

Improving Australian Literacy Levels Through Corporate Community Engagement

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Abstract

By 2010, Unilever Australasia will have improved the literacy skills of 20,000 Australian and New Zealand children through Reading for Life, an innovative program that connects businesses, their employees and schools.

Reading for Life brings together trained volunteers from local business and schools to give children who are struggling to read, one-to-one help for 45 minutes every week over 14 weeks. The goal of the program is to enhance child's reading skills, self-esteem and motivation.

Driven by the passion of Unilever employees to really make a difference around literacy, the company has set this challenge to be achieved through a collaborative partnership with Learning Links (their community partner who devised Reading for Life) their employees, education authorities across the country, and the Australian and New Zealand business community.

In this paper I will share the challenges, learnings and outcomes to date from this massive community engagement program.

For Unilever, engaging with communities is not a feel good exercise — it is a business imperative. When the outcome is improving literacy levels of our children, it becomes a three-way win — good for the community, good for business and good for the future.

Introduction

Corporate community engagement, or community–business partnerships, is a term that has increasing currency in today's business world — it could even be described as 'flavour of the month'. In this paper, I will outline a program that Unilever has developed in Australia and New Zealand as just one of its community–business partnerships. I will start, however, with some background as to why, for Unilever, community–business partnerships is not, and will never be, 'flavour of the month', as we enjoy and benefit from our second century of corporate community engagement.

Unilever, one of the world's largest food and household products businesses, has a long and proud history of community engagement dating back to the late nineteenth century. The actions and initiatives of the

company's founders back in the 1880s helped to create the structure that shapes the company today, nearly 130 years later.

Lord Lever, one of the company's founders, was one of the world's greatest philanthropists in his day, but beyond that he was also one of the world's greatest businessmen. The actions taken by Lord Lever then were all about building a sustainable business, and to him, corporate social responsibility, sustainability and economic viability were as one and mutually interdependent.

He knew that in order to establish a viable business supplying his products to the growing British population at the height of Industrial Revolution, he had to ensure a consistent supply of raw materials. Initially this was a supply of palm oil from Africa, a key ingredient to make soap. He established palm oil plantations in Africa, complete with hospitals, sanitation and education. He then transported this model back to Britain in building the purpose-built village of Port Sunlight — a village that was created to supply labour to his soap factory at Port Sunlight. Once again, he supplied all that a village required — housing, sanitation, medical care and educational facilities.

Fast forward to 2005, and some things haven't changed all that much. While Unilever has grown to be a 43 billion euro business with 230,000 employees, and touching the lives of 150 million people every day, we continue to run plantations in Africa and India that can be regarded as some of the best in the world. Best in terms of the facilities provided — housing, schooling, health care, or best in terms of employee satisfaction, or safety, or best in hard business terms as output per hectare or cost per kilo of produce.

Our community engagement today is not limited to plantations or factory villages, but exists as part of the way we do business in each of the more than 100 countries in which we operate. To Unilever, corporate community involvement is not a specific initiative, it is not a box to be ticked in terms of things we must do, but it is quite simply how we do business. It is implicit in the way we work.

It is from these roots and with these embedded values that Unilever in Australasia has developed a unique and far-reaching community engagement program, designed around improving the literacy of Australian schoolchildren. Called Reading for Life, it is a program designed around involving employee volunteers who 'buddy up' with primary school age children in years 2 to 4 at the local primary school, who have been identified as being behind their age appropriate reading age. For 45 minutes a week over 14 weeks, the employee and their 'buddy' work through a structured program designed to encourage the child to realise their reading potential and in doing so, develop self-confidence.

A key aspect of the program is that the idea for it stemmed from Unilever employees and their concern for the standards of literacy in the community. By listening to employee concerns and realising how important

this issue was for them, it was apparent that a company supported initiative to help address employee concerns had the potential to not only improve childhood literacy, but also have some very strong business benefits. In particular, as this idea stemmed from employees, there was the opportunity to develop a more engaged workforce by ensuring that employees were part of the solution.

In Australia, as around the world, we encourage our employees to live out our values, and in doing so, employees better understand how Unilever contributes to society. The challenge for us was to develop a program that not only addressed employee concerns about literacy, but also enabled our employees to be involved in such a way that provided them to live out their own and the company values.

This challenge led us to our community partner, Learning Links. Learning Links is a Sydney-based not-for-profit organisation, working in partnership with families to help children from birth to 18 who have difficulty learning.

