

# TAKING PUBLIC OUTREACH BY STORM

Storm water goes digital in L.A.

By Namju Cho



In 2008, the city of Los Angeles' multiple-award-winning L.A. Stormwater program was faced with a dilemma: The program had to reach 4 million residents in Los Angeles, but could no longer afford to staff dozens of community outreach events. So the program, in a partnership with social marketing firm S. Groner Associates (SGA), decided to take things online, starting by collecting e-mail addresses in droves. With 500 names and e-mails

## Moving Offline Users Online

The goal was to ensure that when program officials met people face-to-face, residents then were invited to become part of the online community, where the program continued to keep them engaged in the pollution prevention message. Additionally, the program broke down the e-newsletter subscribers into different categories (e.g., dog owners, gardeners, teachers, students), which allowed it to reach audiences with targeted communications. This way, not only did subscribers get information about general storm water news, but they also received specific information about issues that they cared about.

The program also launched other channels to update and communicate with its constituencies in real time, including a blog and Facebook page to keep residents informed and engaged through comments, shares and pledges.

Because of the immediate nature of communicating via Facebook, the L.A. Stormwater Facebook page became a space to voice concerns, complaints, congratulations,

ideas—in fact, a number of Facebook friends from the Mar Vista community in Los Angeles began to communicate with each other through the Facebook page wall.

For instance, a post about a rainwater harvesting project, which involved the complimentary purchase and

installation of rainwater barrels at 600 homes in Los Angeles' Mar Vista and Jefferson communities, prompted a comment from Facebook fan Vicki Karlan, who suggested the program put together a “before and after” scrapbook of rain barrel installations, and volunteered to put the scrapbook together herself.

Facebook helped spread the word about the Rainwater Harvesting Project. In the end, the program received 3,000 signups, five times the number of free barrels available. Of the 600 people who signed up, 25% cited having heard about the program through word of mouth.

Vicki is just one example of the importance of engaging users in a way that increases their investment in the storm water program. Thought-provoking questions, program updates and fan page raffles all are tools that can engage users. Through Facebook, the program has individually addressed more than 500 comments and questions from Los Angeles residents.

The L.A. Stormwater Facebook page launched in September 2009; by July 2010, it had 700 fans. Today, the page has 1,924 fans.

## Public Commitments Made Easy

Facebook also proved to be a great way to create a social norm around behavior that helps prevent storm water pollution, like dog owners picking up after their dogs. Dog owner projects found a great deal of traction, reaching



A resident and dog owner signs up for an e-newsletter at a community event.

in tow, SGA sent e-newsletters based on residents' preferences and interests. By 2010, SGA had accumulated more than 3,800 e-mail addresses, and in 2012 there were almost 4,500 subscribers—a nine-fold increase over four years, with the e-newsletters boasting a higher-than-average (23%) open rate of 28.5%.

thousands of eager Los Angeles residents instantaneously. Through a blog, Facebook and the e-newsletter, the program was able to encourage Los Angeles residents to send electronic postcards and asked them to post a commitment on the program's Facebook wall: "I clean up after [dog's name]." In exchange for making the commitment on Facebook, residents were entered into a contest to win gift certificates to pet stores. Gaining commitments from

residents is a great way to encourage them to sustain good habits. Facebook provided a platform to make the commitment public and communal.

### More Progress

In 2009 and 2010, 802 Los Angeles residents filled out a customer service survey, with 76% stating that they had participated in online media portals (Facebook, the website and the e-newsletter), and 74% citing that they

"strongly agree" or "agree" that the program's outreach materials were informative and easy to understand.

The city's online media public education program has received awards from the California Stormwater Quality Assn. and the National Assn. of Clean Water Agencies.

In addition to utilizing social media outlets, the program's website also was used as a tool to educate residents and build community. SGA revamped the city of Los Angeles' existing storm water website by reorganizing content, making navigation more intuitive and integrating social media channels onto the site, which re-launched in April 2012. The site won the Web Marketing Assn.'s WebAward in 2012 for Outstanding Achievement in Web Development in the area of Environmental Excellence. To promote the new site, the program conducted a scavenger hunt through the Facebook page to drive fans to the new site, using prizes as motivation. This helped promote the site and prompted fans of the Facebook page to learn by exploring the different nodes of the page.

### Sustainability & Maintenance

To ensure that the site would be sustainable even after the contract with SGA ended, the program transferred the website onto a content management system, standardized the look of landing and internal pages, and trained city staff so they could easily make their own updates. By plugging in all social media channels on the home page, the blog and Facebook sections automatically updated themselves, making it easier to maintain. The site also made it easy for residents to order things like a doggie waste bag or a rain barrel sticker, which helped the city follow up with its "customers" to better meet their needs. The city also added a customer service survey on its homepage to reflect its focus on customers. **SWS**

**Namju Cho is project manager for S. Groner Associates Inc. Cho can be reached at 562.597.0205 or ncho@sga-inc.net.**

**For more information, write in 803 on this issue's reader service form on page 49.**

**Rulers of the STORM™**

**Suntree Technologies Inc.®**

**21 PATENTS & COUNTING**

**SUNTREE TECHNOLOGIES**

For over 20 years Suntree has been leading stormwater treatment innovations resulting in 21 patents...and counting! Our experienced team can recommend a complete line of stormwater solutions from inlet filters to high capacity underground treatment systems.

WWW.SUNTREETECH.COM | 321-637-7552

Write in 756