

CIPR PRide Awards 2009

Region: Midlands

Category: 7. Public Affairs

Name of Entry: Sainsbury's Wombourne get the green light

Organisation entering: Gough Allen Stanley

The Background:

In December 2007, Sainsbury's Supermarkets Ltd. unveiled plans for a new foodstore in the village of Wombourne, near Wolverhampton.

Following extensive public consultation, a planning application was submitted to the Parish Council for a 25,000sq ft foodstore with over 200 car parking spaces.

Despite high levels of public support for Wombourne's first supermarket, the plans were thrown out by the Council for the following reasons:

- » The foodstore was too big for the village
- » The foodstore would have a negative affect on existing local retailers
- » The foodstore would cause traffic congestion

Strategy:

Working closely with Sainsbury's development team, architects, planning and highways consultants, a number of amendments were made to the plans to improve the original proposals, addressing the issues raised by the Council.

Sainsbury's external public affairs consultant, Gough Allen Stanley, was required to develop and implement a strategy to communicate the new plans to the public.

The objectives were:

- » To turn negative public opinion into positive support
- » To rally local supporters and give a voice to the 'silent majority'
- » To reverse the decision of the Council's Planning Authority that Wombourne did not need a supermarket
- » To gain planning permission in competition with an application from a rival major supermarket

To meet the objectives, the following strategy was agreed:

- » Utilise a range of communication techniques to inform the public of the new plans and the benefits the development would bring to the area
- » Implement a targeted media campaign to ensure existing and emerging support gained and maintained momentum during this critical time

Implementation:

To implement the campaign, Gough Allen Stanley utilised the following communications techniques:

- » Targeted and sustained press releases issued to the local media
- » Public exhibition held to present the amended plans to residents and provide an opportunity to meet the team. This enabled us to convert any neutral residents into supporters
- » Meetings arranged and held with local stakeholder groups and associations
- » Radio interviews given by team members
- » Regular letters hand delivered to local residents

Creativity:

While the amended plans generated further support for the development from residents, Gough Allen Stanley had to be creative to deflect aggressive tactics from a competitor.

Through our strategic plan of activity, Gough Allen Stanley sent out weekly updates to the press with new stories and angles to ensure a strong media presence.

It was also important that during this time, residents were heard. They were urged to have their say and Gough Allen Stanley provided means for the silent majority to be heard above any objectors of the scheme.

To help generate further support for the application, Gough Allen Stanley provided lists of all local Councillors to all residents, which resulted in them writing to show their support.

Emphasis was put on local people taking control of the situation, letting the Council know that they wanted a local supermarket.

A few residents that felt so strongly about supporting Sainsbury's application that they began their own petition and kept us regularly updated with their progress. These residents also developed themselves excellent contacts within the local press to generate stories of support for the planning application. They also responded regularly to letters pages in the local newspapers.

Evaluation and Measurement:

The sustained campaign resulted in a substantial amount of press coverage, with local people taking up the fight for the store and generating editorial coverage for themselves. This, coupled with Gough Allen Stanley issuing press releases led to a saturation of the local press.

Cost-effectiveness:

Following initial press releases, letters, exhibitions and meetings, the team took a step back and let natural momentum carry the support forward and into the awareness of the Council.

It was key for Gough Allen Stanley to turn around the planning application result. Sainsbury's had already invested a huge amount of time and money into achieving this scheme and through Gough Allen Stanley's hard work and commitment, along with the momentum generated through the residents, the planning decision was granted and work has now begun onsite.

Final Results against Objectives:

Addressing initial concerns and amending the plans, generating and maintaining overwhelming public support and kick-starting local-led campaigns meant the Council changed their opinions of the plans, approving them in full once they were re-submitted.