

Introducing Opal fuel to Alice Springs (B: Epilogue)

By September 2006 the Opal rollout into Alice Springs had struck serious trouble. A voluble and growing media campaign against the fuel had the town's participating petrol stations on the brink of withdrawal and the rest steadfastly refusing to sign up. This was despite the fact that no experts contracted by the Federal Department of Health and Ageing (DoHA) could identify any technical problems with the petrol. Soon, the fears of DoHA came to pass and several petrol stations pulled out with the rest soon to follow. First Assistant Secretary of the Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health (OATSIH) Lesley Podesta realised a change of tactics was in order:

“When you look at Opal through the lens of Aboriginal families and people affected by petrol sniffing, then all of that is a very sensible coherent package. When you look at it through the lens of non-indigenous people who live in big communities and who've always had their choice of petrol then that's a big upsell. We had always looked at it from the point of view that most people would care about this because people didn't like the fact that kids were sniffing. But we had underestimated the emotional attachment people had to their cars and their fuel.”

Instead of pressing on regardless, OATSIH decided to suspend the Opal rollout and reexamine the communication strategy in particular. “We were listening to a whole range of stakeholders and communities who really supported OPAL,” reflected Podesta, “but there were a whole lot of people living in Alice Springs who had never been engaged, had little contact with the issue, weren't civically minded and they didn't 'get it'. So the press, of course, picked that up pretty

This case was written by Marinella Padula, Australia and New Zealand School for Peter Allen as a basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The assistance of Lesley Podesta, Stephen Castle and Joy Savage is gratefully acknowledged but they are not responsible for the content herein.

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quickly,” she continued: “We had thought that the people who served petrol or looked after your car were the best people to communicate with and that was a good strategy. But we underestimated the number of people who buy petrol each week who don’t have any contact with those people at all.”

OATSIH went back to basics, hiring a communications firm to do some market research on the issue and devise a new strategy. The firm, TNS Social Research, convened a number of focus groups and interviewed individual residents and key stakeholders. The research confirmed that “Opal myths” had a strong foothold in the community, with many people believing that Opal:

- damaged engines, particularly in the extreme weather conditions of Alice Springs;
- was less efficient than regular unleaded;
- could be made intoxicating, and, therefore, did not address the problem;
- was simply another of the many ways a small minority of people with issues were imposing upon the rest of the community.¹

The relaunch of Opal was set for February 2007 and a local public relations company, Creative Territory was engaged to plan a new PR campaign to begin six weeks in advance. One of the key objectives for OATSIH, besides improving the response to the fuel, was to avoid the need for legislation mandating the sale of Opal. It was felt that this would simply prompt unhappy retailers to close altogether. In devising its strategy, Creative Territory identified the need to engage directly with fuel consumers as well as re-engage with mechanics, petrol retailers, car dealerships etc. The media would also need to be brought on board. The new approach was to “deal with facts not emotions” and had seven major planks:

1. Prepare the ground for the full rollout.
2. Recruit expert spokespeople, including independent spokespeople.
3. Recruit trusted local Opal champions.
4. Provide information tailored to the needs of individual stakeholder groups.
5. Release accurate and timely information to set the media agenda.
6. Provide factual information.
7. Demonstrate that Opal is safe and reliable.²

This included more frequent site visits to stakeholders, the involvement of the Central Australian Football League and using the Northern Territory (NT) Government Fleet as Opal champions. (NT Government had a 350 vehicle fleet that had been running on Opal since May 2006 without any mechanical issues). A public leaflet drop was organised as well as displays at shopping centres and football matches. Meanwhile, the media was given regular briefings and quick responses to queries. The campaign also featured a major public event – the Toyota Trek to the Centre which saw prominent footballer Dean Rioli drive a sponsored vehicle 5770km from Darwin to Alice Springs and around Central Australia using Opal fuel. Information on petrol sniffing was distributed along the way, while fuel and mileage records were made available to the public.

