

# Influencing Road Users during Severe Winter Weather Events

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## ABSTRACT

Following reviews of our winter service during the more extreme than usual weather there was a clear need (and road user appetite) for improved and additional information for road users planning for or already embarking on their journeys during the winter.

Communications are important to road users during the winter season, therefore the Highways Agency provides a range of key winter messages as part of a winter partnership marketing campaign.

The campaign is developed wholly in-house which is in part a direct result of needing to cut costs at a time when other government departments were doing similar.

Called 'Make time for winter,' the campaign is planned, prepared and delivered internally with no external expenditure or reliance from external marketing agencies or consultants. We pride ourselves on having built excellent working relationships with stakeholders and partners willing to support and participate in our campaign. They share our messages through goodwill alone, based on shared values and benefits to them and their customers.

Our campaign aims is to encourage road users to take the necessary precautions when preparing for winter journeys; providing them with a diverse array of channels with which to access information. We communicate key messages through a range of free to air channels including traditional websites, newsletters and social media including Twitter and Facebook.

This paper highlights the reasons and benefits of delivering a zero cost, in-house developed winter partnership marketing campaign, its aims and objectives and the successes and lessons we have learned from this approach, which has not only proven to be effective but has also resulted in savings to the taxpayer.

This includes:

- Priority messaging
- Tailoring information for the road user
- Using effective channels of communication
- Effective stakeholder engagement
- Effective evaluation to influence change to future campaigns

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Following our experiences over the last three winters the Highways Agency has a good story to tell. Our fleet of winter vehicles treat England's motorways and major 'A' roads around the clock to help keep the strategic network open under all but the most extreme of circumstances.

However, when sudden spells of very severe weather – in particular, heavy snowfalls - coincide with periods of heavy traffic, it is not always possible to prevent congestion and delays, as our winter service vehicles need space to treat the roads as quickly and effectively.

Therefore it's vital that road users give our fleet and contractors the space to do their jobs following severe weather. Road users should make it their first priority to check travel information updates, before deciding to travel, and be prepared to delay their journey in the worst conditions.

During severe weather conditions we work closely with local highway authorities and the police to clear incidents as quickly as possible, and provide drivers with information about closures and congestion to help them make decisions about their travel plans. It is therefore imperative that drivers make time for winter to ensure they plan and prepare for their journeys.

In support of our operational activities the Agency delivers its annual winter partnership marketing campaign '*Make time for winter*' to provide advice and information to road users on the actions and precautions they can take to reduce the risk to delays in their journeys during the winter period.

## 2. DETERMINING THE PRIORITIES AND MESSAGES

We are committed to maintaining a high level of service for road users and communities, and remain dedicated to meeting our promise of **safe roads, reliable journeys and informed travellers**

### 2.1 The Priorities, *Establishing what is required*

In the lead up to and during winter, we ask drivers to act responsibly and think about the trips they make, by planning their route, checking traffic and weather conditions – and adjusting their plans accordingly – servicing their vehicles regularly and carrying an emergency kit.

Therefore the priorities for the winter campaign are to alert drivers to the steps they should take themselves such as:

- ensuring their vehicles are roadworthy
- that they have emergency travel kits in their vehicles
- that they drive sensibly and take precautions while travelling
- Making use of weather-related traffic and travel information to make informed decisions – i.e. 'Is it wise to travel?'

Fundamentally it is equally important for us to ensure that the public clearly understands that severe weather will cause disruption to travel, and that highway maintenance operators will need time and space to clear roads and when necessary treat surfaces.

## 2.1 The Messages, *Simplicity is the key*

To communicate the priorities in the form of key messages, we worked with internal communication partners and operational teams within the Agency, along with some key stakeholders (e.g. motoring organisations, vulnerable road user representatives), to determine the most appropriate and suitable messages for public consumption. Based on the need for people to take responsibility and precautions, the following messages were agreed as part of the overall campaign delivery strategy:

- Be prepared – is your vehicle is ready for winter?
- Be informed – have you checked the latest traffic and weather?



