

Application for CWWA Utility Excellence Awards Community Outreach Award

Metro Vancouver Wipes Pilot Project

Project overview

Like many wastewater utilities, Metro Vancouver has ongoing issues with wipes and other “unflushables” in its wastewater system. In the fall of 2015, Metro Vancouver worked with the City of Pitt Meadows to conduct an eight-week pilot project to reduce the flushing of wipes in that city. The pilot incorporated social marketing approaches and used a light-hearted “Adult Toilet Training” theme. It also included quantitative measurement to help assess the project’s effectiveness.

Main challenges

It is very difficult to change behaviours, particularly those that take place in private places, such as a bathroom. Talking about bathroom habits can be taboo and uncomfortable for many. It can also be challenging to measure whether public outreach projects are working; outreach campaigns are often limited to surveys (which rely on reported behaviour) or are not formally evaluated due to lack of resources.

Outreach approach and creative materials

As part of the pilot project, Metro Vancouver developed the slightly irreverent “Adult Toilet Training” theme. This included a series of humorous “tip” posters in women’s washroom, decals on sanitary receptacles, [a whiteboard video](#) and a roving pink port-a-potty with “never flush wipes” messaging that attended community events.



What's different about this project

Many aspects of this project are different than typical source control outreach programs. This includes:

- Research based: Prior to the pilot, we conducted a regional survey on wipes disposal habits, in-person survey in three drug stores, two focus groups and analysed programs in other cities to see what had and had not worked.
- Targeted audience and location: Through our research we determined that the main wipes being flushed were personal hygiene wipes used by women. We therefore focused the campaign on reaching women in bathrooms.
- Measuring effectiveness: We built a "rag catcher" and used a Go Pro camera to physically measure the amount of wipes and other objects coming in to a Metro Vancouver pump station that services the City before and after the project. We also surveyed female residents to assess uptake of the campaign.
- Material that generated conversation: The slightly cheeky "Adult Toilet Training" theme and humorous approach generated a lot of media attention and provided a way to talk publicly about bathroom habits, making an uncomfortable topic more approachable.
- Incremental approach: Rather than starting with a regional campaign, we tested approaches on a smaller scale, evaluated the project and adjusted it before scaling up to a region-wide campaign.

Project results

A post-campaign survey showed that 51% of female Pitt Meadows residents had seen the campaign, many of them in public washrooms. Most of those who saw the campaign said they would dispose of wipes in the garbage. Rag catcher measurements showed that a 67% drop in the number of wipes entering the pump station after the pilot, while Go Pro measurements showed an 85% drop in overall objects.

The pilot's findings have been used in the current regional campaign, which now includes signage in Shoppers Drug Mart stores (retail partner) across the region, a toilet training quiz and other new elements.