

## AMEC Global Communication Effectiveness Awards 2013

**Category:** Best Use of Communication Management: Public Sector

**Entering Company Name:** Gorkana

**Client:** Defra

**Campaign:** Social Media Horizon Scanning

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### Objective/Brief

The UK Government's Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) works on policy and legislation in multiple and diverse areas such as: the natural environment, biodiversity, plants and animals; sustainable development and the green economy; food, farming and fisheries; animal health and welfare; environmental protection and pollution control; and rural communities and issues<sup>1</sup>.

The Defra Horizon Scanning and Futures team identifies risks and opportunities to enable Government and society to prepare and innovate where relevant. The team defines its role as: *"The systematic examination of potential threats, opportunities and likely future developments which are at the margins of current thinking and planning"* (Defra, 2002).

The introduction of Defra's digital strategy, which included extending its engagement with the public and stakeholders through digital channels, brought with it a vast array of new and complex challenges alongside opportunities. With a diverse remit and multiple feedback channels to interpret already, social media added to this multilayered picture. The opportunity to create an early warning system, however, and identify emerging issues before the media takes an interest was clear. The use of social media to listen to stakeholders, the public and interest groups, capture perceptions and influence policy making was also appealing. If utilised correctly, the power to inform policy decisions and communications strategies was significant.

With diminished resources the team needed to understand who was influencing discussion relevant to policies and where the conversations were occurring. This needed to happen fast enough to allow the right response to quell the burn time of issues. Finally there was the crucial need to know what they didn't know and the tall order of open ended issue discovery.

### Strategy

Defra ran a detailed, in-depth review of social media monitoring platforms and selected Gorkana's Radar tool. The ability for Gorkana Radar to source broad yet relevant content from the social media sphere alongside its outstanding customisation, flexibility and approach was paramount. Fundamental to the approach however, was the expertise and consultancy that underpinned its use. A tool alone cannot answer the challenges presented, the application of human intelligence is key.

The Gorkana solution was introduced in late July 2012 and following consultation the following approach was recommended:

- Identification of the relevant content which evolves over time to pinpoint where relevant conversations are taking place and enable targeted engagement
- In-depth and ongoing research to help Defra understand, monitor and engage with key stakeholders in the industry and interest groups relating to fisheries, agriculture, environmental issues, food and farming
- Identification of key influencers surrounding multiple policy areas to inform the communications team's social media engagement strategy
- Advanced setup of Gorkana Radar to enable delivery of key information around each policy area to team members of varying aptitude without the need to sink time into the tool
- Monthly overview of social media activity related to Defra and other key UK environment and rural affairs issues to influence communication strategies
- Quarterly in-depth reviews and recommendations concerning key issues to influence policy making

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.defra.gov.uk/corporate/>

### **Execution/Implementation**

The first challenge with any social media project is isolating the content that matters. Content was sourced from micro-blogs, blogs, video sites, social networks, discussion forums and image sites. The right streams of data were identified for each policy area using complex search string methodology to remove false positives, spam and splogs. Through a process of iterative sample-based feedback, technology and human analysis worked together to get the purity of content streams within tolerated error margins. The search strings are constantly monitored and refined to maintain relevance in the face of rapidly changing issues and conversations. When tracking discussions on wider topics such as the rural economy or animal welfare, content is filtered so that it has a UK focus and connection to policy issues or political debate. For hot and impassioned issues like badger culls, the team keeps track of various hashtags used by campaign groups (e.g. #teambadger) to follow the fast-moving debate.

It is critical for Defra that the approach is strategic, yet organic, since issues evolve so quickly on social media. To ensure the strategic priorities are captured, Gorkana and Defra define three priority topics depending on the policy, news and media agenda. These can be as diverse as badger culls, ash tree dieback and flooding. The Gorkana team researches and develops customised search strings to capture social media conversations, and designs dashboards to push insights and allow easy interrogation of data. Alongside this, organic and detailed gap analysis is undertaken by Gorkana to identify the wider conversations and add these into relevant policy searches for the full Defra picture.

