

## Is it possible to change public perception of the parking industry?

We all know that the purpose of parking enforcement is to deter illegal parking, improve traffic flow, and reduce congestion with the Traffic Management Act (2004) (TMA) helping to do this by promoting better and more transparent parking enforcement across the country. By 'we', I mean of course, all those of us who work within the industry itself. Unfortunately, this is not also the opinion of the industry's biggest stakeholder, the general public. Parking enforcement is still generally a mistrusted industry, with many viewing it as simply a means for local authorities and private companies to make money out of inconveniencing car users. Civil Enforcement Officers (CEOs) are vilified and occasionally assaulted and the British press attack the industry on a regular basis as an easy means to write column inches. But what can be done? Is there anything the industry could be doing to change public perception of parking from one that is wholly negative to one that is much more positive?

Changing public perception is not easy and history shows that once an industry has become tarred with bad press, it is difficult to change opinion. This has been seen within the tobacco industry and more recently within the nuclear industry – an immediate change in the majority's perception of its safety as a result of the tragedy in Japan. But why change perception? The parking industry has been around for many decades and has rapidly expanded and advanced in the last decade. Is it a major issue that the general public mistrust us?

There are a number of arguments for changing the industry's image. Firstly, it may help in achieving the main aims of the TMA. The Operational Guidance to Local Authorities states that 'enforcement authorities should aim to increase compliance with parking restrictions through clear, well designed, legal and enforced parking controls' whilst stating that 'the objective of CPE should be for 100 per cent compliance, with no penalty charges.' It is very hard to achieve this ultimate goal if the general public feel that parking controls are solely a means of revenue generation. By improving the image of parking enforcement and engaging with the public to convince them of the positives rather than the negatives of enforcing illegal parking, it is more likely that compliance would increase.

Increased trust in parking enforcement would also make it easier for those working operationally in local authority parking to make changes and amendments to their enforcement strategies. Local elections are often the cause of much despair for those trying to implement parking policy with rallying against parking enforcement often being used as a



tool by councillors to garner support. If the general public's opinion of enforcement was positive, councillors would be more likely to support changes rather than oppose them.

Frontline staff would also benefit. If you conduct an internet search of 'Civil Enforcement Officer assaulted' you will find a plethora of results detailing incidents of abuse against them. This is unacceptable and is rightly being taken seriously by local authorities and the police. However, there is a possibility that these incidents would become a thing of the past if the public image of the industry could be changed. Instead of the being seen as enforcers of draconian rules that are only there to fill the pockets of local authorities/ private companies, Civil Enforcement Officers could be seen as a benefit to the local community who not only stop illegal parking but provide a number of other community services.

Change would not come easily, however. As stated before, parking is not the only industry with a negative image. The Tobacco industry has spent millions aggressively marketing their products to battle against increasing tough legislation and the changing nature of how smoking is perceived on a health and social basis. The banking industry is another example. At this moment in time, bankers and the banking industry as a whole have a worse public image than parking, providing us with a little respite, and on a personal level allows me to use the phrase 'at least I'm not a bloody banker' as an easy get-out if anyone wants to challenge me on my profession. But how is it possible to change an extremely damaged image?

It doesn't help the cause that the media sees parking enforcement as an easy target for column inches. Whether berating local authorities for 'heartless parking fines' or using financial figures from Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) as 'proof' that enforcement is just a money making scam, the British press will choose to publish a negative story over a positive one. So is it possible for the industry to improve its public image? There are many things that are already being done.

On a local level, it is important that front-line staff are provided with sufficient training to ensure good customer service. CEOs are the main representatives of the industry at the ground level and though they have a difficult job it is important that they are seen to be professional and authoritative whilst remaining friendly and courteous. As the Operational Guidance states, 'it is also important that front-line staff carry out their roles to 'give the public a high-quality, professional, efficient, timely and user-friendly service'. Training should also help to ensure that PCNs are issued correctly. Although the public will not be happy that they have to pay a penalty, confidence in parking enforcement can be improved if the validity of the penalty is proved and it is shown that the driver made the mistake, not the CEO.

Public consultations are also important. A good consultation strategy that involves the general public and gives them the feeling of that they have a say, helps to improve relations between the local authority and residents. London Borough of Croydon recently won the Alpha Parking Customer Service Award at the British Parking Awards with their consultation strategy being one of the reasons for this. By engaging with the public in a positive manner and ensuring that all parking enforcement changes are easily understood by those affected, it can only increase confidence in the fact that parking enforcement is implemented for the good of the public and not just for the good of the local authority's coffers.

Working locally to increase confidence in parking enforcement helps but there also needs to be a national strategy. The recent appearance by the BPA on BBC's Watchdog shows that parking enforcement (especially on private land) is not an easy subject to defend. Popular opinion is that the parking industry is in the wrong and everyone else has been mistreated and is innocent. So what can be done to reverse this trend? How can the industry communicate more directly with the general public to convince them that what they read in the papers is not the whole story and that there are many advantages and positives to parking enforcement. In this case, I feel that communication and marketing are key.

The field of marketing has changed over the last few decades to emphasise the importance of building relationships with consumers. Relationship marketing emphasises building stronger relationships between the organisation and all its stakeholder markets and is seen as important as an organisation's existing customers are often its best marketers. Although the industry is not 'selling' a product to its stakeholders, it needs to 'sell' the idea that parking enforcement is a positive thing. By building a good relationship with the general public the industry can hopefully create advocates of the industry – people who see the benefits of parking enforcement and are happy to express this to others. But how can this be achieved?

There are a number of tools available that can be used as part of a communication strategy. The BPA already has a social media presence with a Facebook page, Twitter account, and LinkedIn page. These are all very useful tools for communicating with stakeholders but need to be used in conjunction with other promotional marketing methods to really reach a majority of the population. Social media loses its power if the only people that use it are those who already work within the industry. I would, therefore, suggest that maybe it is time to think about the 'bigger picture'. To really reach every member of the population of the UK and address the issue, a larger scale campaign would be necessary.

In 2009, the Police launched a marketing campaign to combat the public's perception of the police as being unfriendly, an opinion which emerged from a survey. The campaign used television, press and online adverts, and advertorials in women's magazines to promote the police pledge that neighbourhood policing teams spend 80 per cent of their time visibly



working in neighbourhoods and appointments to see local police could be made within 48 hours for non-emergency problems. Publicity made it clear that all police forces had signed up to these standards of service and its aim was to give people greater confidence to come forward to report crime and give evidence against criminals in court. There is nothing to say that the parking industry could not follow suit. Although the initial investment would be reasonably large, the overall benefit to the industry as a whole would outweigh the initial costs. A campaign could be devised to promote the positive aspects of parking enforcement and publicise the positive stories rather than the negative ones. If it worked, it could drastically change the industry we work in. Imagine a parking industry where CEOs didn't have any fear when going out on-street, local authorities could implement parking schemes without too much opposition from the public and their own council members, and the general public respected the industry for what it does – alleviate congestion on roads and provide a necessary service for local residents and businesses.

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