



*Ministry for the*  
**Environment**  
*Manatū Mō Te Taiao*

Qualitative Consumer Feedback  
on  
Waste and the Waste Reduction  
Executions

November 2002

**COLENSO BBDO**

# INTRODUCTION

## Background

As part of “The Big Clean Up” programme launched earlier this year by the Auckland Regional Council, Colenso BBDO developed a range of communications on the subject of waste -more specifically, communications designed to improve environmental awareness of this topic and also to provide people with information about simple things that they can do to make a difference in this area.

The Ministry for the Environment became interested in this work, and it was proposed that the communications could be used further afield (i.e. outside the Auckland region) in a national campaign with the support of both the ministry and various regional and city councils.

To this end, Colenso BBDO offered to conduct research in order to discover what peoples’ thoughts and attitudes are towards the environment and, more specifically, their attitudes towards the issue of waste as well as towards the proposed communications. This document is a record of this research.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

### 1) The Big Picture

- To assess regional attitudes towards the environment
- To assess what factors contribute to any given region being 'green'
- To gauge opinions as to who is/should be responsible for the environmental well-being of the area

### 2) Waste

- To understand the local situation as regards waste reduction
  - What schemes are in place? Do they work?
- To assess the level of knowledge about this subject
  - What happens to what we throw away?
  - Why do we recycle?
  - What else can we do in this area? (e.g. reduction of packaging, composting, reusing...)
  - Exploration of incentives or barriers to action

### 3) Communications

- Discuss any existing environmental communications that may be recalled
- Introduce & evaluate the proposed waste campaign

## RESEARCH APPROACH

In order to discover and discuss people's attitudes and actions, we decided that qualitative focus groups (of 8 respondents each) would be the best methodology to employ.

40 people were spoken with, in five centres:

- Auckland
- Palmerston North
- Wellington
- Blenheim
- Dunedin

These centres were selected by both Colenso BBDO and the Ministry to represent both large and small towns, as well as regions with different infrastructures supporting (or otherwise) waste reduction programmes.

The criteria on which respondents were recruited were quite general, given that we wished to speak with a broad cross-section of people. Essentially, we wanted to speak with the main householder, being the person who had the most to do with the household's shopping, consumption and refuse. We also worked to ensure a spread of ages, life stages and socio-economic status, as well as representation from both genders.

The recruitment was carried out by ConsumerLink, an independent recruitment specialist.

The groups were carried out between the 20<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> of November, 2002.

## THE BIG PICTURE

### Regional attitudes toward the environment

I'll start by looking at some general, widespread and commonly-held factors and beliefs (and their implications) before moving on to a look at any quirks or comments that arose in individual towns / regions.

As expected from a general cross-section of society, there was a wide range of attitudes evident amongst the respondents, ranging from highly aware 'greenies' to some much more lackadaisical approaches to this issue.

A key point to note is that many peoples' 'claimed behaviour' is different to what they actually do in everyday life. For example, while many people claim to recycle most of their recyclable waste, it was clear that, often, this is idealised behaviour and their actual actions do not quite reach the lofty goals set by their ideals.

As an opening exercise, we asked the respondents to privately list the average weekly contents of their rubbish bag or wheelie bin, excluding what is recycled. Once the group was finished, we looked over these lists and found recyclables were being thrown out, even by those who rated themselves as quite 'green'.

It is unfortunately true that while most people are aware that looking after your environment is a good thing, they do not always do as much as they could. A combination of behavioural and attitudinal factors such as inconvenience, laziness and forgetfulness all get in the way of people fulfilling their ideals. This strongly reinforces the need to continually raise awareness of the importance of environmental issues, as well as continuing to provide easy and practical methods by which people can 'do the right thing'.

- Auckland

Aucklanders' attitudes to the environment were quite strongly felt. The key issues were the most visible and publicised ones –transportation and air quality.