¹Jones, T and Green, R. ‘Saving Lives with Opal: Issues Management’ Creative Territory, 2007, p. 4.

²Ibid, p.6.

The campaign had the desired effect. After the second rollout, all Alice Springs petrol stations were on board, Opal sales had increased markedly and negative media reports had decreased. For Lesley Podesta it had been a powerful demonstration in how much more effective public health campaigns could be when they drew in the whole community rather than just affected populations. But, she noted, it wasn't simply a matter of slick PR:

“OATSIH has been very creative. When we encountered resistance we sent staff out into the field to go and talk to roadhouses, communities, organisations. The widespread acceptance of Opal isn't just about glossy advertising, it's because people have met people on the ground. We've put dedicated staff in Central Australia to do that.”

In June 2008, the review of the first stage of the Petrol Sniffing Prevention Strategy (PSPP) was released. Communities, interest groups and the Government concurred that the Opal rollout had been a major success and greatly contributed to diminished sniffing activity. While the review acknowledged that there was still more to be done addressing the underlying issues that lead to substance abuse, it was generally seen as an important breakthrough. By November 2007, more than 100 towns, roadhouses and cattle stations³ across four jurisdictions (Northern Territory, South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland) had replaced regular unleaded petrol with Opal and the program was set to expand further.

There were, however, still a number of roadhouses in the Central Desert region which were still refusing to stock Opal. In 2010, the South Australian Centre for Economic Studies released a cost-benefit analysis looking at mandating the sale of Opal in designated areas. The main reasons behind the resistance were ongoing concerns about the quality of Opal and loss of revenue. However, the analysis also noted that:

“Beyond their commercial concerns, some non-participating retailers also had a degree of frustration at being told by Government what they can and cannot do. There is a feeling that governments located far from the affected areas do not have a feel for conditions on the ground and will sometimes intervene for the sake of being seen to act rather than on the basis of a careful assessment of the prospects for success.”⁴

Nonetheless, it concluded that the benefits to passing legislation would outweigh the costs. In November 2010, the Federal Government announced that it would not be mandating the sale of Opal but would reserve the right to do so if necessary. Meanwhile, that year BP also announced a “new and improved” version of Opal fuel (*Exhibit B*) which was being rolled out to additional areas such as the Kakadu region.

³ ‘Review of the First Phase of the Petrol Sniffing Strategy’ Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, June 2008, p.21.

⁴ ‘Cost Benefit Analysis of Legislation to Mandate the Supply of Opal Fuel in Regions of Australia: Final Report’ South Australian Centre for Economic Studies, January 2010, p.v.

Exhibit A: Opal leaflets and sticker

OPAL Just the facts

Opal fuel is a low-aromatic unleaded petrol that complies with Australian Fuel Standards. Opal fuel has been designed to help reduce the incidence of petrol sniffing in some remote regions throughout Australia.

Like regular unleaded petrol, **Opal** fuel has an octane rating of 91 and performs just as well in vehicles.

Opal fuel contains low levels of sulphur and benzene, and very low levels of the intoxicating aromatic chemicals that give petrol sniffers a high.

Using **Opal** fuel will not cost you more. The Australian Government subsidises the production and distribution of **Opal** fuel so that it can be available at a price equivalent to regular unleaded petrol.

The introduction of **Opal** fuel is an important part of the Australian Government's commitment to combat petrol sniffing. Together with diversionary and harm reduction programs, **Opal** fuel has been very successful in reducing the incidence of petrol sniffing in remote areas of Australia.

OPAL FUEL and other equipment

Most equipment that currently uses regular unleaded petrol can use **Opal** fuel. **Opal** fuel can be safely used to make a two-stroke mix for use in two-stroke engines.

For more information

To find out more, please visit:
www.health.gov.au/petrolsniffingprevention
www.bp.com.au
 or telephone BP Lubricants & Fuels Technical Helpline: 1300 139 700

WARNING: Sniffing any kind of petrol damages your health and can cause death.

