



Freebies clean up their act

As the distribution of free newspapers and magazines increases, **Stuart Derrick** looks at what recycling steps publishers are taking to minimise the litter created

The UK's media landscape has been transformed in the past few years by the growth in high-quality free newspapers and magazines.

Advertisers have been pleased by the full-colour offerings of *London Lite*, *City AM* and *thelondonpaper* in the capital, along with Manchester's *Evening News City Edition* and magazines such as *ShortList* and *Sport*.

However, not everybody has been overjoyed. A rumble of consumer discontent has led to the growth of online campaigning groups, as well as local authorities, taking publishers to task over the effect free publications are having on their recycling efforts.

Project Freesheet is one group that has focused its ire squarely on *Metro*, *London Lite* and *thelondonpaper*. Founder Justin Canning says the group has changed the nature of free newspapers in the capital: "The sheer scale of distribution has had an impact on local waste disposal services. The papers are largely going straight to landfill."

Canning says that although readers need to be aware of their role in recycling, publishers must do more. "By taking a paper, you are taking up the responsibility to dispose of it properly and that doesn't mean leaving it on a Tube," he says. "Publishers should be forced to provide for their impact before launching."

As well as arranging an online petition on the Downing Street website, 60 Project Freesheet volunteers recently took part in a walkabout that picked up 800 kilogrammes of discarded newspapers. These were given to a Hackney Council art project to highlight concerns about the amount of paper being used. The Gillette Square Newspaper House by artist Sumer Ereik was built entirely of newspapers brought along by members of the public.

If Hackney's action can be seen as a light jibe at freesheets, London's Westminster Council has been more forthright in taking on the biggest two publishers: Associated Newspapers and News International, publishers of *London Lite* and *thelondonpaper* respectively. The borough is the sweet spot for distribution of many of the combined circulation of 900,000 copies.

Last year, Westminster called for the papers to provide £500,000 to ease a growing litter problem, with 20 tonnes of free papers ending up



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as street waste every week. The publishers' situation was not helped by mutual allegations of dumping undistributed copies.

After a wrangle that resulted in Westminster threatening to require distributors to have permits to distribute, the three parties announced a deal in January. Associated and News International are sponsoring 70 new recycling bins in the borough and their distributors are required to pick up litter in the vicinity of their pitches.

John Leitch, director of circulation at *London Lite*, denies the publisher was dragged to the table by the threat of stronger action. "We were not being threatened," he says. "Recycling is something we are happy to help with, but it was difficult for our readers to find an opportunity to do it."

The new bins are situated in high-traffic areas with publishers having their own distinct zones of responsibility. News International deals with Oxford Circus and Charing Cross, while Associated looks after bins in the Leicester Square and Victoria Station areas. Leitch says distributors are trained in their duties and there is a strong structure to discourage rogue operators.

Ian Clark, general manager of *thelondonpaper*, says the aggressive launches of two new papers head to head made recycling a secondary issue: "It was ultra-competitive and there was a lot of jostling for position, but it has settled down now and our litter patrol teams have begun to work."

Clark says News International was not against the Westminster proposals, but didn't feel the

council's demand for £500,000 represented the scale of the problem. The company also wanted to speak to other boroughs to ensure a cross-London deal. The publisher collects 400 bags of waste paper a day and analysis shows *thelondonpaper* contributes the lowest proportion of the waste at an average of 13% to *London Lite*'s 14%.

Meanwhile, the *Manchester Evening News* has been distributing free copies in the centre of the city since May 2006 and now has a free circulation of 90,000. However, director of communications Elaine Darbyshire says the paper has pre-empted a Westminster-style scenario by introducing its own five-person litter patrol team. These efforts also extend to *Metro*.

"We managed the issue proactively, as we have a strong emphasis on environmental responsibility. We are working closely with the council and are looking at providing recycling bins," she says.

All copies are recycled, as *MEN*'s waste control company can handle mixed waste, which has resulted in a recycling rate of 40% for the company. "You cannot control every single paper, but the strategy is working in Manchester, where you don't see the streets strewn with papers. This would be more challenging in London," says Darbyshire.

Such words are cold comfort to Project Freesheet's Canning, who sees the papers as "litter you can read". But even he admits the free papers are here to stay. The challenge is to make publishers more active proponents of recycling ■