Many households in Cotonou have full and overflowing toilet pits, leading to disease risk and open defecation. The supply of services wasn’t being met with sufficient demand for services.

A branded call center has been an effective way to increase trust between service providers and consumers. Tanker operators have been able to increase their business by providing better customer service and transparent pricing.

Involvement of local authorities is a critical success factor for compelling households to empty their pits. Establishing payment plans or helping customers to plan and save for emptying their pits increases uptake of services.

Lack of trust between potential customers and service providers is a critical risk factor. Many tanker operators to offer safer, faster, and more affordable pit emptying services. The price (as low as USD 62) advertised by the call center to remove 6 m³ of fecal sludge was determined by the results of a secret shopper exercise.

The awareness raising campaign reached 10,613 houses (2,554 with full pits) in 7 districts of Cotonou, resulting in 5,168 people gaining access to safer sanitation services.

The SSD project created a call center and network, branded “VIDANGE MIMIN” (clean emptying), to connect consumers to quality-assured, private-sector emptying services. An initial landscaping study identified several weaknesses in the existing sanitation market that were leading to poor uptake of services, including:

- Lack of trust between potential customers and service providers
- Lack of rationale for or consistency in prices charges to consumers and high prices
- Low knowledge among households with full pits about how to get them emptied
- Lack of engagement from municipal officials to urge citizens to empty pits

Approach or method

The SSD project created a call center and network, branded “VIDANGE MIMIN” (clean emptying), to connect consumers to service providers. The project trained existing private operators to offer safer, faster, and more affordable pit emptying services. The price (as low as USD 62) advertised by the call center to remove 6 m³ of fecal sludge was determined by the results of a secret shopper exercise.

Demand for services is created with local radio spots, billboards, and flyers, and by a pool of recruited door-to-door sales agents that connect households to service providers through the call center. Government and municipal authorities also instigate demand by accompanying sales agents on door-to-door visits and conducting advocacy and awareness campaigns to urge households to empty their full pits.

In addition, a Disposal Savings Plan is being tested with landlords and households in partnership with a local MFI. The consumers contribute periodically in order to have enough money saved to pay for emptying services at the appropriate time.

Lessons learned

- Strong involvement of government and municipal authorities is an important factor for increasing demand for emptying services;
- Providers joined the network to expand the size of their market, access capacity development, and gain new customers through the call center;
- Adopting the price range revealed by the secret shopper survey was a successful strategy for establishing prices that satisfied both consumers and service providers;
- The call center’s greatest value was in increasing awareness and overall service quality, but only a small proportion of emptying services are ordered through the call center. Others contact service providers directly;
- Many households do not have enough cash on hand to purchase services. It is critical to establish savings schemes or payment installment plans;
- Despite significant training and provision of safety equipment, such as gloves, many service providers continue to work without safety equipment.

Outcomes

- The awareness raising campaign reached 10,613 houses (2,554 with full pits) in 7 out of 13 districts in Cotonou.
- 675 homeowners called the call center, and 304 purchased the service, resulting in 5,168 people gaining access to safer sanitation services.
- Based on a survey of one district in September 2018, only 3% of customers targeted by the communications campaign who emptied their pits utilized the call center. 97% contracted services directly with service providers.
- Ninety-five percent of households who received services through VIDANGE MIMIN reported being satisfied by the quality of service.
- Service providers report increased business as a result of joining the VIDANGE MIMIN network and call center.

Approach or method

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