Australian Government
Department of Health and Ageing

OPAL FUEL

Manufactured by BP Australia

OPAL FUEL and cars

If your car is designed to run on regular unleaded petrol, it can run on **Opal**. Cars that require premium unleaded petrol or pre 1986 cars that use a lead replacement additive should not use **Opal** fuel.

No vehicle modifications are needed to switch to **Opal** fuel. You can safely mix it with the regular unleaded petrol already in your tank.

OPAL FUEL and outboard motors

Opal fuel can be used in all fuel injected boat motors designed to run on 91 octane regular unleaded petrol.

It is important that you consult the manufacturer's handbook to determine the correct octane requirement for your boat motor.

Opal fuel can be safely used to make a two-stroke mix for use in two-stroke engines. Boat motors designed to use 95+ octane premium unleaded petrol should not use **Opal** fuel or regular unleaded petrol.

If your boat motor is not fuel injected, please consult with your mechanic before using **Opal** fuel.

OPAL FUEL and motorbikes

Motorbikes and trail bikes that are designed to run on regular unleaded petrol can use **Opal** fuel.

Bikes designed to use 95+ octane premium unleaded petrol should not use **Opal** fuel or regular unleaded petrol.

The manufacturers of **Opal** fuel, BP Australia, recommend using an octane booster to improve engine operation if your bike experiences general performance issues or trouble starting.

this car uses OPAL fuel

good for cars, no good to sniff
mutukaku palya, pantilpai wiya

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Exhibit B: Opal leaflet 2010

Fact: Opal fuel has the same storage requirements as regular unleaded 91.

The storage life of regular unleaded fuels is one year when stored under shelter in a sealed container. Once a seal is broken the fuel has a storage life of six months at 20 °C, or three months at 30 °C. If stored in an open container or fuel tank, the storage life is reduced to one month. This can be extended by topping up with one third of fresh fuel, which restores volatile components that have evaporated.

When storing fuel always make sure you use fuel containers that are stamped as meeting AS 2906 and store fuel in a safe, dry place that doesn't have large temperature changes.

Fact: Opal fuel can't be made 'intoxicating' by using polystyrene to alter the fuel.

Opal fuel can only be made intoxicating through the addition of an already intoxicating compound.

Opal fuel was assessed and compared to other fuels by an independent toxicologist. The tests concluded that, 'all fuels are potentially toxic, but in terms of chronic exposure, Opal is the least toxic of all the fuels assessed'. Opal still contains some volatile substances and, as with other fuels, it shouldn't be inhaled as it can have adverse health effects and, in extreme cases, may cause suffocation and death.

Fact: Opal fuel is manufactured by BP Australia.

Opal fuel is manufactured solely at BP's Kwinana Refinery. Kwinana refinery is based in Western Australia and is the largest refinery in Australia.

Fact: Australians have been driving around on Opal fuel since 2005.

Since the launch of Opal fuel in 2005, over 1.5 million fills* have been sold throughout Central Australia.

*Based on 84 million litres of Opal fuel manufactured since 2005 launch and average fill of 55 litres, calculated using BP's card customer database average for rural sites in 2009.

Fact: Opal fuel is effective in helping to reduce the incidence of petrol sniffing.

Petrol sniffing is a highly dangerous form of substance abuse and destroys lives. Australian Government research shows that the introduction of Opal fuel has helped reduce the incidence of petrol sniffing by up to 94% in affected communities.

Warning: Sniffing any kind of petrol damages your health and can cause death.

For more information on Opal fuel please call the BP Lubricants and Fuel Technical Helpline on **1300 139 700** or **www.opalfuel.com.au**

For more information on why Opal fuel is a safer alternative for the community visit **www.health.gov.au/stoppetrolsniffing**

Opal Fuel

Top up your facts



Manufactured by BP Australia
www.opalfuel.com.au

Opal Fuel Top up your facts

Petrol sniffing is a life threatening issue for many people living in remote communities.

