

Work Solutions:

A criminal waste: helping offenders find work

CASE STUDIES

Background

Around 30 per cent of all men in the North West have a criminal conviction by the time they reach 30.

Ex-offenders frequently struggle to find work. The stigma of a criminal record acts as a major barrier to employment, leaving these job seekers at risk of re-offending.

Our client, Work Solutions, is a non-profit making organisation that helps thousands of unemployed and low-skilled people into work and training.

The organisation provides support for more than 7,000 offenders every year, in prisons and community settings. Staff do a remarkable job of giving offenders the confidence and skills to put their mistakes behind them and get back on the employment ladder.

Work Solutions asked us to deliver a sharp and well-targeted communications campaign, to convince North West businesses of the benefits of hiring ex-offenders.

Campaign objectives

There were four core objectives for the campaign:

- Persuade North West employers: we needed to show companies that ex-offenders can make valuable employees, particularly in trades where there are skills shortages, such as construction, retail and administration.
- Tackle the myths: it's easy to think of offenders as untrustworthy and high risk, but the statistics tell a very different story. Our job was to challenge the stereotypes.
- Keep it simple: criminal justice is a hugely complicated area, with a plethora of organisations working in the sector. We needed to cut through the sea of acronyms and simplify the information for prospective employers.
- Bring offenders' stories to life: to highlight the potential of ex-offenders, we needed to find inspiring case studies that persuaded our target audience. Offenders and ex-offenders are often unwilling to share their stories publicly, so a sensitive approach was needed to win their support.

Planning

Before deciding on activity, we had to get under the skin of their work in this area.

We went on a fact finding tour, to see Work Solutions' staff in action in prisons, Probation offices and community centres. We got to speak to offenders about the issues they faced and found several motivated young people willing to participate in our campaign.

We also extensively researched the roles of a wide range of partner organisations working in the sector, such as HM Prison Services, the Probation Service and the Learning and Skills Council.

This research enabled us to produce a well-informed campaign plan that was endorsed by our client, and other key stakeholders.

Implementation

We used a combination of media relations, marketing materials, on-line activity and events to reach North West employers.

Key activity included:

- An employers' guide to working with offenders: an accessible, engaging handbook featuring practical information for employers, inspiring case studies, frequently asked questions, common myths and sources of further information.

The handbook was written, researched and designed by IPB

Communications, with input from our client and a wide range of partners. This was the first time that the whole sector had collaborated to provide a central resource for North West employers.

Eight thousand guides were distributed to businesses and specialist training and employment organisations across the North West.



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- Media relations: we launched a press campaign, focused on ex-offenders who were looking to rebuilding their lives and innovative methods used to engage them. We used these stories as a platform to talk about the region's huge untapped labour pool and the support that that Work Solutions was providing.

We aimed the stories at local and regional newspapers, TV and radio, specialist trade titles and the nationals.

- Website: we created a new microsite to support the campaign. The site (work-solutions.org.uk/offenders-services.htm) provided key information for employers, and provided a gateway for offenders to access training and help in finding a job.
- Events: Work Solutions staff ran a series of regional events for employers, designed to debunk negative stereotypes and highlight the advantages of employing ex-offenders. We supported the process through marketing materials to employers and publicity and media relations activity in partnership with Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce, which has 6,000 members in Work Solutions' catchment area.
- Awards: we entered Work Solutions for a range of industry awards, to highlight the organisation's achievements, and to give staff a well deserved pat on the back. Opportunities included the National Training Awards and the Regeneration and Renewal Awards.

More than 200 employers attended the information sessions that were promoted in the media and through the Chamber of Commerce.

As a result of our coverage of an initiative in Bolton, which received coverage in the Guardian, Work Solutions was able to set up a similar scheme in Salford in partnership with the city Council in 2008.

Work Solutions won a National Training Award and was 'highly commended' in the Regeneration and Renewal Awards in 2008.

Results

The campaign had a significant impact, with all strands of activity finding their mark.

The media campaign generated more than £100,000 worth of coverage, including pieces in The Guardian, The Guardian online, regional and local newspapers (e.g. Manchester Evening News, Bolton News), several trade magazines (e.g. New Start, TMag), partnership and regional Government publications, North West regional TV and local radio. This coverage reached a potential audience of more than 1.6 million people, based on audited readership, listener and viewer figures.

Work Solutions saw an increase in enquiries from North West businesses about offender employment opportunities. Leads came from companies in IT, sports and leisure, construction, retail and manufacturing.

