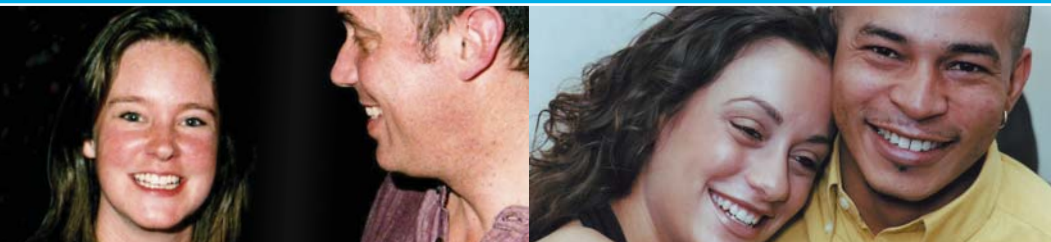


livingtogether project



Report

by Rachel Braverman

Introduction

Background

Around two million couples are currently co-habiting in the UK, with the numbers expected to rise to three million by 2021. Although cohabitation confers no legal rights, a survey carried out by Advicenow in 2004 found that 61% of people assumed that couples that had lived together for a while had the same rights as married couples. This could lead to serious problems around housing, finance and other areas if cohabiting couples split up or when one of them died.

The seriousness of the problem became apparent both to the advice sector and government. Advicenow became aware of the widespread belief in the myth of 'common law marriage' through a small survey of the most common myths and misconceptions of advice agency clients. Looking at statistics from the British Social Attitudes survey gave the Department of Constitutional Affairs (DCA) a similar awareness. As a result, the LivingTogether project to increase the public's awareness and knowledge of issues around cohabitation was developed by Advicenow and funded by the DCA.

This is a report on the first three years of the project. The resources continue to be available at www.advicenow.org.uk/livingtogether.

Aims and objectives

The project has three main aims:

- To dispel the myth of 'common law marriage'
- To raise awareness of specific issues which can affect cohabiting couples
- To help cohabiting couples protect themselves by pointing out the practical steps they can take to deal with each issue and where they can go for help.

Although not explicitly stated as an aim, the hope was that if people knew what the issues were and how to tackle them, they would take action.

In order to achieve these aims, Advicenow had two objectives:

- To produce a range of easy-access materials on each of the issues affecting cohabiting couples, to be published on the Advicenow website
- To market the materials as widely as possible through a sustained media campaign, led by Amazon PR.



Contents

Introduction	1
Aims and objectives	1
How the project worked	2
Results	4
Conclusions	5
Acknowledgements	6

How the project worked

Materials produced

The LivingTogether website, www.advicenow.org.uk/livingtogether, was created as part of the Advicenow site. Like the rest of the Advicenow site, the overall style is similar to that of a magazine, using a lively presentation and informal language. Advicenow used techniques from mainstream publishing, combined with those an educator would use to ensure they met the needs of people with a wide variety of learning styles, including using several formats and styles to get the information across. Case studies, quizzes and cartoons not only made the pages more attractive, they allowed the various messages to be presented several times in different ways.

The information is divided into seven topics:

- **Moving in**
- **Wills and inheritance**
- **Children**
- **Money**
- **Next of kin**
- **Breaking up**
- **Same sex couples.**

A distinguishing feature of the LivingTogether campaign is its preventative role. There are practical steps cohabiting couples can take to safeguard their interests and avoid major problems later. Advicenow found that presenting information in terms of the realities of people's lives was more effective than talking about the law. They therefore produced information that addressed readers in their own situation and provided them with practical help to sort out their problems.

For example, a leaflet called 'What about the Kids?', focusing on parents' relationships with their children and how that may be affected by the law was more attractive than 'Parental

Responsibility' that took the legal aspect as its starting point.

Users could also take a quiz and look at survey results around what people think. Eighteen leaflets could be downloaded either from the relevant topic or from the home page. As the aim was to encourage people to take action, the leaflets included step-by-step guides and checklists.

A problem page was added in Year 3 and has proved popular, generating 59 problems in the first 9 weeks. Encouragingly, 35% of queries were from people living together happily or at the point of moving in, who wanted to organise their affairs properly. Of the 29% of people who were in the process of splitting up, the vast majority wanted help with housing one or both of the couple owned.

It is important that everything on the website is accurate, as well as accessible, so Advicenow commissioned in-depth and detailed material from specialists. All material was peer reviewed before being published, to ensure accuracy. However, Advicenow found that highly specialised lawyers and advisers tended to focus on fine detail and completeness, which could obscure the main message. It was therefore important that peer reviewers understood the purpose of the material and the nature of the intended audience.