Opal fuel has been specially designed to help discourage petrol sniffing. It's safe for use in engines that are compatible with, and will be priced at an equivalent local price to, regular unleaded 91. In fact, the best part about Opal fuel is that Australian Government research shows that it has reduced incidence of petrol sniffing up to 94% in affected communities.

Here's your chance to top up your facts on Opal fuel.

Fact: Opal fuel is a 91 octane fuel which is safe to use in both cars and boats where the manufacturer recommends the use of regular unleaded 91 octane fuel as a minimum.

Opal fuel is suitable for use in cars and boats that are compatible with regular unleaded 91, including cars, petrol 4WDs, boats and vans.

Vehicles that shouldn't use Opal fuel include those that require a premium unleaded fuel with an octane rating of 95 or higher. Cars built prior to 1986 may require a lead replacement additive.

In small engines such as two stroke engines, Opal fuel is safe to use where the manufacturer recommends the use of regular unleaded 91 as a minimum. However, for optimum performance, BP recommends the use of premium 95 or 98 octane fuel.

Fact: Premium Unleaded supply is not affected.

Premium Unleaded petrol will still be available at your local servo but you might see changes in the way it is sold in your area including:

- > Premium bowsers may be locked when they are not in use
- > Sales of premium unleaded fuel may be monitored
- > Retailers may not sell unleaded fuel in small containers.

Fact: Opal fuel meets all the specifications for regular unleaded 91.

Opal fuel meets the National Fuels Quality Standards Act 2000 which provides the legislative basis for national fuel quality and fuel quality information standards for Australia.

Fact: Opal fuel will be available at an equivalent local price to regular unleaded 91.

Opal fuel is subsidised under the Australian Government's Petrol Sniffing Prevention Programme. This allows Opal fuel to be priced at an equivalent local rate to regular unleaded 91 octane fuel.

Fact: Opal fuel has been independently tested.

An independent automotive testing laboratory report stated that 'there is no significant difference when a vehicle runs on Opal fuel compared to the same vehicle running on regular unleaded petrol'. October 2004

Testing also showed that any difference in fuel economy versus regular unleaded 91 is minor and should be no more than the variability for petrol grades and driving styles.

Fact: New and improved Opal fuel now contains advanced cleaning technology which has been formulated to help break down the sooty deposits which ordinary fuels can leave behind.



Fuel inlet valve using ordinary fuel* after 3200km



Fuel inlet valve using new and improved Opal fuel* after 3200km

*Under standard laboratory test conditions

The use of ordinary fuels can leave deposits on critical parts of your engine, preventing it from working as well as it could. New and improved Opal fuel has been specifically formulated to clean your engine as you drive, helping to remove these deposits and prevent new sooty deposits from forming.

Independent laboratory testing on a Toyota V6 engine showed that after 3200km, new and improved Opal fuel cleaned up to 20.8% (with an average of 10.6%) of existing sooty deposits which had formed on vital engine parts such as inlet valves.

Fact: New and improved Opal fuel is safe to use in boats where the manufacturer recommends the use of regular unleaded 91.

Independent laboratory testing and preliminary field testing on Opal fuel confirmed that Opal fuel offered equivalent performance to regular unleaded 91.

Fact: Opal fuel shouldn't require any engine adjustment.

Vehicles with adjustable engine management systems should be set within the range prescribed by the engine manufacturer. No adjustment should be necessary other than as part of routine maintenance to keep the vehicle in tune and operating at its best.

Fact: Opal fuel is suitable for all climates.

Opal fuel is less volatile than regular unleaded fuel. That gives it an advantage in a hot climate, as it is less prone to vapour lock. In a colder climate, operation may result in an increase in engine start up time and slightly rough running until the engine warms up.

Fact: Opal fuel is compatible with hoses and other fuel system items.

The use of Opal fuel will not have a direct impact on fuel system components such as hoses. Hoses do deteriorate naturally through use and should be checked regularly as they have a finite service life.