

Flexibility proves the key to success for Sunderland City Council's campaign

Advertising and marketing campaigns run by Sunderland City Council helped it sign up an extra 3,600 people to Direct Debit.

The council has now been confirmed as the winner of this year's Direct Debit Challenge League and been given the Marketing Campaign of the Year Award.

Tailored message for target audience

Guided by the targeting data provided by Bacs and Experian, Sunderland developed a wide range of activity designed to attract more customers to Direct Debit. The core of the campaign centred on the marketing strapline 'An elephant never forgets' which promoted the overall benefits of Direct Debit, including never forgetting to pay a bill.

This campaign was supported by a determination to make Direct Debit as accessible to residents as possible. This included offering residents a wide range of payment dates and frequency to ensure it met with their lifestyle and financial situation.

Howard Middlemiss, the council's Revenues Manager, said: "The more successful we are each year, the more difficult it becomes to secure new Direct Debit payers – taking us closer to a perceived 'saturation point'. 'We recognised that to retain the momentum of previous campaigns it was critical that we found new and more specific ways of talking to our target audiences. To help us identify who we should be talking to, and more importantly what we should be saying to them, we utilised the targeting tool developed by Bacs and Experian."

Over 65,000 people in Sunderland have signed up to Direct Debit and this represents more than 70% of those who pay council tax. Every 3,000 new payers help generate annual savings of £15,000.

Mr Middlemiss said the City Council, which is one of only 13 in the country to be consistently rated as top performing authority by Audit Commission, also sought to tackle the issue of financial inclusion with a review of its campaign activity.

Support from local banks to encourage financial inclusion

The City Council had found that some residents were unable to pay by Direct Debit because they did not have a bank account. To help overcome this barrier, the City Council empowered its customer advisors to provide guidance on setting up a basic bank account. It also secured assurances from a high street bank that, where people had been referred by the City Council, it would look favourably on their application for a bank account – a critical step on the journey to achieve greater financial inclusion.

To promote the benefits of Direct Debit, the City Council also ran roadshows that meant it could talk directly with its target audience. One of the most successful elements of the campaign was information points in payment centres. It gave the council an opportunity to speak with people about the benefits of Direct Debit when they were coming in to pay by cash or cheque.

Critical value of understanding what messages work

Mr Middlemiss added: "Sunderland City Council also created an incentive that would capture the attention of our target audience – a prize draw with a cash prize of £1,000. We felt that it was important to include all those people who were already paying by Direct Debit, not just new converts, so we made it clear on all the promotional materials that anyone paying by Direct Debit would be entered.

"We were also able to encourage the winner to take part in publicity and secured coverage in our local newspaper, the Sunderland Echo, which helped to raise awareness of Direct Debit.

"The tools provided by Bacs, including the e-learning facility and the data mining results, were a critical part of our campaign development. The Direct Debit Challenge League is another tool that used to benchmark our performance and demonstrate to ourselves that what we are doing is successful.

"It is a continual process and we are already planning our activity for next year, including promoting the availability of a flexible payment holiday that can be timed to suit residents' financial circumstances."