Advicenow developed a two-step model of how the campaign would work. The first stage was to get articles into the media with a simple message, such as 'cohabiting couples should make a will', plus a signpost to the web page. The second stage was to provide more detailed information on the website, outlining the key issues and the practical steps people could take.

Media campaign

The media campaign was central to the project. The strategy was to raise awareness through a variety of media, including broadsheet and tabloid press, radio, TV and websites. As well as launching the campaign in general, a leaflet on each issue was launched separately. This gave Amazon PR a 'hook' to grab journalists' attention. They also considered the timing of the various launches carefully, using their knowledge of what else was in the media that might provide an opportunity or competition (or both). Occasions, such as Valentine's Day, also provided openings to promote particular topics.

The aim was to get two main points across; information about the topic being promoted and the web address. Amazon PR developed key messages they wanted to get across to journalists:

Key messages

1

Mistaken belief of existence of 'common law husband and wife'

2

The LivingTogether campaign addresses these misconceptions

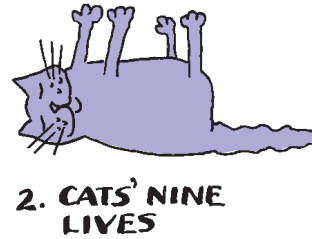
3

The LivingTogether campaign provides practical solutions

As they were aware that the campaign could be seen as encouraging people to marry, they also emphasised this was not the case and that the aim was to provide the information, so that people could make their own decisions.

During the first two years, the aim was to reach a broad audience, as all sorts of people cohabit. However,

THREE THINGS THAT DON'T EXIST.



the campaign also concentrated on tabloid newspapers and the cheaper weekly women's magazines, such as Bella and Yours, which were likely to reach more vulnerable readers. Regional media and radio phone-ins were used to target hard to reach groups, particularly men.

This was highly successful, resulting in a great deal of media coverage. However, it relied on a regular supply of new resources to launch and once all the material had been written by year 3, a more targeted and reactive approach was used.

A major coup for the campaign was to become involved with a soap opera storyline. Amazon PR contacted the producers of all the major soaps, offering to help ensure accuracy if any of their cohabiting characters were splitting up. Emmerdale responded positively, with Advicenow clarifying the legal position when characters Simon and Nicola broke up. This generated excellent coverage in soap magazines and the LivingTogether website was top of the list of ITV's soap helplines for two months.

Two key factors in gaining media coverage were the availability of people willing to talk about their experiences to become case studies and of spokespeople.

Finding case studies proved difficult. Both Advicenow and Amazon PR had relationships with many organisations providing advice and/or with users who might have experienced problems around cohabitation. Advicenow, in particular, networked extensively. However, advice organisations as a whole were either unable or very reluctant to provide case studies.

Most were found through personal contacts, particularly from Amazon PR. There were only 15–20 in total and most case study participants were white. A number of opportunities for coverage were lost because of the shortage of case studies.

Sourcing spokespeople was simpler. The Advicenow features manager, who had worked as an adviser for many years, was the main spokesperson, with other members of the team also taking part. Amazon PR offered her some training, in the form of role-plays of interviews with journalists.

Partnership working

Partnership working was key to the success of the project. As well as working with Amazon PR, the main partners were One Plus One, the DCA and a reference group, made up of representatives of stakeholder organisations.

Advicenow and Amazon PR both viewed their partnership very positively. A working relationship had already been established on previous projects, so each organisation was used to the way the other worked. When talking to staff, the appreciation and respect showed for partners was striking. Not only were individual team members valued, each organisation held the other's particular areas of expertise in high regard. Both organisations also knew their own limits. Amazon PR would not try to act as spokespeople for the advice sector and Advicenow left public relations up to 'the professionals'. These attitudes led to firm

boundaries, making the work easier. Effective communications were set up, both formal and informal. Amazon PR presented regular activity reports. Both partners were willing to discuss details, so that the accuracy and marketability of material to be promoted was kept up.

One Plus One were already working on the issue and had their own website, so it took a while for boundaries and roles to be clarified. The DCA took a hands-off approach, which meant the campaign could operate independently. This was vital, as it gave Advicenow a legitimacy it would have lost, had it been viewed as merely part of a government agenda.

