

## PRSA Silver Anvil: Most effective ESG campaign

In February 2021, [Austin Resource Recovery \(ARR\)](#), the City of Austin department who handles solid waste collection and zero waste initiatives, completed the fourth and final expansion of its [curbside composting](#) collection program. Approximately 55,000 Austin households received green carts for their food scraps, food-soiled paper and yard trimmings, bringing the total number of households with this service to over 207,000.

A planned four-year phased in approach began in 2017. Phase 4 was scheduled to occur in April of 2020 but was delayed due to supply chain issues caused by the **global** pandemic.

ARR's Public Information and Marketing Team (PIO) announced the final roll out in December of 2020 and began a year-long communications campaign. The goal of the campaign was to inform residents and encourage participation.

### Insights & Analysis

ARR contracts with Texas Disposal Systems Landfill for all of Austin's residential trash. That landfill has a projected life span of 11 more years. In 2015 ARR completed a material composition study of curbside trash collected. It showed that 46% of what Austinites send to landfills was compostable. Keeping those materials out of the landfill will help extend its use, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and create nutrient-rich compost for crops, lawns, gardens and other outdoor areas.

Additionally, ARR conducted curbside compost audits in 2017, 2018 and 2019 to gather contamination rates and other data. Contamination is the presence of non-compostable materials that do not belong in the stream. This includes trash and recyclable materials. These rates provide insight on the effectiveness of the curbside compost collection and education component of the program. The 2019 audit took place after the completion of the third phase of curbside compost roll out. It included a random sampling of Austin households serviced by ARR and found an overall contamination rate of 2.8%.

PIO's research looking at Austin residents as they made disposal decisions identified five personas based on ability, knowledge and motivation.

Austin is a flourishing city full of diversity. Of nearly 1 million residents, one quarter are immigrants representing over 82 spoken languages. Nearly a third of Austin households speak a language other than English at home and 11.4% of Austinites speak English "less than very well."

### Planning

PIO identified the greatest need as informing and encouraging participation for those new to the service. The greatest opportunity for impact was in reeducating households already receiving curbside compost collection. Communities that had a lower participation rate may not have been effectively engaged in previous years. The fourth and final rollout provided compost collection to all ARR customers, allowed for a communications campaign that employed radio, television, outdoor advertising, direct mail, social media, digital advertising and robust community engagement.

Communications strategy leveraged community leaders, minority-owned media, faith-based groups, and direct engagement. PIO identified digital and physical community gathering spaces. The team focused on motivators, communication channels and barriers unique to each community. Messaging, content and outreach was culturally relevant and provided in multiple languages. Also, it addressed barriers to composting for each of the personas.

Advertising and outreach plans were flexible and nimble to respond to COVID-19 restrictions. Local health guidance limited PIO's ability to engage residents for the majority of 2021. While PIO relied on virtual engagement and ad placements, changing safety guidelines required them to pivot and adjust their communication and engagement tactics often and quickly to take advantage of newly presented opportunities.

### Execution

The use of culturally relevant media and language access were priorities in all communications. PIO utilized a comprehensive list of purchased and earned tactics across the campaign to distribute strategically designed content.

Virtual Town Hall: to adhere to COVID-19 safety regulations, PIO held a virtual town hall on January 28, 2021. This town hall was a first for the City of Austin in its breadth of language access considerations. The town hall was televised live on local stations ATXN and ATXN3. It was also streamed on two Facebook accounts. Simultaneous Spanish interpretation was provided on ATXN3 and provided via a conference line for our Vietnamese speaking residents. Residents were able to ask questions through our on-air moderator in their preferred language.

Radio: Staff participated in a 6.5-minute interview on En Tu Comunidad. PIO also placed 36 15-second spots on local radio stations KUT and KUTX.

Television: PIO placed 168 30-second ads on local Univision 62 Austin that ran May through August. A local entertainment reporter endorsed PIO's campaign and explained the "how-to," importance and benefits of composting. Staff participated in a 2-minute interview on the local show Despierta Austin. PIO also placed 49 15-second spots and several short "ARR Tips" educational vignettes with local talent on KVUE television.

Outdoor advertising: Staff executed a 20-week billboard campaign featuring 7 posters. Posters were in English and Spanish and in targeted geographic areas. Sites rotated to new positions once every four weeks. Additionally, PIO provided vehicle magnets with the message "Ask me about Curbside Composting" to teams delivering carts to the 55,000 new households.

Direct mail: Every added household received a direct mailer that included a welcome letter, how-to compost guide, downsize your cart card and 3-cart brochure that explained how to use each cart collected curbside.

Social Media: PIO planned and executed a Reddit Ask Me Anything. Bilingual staff answered questions live. UniMás posted paid advertisements on their social media account on 7/10 and 7/24. PIO posted original content about composting 12 times over the course of the campaign.

Digital: PIO created a dedicate page on a City of Austin platform, SpeakUpAustin.org. Through this page, residents were able to find informational materials on the roll out, ask questions and receive responses within a business day, and voice their concerns or excitement. Educational materials were available on PIOs webpage, including digital copies of the How-to guides and PSAs to encourage proper use of the green cart.

Community outreach: The team engaged residents outside of six City of Austin Libraries and two YMCAs as local health guidance allowed. Our team hosted 7 contactless drive-thru events at locations across the City. These hour and a half events were attended by an average of 600 vehicles. Staff and volunteers answered questions and provided attendees with tools to successfully participate in the program such as informational material, free compostable bags and kitchen compost collectors.

Zero Waste Block Leaders (ZWBLs): PIO activated over 250 ZWBLs, resident volunteers, to provide accurate information at a hyperlocal level. They received a pre-press release informational session and were asked to be local resources for their friends, families and neighbors.

## Evaluation

Advertising and community outreach were highly effective. Key indicators:

- A decrease in contamination from 2.8% to 1.25%.
- A 38% increase in the amount of diverted material.
- An increase in pounds of curbside compost collected per household per week from 9.05 to 10.43

PIO provided the community with approximately 4,000 kitchen compost collectors. PIO social media posts had a reach of 23,290 with 585 likes, comments and shares. Billboard placements came in under budget and delivered a minimum total of 8,851,780 impressions over the campaign. Through SpeakUpAustin.org, PIO directly made 1800 residents aware of the expansion, informed 371 more, and directly engaged 235 residents answering their questions.

Audits are conducted by ARRs Quality Assurance team as outlined in the compost vendor contract. The 2021 audit included households from Phase 4, who had no prior experience composting within the City of Austin. This, along with the reported increase in amounts composted by all households in the City, demonstrates the success of the communications campaign at informing residents and encouraging correct participation in the curbside compost program.