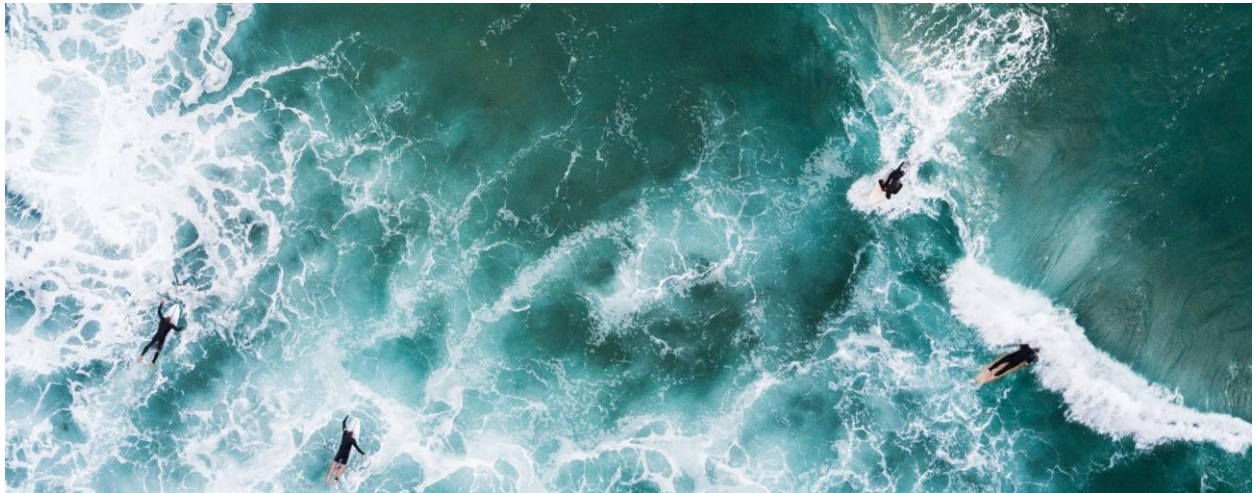


Drawing a line in the sand



The brief

Surf Life Saving Northern Region administers 17 surf clubs encompassing beaches from Raglan north around North Cape to Auckland – covering around 40% of the population and some of the country’s busiest and most dangerous beaches. The movement faces steadily growing numbers of beach-goers, but in 2017 had reached a crisis point in terms of its ability to continue to provide the services expected by the public and local government, given uncertain funding streams and rising costs.

The Region also struggled to be seen as a core emergency service by funders and the news media, often being accorded “charity” status or being lumped in with sports and recreation groups. SLSNR receives no government funding.

SLSNR believed a public discussion was needed about what communities expect from lifeguarding services, along with a review of the public funding structure.

The Wright approach

Wright Communications felt the only way to effect any change to the situation was to make a strong statement in the lead-up to the 2017-18 season, which commenced on Labour Weekend in late October.

Wright Communications prepared a comprehensive background paper on the plight of lifesaving in the Northern Region and entered into discussions with the editor of the

Weekend and Sunday Herald newspapers in Auckland to gauge the newspapers' interest in an exclusive expose of the issue.

SLSNR made more than 20 people from the SLSNR's surf clubs and other administrators available for Herald journalist Kelly Dennett to interview and the ground-breaking feature ran on 4 November 2017. More than anything else the feature made the strong point that unless funding was improved some services would cease and people would very likely drown as a consequence.

That lifted the lid on the issue, but it would have been easy for things to quickly subside and no progress result. Wright Communications' strategy was to draw on the events of what was likely to be a busy summer for lifeguards at the beaches, to maintain the themes around proper recognition of surf life saving as an emergency service and the need for robust funding. A second season "launch" followed in late December as schools finished and lifeguards prepared for a major jump in numbers going to the beach; this was promoted widely to the media, and through the summer regular summaries of beach activity and alerts to major beach incidents were distributed to what was by now a long list of interested media.

The alerts also ensured media would be aware of the work done by lifeguards in, for example, search and rescue callouts, which often went unreported in Police or Coastguard media bulletins – an issue in the past. Wright Communications also worked closely with the other emergency services groups to ensure greater collaboration and sharing of information. We convened a meeting of Police, Coastguard, St John Ambulance, Auckland LandSAR (Search and Rescue), Auckland Rescue Helicopter Trust, Harbourmaster's Office, SLSNZ and SLSNR. The purpose was to discuss and agree protocols for reporting on any beach-related events of major note. We subsequently met with Police and St John to advance discussions.

Outcomes

Not surprisingly, the hot, busy summer produced some record days in terms of rescues and beach attendance and the plight of the movement in the face of that public demand received strong ongoing media attention.

Surf Life Saving Northern Region management received unprecedented airtime in the media, featuring regularly in print, online and on programmes such as the AM Show and NewsTalk ZB. The issue around the need for more certain funding, and the possible loss of services if it is not found, has been firmly stamped on media commentary, and has led to discussions with Central Government around some form of funding from that quarter.

Client satisfaction

"The professional services from Wright Communications over the past 18 months have been critical in sharing Surf Life Saving Northern Region's current challenges with the New Zealand public in a meaningful and engaging way. The current media landscape is a

challenging one to navigate; Wright's insight, understanding of the industry and consumer, and high-level relationships within the sector allowed for the necessary investigative reporting to take place creating astute media content that has educated and informed New Zealand's public and assisted Surf Life Saving coverage to be front and centre for much of this summer's lead media releases."

Matt Williams – Chief Executive Officer, Surf Life Saving Northern Region