



AWARDS FOR
EXCELLENCE IN
**PUBLIC
RELATIONS
2023**



Best Public Affairs Campaign



Sean Martin, President, Irish Postmasters' Union; Laurie Mannix, FPRII (Life), Director MKC Communications; and Martina Quinn, MPRII, Chairperson, PRCA.

Campaign

Delivering for Ireland's Post Office Network. A public affairs campaign on behalf of the Irish Postmasters' Union to secure funding that would secure the livelihoods of postmasters and secure the viability of the post office network.

Description of Campaign

This was an intensive 4 month lobbying campaign by the Irish Postmasters' Union to secure funding for Ireland's postmasters, who as independent small business owners were facing a financial cliff edge. €30m euro in funding was secured for Irish Post Offices through a strong grassroots campaign which positively positioned the contribution of post offices to Irish society.



Public Relations Consultant

MKC Communications



Client

Irish Postmasters' Union

Background to the Campaign

The majority of post offices in Ireland are independently owned businesses which earn fees on a per transaction basis under contract with An Post. These small businesses are at the heart of their local communities, providing critical services that go far beyond the financial and extend into social and community services. The viability of the network, and the livelihood of Postmasters, is threatened as footfall continues to diminish. Government funding was required to secure a longer-term future for the network and the benefits it brings to communities.

The Government had de facto already accepted the critical role of Post Offices in local communities, having identified Post Offices as an essential service during the pandemic, but with Government finances ravaged during the pandemic there was a reluctance to provide funding and a fear that to do so would mean indefinitely funding the sector.

With a critical deadline of mid-summer looming when many postmasters would have to decide whether to continue operating or cease operations, MKC and Noel Dempsey were engaged at the end of February and work with the IPU commenced in March to secure the required funding.

Statement of Objectives

There was only one ultimate goal: To secure a commitment of government funding of a minimum of €8 million for 3 years before the end of the June that would provide a lifeline to independent post offices, securing the livelihoods of postmasters, and the viability of the post office network in the medium term. In support of this goal the following objectives were identified:

- Demonstrate the importance of the Post Office network to key decision-makers and elicit their support for funding for the sector
- Create public awareness of the essential role post offices play
- Convert the widespread political goodwill towards post offices into concrete action.

Programme Planning and Strategy

This was a short-term integrated campaign with a mission-critical outcome required to be achieved within a matter of months. If the campaign was unsuccessful, post offices would close, sounding a further death-knell to many communities across Ireland. It was vital that we had the full commitment of all members of the IPU, that messaging was research based, resonated and targeted the right stakeholders on a consistent basis, supporting the argument that post offices deserved PSO support, or similar.

A strong grassroots campaign was going to be critical to our success. Our first engagement was a workshop where the issues were laid bare on the table. The Union had been campaigning negatively for many years. We worked with them to change the internal mindset from one of negativity to positivity. The lobbying campaign became one of demonstrating the value of post offices to their local communities both in economic and social terms. Our messages focused on the role of post offices during lock-down, the need to keep money circulating within local communities, and, most importantly, a demonstration of the additional government services that could be provided to Irish citizens by the Post office network in return for an annual contract fee. In other words, we weren't looking for 'free money' but proper payment for service provision.

The campaign timing coincided with the Government campaign to develop remote working hubs in towns outside Dublin. Our campaign positioned Post Offices as central to the government achieving success for remote working hubs – people won't relocate if services aren't available and with banks retrenching, for many villages and towns the post office is the only game in town.

Stakeholders

The closure of any post office is highly emotive and results in loss of support for incumbent public representatives. A list of all public representatives Ministers, TDs and Senators was drawn up for targeting during the campaign. Special focus was put on members of the Joint Oireachtas Committee and in securing a presentation to the committee by representatives of the Irish Postmasters' Union. Informal lines of communication were also opened up with An Post, which also operates post offices, to support the Irish Postmasters' campaign. The organisation became an important partner in making its own representations to Government on the issue.