Traffic congestion and its effects on the environment of the Auckland region were far and away the most important issue for this group. As an issue, it linked into other areas, such as increasing population density and the systematic reduction of trees and green spaces (particularly in the North Shore area -according to the respondents, the only remaining green areas are playing fields. The culprit is seen to be increased housing, with the city council taking the blame).

Litter also came in as an important issue, again, linked in to the increase in population density. There was a feeling that litter can be self-perpetuating, in that seeing litter on the street normalises littering behaviour. Again, this is strong evidence for continuing to raise awareness of this issue in this region.

There was a sense of almost guilt at work here –that Aucklanders do a lot of damage to the environment, but that they are more conscious of this damage and thus act to minimise or compensate for their 'bad' actions. An example of this would be someone who drives more than they should and then goes home, sorts the rubbish and tends the compost heap.

- Palmerston North

The removal of a large totara tree from the square was a big local environmental issue, as was a plan to remove other trees in order to widen a road. Also, the quality of the water is an issue, especially in places downstream from the city, such as Foxton. This is currently seen to be getting worse, but there are proposals in place to fix the problem in the future.

While it was felt that the council was quite green, they were less charitable about their neighbours –the feeling was that Palmerston North’s citizenry were not terribly environmentally aware. While people do recycle more since the introduction of kerbside recycling, it was felt that the overall environmental consciousness was not strong.

The communal bicycle scheme was praised as an example of grass-roots environmental action, reducing reliance on fossil fuels.

Further, there was a lot of comment that the regulation rubbish bags were not tough enough to withstand the attentions of the local canine community, and that this caused a lot of litter and general dirtiness.

- Wellington

Wellingtonians rated their city quite highly, environmentally, especially given the fact that it is a main urban centre. The lack of heavy industry and “lots of fresh air” contributed to this perception. Further, it was felt that Wellingtonians are a pretty responsible bunch that were good with recycling as well as taking public transport, cycling and walking rather than driving their cars. Additionally, it was felt that there was a scarcity of litter, that people were very conscious of this issue.

- Blenheim

The fact that Blenheim does not have kerbside recycling is a strong barrier to people actually realising any green ideals that they may harbour:

*“It’s a hassle to recycle”*

*“The bins automatically got you thinking about recycling -I used to use it every week”*

More generally though, there were more pressing environmental issues in this region than waste reduction. The wine industry was seen as quite the harbinger of environmental and social evil -arsenic leaching from the fence posts, the heavy drain that vineyard irrigation places on the water supply, the removal of shelter-belt trees and the drift of insecticide spraying are all cited as key environmental concerns.

Further, it was felt that the region had wildly insufficient bins for litter disposal, creating a further barrier to people disposing of their waste in a thoughtful manner.

- Dunedin

The group felt that Dunedin was becoming more ‘green’, with a kerbside recycling programme coming on line next year.

Beyond that, it was felt that Dunedinites have a pretty good attitude towards the environment –the community seemed to get right in behind initiatives such as Earth Day. To a certain extent, the annual North Dunedin scarfy clean up was seen as part of these community initiatives.

The feeling was very much that most of the regions’ environmental problems were individually caused (drunk students smashing bottles or teenage littering of the carparks outside McDonalds). That being said, it also seemed that there was quite a strong community spirit to solve these problems also (the afore-mentioned scarfy clean up, or, more interestingly, the group that collected McDonalds litter and dumped it inside the restaurant!).

## What makes a region green?

Our groups were able to give us a lot of factors that would contribute to a region being thought of as 'green'. These included:

- Recycling programmes (especially kerbside; cost will be a barrier)
- Good public transport
- Water quality & availability
- Air quality
- Clean beaches
- No litter (plenty of bins)
- Minimal or clean industry, or strong controls put on industrial waste
- Plenty of open, planted spaces (especially native plants/trees)
- Community involvement & initiatives (clean-up days etc)
- Organic farming initiatives
- Low use of insecticides

## Responsibility for the environment

There was a very strong sense that, while it was incumbent upon the individual to be concerned for his or her immediate environment, the corollary is that there must be sufficient infrastructure to support this concern. As Kermit once said, 'it ain't easy being green' and it is a sad-but-true fact that, while their hearts may be in the right place, most people are lazy and self-centred. Their actions will not live up to their ideals unless a system or programme is in place that makes it easy, convenient and preferably costless to be 'green'. It is incumbent upon the various local bodies and governments to provide these schemes, as the general population will not (indeed, can not) set them up off their own bat.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the main area of discussion –waste reduction. This will be discussed in more depth in the next section.