Figure 1 – Poster designs for the winter campaign

### 2.2.2 Be prepared, *is your vehicle ready for winter?*

This message asks the road user to think about what they can do to reduce the chances of breaking down. The main emphasis for this message backed up by supporting images and text, is to encourage road users to check their vehicle is in good running order before setting out and to consider regular servicing to help minimise the risk.

### 2.2.3 Be informed, *have you checked the latest traffic and weather?*

This message focuses on the importance of journey planning in severe and wintry weather; advising road users where they can access up to the minute traffic reports for our network of 4,300 miles of motorways and major A roads across England.

The key emphasis for the message is that by spending a few extra minutes checking before you set off can make all the difference to your journey.

### 3. CHANNELS OF ENGAGEMENT

#### 3.1 Channel Management Strategy, *owned channels*

To deliver an effective campaign relies on a well planned communication strategy; knowing when to begin delivering on your campaign messages and being prepared to adapt those messages based upon real time events and assessment of how the initial campaign is being received.

The first area of importance is a well thought out channel management strategy; that is; identifying the key channels for hosting the messages and how best to use them to target the audience. The Highways Agency is able to deliver its campaign messages through a range of owned (in-house) free to air channels allowing road users access to important information at no cost. Those channels include:

- Corporate Website
- Social media: twitter, facebook, Flickr
- Variable Message Signs (VMS)
- Highways Agency Information Points (HAIP)
- Press releases
- Highways Agency Information Line (HAIL)
- Email alerts
- Stakeholder Magazine

Each of these channels guarantees the Agency is able to reach a proportion of the road user population, however in order to increase the reach and opportunities for people to see the key messages, owned channels themselves would not provide the means to make the impact required for the winter campaign, and with no marketing budget to spend on paid for advertising, the best option is to recruit willing partners able to share the messages and see the benefits of doing so.

#### 3.2 Partnership marketing, *earned channels*

As with previous years the Highways Agency works alongside strategic stakeholders and partners to deliver our key messages. This continues the nil-cost approach to our communications. We have identified a specific core of key partners and stakeholders (who have traditionally provided us with a return on our investment) to carry our messages through their channels as part of their winter campaigns targeted at their customers. We have categorised these by sector which includes

- Motorway Service Areas
- local authorities
- motoring associations
- freight
- retail
- airports
- sports and leisure venues
- Supply chain partners

Many partners finalise their winter communications by September so it is important our materials are available to them by then so they can be used as the winter season begins.

### 3.3 The Campaign Toolkit

In order to deliver the campaign messages on our behalf, the Highways Agency produces a winter campaign toolkit of materials that partner organisations are able to share with their audience. The toolkit collateral consists of the following items:

- Posters
- Web copy
- Photography
- Web links
- QR Codes
- Flash animations
- YouTube videos

It was also highlighted by some of our participating stakeholders that tailoring the messages to meet differing audience needs was also important to gain acceptance from road users and for them to embrace the messages. This might incorporate changes that include:

- Creative adaptations of the posters to reflect the vehicle types
- Bespoke elements focused on specific parts of the message: e.g. safety
- Translations of posters into foreign languages to reach road users from overseas (located at ports and truck stops)

In addition, some partners expressed a desire to reinforce the partnership through co-branding of our materials; that allowed them to include their logo along with the Highways Agency.

## 4. PARTNERSHIP MARKETING

Securing the support of partners for the campaign is a process which takes place months in advance of winter. The Highways Agency has an effective partner and stakeholder engagement strategy exists to develop relationships with organisations whose actions can impact upon the Agency's operations and who can be affected likewise by the Agency. It is therefore highly beneficial that these partnerships are able to work together to achieve shared aims and objectives.

To keep our partners informed, the Highways Agency communicates a series of "warm-up" messages to bring them up to date on the planning of the campaign development and in addition, to seek their views on what those plans are and any amendments required.

To assist us with monitoring which partners are involved, the Campaigns Team within the Agency records all activity with each respective partner in a log or partner engagement matrix. This allows us to identify which partners are so far supporting the campaign backed up by evidence gathered from their use of the toolkit. This is an important evidence gathering tool to support the evaluation of the campaign.

