

# GIVE GRAFFITI A GO



Whether you think graffiti is an art form or vandalism, giving artists room for expression will ensure this costly crime no longer sucks up council resources. By Grahame Collier.



Grffiti is not the worst environmental and social issue around, but it boxes above its weight when it comes to raising community angst and absorbing customer service, clean-up and compliance resources in councils. Why? Because graffiti is visible, nagging, costly, invasive of personal and community space and not well understood. It is mainly the province of the young. To some people, graffiti is vandalism posing as art – others see it as an art form worthy of display.

In councils the normal way of managing graffiti is through the use of offences and penalties and the immediate clean-up of sites that have been 'graffitied'. The two basic clean-up methods, chemical and abrasive, are often more environmentally damaging (especially to our waterways) than the graffiti itself.

Many agree the current graffiti management processes are not working. We cannot catch people in the act and clean-up consumes resources, is costly and has other impacts. So what do we do? A lateral approach may be worth a try. We start by changing our thinking about and approach to people whom graffiti – from vandal to artist – and get rid of derogatory language and a totally compliance-structured model. We work with people who graffiti.

Next is to identify and establish places where it is OK to graffiti, including existing and/or purpose-built places such as skate parks and public toilet blocks. We'd consult with the community about designating these sites as 'graffiti safe'.

Then we market these sites to those who graffiti. We could run a graffiti competition on these sites, marketing it through

youth centres, secondary schools and the local press. We'd back it up with really good site-based prizes and validate the person's art by ensuring photos of the winning graffiti are published in the local press. We'd need to ensure the judges are credible among those who graffiti.

That's just the beginning. Immediately following the competition, we could work with the judges and the (winning) competitors to set up a new culture where their graffiti is only 'cool' on designated graffiti walls and self-expression, validation and equity is promoted among those who graffiti.

A key feature will be to indicate – and seek participants' views on – the council's intention to clean up designated sites every year so there is space available for new graffiti. Before painting over the graffiti though, photographs will be taken and displayed in the council library or other public spaces, with free copies available to all artists who request them.

If graffiti occurs in a non-designated site, as it will initially, don't wave compliance options in people's faces as a first resort, but put up a small notice pointing to the designated sites and encouraging them to go there. Get people to talk with their friends about using the designated sites.

Finally, give this approach time to bite. Try it for 12 months and see what is working and what is not. Making tough changes does not happen overnight.

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