Most respondents were aware that their local regional council was primarily responsible for the environment, but this was tempered by a sense that the regional council was slightly more theoretical than practical in its focus. This view seems to come from the fact that it is the city or town council that actually undertakes and implements the practices that result in change, such as the introduction and implementation of recycling schemes.

The Auckland respondents had the strongest identification with their regional council and knowledge of what it actually did. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that the ARC has been undertaking quite visible communications of late. In the other groups, there was a slightly more vague sense of the regional councils' role, but it tended to be more blurred with the role of the city or town council. (Obviously, in the case of Blenheim, this distinction is irrelevant).

The role of central government and the ministry was more nebulous. The respondents were unsure of where the areas of responsibility lay –the assumption was that central government was more high level and had more to do with legislating and controlling industry than anything which would have a direct impact on their day-to-day actions or attitudes towards the environment.

# WASTE

## The Local Situations

- Auckland (region)
  - There was a strong feeling that the recycling schemes in the Auckland were well used, especially where kerbside recycling was in place.
  - A comment was made that recycling is an easy way of “*looking good and responsible*” [emphasis added]. This was an interesting one, given the kerbside programme –having a full bin makes you look environmentally aware to your immediate neighbours. Peer pressure can be a wonderful thing!
  - It seemed that Aucklanders gave the least thought to what happens to their waste once it has been collected –the consensus was that it was taken to the tip, sorted and buried, where it “decomposes away”. It is proposed that, for people living in a big city, landfills are rarely physically encountered or thought about –out of sight, out of mind, whereas people in smaller towns seemed more aware of where their local tip was located.
  - However, upon probing, there was recognition that landfill reduction is an issue and is a key reason to recycle.
  
- Palmerston North
  - The kerbside recycling scheme was praised but there was also comment that people would do more if it were easier. One of the respondents had spent time in Auckland and it was felt that recycling bins engendered ‘good thoughts’ when you were putting the rubbish out, in terms of acting as a prompt for you to separate at that moment of truth.
  - As mentioned above, these people felt that this was not an area with a particularly green citizenry. However, the group was

quick to identify the problem of landfill and the role of recycling in reducing this.

- Wellington

- Again, we got this very strong sense that separate recycling bins have helped reduce unrecycled waste in the region – *“I think that getting those green bins has helped a lot”*
- The group was also quite aware of where waste ended up –that the region had three tips- but again, we got a strong sense of ignorance surrounding landfill. Many people thought that what goes to the tip somehow disappears. They were surprised by some of the claims made in the communications – *“it doesn’t break down like I thought it would”*. We will return to this point when we discuss the communications.

- Blenheim

- As mentioned, our Blenheim group felt somewhat frustrated. There is no kerbside recycling programme and the recycling centre has limited hours of operation. In general, *“it’s a hassle to recycle”* seemed to sum up the prevailing attitude.
- There had been a pilot scheme, apparently, which was well received by those who took part in it. Most were dismayed when it didn’t launch region-wide.
- Again, we found this sentiment that *“bins automatically got you thinking ‘recycling’.”*
- While people were aware of landfill as an environmental issue, there was a sense that some infrastructural changes needed to be made before the citizenry could affect any change –that the council need to make it easier for people to recycle by providing kerbside pickup, preferably with separate bins.

