed media and presentation training from Weber Shandwick.

A range of communication 'products' were created in order to ensure information was readily available to key groups:

- A dedicated information line was set up
- A DVD showing the aircraft in motion was created
- An information powerpoint was created for use at council briefings
- A range of marketing collaterals were created to include a nomadic stand, pop up stands, branded pens and rulers
- A series of adverts and fliers for publication in agricultural show programmes and race meetings
- Posters for distribution in police and garda stations, riding schools, Post offices, pharmacies, corner shops, schools, etc.
- One A4 double sided fact sheet promoting an information line

- A contingency plan for a complaint or emergency reported during the airborne survey was created and put in place

D. THE MEASUREMENT STAGE

Key performance indicators were put in place relating to the five elements of the communications programme listed below. The results of the campaign are detailed in Table 1:

- 1. Proactive media strategy supported by a rapid rebuttal and issues management plan**
Target: To achieve less than 50 negative responses over 12-month period
- 2. Robust and sensitive influencer programme, covering politicians, local councils, other Government agencies, relevant lobby and interest groups**
Target: Secure one meeting bi-monthly over 12-month period
- 3. Targeted educational programme to reach schools and academics**
Target: Work directly with 10 schools over 12-month period
- 4. Focused public and community outreach programme including a clear "customer" relations and complaint handling systems**
Target: To achieve less than 50 negative responses over 12-month period
All complaints have been resolved satisfactorily. The outreach programme is viewed as a best practise case study amongst DETI. No flight days were lost as a result of complaints or negative publicity.
- 5. Events plan.**
Target: Create/attend six 'events' over 12-month period

Aims	Outreach method	Timing	Nos / Results	People 'reached'	Comments
2	Letters to landowners	2004-6	63,000	126,000	
4	Information line	2004-6	616	616	- only 12 calls were project specific complaints - only 28 requested additional information
4	Posters in public places	2004-6	550	500,000	
4	PINS	2004-6	55	182,401	
1	Media relations coverage Belfast Telegraph, News Letter, Irish News	2004-6	6	345,900	
1	Newspaper articles	2004-6	40+	500,000	
3	Schools targeted	2004-6	13	2012	
3	Schools Challenge Day at W5	2006	88	125	
1	Radio interviews	2004-6	7	1,118,500	
1	TV interviews	2004-6	3	999,000	
2	District Council Briefings	2004-6	6	120	100% coverage
5	Stands at agri/equine shows	2004-6	7	85,000	100% coverage
5	Launches (Newtownards and Enniskillen)	2005	2	100 (key stakeholders)	
5	Presentation of interim findings to key stakeholders	2006	1	100 (key stakeholders)	
5	Launch of phase II of airborne survey	2006	1	60 (key stakeholders)	

Table 1

E. BUDGET

£350,000 / €505,221 - Over three years