



1 Empty meter at 10:52.

2 Paid meter at 10:53 for 29 minutes. Expiring at 11:22.

▶ **RESETTING** PUBLIC OPINION

**An innovative
PR program brings
success to Santa
Monica's meter
resetting system.**

By Frank Ching

Santa Monica, Calif., is more than a quintessential Southern California city—its status as home to the world-famous Santa Monica Pier and a vibrant downtown area make it among the most celebrated beach cities in the world. Each year, more than 20 million vehicles transcend on 8.5 square miles, and nearly 12 million of those vehicles park at the city's parking meters.



This high demand for metered parking, coupled with limited personnel and financial resources, are my greatest challenges as city parking administrator. With only two meter technicians to service nearly 6,000 meters, the city needed a cutting-edge parking solution. I turned to technology to solve our parking challenges and formulated a comprehensive public relations strategy to garner public support for the city's initiatives.

Employing Technology

Following a successful trial of smart parking meters and in-ground vehicle detection sensors, we installed 6,000 single-space meters and 6,000 sensors—one of the largest deployments of such systems in the U.S. Each smart parking meter is wirelessly linked to a sensor installed underground. The system uses magnetic-based sensing technology to detect the presence or absence of a vehicle via changes in the magnetic field immediately around the sensor. The sensor then communicates directly with the meter, and data is transferred using the available cellular link inside the meter.

In addition to providing real-time revenue and occupancy data, the sensor/meter technology we chose from IPS was selected for the unique capabilities it provided to implement the reset function and anti-meter feeding

function, as well as the ability to export real-time occupancy data to parking guidance devices.

We implemented the reset capability on the meters so any remaining time on a meter at a vehicle's departure would zero out before a different vehicle pulled in to use the space—commonly called meter resetting. The ability to generate turnover is essential for our downtown businesses, and the sensors allowed us to enforce anti-meter-feeding policies by preventing motorists from feeding the meters and circumventing maximum-stay limitations. This greatly helps free up parking spaces in high-traffic areas. Additionally, we provide users with a parking availability application for their smartphones or computers that provides real-time data on parking availability and displays location, rates, and number of spaces available in a map format. The city's parking application interfaces with the smart parking meter and sensors and does not require any additional infrastructure. Therefore, our parking system is directly interacting with motorists.

Using Data to Garner Public Support

Many cities have begun using sensors and real-time apps. Our approach is unique because we incorporate the data gathered from the sensors into our decision-making



Tips for a Successful PR Campaign

- **Educate yourself:** Become the subject matter expert so you can be prepared to address any argument.
- **Establish principles:** Define the project principles and message at the outset—then stick with them.
- **Embrace the media:** Work with, instead of against, traditional and social media. Do not underestimate their influence; use it to your advantage.
- **Be transparent:** When you are up front, you have control over the message. Otherwise, the media will interpret the story in their own way.

process to improve operational efficiency. Without using sensors, we never would have realized the severity of demand for metered parking. The system's data on occupancy and turnover provided the justification we needed to implement the anti-meter-feeding and meter reset capabilities.

We also use the sensor data as a foundation for studies on time limits, and input it into a formula developed by our consultants to analyze and adjust parking rates if necessary. Armed with this information, we are able to make data-driven decisions and explore dynamic rate structure options, new enforcement hours, and other changes and new policies to generate higher turnover and enhance customer convenience. All of this takes the place of investing in additional (expensive) infrastructure.

Results

The success of the pilot and subsequent installation of meters and sensors earned the support of key stakeholders and politicians. However, the battle for the public's support required a comprehensive, proactive publicity campaign that aimed to disseminate as much information as possible in a transparent and consistent manner.

Believe it or not, the sensors provided benefits that we capitalized on in our PR campaign. For example, occupancy data from the sensors provided us with statistics that allowed us to explain to the public the need to generate turnover to accommodate the nearly 12 million vehicles that park at the city's 6,000 meters each year. Additionally, the enhanced payment options and greater meter uptime meant that fewer citations were issued for nonpayment or overtime limit violations, which also helped gain public support for the program.

At the same time we shared this information, we held update sessions to educate the public on success stories and distributed promotional items that featured a QR code that linked motorists to free parking availability applications on their smartphones. The city regularly monitors social media to stay abreast of current public opinion regarding parking initiatives and partners with the local business improvement district to respond to complaints or concerns raised by the public.



FRANK CHING is city parking administrator for the City of Santa Monica, Calif. He can be reached at frank.ching@smgov.net or 310.458.8299.

Recommendations for Success

The City of Santa Monica is one of the largest successful deployments of meter sensors in the U.S., but the same principles for success apply to cities looking to introduce the technology on a smaller scale:

- Be prepared for challenges by establishing project principles—and sticking to them—at the outset of the program.
- Use traditional and social media to your advantage. The media needs compelling stories to write. By redirecting them to positive stories, you offer reporters a story angle while also shifting the focus away from any potential negative press concerning the sensors. However, it is important not to avoid any hot button issues that may arise, for example, revenue increases, which are usually a contentious issue. Instead, address the issue head-on, highlighting that while revenue may have increased since deploying the sensors, citations revenue decreased due to the additional payment options and anti-meter-feeding capabilities.
- Above all, be transparent and highlight the benefits of your program, using data and testimonials as you can.

Looking Ahead

The successful deployment of cutting-edge meter and sensor technology in the City of Santa Monica can be regarded as a model of how parking data can be used to guide and implement parking decisions to meet the evolving needs of the city and business community and how parking data, in combination with a proactive and consistent message, can help the city garner public support for parking initiatives. **P**