- Dunedin
  - As mentioned above, the Dunedin group were aware of the upcoming launch of a kerbside recycling programme, and this was felt to be a hugely positive step with most respondents stating that this scheme would greatly increase the amount that they recycle.
  - Some members of the group were quite switched on about waste creating landfill, although many thought that this wasn't really a big deal, as the landfill sites were put to good use as sports ground and so forth.
  - But there were still some who hadn't really thought about it:  
*“they get rid of [rubbish] –I don't know where”*

## Knowledge of and attitudes towards waste

As already intimated, we found that most people were pretty ignorant as to the fate of their household refuse. It just goes away, disappearing from you kerbside, never to be thought of again.

*“They get rid of it – don’t know where”*

Of course, people know that it goes to a landfill site, but this was not necessarily seen as much of an issue –after all, it is a place custom-designed to process waste. But it seemed innocuous to many. Once we got people thinking and talking about it, they would realise that ‘it all goes to the tip’ actually means ‘it all goes into the ground’, but again, this isn’t necessarily a bad thing for them.

The expectation was largely that it all broke down or biodegraded (now, there’s a much misused word) in the tip. Many expressed surprise or even disbelief that things such as newspapers could still be preserved and intact after 40 years in a landfill. Further, we kept encountering people who clearly thought that their rubbish would be sorted as it came out of the truck at the tip. Why should they be bothered separating when it was going to be done anyway? This misconception should be addressed.

While people were largely aware and supportive of recycling programmes, these were only partially linked to the goal of reducing landfill. Often, recycling was seen to be about taking the strain off primary resources and manufacturing by facilitating the re-use of used materials. And to a certain extent, recycling was seen as a good thing in its own right –a solution divorced from a problem.

While most respondents were great about separating their glass, plastic and paper, the one recyclable that many people seem to just throw out with the general rubbish is tin cans. People just can’t seem to be bothered washing them and removing the labels and they worry (or justify) that they might cut themselves. It is just an extra hassle that people can’t seem to be bothered with. A clear implication here is that we could focus a little harder on tins and perhaps a little less on the materials which most people already recycle, such as plastics, glass and paper.

Composting was popular, but mainly among the older, gardening-variety respondents or those in semi-rural areas. It was often more about being able to have fertilizer than about reduction of waste. But this is a good example of being able to appeal to people's practical nature, rather than their (beleaguered) altruism, in encouraging 'green' behaviour. However, for the modern apartment-dweller or urban nomad, these messages are not relevant to their lifestyle at all.

One nearly universal area of guilt was regarding the use of plastic supermarket bags as bin liners. While most people seemed to initially feel that this was a form of re-use, upon further consideration they realised that, actually, they were simply ending up in landfills, perhaps even stopping their contents from decomposing properly. These bags were considered to be not especially biodegradable, and many respondents were surprised to learn that there are in fact biodegradable rubbish bags available for purchase. But cost is a factor, and supermarket bags are free. This acts as a strong disincentive for people to consider purchasing the more eco-friendly alternatives.

Some respondents expressed concern about the amount of unnecessary packaging that they bought, especially with things like toys and small appliances. However, it was felt that there is little alternative in these areas. People were more comfortable considering packaging reductions in FMCG areas, but few seemed to actually do anything to reduce their packaging. Everyone likes the idea of the Bin Inn, but no one seemed to shop there, and people would be averse to switching brands just to buy a refill pack. Further, it was felt that refill packs were not always cheaper, and it was felt that they should be, both as an incentive and because it should cost less to use less packaging.

We were disappointed in the lack of awareness of the Envirochoice mark –we were hoping that it would have had greater traction. Very few respondents (maybe 3 or 4 out of 40) had any spontaneous recall of such a scheme. However, all agreed that it is a great idea for there to be a set standard for eco-friendly goods and packaging.

But the flipside to the potential effectiveness of any such scheme is the brand loyalty of the consumer. And this shouldn't be surprising –after all, manufacturers of

packaged goods spend good money to develop strong brand loyalty among consumers, and it would take an equally strongly developed eco-mark to change peoples' buying behaviour. What people really want is an eco-friendly version of their favourite brand.