A multilayered approach is used to identify influencers for Defra, with a focus on reach, resonance and relevance. A key outcome from this approach was achieved with the badger cull debate. Gorkana was able to isolate the top 20 people driving conversation by looking at a combination of metrics including followers, retweets, name checks, @ mentions, link sharing, and content of posts. These were collected into an 'author group' in the tool allowing them to be tracked in realtime. Gorkana demonstrated that up to 60% of the conversation was being driven by these 20 influencers which allowed Defra to engage directly with the most important people to facilitate wider understanding.

With many diverse areas falling under Defra's remit, the team needs to look at issues as diverse as plastic bags, killer shrimps, rural broadband and ash dieback disease. To support this, Gorkana has configured a series of intelligent dashboards so each team member can log in and immediately see clear information about the issues that fall within their remit. Each of the thousands of posts that get picked up everyday are categorised to match Defra's internal structure. Defra's Horizon Scanning and Planning team use these dashboards to internally communicate on social media trends and emerging issues on a daily basis.

The monthly and quarterly reporting allows the team the opportunity to retrospectively look at the conversations and interactions and provide management insights which can be acted upon in future policy making and communications planning.

This scale and detail of social media monitoring and reporting is not being undertaken anywhere else in government. It is a new approach driven by an understanding that social media can provide accurate insight into public and stakeholder perception to help inform Government policy and communications.

### **Conclusions**

As a result of the social media program Defra has changed the way it engages and consults with key stakeholders about policy. The Horizon Scanning and Planning team at Defra use reports pulled from Gorkana Radar every day as an integral part of their job. Their work is a critical component of internal Defra policy and communications intelligence and extracts are distributed to a senior audience.

Defra understands that initial conversation around any particular event/topic has the potential and tendency to evolve in response to other stimulants including government response, industry response and public response. It is these follow-up conversations which on occasion contain the most interesting and relevant insight. A good example is the evolution of the conversation around the flooding in December 2012. Initial emerging topics were logistical, followed by personal stories, experiences and jokes about the flooding, flowing into conversation around the Prime Minister's flood defences funding announcement, leading to more debate around flood defence schemes and their role in encouraging business growth.

The feedback to Defra from Ministers and senior officials has been that the monitoring is incredibly insightful and helpful, not only to help them understand public sentiment on each topic but also for making informed communications decisions. The reporting has been so helpful that other areas of Government have taken an interest and the reports have been shared with No.10.

For the communications team, knowing the right spaces to engage with interested parties is invaluable. During the badger cull issue for example, Gorkana demonstrated that Twitter was the dominant channel—sometimes generating over 90% of the conversation—so this is where communications efforts were focused including a Twitter Q&A where the Defra Chief Scientist responded to live questions. Based on the information provided from Gorkana, the department’s press team has identified and engaged with those people who are really interested in having a conversation or a debate. They have also been able to listen to the key audiences more closely and feed this back into Defra.

Defra correlates the data from Gorkana Radar with website statistics, helpline volumes, correspondence received, and parliamentary questions, all of which are fed into the reporting structure to enable the Horizon Scanning and Planning team to provide a full picture report internally.

Never before has social media analysis been undertaken at this level of sophistication in government. As a result, Defra has been approached by other departments, agencies and arms-length bodies to share its best practice approach to social analytics. Defra’s social media analysis program has been recognised in a major communications capability review, which noted that Defra is leading the way in social media monitoring and analysis. The review included a recommendation that the team share its strong process and system across Whitehall.

Defra’s Director of Communications said:

*“Defra has such a broad remit, covering wide-ranging topics, that our requirements were always going to be a real challenge for Gorkana but the team rose to the task.*

*They worked closely with our Social Analytics area to develop a system that complemented our objectives closely in the most user friendly way possible. They also worked hard to understand the challenges that we faced, impressed us with their proactive solutions and they even identified gaps and assisted us in closing them to keep us on top of fast-paced Defra-related issues.*

*Understanding what is bubbling up, who is talking and where has allowed us to do some pioneering myth-busting which has stopped the uncontrolled spread of misinformation and scaremongering. We are fielding a smaller media team now and so we needed to work smarter; the Gorkana project has meant that we are more targeted and more efficient.*

*We’re now leading the way in Whitehall with this cutting-edge service that delivers real benefits to the communications team, policy colleagues and ministers”.*