THE BRIEF

In September 2009 Dublin City Council launched, dublinbikes, a facility whereby members of the public can join a public bicycle scheme to avail of bicycles to travel around the city; journeys lasting less than 30 minutes are free of charge.

The scheme is part of a civic amenity contract which Dublin City Council entered into with JC Decaux (JCD), following public tender. The scheme is worth approximately €26.5 million to the Council over 15 years. JCD received planning permission to erect 72 metro panel advertising stations on which they can sell advertising; the bike scheme is paid for from revenue raised by this advertising. Similar schemes operate in other European cities, including Paris.

There are 450 bikes, located at 40 bike stations around Dublin city centre, that will be maintained and operated by JC Decaux for 15 years.

Anticipation of the scheme started in 2008 when the partnership with JC Decaux (JCD) was first announced. The experience of other cities, where bikes were vandalised and/or stolen gave rise to negative media coverage and a negative perception of dublinbikes, during the twelve months when the bikes were on order and the bike stations were being put in place.

A PR launch was required to create a positive profile for dublinbikes in order to ensure its success and longevity for the people that use Dublin City every day.

STATEMENT OF OBJECTIVES

There were a number of communications objectives for the roll-out of dublinbikes onto the streets of Dublin. As a public service provider, operating in a recession, Dublin City Council needed to show that it had procured much needed infrastructure for Dublin at good value to the tax-payer, it had to ensure that the scheme was welcomed and continually used by pedestrians throughout the City.

In summary, the objectives were as follows:-

- Create positive awareness that dublinbikes is open for business
- Generate at least 5,000 registrations in Year 1
- Raise awareness that the scheme is a public private partnership (PPP) that provides value-for-money, both for the City and its citizens
- Ensure that all potential users know how the scheme works - the need to register, how / where to register, cost of renting a bike, discounts available, where the bike stations are located
- Prove that the bikes are vandal and theft proof to dispel negative speculation

- Increase cycling in the City as part of the Council's commitment to making Dublin City more attractive and sustainable

PROGRAMME PLANNING & STRATEGY

In June 2009, when a date for the roll-out of the dublinbikes was agreed, Dublin City Council's press office devised a concentrated PR campaign to counteract any further negative coverage and to publicise the start of the dublinbikes scheme.

Save for ads on the JCD Metro poles, there was no other advertising campaign employed and so generating extensive coverage in the print and broadcast media was necessary to achieve the PR objectives.

Stage 1: July / August 2009 – counteract negative coverage

It was decided that a PR campaign was required to flush out the negative coverage early and deal with it pro-actively so that the Council was seen to be leading the story about dublinbikes rather than reacting to a negative story. Therefore when the bikes were ready to be launched the story would not be a negative one about the contract.

1. The Press Officer briefed all of the team who would be taking calls so that each could deal with queries authoritatively and knowledgeably.

2. A Press Release was prepared and issued to all media detailing the contract and dispelling negative accusations. Full details were given of the finances and the value added that the City Council expected to achieve as a result of the deal.

3. Media preparation was organised for key City Council Spokespeople, including the Elected Members who were prepared to promote the dublinbikes scheme.

4. A detailed messaging document was prepared with key messages to be repeated in any interviews / media briefings:-
   - The contract was the first time a public amenity dividend came out of advertising
   - The dublinbikes scheme was part of a wider public amenity package
   - Dublin City Council was guaranteed to receive its return on the deal

5. Q&A document was prepared for the Spokespeople with all of the possible questions that might be asked, along with answers to each.

6. Dublin City Council sent a Letter to the Editors outlining the facts about the scheme.

In response to media queries, the Press Officer briefed journalists and the City Council Spokespeople did several radio and TV interviews, including on RTE's "Drivetime". The result was that both sides of the story about the contract were dealt with fairly and the issue was closed, in advance of the launch of the scheme: Dublin City Council had convincingly argued that the deal was a good one for the public and any aspects of it that the media might label 'controversial' were discussed openly well in advance of the bikes being available on the streets.

Stage 2: Create Awareness and Understanding of the Scheme – August & September 2009:-

The date of Sunday 13th September 2009 was set for the launch of dublinbikes when the scheme would 'go live' to the public. It was decided that during August and in early September the scheme would be promoted in print and broadcast media as a safe, efficient, fun and easy way to get around the city.

1. Press Release #2 was prepared and issued to all print, radio and TV News Desks four weeks ahead of the launch, on 10th August. The new dublinbikes website going live was the news hook. The website allowed people to register and subscribe to join the scheme. In the following days, the Press Office arranged for Samantha Libreri of RTE News to test the bike scheme well in advance of the bike stations being in place.

2. A media briefing was organised for Monday 7th September 2009, in Dame Street, at one of the new soon-to-be launched Bike Stations:-

- Invitations were sent out to the News Editors, Pictures Editors, Environment and Motoring Corrs in all of the print media as well as TV and Radio. Follow-up calls were made to line up interest and attendance.
- All journalists were given the opportunity to try out the bikes and enjoy a free cycle around the city - they could pre-book a 30 minute slot between 13.00 and 17.00 that day (provisions were made for reporters who came without reserving too).
- In all, 13 members of the Media reserved slots and a further 9 turned up on the day to try out the bikes, including from The Star, Irish Examiner, Irish Independent, Irish Times, the Sun, Evening Herald, RTE Morning Ireland, Spin 103.8, Dublin's 98 FM, Radio na Gaeltachta, Today FM, TV3, City Channel and Press Association (PA).
- A Press Invitation and Media Q&A (Press Release #3) was prepared and issued to all media, highlighting the benefits of the scheme, the cost, how-to use it and what safeguards were in place against theft and vandalism.
- A number of Spokespeople from Dublin City Council were briefed and available to do media interviews.