It is proposed this is currently an area with unrealised potential. We have seen that people will not be averse to buying refills and other low-packaging products, but they need to be more strongly identified as such. A campaign promoting the mark will not only help consumers feel more comfortable about buying but will also act as an incentive for manufacturers to put more products in such containers –after all, if the manufacturers think that consumers will demand it, they will make it.

## COMMUNICATIONS

- THE STRATEGY

The communications strategy is predicated upon a ‘one-two’ approach, where the first step is to raise awareness of the problem and the second is to offer solutions in ‘bite-sized chunks’, encouraging people to develop new habits.

It is our belief (validated by this, and other, research) that this approach works. If you go out with messages focussed on the problems, people may feel more aware but can also feel impotent. Conversely, going out with solely practical messages will not be as effective, because such a campaign offers solutions to issues where most people are blissfully unaware of the problems – *“most people don’t know what the problems are”*.

- THE TELEVISION WORK

‘Book’

Most respondents reacted well to this ad – *“it makes you think about it”* was a typical response. As discussed above, people do not currently think about the fate of what they throw out – the perception is that it just goes away.

The fact that this rubbish is identified as once belonging to a particular person was a point that respondents picked up on. This led to discussions of whether people would take more care in this area if they were held personally accountable for what they threw out. This was felt to be quite a powerful thought, and ties in to the thinking behind some of the print work that this agency has done for the ARC on the issue of litter (*“Would you still do it if it had your name on it?”*).

It was recognised that raising awareness of the problem in this way was an important first step in changing behaviour. While the subsequent executions were more strongly applauded for showing people what they can do about the problem, it was not thought that they would be quite so effective if we were not to illustrate that landfills are not places where rubbish just *“composts down”*.

The only downside is that some respondents were sceptical that a book could possibly still be whole and readable after so long –that this ad seemed unreal and ‘in ad-land’. It is proposed that the commercial should be executed so as to reinforce the veracity of the claim.

### ‘Detergent Bottle’

Having made comment above that brand preference is strong in these household cleaning categories, changing behaviour in this area will be a difficult yet important battle.

That being said, people did react strongly to this proposition, and it did make many respondents say that it would make them consider looking for refill options –this wasn’t really an area which many had thought about previously. Again, it is about giving people easy and practical things that they can do to help the environment.

Further, it was thought by some respondents that an ad like this might just prod some local manufacturers into reconsidering the packaging options that they make available.

### ‘Carpet’

This execution was very well received. A simple illustration of an important point.

Again, it made people aware of just what happens to their rubbish –that it has to go into the ground. And people were absolutely astounded, gob-smacked even, at the sheer volume of waste described. It was felt that this execution does a great job of ‘bringing home’ and illustrating the problem and setting them up for information on what they can do to help.

*“Most people don’t know what the problems are”*

'Apple'

Again, well received. People felt that this was a good area to focus on –to look at reduction in addition to recycling, especially given the beliefs that these plastic bags do not break down over time.

Making people just stop and think for a second about the unnecessary bags and wrappers is the main part of the task here –once people actually think about it, they'll decline a bag (or perhaps go further and take their supermarket bags back for re-use). The problem is that most people just take what is offered to them without thinking, and this execution aims right at this behaviour.

Again, we can see that showing people simple things that they can do to help their environment will be well received and likely to affect change.

*“give people an idea of what they can do”*

- THE PRINT WORK

### 'Time Capsule'

Crystal clear message that plastics don't break down and should be recycled.

Further, this execution works on another level by making people think about the future and this emphasis was seen as important –showing people the consequences of their actions was held up as an important task of any communications in this area. It's not just about landfill now, but also about the fact that we are leaving problems for future generations.

The line "What Ends Up In A Landfill Stays There. Recycle." was well thought of - simple, direct and educational.