## 5. EVALUATION

### 5.1 Evaluation Plan, Government Communications Network

The Highways Agency partnership marketing campaign is subject to administering a clear and holistic evaluation plan, which provides sufficient qualitative and quantitative evidence to measure the success and the impact the campaign has had on the road user, and how this contributes to the extent the campaign objectives are achieved.

The Government Communications Network (GCN) provides an evaluation framework that is adopted by all government departments. It ensures that all communication activity is consistent and is evaluated effectively.

A comprehensive campaign plan exists for the winter campaign which outlines the objectives and a series of key measurables to help monitor the progress of the campaign during its lifecycle as well as contributing to the end of campaign evaluation reporting function.

#### 5.1.2 *How to Measure, deliverables*

The key measures for the campaign are set in place at the offset of things. Objectives are agreed using the SMART principles:

- Specific
- Measurable
- Achievable
- Realistic
- Time bound

To keep an eye on progress the plan is divided into stages; which gives those monitoring the campaign the facility to “dip test” as required on activities and how they are progressing. For example, the Agency chose to run a stakeholder summit for a number of key operational partners in 2012 to gain their support in adopting the winter campaign. This activity was broken down into a series of stages including some measurable interludes which were:

- Inputs
- Outputs
- Out-takes
- Intermediate outcomes
- Final outcomes

#### 5.1.3 *Inputs*

This is the initial stage. Highlighting the activity that was undertaken by the Agency, in this case the stakeholder summit

#### 5.1.4 *Outputs*

This is what was produced in support of the event including a summit pack of posters, leaflets and useful information

#### 5.1.5 Out-takes

These were the key messages that we wanted our audience to take away as a result of the outputs; including the initial thoughts and feelings that people had in being made aware of our planned campaign for winter.

#### 5.1.6 Intermediate / Final Outcomes

The change in behaviour that we were keen to see happen. In the case of the summit it was that each attendee would leave and take the information and support the winter campaign. The measurables to prove this was the case would be picked up via a range of tools including data analytics, conversations with that partner etc.

## 5.2 The Final Report

The final evaluation report is presented back to the Agency 8 weeks upon the conclusion of the winter campaign. A range of evidence capture is implemented in order to gain as clear a picture of how successful the campaign was in achieving the objectives set out at the beginning. Evidence would include:

- Number of hits to the Highways Agency Website specific campaign pages
- Opportunities to see messages at Motorway Service Areas or on Variable Message signs
- Interviews with road users as part of the National or Area Road User Satisfaction Surveys
- Partner Interviews
- Partner web analytics
- Number of partners supporting the campaign
- Social Media traffic
- Partner survey hosting

The reach and opportunities to see only provide part of the overall evaluation outcome. The key important outcome is assessing how much of an impact the campaign has had on driver behaviour, for example, as a result of seeing a message on vehicle / self preparation, did the road user do something different such as deciding to carry an emergency kit? It is this evidence that is valuable, particularly when helping to shape future campaigns and to see to what extent our messages have resonated with the public.

All of the organisations that completed surveys said that they found the winter campaign useful in getting winter driving messages to their customers and staff. All respondents also confirmed that they would be happy to support future Agency campaigns.

Positive feedback we received about the campaign:

*“The social media elements such as the ‘winter kit’ and quick polls provided us with engaging content to share with our own Facebook fans and Twitter followers”*

*“It was a good general message – we used the email footers throughout the department and on TV screens”*

*“Simple tag lines and clearly communicated information”*

*“The campaign complimented our own messages and provided a contact reference for consumers”*

*“The messages were clear and easy to understand”*

## **6. NEXT STEPS**

Work on developing the next campaign will take on board the findings of the evaluation exercise as well as key recommendations and identified priorities for the Agency. The campaign has the support of the Roads Minister and is the biggest campaign delivered by the Agency on an annual basis.

The campaign is wholly developed in-house by a cross section of Agency team staff and is coordinated by a Campaigns Manager to ensure all planning and implementation is delivered to agreed timescales.