

Saving Lives with Opal

Issues Management

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**A campaign conducted on behalf of the
Australian Department of Health and Ageing**

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Executive Summary

Throughout the Central Desert Region people were losing their lives to petrol sniffing.

In May 2006, the Australian Government led the replacement of all regular unleaded fuel in Alice Springs with *Opal*, a safe, non-sniffable alternative.

Within months, unsubstantiated reports surfaced that *Opal* was responsible for mechanical failures and some service stations withdrew the fuel from sale.

When no evidence could be found to substantiate these reports, the Minister for Health and Ageing decided to move ahead with the full rollout of *Opal* in February 2007.

Creative Territory was commissioned to manage engagement with stakeholders, the community and the media for the initial 6-week campaign period.

Our goal was to create an environment that allowed for the complete replacement of regular unleaded fuel in Alice Springs with *Opal*.

Central to the strategic approach was a commitment to:

- dealing with facts – not emotion, and
- providing independent authoritative information.

Opal has now fully replaced regular unleaded in Alice Springs, no new negative mechanical outcomes have been reported and – most importantly – lives are being saved.

Statement of the Issue

Petrol sniffing is a problem that is killing people in regional and remote communities.

***Opal* fuel is part of the solution.** It is a safe, non-sniffable replacement for unleaded petrol.

The Australian Government led the rollout of *Opal* in Alice Springs from May 2006 to support its introduction in remote communities. This move greatly reduced the incidence of petrol sniffing.

By September, claims emerged that *Opal* caused mechanical failures. Some retailers withdrew the product, even though the claims were proven to be incorrect by independent scientific analysis.

The issue had the potential to derail the full rollout, with an environment of mistrust around the safety, efficiency and “non-sniffability” of the product.

Other emergent issues impacted on community willingness to contribute to the solution. A range of restrictions had been introduced by governments in response to social issues including speed limits and restrictions on alcohol and drinking in public places. Residents were tired of making sacrifices for the so-called “greater good”.

Goals and objectives

Against this community backdrop we had one clear goal:

To create an environment that allowed for the complete replacement of regular unleaded fuel in Alice Springs with *Opal*, without the need for Federal legislation.

The objective of our campaign was to reassure the Alice Springs community that *Opal* is a safe, reliable and non-sniffable fuel.

Research

Research included:

- Focus groups by TNS Social Research;
- A review of available literature; and
- Individual interviews with stakeholders and Alice Springs residents.

The research showed many people believed that *Opal*:

- Damages engines, particularly in the extreme weather conditions of Alice Springs;
- Is less efficient than regular unleaded; and
- Can be made sniffable, and therefore does not address the problem.

Although these beliefs were not based on facts, it was critical that they be addressed in our issues management strategy.

Research also showed many people believed petrol sniffing problem was caused by a “small number of people” and that the broader community should not have to “pay the price to fix the problem”.

Combined with other social issues such as road deaths, anti-social behaviour, crime and public drunkenness, there was a feeling that the majority of people were paying the price for the sins of a few.

For this campaign to cut through, we had to work with facts not emotions.

We needed to show people that:

- *Opal* is safe and reliable
- *Opal* is non-sniffable
- *Opal* is part of the solution and it will work.

This approach was confirmed by concept testing.

Target publics

The broad audiences for this strategy were:

1. Alice Springs fuel consumers

For the campaign to succeed, regular unleaded fuel consumers required accurate, authoritative information to ensure they were confident in changing their purchasing behaviour.

2. Stakeholder groups who have the ability to influence fuel consumers.

This stakeholder group represented organisations or professions that fuel consumers trust to provide reliable mechanical information and advice, and included:

- Fuel console operators
- Mechanics
- Car dealerships
- Hire car companies
- Fleet managers
- Taxi drivers
- Tourist information centres/roadhouses

These people have regular contact with fuel consumers and their ability to provide accurate information was vital. This group also provided us with anecdotal feedback about public sentiment and concerns.

3. Local media

Initial efforts to roll-out Opal fuel were hindered by unsubstantiated reports of mechanical failures distributed through the local media. Ensuring the media was provided with accurate and timely information, including providing spokespeople to respond to emerging issues, was a key focus for activities. Strong relationships with local media ensured all opportunities to provide information were maximised.

4. Local champions

In a small community such as Alice Springs, word of mouth can impact significantly on campaign results. Recruiting a group of trusted locals to 'spread the word' – and ensuring they received regular updates and information resources – provided another avenue of reaching fuel consumers.

Communication Strategy

Our approach was to **deal with facts not emotions** and involved seven strategies:

1. Prepare the ground for the full rollout.
2. Recruit expert spokespeople, including independent spokespeople.
3. Recruit trusted local *Opal*/champions.
4. Provide information tailored to the needs of individual stakeholder groups.
5. Release accurate and timely information to set the media agenda.
6. Provide factual information.
7. Demonstrate that *Opal* is safe and reliable.

