

Thinking differently about litter

A guide to changing hearts and minds



It's time to fight back against litter

It's human nature – we get conditioned to those streets, parks and beaches where people drop their litter.

We ignore, tolerate¹ – or convince ourselves that littering is so widespread it can't be solved. And that's half the problem.

It's not that people don't care – the number of clean-ups and community groups on the go are testament to that. But it's not yet enough. To really turn things around, we need to change the public mindset.

¹ [Click here to view PDF](#)

² [Scotland's Litter Problem: Quantifying the scale and cost of litter and flytipping, ZWS, July 2013](#)



FACTS

15k tonnes

**of litter is dropped
in Scotland every year²**



The fundamentals of perception change

Before you try to shift people's perceptions, choose a specific littering behaviour to focus on. Dropping cigarette butts, for example. Or litter in your local park. Give some thought to the context too – every situation combines **individual, social, material and habitual** influences. To truly understand what's going on³, you need to factor in all four:

- **Individual** – the personal values, attitudes, identity and standards someone holds.
- **Social** – a shared understanding within a society or culture; a combination of values, attitudes, identity and social standards.
- **Material** – the infrastructure that supports the way we think and behave.
- **Habitual** – the things people do without thinking, and which become locked into their behaviour almost by accident.

Even a small shift in perception can reduce the amount of litter on our streets. Here are just some of the approaches that have been proven to work:

① Open people's eyes to the problem

If we experience something often enough, we start to tune it out. It slips down our personal priority list. For many, that's what's happened with litter.

Often, even people who see the problem don't recognise what it represents, so they never think to question the bad habits they've picked up over time.

Many smokers are adamant cigarette butts aren't litter⁴, but Scotland spends a packet cleaning up smoking-related rubbish year after year. We need to let people see the problem for what it is.



Environmental charity, Hubbub, did just that. Using giant cigarette ends for dramatic effect, they made it impossible for people to ignore the butts strewn across London's Villiers Street. It was enough to make many people re-evaluate the level of litter they were prepared to tolerate.

The Chewing Gum Action Group (CGAG) took a similar approach to tackling gum litter on London's Oxford Street. Shoppers had become blind to the thousands of gum stains dotting the pavement – until CGAG circled each one with brightly-coloured chalk.

This tactic was just one in a wider awareness-boosting programme that **reduced gum litter by 48%** in the areas it targeted⁵. If this approach could be extended across the UK, we could save up to **£27 million in clean-up costs**⁶.

³ [Zero Waste Scotland Rapid Evidence Review of Littering Behaviour and Anti-Litter Policies](#)

② Increase everyone's sense of responsibility

The problem with shared responsibility is that it can all too easily be shirked. Unless people are held personally accountable, it seems there's just not enough incentive to toe the line.

Beaconsfield Motorway Service Area in Buckinghamshire found a novel way to kick-start the consciences of their littering customers. By recreating the sensation of being watched, using posters featuring **light-reflective eyes**, they **reduced littering by 23%**⁷. Proof that even if a person's internal code of ethics doesn't include putting litter in a bin, they can still place value on being seen to do the right thing.

We can channel this social pressure to nudge people's behaviour by communicating what society 'expects'. The Zero Waste Scotland toolkit is a comprehensive collection of ready-to-use resources for everyone from local authorities and land managers to schools, businesses and community groups.



IDEA

Encourage the conversation

Getting people talking isn't just the job of the media. Edinburgh community group, Leithers Don't Litter, created a tongue-in-cheek exhibition of litter-related artwork. Its aim? To inspire local people to reflect on their actions and encourage brands to allocate more resources to litter prevention. The exhibition was seen by more than 10,000 locals.

③ Put the issue on the public agenda

Behind closed doors, lots of people are exasperated by litter. But they feel powerless to take on the issue alone.

Starting a community-wide conversation brings these people together and shapes a new social norm. This puts pressure on individuals to consider their behaviour and on businesses to react to customer demand.

In 2016, celebrity chef, Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, launched a 'War on Waste' campaign against single-use coffee cups. This campaign and the media storm it created prompted a major supermarket chain to remove individual cup coffee packs from their shelves. Starbucks also promptly upped their incentives for switching to reusable cups.