Coverage on the broadcast and print media that day and in the following days was excellent and meant that dublinbikes was one of the main stories throughout the week leading up to the Sunday 13th

September launch date, including editorials and articles in the Saturday 12th and Sunday 13th September newspapers. The Press Office took numerous calls throughout the week from the Media and lined up countless interviews with our Spokespeople.

Stage 3: Consumer Launch – Sunday 13th September

1. Media were invited to photograph and participate with over 180 City Council Elected Members, staff and others associated with the Council gathered at Christ Church for a huge Cycle down to the Quays on Sunday 13th September to mark the start of the scheme going live to the public.

2. Press Release #4 was issued to all media on Friday 11th September, announcing the scheme was starting that weekend and reminding the public of the website, the operating hours and the costs.

3. Interviews were lined up with City Council Spokespeople on radio and TV – RTE TV, 98FM, Spin 1038, INN, Newstalk and several print media all turned up for the photocall. Interviews and the press release reminded the public how to register for the scheme and the operating hours and costs involved.

4. A picture tells a thousand words and so we put a lot of effort into planning the photograph and pitching it to the Pictures Desks. We organised a cherry-picker on the opposite side of the river, at the Four Courts, to provide height for all of them in order to help them get good photographs that would show how many bikes were available. Around a dozen photographers from all of the newspapers and photo agencies turned up.

5. Vox-pops were carried out by almost all media with people using the bikes that day – both those in the official first cycle and members of the public throughout the day.

The coverage in that day's radio and TV reports was extremely positive, as was the press coverage on the following day. The photographs in the newspapers on Monday 14th September were spectacular, with the sun shining on the Liffey, not a car in sight and hundreds of cyclists enjoying the sunny day. Over 1,000 people registered to use the bikes that day.

Stage 4: Post-Launch

The aim was to maintain interest in the bikes and build on the momentum of the launch:-

1. On Monday 14th September the Press Office team made themselves available to members of the media to show them how the scheme worked. Several radio shows did test runs that day; the Press Office also sent a bike into the Afternoon Show studio in RTE TV.

2. Inevitably the first 'vandalised bike' story appeared, in the Evening Herald. Many follow-up calls ensued. Dublin City Council first clarified the position with JC Decaux and found that the story was

without foundation. The Press Office therefore strongly refuted the story on several radio interviews. Press Office also contacted Andrew Phelan who agreed to clarify any stories of this nature in future.

3. Press Release #5 was issued on 18th September, detailing the numbers of people who had registered to use the scheme – 6,000 in the first week, 1,000 more than the entire Year 1 target. The scheme was a success.

It was decided that no further efforts would be made to generate media coverage from this point onwards, but rather to deal with queries as and when they arose. The media has continued to write – positively - about dublinbikes and to contact the Press Office with queries about user numbers.

Conclusion

1. The PR campaign was hugely successful in that the number of people registering to use the bikes and the usage of the bikes surpassed all expectations.
2. The majority of media coverage was positive, encouraging the public to try out the scheme; a number of negative articles did appear and in some cases, journalists 'ate their words' weeks / months later, such as The Evening Herald's Kilian Doyle.
3. The "vandalism" story had the effect of illustrating that the system was working as it was designed to, as we had said it would in our press releases, media briefings and interviews all along.

MEASUREMENT

- The overwhelming success of the scheme surpassed the Council's expectations and projections in the first week - nearly six-fold the number of users that was projected for the first year have already registered for dublinbikes, six months since it was launched.
- Furthermore, vandalism and theft that was predicted has not occurred – only one bike was not returned and this was recovered the following day.
- Media coverage was positive around the launch and continues to be. We strongly believe that the extremely high initial uptake of the scheme was due largely to the positive media coverage that was generated in the days leading up to and just after the launch.
- The contract has not been an issue since end August 2009.
- As a comparison, Marseille, France is roughly the same size as Dublin; they have 1,000 bikes in their scheme and only 3,000 registered users.
- The number of people cycling in Dublin City has increased by 12% when measured in November 2009 against November 2008 by Dublin City Council Annual Canal Cordon Count.

Each time a bike is hired from a dublinbikes station it is recorded on an advanced technological tracking system. There are over 27,000 registered users for dublinbikes and on average and the scheme is still hugely popular, more than six months after its launch - a bike is rotated 7.2 times per day. The average duration of a journey is 16 minutes; 96% of journeys are free, i.e. last less than 30 minutes. With 40 bike stations, there is an average of 693 subscribers for each station.

The following figures relate to the period 13th September 2009 to 28th February 2010:

- Subscriptions within first seven days = 6,000 (1,000 more than the target for Year 1)
- Subscription total in first six months = 27,715
- Total number of Journeys = 410,499
- Long-term Hire total = 19,255
- Each bike has an average of 61 subscribers

BUDGET

The budget was Less than €12k:

The press and media campaign was implemented by Dublin City Council's in-house Press Office team (6 staff), with some support and strategic advice from our PR Consultants, RPS Mary Murphy Associates.

- The fees for PR advice would have been in the region of €4k
- Photography for the various launch events was approximately €650
- Reception at press conference cost in the region of €300

SUPPORTING MATERIALS

- Five press releases were drafted and circulated to media
- A Frequently Asked Questions briefing for media was also prepared and circulated in September 2009
- Around 30 radio and TV interviews and reports were generated from July to end September, promoting the scheme.
- Nearly 100 newspaper and magazine articles were published about dublinbikes, the vast majority complementary.

Attached is a representation of the media coverage as well as press releases and briefing materials issued to media.