Advicenow set up a reference group for the project, made up of representatives from stakeholders, including the DCA, One Plus One, Citizens Advice, Resolution and Family Lawyers In Partnership. As well as providing a sounding board for ideas and a checking mechanism, this proved a good opportunity for networking and developing relationships.

Funding

The project received funding of around £520,000 for the first three years. This was split roughly 50/50 between Advicenow producing the materials and Amazon PR promoting it. Whilst this is a substantial sum for a voluntary organisation of Advicenow's size, it represents only a fraction of the DCA's planned spending for 2005/6 of nearly £3 billion.

Results

The project has been monitored in four main ways:

- Amazon PR produced annual media evaluations
- Website usage was monitored, particularly downloads of material
- Advicenow surveyed around 1,000 people in June 2004 and November 2006, to see if the campaign had succeeded in challenging the common law marriage myth
- Professor Anne Barlow of the University of Exeter carried out a short survey of behaviour and attitudes of people who had accessed the LivingTogether website.

Overall, media coverage of the campaign, as measured by Amazon PR, has been substantial. There were 564 pieces of coverage from the start of the project to November 2006. These included a broad spread of media, with 65% of pieces appearing in regional press and radio. The Emmerdale link was particularly useful, as it reached people who may not regularly read any magazines or newspapers. The campaign even generated a question on Radio 4's News Quiz the week after the Breaking Up Checklist was launched.

All coverage was either positive or neutral. The campaign achieved overwhelming legal accuracy in all media coverage. This came through clarity in preparing the messages and through Amazon PR and Advicenow understanding the needs of journalists and working closely with them to get the stories accurate.

The combined circulation figure (or reach) for paper coverage (magazines and newspapers) over the three years to November 2006 was 76,928,665. Multiplying this by 3 gives a standard Opportunity To See measure of 230,785,995. This is enough for everyone in England and Wales to have got the message 4.3 times each. We also got a significant amount of coverage on radio, TV and online – our reach using these

mediums is estimated as a further 589,453,542.¹

There was some success in targeting particular groups, including coverage in the tabloids and in the Voice. However, some media, such as men's magazines, proved hard to reach.

As one of the aims of the media coverage was to guide people to the LivingTogether website, the number of times the web address was mentioned was important. Professor Barlow's study found that 66% of people found the site by surfing the web. It was therefore encouraging that the URL appeared frequently, being mentioned in 90% of coverage in year 1 and 76% in year 2. At the time of writing, the figure for year 3 was somewhat lower at 60%, which might reflect the fact that much of the coverage was short news items, particularly about the Law Commission Review, where there was no room to mention the URL. However, there are several PR initiatives in the pipeline before the project ends, including a major launch of the Mr. and Ms. survey, highlighting the campaign's success in dispelling the 'common law marriage' myth, and initiatives around housing and wills.

The number of times the various leaflets and webpages were visited and when gave some indication of how much attention the media coverage attracted. Overall, there were over 150,000 downloads up to November 2006.² Due to the limitations of the software we were using at that time, we don't have reliable statistics for page views for the webpages from

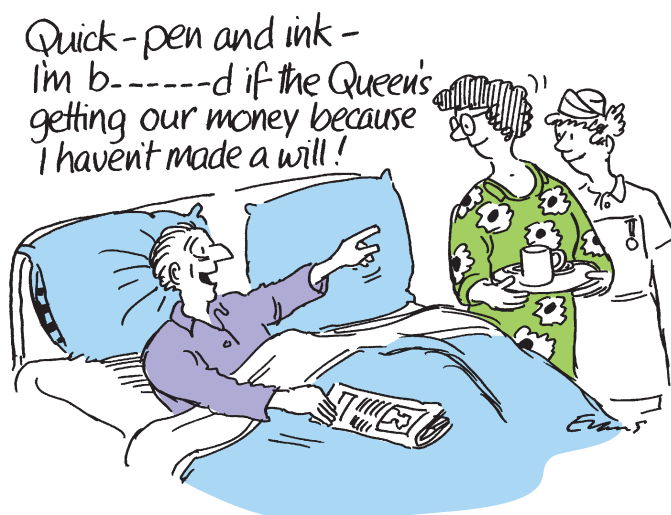
this period but experience suggests that it was probably at least 8 times the download figure, approximately 1,200,000. By far the most popular guide was the Breaking Up checklist, accounting for 75% of downloads. The next most downloaded was the LivingTogether Agreement at 6%.

There was a direct correlation between public relations activity and downloads. Media coverage increased substantially when there was a launch and visitors to the site shot up when there was media coverage.