Heightened public attention may also have been the driver behind Costa's UK-wide cup recycling scheme – estimated to **save as many as 30 million Costa cups from being thrown away each year**⁸.



4 Think differently about the media as well as the message

Once you've decided on your litter-prevention messages, it's time to get creative with your tactics too. The more unexpected the better.

As part of their 'The Heart of the City: Rubbish' campaign, Auckland-based ad agency BBDO stuffed bus shelter advertising boards with litter collected from the surrounding pavement⁹.

This is only the start of what's possible. Pepsi once turned a bus stop into a giant augmented reality device – a **stunt that's now been viewed online 7.5million times**, spreading the message far beyond the lucky ones who saw it in real life. This level of investment isn't feasible for most litter prevention campaigns, but it's a good demonstration of how using different media – and using media differently – can be a powerful approach.

IDEA

Set a different tone

Rationally, most people know littering is wrong. If you asked them if they identified themselves as a litterer, they'd likely say no. And yet a lot of people continue to do it. We need to get people not only thinking, but feeling differently about litter – the language we choose may hold the answer.



Thanks to its bold word choice, Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park's long-running litter prevention campaign delivered a serious message in a hard-hitting way – and people took notice.

The Zero Waste Scotland and Transport Litter Group's campaign, Flingin's Mingin' adopted the vernacular of its target audience to achieve a similar effect.



5 Set realistic goals

Positivity creates more momentum than pessimism. So small steps and achievable objectives are important. You'll not solve Scotland's litter problem in one day, but each day you can take one step closer to your goal.

That's exactly the attitude adopted by Leeds-born campaign group #1piece of rubbish¹⁰. They ask followers to pick up just one item of litter each day – something absolutely everyone can do. The group now has more than 15,000 followers, all doing their bit to spread the litter-prevention message.



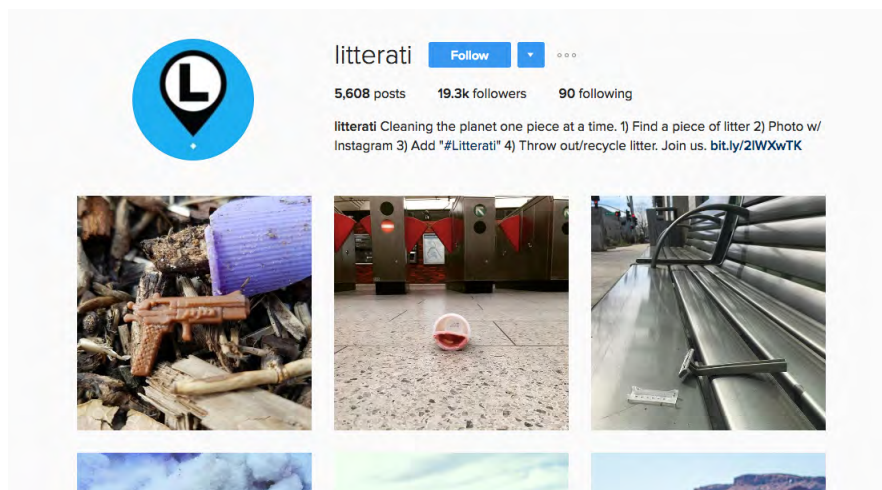
6 Technology

Changing people's perceptions isn't necessarily enough. Even with the best of intentions, people will resist any new behaviour that's too difficult or demanding. Creating an environment that makes change possible is essential.

That's where tech comes in – making it easier to track and tackle litter.

Smartphone app, Litterati, empowers communities and companies to track the direct impacts of their actions – by logging the litter situation in their local area. This crowdsourced data can then be used to inform future interventions:

- 5th-grade students in Oakland discovered that drinking straw wrappers were one of their most littered items. They decided to switch to bottles without straws.
- Data collected by Litterati users showed a high percentage of San Francisco's litter was smoking-related. The city subsequently passed a tax on cigarette sales to help keep the city litter-free.



Over to you

**Ready to change perceptions?
It's time to start putting together
your plan of action.**

Remember, context is crucial. Behaviours don't exist in a vacuum, so look at the situation from every angle – individual, social, material, and habitual – to give your efforts the best chance of success.