*"The most important thing about these campaigns  
is telling people what they can do"*

### 'Baby'

Now, here's a contentious area! While everyone agrees that disposable nappies make a massive contribution to our landfills, there was also a strong sense of guilt and inevitability. While people are aware that nappies end up in landfills, there is a sense that there are no other options: *"there's only so much land –we're going to be living on top of nappies"*

Few mothers used cloth nappies –in fact, one told the group that she had read a study which detailed how the energy and chemicals required to launder cloth nappies caused more damage to the environment than disposables. Further and more generally, it was felt that disposable nappies were just so convenient that they were here to stay.

So while this ad had great impact and dramatically raises awareness of the fact that nappies don't break down, people felt a little 'beaten up' by it, given the lack of alternatives. You cannot recycle disposable nappies and there isn't an equally convenient eco-friendly version. So while it made people think, it does not give people an avenue for affecting any positive change.

- THE AMBIENT WORK

'Landfill metrolite'

Huge impact –people really thought that they would stop, look and think, especially in metro centres where people are distanced from landfill sites.

Some care will need to be given to the construction of this piece, as it will be critical that it doesn't look as if it has been faked. As mentioned earlier, some respondents were sceptical that things like newspapers could survive intact in a landfill, and this acted as a barrier to the uptake of the message. It will need to be a genuine slice of landfill –perhaps we need some type of official archaeological certification?

'Tree in a can'

Again, a striking yet elegantly simple way of identifying a problem and showing people what they can do to help.

Most people were amazed at the fact that 45% of waste is compostable.

For maximum effectiveness, the 'media placement' will be critical –urban, high-traffic areas where the last thing you expect to run into is a tree.

'Convoy'

People got quite excited by this one –the thought of four rubbish trucks thundering through town was sure to attract attention.

As regards the message, people were once again extremely surprised by the volume of rubbish shown, especially once it was shown like this, scaled down to the individual household. This would seem to be valuable territory –bringing the problem to life by actually showing it on a personally relevant scale.

## 'Trolley'

While I must note that reaction to this execution was muddied by some peoples' inability to visualise the final execution (a common problem with researching sketches, rather than the finished article), it was felt that this idea played quite an important role in the communications mix, as it spoke with shoppers at the 'moment of truth' –when they are purchasing the things which will eventually be thrown away.

An addition to this execution was discussed –a line of copy could run along the trolley's handle with a message to encourage the shopper to think about the amount of packaging they are buying, and to encourage them to but refills.

## SUMMARY

- There is generally a gap between people's (lofty) ideals and their (lazy) actions. By instituting easy-to-use schemes to bridge these gaps, we can affect some positive practical change. An example of this is kerbside recycling, and even further, providing a separate bin for this purpose. This keeps this issue in front of their face and makes it easy to 'do the right thing'.
- It is important to raise awareness of the problems themselves- environmental issues can all too often be 'out of sight, out of mind'. Nowhere is this more evident than with waste –for many, not only does rubbish conveniently disappear from your wheelie bin each week, but it magically breaks down and vanishes once it has got to its destination, wherever that may be. It is important to show people the reasons why they should recycle –that rubbish doesn't just go away.
- People want to be shown small, easy things that they can do to affect change. By giving people solutions in 'bite-sized chunks', we can empower the individual and remove this feeling that the environment is a massive thing that no individual has any control over. People will get scared and commitment-phobic if we ask them to save the world –we've got more luck just asking them not to put their newspapers in their wheelie bins.
- While individuals will shoulder some responsibility for their environment, they must feel that the government (local, regional, central) has put sufficient infrastructure in place to support them. While people in regions without kerbside recycling will still feel that they should recycle, they feel that their representatives should be leading the way and facilitating the good deeds of the citizens.

- Recycling is an important concept that already has a great deal of traction. People know about it and do it already, although in many cases people are still putting recyclables into the general rubbish. It is important to keep pushing on this one, both on the reasons behind recycling and on the fact
- While people can see the environmental benefit in buying refills, they do have strong brand loyalties which will hold strong sway. These may be overcome by the development of a strong eco-mark, or by pricing incentives, or by encouraging major manufacturers to offer refills on all main brands.
- Composting is seen as being a great solution, but is of limited applicability to many people.