Comparisons of the surveys done in June 2004 and November 2006 suggest that the message is getting through. Numbers believing couples that have lived together for a while gain the same rights as married couples fell from 61% to 55%. However, that still leaves over half of people believing the myth.

A fundamental question is whether cohabiting couples would take action if they were alerted to the risks they faced. Professor Barlow's study gave some indications here. Respondents were positive about the website, with 93% stating they found it helpful and 90% felt it had improved their knowledge of their legal position. A significant minority of 35% said they now intended to take action.

Several respondents, who were either planning to move in together or who had done so recently, found the website particularly useful in helping them sort out their affairs. This raises some interesting questions about how to turn increased awareness into action.





Conclusions

Meeting aims and objectives

The project has met its objectives of producing and marketing a range of easy-access materials about cohabitation issues. Having the material peer reviewed for accuracy and edited for readability resulted in very high quality information easily available to users.

Media coverage has been extensive, largely due to Amazon PR's skills and the practical style and attractiveness of the guides. These proved popular with both the media and the public. The media coverage succeeded in leading people to the website, as shown by the substantial Opportunity To See figures. The large number of downloads suggests that people then used it. Of particular importance is the fact that people saw and heard accurate messages.

The attitude surveys and Professor Barlow's research showed that the project is also starting to achieve its aims. The belief in common law marriage has reduced and interview respondents stated their knowledge had increased.

It is well recognised, for example in the fields of health promotion and drug awareness, that it is very difficult to get people to take action until they reach a crisis point. This could explain why the breaking up checklist, designed to help at such a time, was by far the most popular download.

However, there are signs that people may change their behaviour as a result of becoming aware of their risky legal situation, before they reach crisis. Professor Barlow finding that more than a third of people (35%) intended to take action, including discussing their situation with their partners, is positive. Her finding that couples at the start of cohabitation were more likely to use the information indicates that reaching people at a point of change in their lives could be particularly useful.

Partnership working and communication

A great deal of the success of the project can be traced to a highly effective relationship between Amazon PR and Advicenow. In particular, strong boundaries, good communication and mutual respect led to a maximisation of each organisation's skills and experience.

Amazon PR's substantial experience in media meant they understood the needs of journalists, knew the various editorial agendas and were aware of pitfalls. This depth of knowledge would be impossible for people not specialising in the media. However, it is unusual for organisations within the advice sector to use an external public relations company, although they are frequently too small to have internal PR departments.

Each organisation learned from the other. Advicenow staff gained knowledge of public relations and skills in being spokespeople. Amazon PR commented they now knew much more about cohabitation and the advice sector.

Using spokespeople and case studies

Using spokespeople and case studies were highly effective in gaining media coverage. Case studies are also an established way of attracting people's attention and encouraging them to reflect on their own situations.

There are a number of possible explanations for the difficulty in persuading organisations in the advice to help find people willing to act as case studies:

- Advice organisations might be distrustful of the media and protective of their clients.
- Confidentiality is a very important value in the advice world. Advisers may feel that even to ask clients to break their own anonymity might compromise this.

- Advice organisations tend to be very busy, with a lot of pressure coming from the clients in difficult situations and with deadlines to meet.
- The advice sector may not realise the importance of reaching people through the media or using case studies to aid the process.

On reflection, the problem page is a potential source of case studies, which could be useful for future work.

Independence

The DCA's hands-off approach was key to the legitimacy of the project. The project was well monitored, in terms of both outputs and outcomes. The monitoring methods came from the fundees, so what was monitored became useful to the project itself and not merely a funder requirement.

Funding and value for money

The project was well funded, thanks to the DCA. This meant that it was possible to take full advantage of all Amazon PR and Advicenow's experience and expertise.

The project provides good value for money. As of November 2006, the guides had been downloaded more than 150,000 times. We don't have reliable statistics for page views for the guides as webpages from this period but experience suggests that it was probably at least 8 times the download figure, approximately 1,200,000. In addition, there are the very substantial Opportunity To See figures. Over time, the project will offer better and better value for money, as people continue to download material.

These figures have been changed since this report was originally published in March 2007. This is because we have become aware that the statistical software we were using at the time was producing inflated figures for downloads.



- 1 Source: Mid year population estimates from the Office for National Statistics
- 2 These figures have been changed since this report was originally published in March 2007. This is because the statistical software we were using at the time was producing inflated figures for downloads. The figures have now been adjusted to give a more accurate picture.

Acknowledgements

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For more information about this and other advicenow projects email us at info@advicenow.org.uk

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