Implementation

1. Prepare the ground for the full rollout

- Research
- Meetings with local organisations and opinion leaders, including senior members of government located in Alice Springs, prominent car dealers/mechanics, Automobile Association of the NT, Chamber of Commerce and local industry associations.
- Discussions with local media

Through these activities we established relationships within the local community, developed a sense of community opinion, established key informational requirements and identified potential Opal champions and spokespeople.

2. Recruit expert spokespeople:

Three key experts were used to provide authoritative information throughout the campaign:

- Royal Automobile Association of Australia (RAAA): Noted motoring writer and fuel specialist, Mark Borlace, became the leading independent source of mechanical information.
- BP Australia: As the manufacturer of *Opal*/BP was in a position to provide detailed information on the development of the fuel and the testing undertaken prior to the fuel being available on the market.
- Federal Minister for Health Ageing provided key information about the Government's 8-point plan to combat petrol sniffing and the role *Opal*/fuel would play in its success.

The spokespeople became familiar faces to the local community and provided information across a range of issues and topics.

3. Recruit trusted local *Opal* champions:

The following champions were recruited.

- Alice Springs Mayor Fran Kilgarrif (A trusted local leader who was able to talk about Council use of *Opal*/fuel)
- Automobile Association of the Northern Territory (independent authority on mechanical issues representing the view of motorists)
- Central Australian Youth Link-Up Service (runs diversionary programs as part of the Government's 8-Point Plan to combat petrol sniffing)
- NT Government Fleet (owns 350 petrol vehicles that had been running on *Opal* since May 2006 without any mechanical issues)
- NT Government (as a supporter of the rollout of *Opal*)
- Central Australian Football League (supporting the positive impact of *Opal*)

These Opal champions reinforced the overarching messages of the campaign through their local networks and contacts and provided opportunities to gain positive media coverage.

4. Provide information tailored to the needs of individual stakeholder groups:

Key activities included:

- Technical briefing sessions for mechanics and car dealers conducted by RAAA and BP Australia
- Individual briefings between Mark Borlace and local mechanics who had attributed mechanical issues to the use of *Opal*. During these briefings, the claims were investigated and on all occasions it was found that *Opal* had not caused the issues.
- Individual visits to stakeholders and stakeholder groups
- Community brochures aimed at fuel consumers were distributed via letterbox, petrol stations and tourists stops
- Technical brochures were distributed via petrol stations, mechanics, taxi council and motor industry
- A display at the airport with supporting information at car hire desks provided appropriate information to Alice Springs visitors

Through these activities each audience was provided with information relevant to their needs. Information was available at a variety of outlets, ensuring ease of access.

5. Release accurate and timely information set the media agenda:

Specific media activities included:

- Local media teleconference following the Minister's announcement
- Media briefings as required
- Media releases linked to key events
- Monitoring local talk back radio
- Responding to media queries

The media activities ensured that information was distributed in a timely manner and criticisms were responded to appropriately.

6. Provide factual information:

In addition to the distribution of print material, information was provided to the community through involvement in local community events and displays including

- Shopping centre displays,
- Centralian Expo,
- AFL Football match and Auskick clinics attended by celebrity talent Dean Rioli,
- A series of events at Indigenous communities on the trek.

*Local discussion was driven by facts and track record as opposed to emotion and innuendo. By maintaining a strong community presence and being involved in positive experiences, *Opal* became a part of the Alice Springs landscape.*

7. Demonstrate that *Opal* is safe and reliable:

The Toyota Trek to the Centre was the centerpiece event of this strategy. It involved a sponsored vehicle driving 5770km from Darwin to Alice Springs and around Central Australia using *Opal* with celebrity driver, football legend Dean Rioli. The Menzies School of Health Research also participated and provided a valuable insight about the medical and physical effects of petrol sniffing.

Fuel and mileage records were made available to the public and media while a diary of the trek was available via a website. On arrival in Alice Springs, the vehicle was used as the centerpiece for public displays.

A significant amount of media activity was generated by this event throughout the Territory.

The Trek to the Centre demonstrated to the public that Opal fuel is safe, reliable and efficient. Local events along the way provided information about the benefits of the fuel.

Results

A tangible demonstration of success of this campaign is that no mechanical issues have been referred by the local motoring industry for investigation since the campaign commenced. Prior to this, *Opal* was regularly blamed for mechanical failures and problems.

At a more fundamental level

- Media coverage was overwhelmingly positive.
- Key stakeholders and opinion leaders were individually briefed and publicly supportive of *Opal*.
- Emerging issues were responded to quickly and appropriately.
- Appropriate information was available for people.

Evaluation

By the most important measure of success, this campaign achieved its single objective:

All Alice Springs fuel distributors have now fully replaced regular unleaded with *Opal*/without the need for compulsion through legislation.

The fact that the Federal Government did not need to legislate the compulsory supply of *Opal* within Alice Springs indicates the stakeholders and community's acceptance of the fuel.

Most importantly, there are positive results that *Opal* is reducing the incidence of petrol sniffing through the region and lives are being saved.