

Taking sponsorship to school

Resistance to privately-sponsored education programs is still there, particularly in the lower grades, but it's weakening. Barriers will fall if the private sector can show that it can deliver top notch educational materials responsibly, without pitching product.

Carol Green still talks about the time she was picketed.

That was five years ago. Green, president of Children's Creative marketing Inc., was addressing a Children's Marketing conference about how Canadian companies could become responsible partners in the education sector. She left the conference only to be greeted by pickets, cameras and television lights.

Though most Canadian provinces have accepted to some degree the principle that corporate sponsorship can play a role in the enhancement of the education experience, there are no firm rules to define the nature of an acceptable relationship. At one end of the spectrum are programs such as Learning Through the Arts, with TD Bank Financial Group as Presenting Sponsor (**see ??? for story**). The program is widely accepted among educators, students and parents.

More challenging are those sponsored educational initiatives where the link between the initiative and the sponsor's core business is transparently clear.

Ontario is the most receptive province to those programs, says Green. Premier Mike Harris has publicly encouraged business participation in education, primarily to provide what educators feel they are missing.

"He is the only Premier to make that announcement," says Green. Elsewhere, the political landscape is varied and shifting, from skeptics in British Columbia and Quebec, to grudging acceptance in Alberta.

"It's taken us quite some time to gain the acceptance of the education sector," says Green, and though acceptance is far from complete, there are more and more opportunities for corporations to partner in the delivery of specific elements of the school curriculum -- and enhance their image within the marketplace in the process.

Corporations have to take the time to understand what voids the education system needs to fill and then design effective and responsible programs to fill those voids. Green places a lot of emphasis on the word "responsible." That means soft.

Green says convincing prospective sponsors to soft-pedal the corporate message is a tough sell, especially when she's pitching a program to the marketing department. It doesn't help, either, when someone points out that there are programs in schools right now that are nothing but thinly-disguised marketing campaigns. Schools desperate for resources and unfamiliar with the give-and-take of sponsorship negotiation are letting in programs that may be too strongly tailored toward the sponsor's goals, and too little focussed on learning needs.

It's a strategy with no future, says Green. "The problem is, if you do that once, you're not going to be invited in again."

This doesn't mean that sponsors get zero visibility. Kodak's new Science of Imaging program, which explores the science related to photography and is being tested in 200 grade 6-8 classrooms, includes a free one-time-use Kodak camera and picture CD processing coupon per student, as well as a project newsletter aimed at parents. There are also web pages for teachers and students on the Kodak.ca website.

Sponsors should also be flexible. Programs must educate, and therefore must be designed, refined and managed by educators. Sponsors should also plan on being involved for the long term, a minimum of three years, says Green. Few programs get it right at the launch date. A good program includes feedback loops from teachers, students and parents, and sponsors should be prepared to have their programs adjusted in response to that feedback.

Creative Sparks, a story-writing, arts and animation program sponsored by Teletoon, has evolved over the past three years in response to evaluation forms and teacher focus groups, says Green. The two-year-old program has added additional media literacy information, a chart to help teachers understand the program's options and periodic incentives for student from Teletoon as worksheets are completed.

Green says acceptance from educators will arrive only over time. Learning that programs cannot be forced on educators was a hard but important lesson, she says. Teachers rely heavily on peer recommendation. Green recommends sending a description of the program, including how it fulfills aspects of the mandated curriculum, to school Principals. Let the Principal select the teachers most likely to be interested in the program, says Green, and let those teachers decide whether or not they want to introduce the program to the classroom.

Including a mechanism for parental involvement will promote acceptance and ensures that the sponsor's message is brought into the home. At a minimum, Green recommends that programs include a letter from the sponsor explaining the learning benefits of the program.

With Kodak's Science of Imagining program, Kodak gives parents a two-page full colour newsletter that includes excerpts from some of the lessons. Part of the newsletter talks about Kodak, and its involvement in leading edge technologies. The newsletter reinforces the company's image as a technology pioneer concerned about quality education.

Though the opportunities are clearly there, many corporations are still wary of involvement in the education sector because of negative media reports that dogged early efforts. But things are changing, says Green, and they're changing quickly.

"Because things are changing so quickly, there is a great opportunity," says Green. "As long as you're prepared to do it right, it's a wonderful opportunity to support the Canadian education sector, and it needs the support."

BOX

Tips for a successful education sponsorship

1. Do your homework. Know what educators want before you start.
2. Be flexible. Work with educators to give them what they want and in the process, try to get some of what you want.
3. Be responsible. Deliver only high-quality material.
4. Be in for the long term. Plan on a minimum 3-year involvement.

5. Communicate throughout project with your target audience: students, teachers and parents.
6. Get feedback at end of the project. The education sector is in the midst of fundamental change. You have to keep pace.

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