

A Perfect Parking World- Back off RoboCEOs!

Firstly, don't panic I won't be suggesting that parking could be a self-policing world in which motorists rely on smart vehicles and the phrase traffic congestion would become obsolete due to the unleashing of futuristic RoboCEOs, well not yet anyway. In my perfect parking world, we would continue to have a rich and diverse industry.

Technology such as remote payment apps, smart ways to locate parking spaces and electronic parking advertisements are now commonplace and undoubtedly improve the customer experience in our towns and cities. So surely the next step for parking innovations will lead us to a world in which automated AI based systems would eradicate the need for enforcement. While this is a nice idea and one in which we may well get to in the near future. However, for now, we don't live in a perfect world, parking or otherwise. So, until we reach the promised parking land, we will still need an element of enforcement, and that requires a team of dedicated real-life Civil Enforcement Officers (CEOs).

So on to enforcement, why is this still such a dirty word? and why are CEOs still getting regular abuse if they are recognised as an integral part of the industry? Is it the end result of endless rounds of policy, procedure and legislation that makes the role seem so officious? Yes, I know legislation is the foundation of what we do and why we do it, but does it really have to fully govern how we do it?

I don't need to go through a list of derogatory and abusive terms that Civil Enforcement Officers are referred to on a daily basis, we've all heard them before, although my favourite term during my time as a CEO, was "Parking Muppet". Conjures up images of Kermit the frog in a utility vest dishing out little yellow wallets doesn't it?

As we are all aware the end result of enforcement patrols is often the issue of a PCN, however the opportunity for officers to do so much more is there for the taking. During a survey of my team in Cornwall a few years ago we found that CEOs are asked between 10- 15 non-parking related questions a day. A few examples: -

So where can I actually park?
 Where is the nearest bank?
 How do you sleep at night?
 Where is the nearest beach?
 Can you help me out of my wetsuit?

Ok I admit the last two, whilst genuine examples, may not be relevant everywhere. Although primarily it flagged up that we are asked some fairly strange questions during our patrols it also reminded me that we are one of only a few teams in my organisation that provide daily patrols in our communities and more importantly we are still uniformed.

I believe that our colleagues, our elected members and ultimately our communities view of parking enforcement is a key element when considering how to improve our reputation, and if their perspective is a negative one, we need to challenge it.

For as many times as a CEO is verbally abused there are 10 more incidents where they have signposted, assisted, supported or just had a chat with members of the public. I get that maybe the motorist has just received a PCN and that's not the best opener, but the value of having a personal conversation to explain why can't be underestimated. Until a conversation takes place the CEO would have issued a PCN based on evidence in front of them, and whilst this process can't be reversed there are several positives that can be taken from a conversation with the motorist.

Engagement with any motorist offers the CEO an opportunity to **explain** why the PCN has been issued, during this exchange **education** then plays a part alongside **encouraging** future compliance. Basing our CEOs patrols on the principle of the 4 E's Engage, Explain, Encourage and Enforce we are empowering our officers to improve public perception through daily interactions with members of the public. A powerful tool when seeking to change cultural views on enforcement. This may seem a "rose tinted" view of enforcement for some, but I don't accept that we can't move some way towards this even if we don't achieve acceptance from all members of the communities we serve.

So, how do we continue to be a productive service whilst protecting our officers, improving public perception and continuing to develop the way they work. Well training is a no brainer, new Handhelds would require training, introduction of CCTV will demand a different skill etc, all very sensible. But how many of us embrace the available training when it isn't directly linked to parking enforcement? Probably not as much as we should, but a few extra hours of training could empower our officers and provide combined services for our communities. An example, and one we have been trialling in Cornwall is upskilling CEOs to enforce Public Space Protection Orders and littering offences. Our beautiful County has 100's of beaches in Cornwall and 15% of them have seasonal dog bans. Most of these beach locations either have Council maintained car parks or parking restrictions adjacent to them so the enforcement is already there, makes sense to me and provides an opportunity to deliver the 4 Es approach.

Would that mean less PCN revenue? Yes, possibly.

Would that be due to higher compliance? Yes, possibly.

After these factors have been considered the positive impact on the bigger picture can start to emerge, more productive officers in the communities delivering a wide range of statutory services whilst lowering incidents of violence and aggression.

I accept that this approach won't work in every area and it certainly won't be popular with local authorities stuck in a tiered hierarchy of fiercely protected silos! It would be refreshing to challenge that outlook just a little though wouldn't it? Empowering frontline workers to be part of the community and not just part of a parking enforcement team is music to my ears.

I have often been accused of being a "sitting around a campfire" style of manager when delivering a Civil Parking Enforcement service in a rural County. Well if listening to the views of those on the front line and empowering the people that take the brunt of motorist's frustration earns me that title, then so be it. I will embrace the campfire, continue to toast

marshmallows and shout about how we can challenge negative perspectives and champion the wider remit and value of parking enforcement officers

Finally, until RoboCEO becomes available we must recognise that our enforcement officers are not only an important resource in lowering congestion and pollution levels within our towns and cities they are part of our communities and we should consider how their role can be progressed to deliver the best service we can, for both the public and private sectors.