Grassroots Campaign

The theme adopted for the campaign was 'Driving Community Renewal in a Post Pandemic Ireland.' Leveraging the recent pandemic where post offices were deemed an essential service, we directed a grass roots campaign, led by Seán Martin, President, where postmasters lobbied their public representatives on the benefits to their constituents of a vibrant post office network.

Members of the IPU executive committee were provided with key messages and a list of the public representatives in their area to meet. Every Minister, Minister of State, TD and Senator was met over the course of four months.

Public representatives were reminded of the contribution made by local postmasters and the services made available to local communities. Politicians were asked how they would answer their constituents if post office services were lost. The consistent message at every engagement at grassroots and national level was "we're making a positive contribution and we can do more for government. We're looking for a hand-up, not a hand-out; our social value needs to be recognised and we need to be supported".

Tools of Engagement

Economic Research: In 2020 (pre-Covid) Grant Thornton had produced a review of the post office network which identified a funding gap of €17 million to maintain the post office network. The Grant Thornton review was updated in 2022 and a €12 million funding gap was identified. The €5 million reduction was positively positioned as being achieved through the efforts of postmasters investing in their businesses, working with An Post and Government to secure additional services and responding to community needs with extended opening hours.

An A4 'leave behind' of key messages was developed and provided to local Post Offices for sharing with their public representatives.

Newsletters were produced and posted to all Oireachtas members on a monthly basis from January – May. Each newsletter – written, designed and produced by MKC, put a spotlight on a local postmaster who spoke of the public service provided by post masters and the personalised service provided in a world when the drive to digitalisation was at risk of creating a two-tier society. As the deadline approached, the tone of the newsletter became more urgent, with the headline on the president's letter 'Support needs Action not Words'.

Social Media: #loveyourpostoffice. The Irish Postmasters Union had a dormant twitter account. MKC took over the account and increased followers from 50 to close to 200 over a three-month period, including key stakeholders including politicians, journalists and the general public. Infographics were produced which focused on the value of post offices to the community.

Traditional Media: The Grant Thornton Report was circulated to all Oireachtas members and was used to leverage media coverage for the issue. Again the message was one of positivity – 'Post Offices are an Untapped Resource' as opposed to 'Post Offices in Decline' as had been the previous approach. Widespread media coverage was secured. Interviews with postmasters were also placed in print and broadcast media throughout the campaign. The media campaign culminated in an editorial in the Irish Examiner 'Putting rural Ireland back on the map' supporting the provision of funding to Ireland's post offices.

Measurement

MKC analysed the success of this campaign in line with Barcelona Principles and assessed the outputs, outcomes and impact.

Outputs

The grassroots campaigning – over 100 individual meetings with TDs and Senators took place yielded results. Over 25 PQs were raised in the Dáil, the Irish Postmasters Union were invited to appear in front of the Oireachtas committee, media commentary was widespread and supportive, and every government party discussed the need to support post offices at their parliamentary meetings. Twitter followers were increased 50% and included influential politicians and journalists.

Outcomes:

On 1 June the government announced a funding package of €30 million over a three-year period to support Irish Postmasters. In making this funding available the government, like many countries across Europe, was recognising the social value of post offices. More importantly, for the first time ever it admitted the need for a PSO payment to secure the viability of the network and has created a precedence for further funding in the years ahead.

Impact:

The impact of this campaign was that it secured the livelihood of postmasters across Ireland, ensuring their businesses remained viable. An equally important impact is that in doing so, it secured essential services for local communities throughout Ireland, particularly for vulnerable (aged, lower income) members of our society.

A secondary impact is that it enhanced the Irish Postmasters Union's credibility in front of all its stakeholders, media, members and government. The grassroots campaign led to increased cohesion among postmasters and enhanced their own appreciation for the work of their Union.

“MKC Communications delivered on an exceedingly difficult ask. Challenging our approach and developing a campaign which was positive and focused on the economic and social contribution of our members made all the difference.

The professional communications materials – newsletters, infographics, twitter graphics all lent a professionalism to the campaign and invigorated our members. We have no doubt that the contribution of MKC and Noel Dempsey was instrumental in securing this funding”.

Seán Walsh, President.

ruепoint



Onclusive

PARAGON