In selecting a not-for-profit partner we had a number of criteria to aid us in the selection process. First and foremost was cultural alignment — ensuring that we viewed the world from a similar lens, and that the values and aspirations of the two organisations were aligned. We also wanted to ensure that our expectations were consistent — knowing that we were all heading into uncharted territory, and that this may not work. Finally, we had to be comfortable with the not-for-profit partner, and they had to be comfortable with us — we had to like each other and we had to trust each other.

Learning Links met these criteria, and in 2003 we set off on a remarkable journey that we named 'Reading for Life'. While Unilever had the 'people power' and will, we had absolutely no skills or credentials in developing or deploying a literacy program. By contrast, Learning Links had the intellectual and professional capabilities to develop a program, but limited resources to deliver it. Together we worked up model that drew on our strengths and was designed to meet our needs.

The resulting Reading for Life model ensured, most importantly, that the program was designed to work — that children who participate would indeed improve their literacy outcomes. The program also had to fully engage employees — providing the tangible benefit to employees that they were indeed really making a difference. The program also had to be easy to deliver, require minimal staff training and be practical to the extent that time out of the workplace was manageable. The program also had to be affordable and be able to be deployed across all our 13 sites in both Australia and New Zealand. There were also the governance requirements in relation to child protection and duty of care. Finally, the model had to be scaleable and replicable because we had a feeling from the outset that if this worked, we would want to share it with other organisations.

The result was truly magnificent. Together with Learning Links, we developed a model of an employee driven community involvement program that had the demonstrable effect intended on the literacy levels of participating children. This is how it works.

Working with the school, Learning Links helps to identify children with below-age appropriate reading age. The children are tested across a number of literacy variables to provide a quantitative starting point.

Volunteers from Unilever are trained by Learning Links and are then paired up with the selected children and become reading buddies, visiting them at their school to help enhance the child's reading skills, self-esteem and motivation. Each volunteer works with a child one-to-one for 45 minutes every week for between ten and 14 weeks. Children in the program range in age from seven to ten years — equating to primary school years 2 to 4 in NSW.

At the end of the 14 weeks, the children are again tested to compare the results with those at the start of the program to confirm that the child has improved in their overall reading age.

However, Reading for Life is more than simply reading with children. Its semi-structured content is modelled on best practice and developed by a team comprising a psychologist, teacher and speech pathologist. Our employee volunteers are trained and supported by professionals from Learning Links at the start and for the duration of the program.

Reading for Life contains activities to engage and interest children, including numerous interactive activities, many of which involve word games. It also offers them encouragement to do their best and have a go in a supportive environment. Each Reading for Life program includes schools, children and volunteers who meet certain selection criteria. The program also actively involves families and classroom teachers.

This all sounds well and good — and very altruistic on the part of Unilever — but the key question is 'does it work'? Are the outcomes for the children tangibly beneficial, and does it benefit Unilever — or more importantly, our shareholders?

Firstly, what's in it for us? I say *firstly*, because in reality, if any corporate community involvement program does not tangibly and quantifiably benefit the business, then it will not be sustainable. For Unilever the benefit is all around staff engagement — benefiting both staff retention and staff recruitment. In enabling employees to not only work *for* Unilever, but also to work *through* Unilever, we believe we are offering a competitive advantage in the employee marketplace.

[Play video]

What's in it for the children? This is very clear. At the outset, we ran a pilot of the program to check, amongst a number of things, that the children were indeed improving their literacy levels. Pre- and post-testing of the children was undertaken with qualitative evaluation of the children, staff, parents and employees also undertaken at the end of the pilot. The results exceeded everyone's expectations.

From a quantitative perspective, the results are strong (Table 1).

Table 1. Results of the pilot

Skill	Average gain
Reading accuracy	7 months
Reading comprehension	8 months
Reading fluency	5 months
Sight words and vocabulary	30 words
Reading self concept	2 points
Phonemic awareness	14%

Bear in mind that these results are based on sample of over 250 children who have been through the program to date. Qualitatively, the results are also impressive, with comments from parents like:

“The volunteer miraculously opened our son up to enjoying to read. My happy son was back. Words cannot express our family's appreciation for the volunteers.”

And from students, such as:

“I want to do it the rest of my life. Even if I'm in Year 6 I'd still do it.”

From teachers:

“It's nice to have these children getting some extra help. They're the ones I call the limbo kids; they sort of get left behind.”

“Prior to them going on the program they were getting bored and restless, but now when we go to the library, they get out then chapter books and they are all into it. I've noticed a change in attitude about reading.”

And from employees:

“You go home and tell your family or your friends about what you are doing and people get quite amazed that you’re doing this and your company supports it. A lot of people say ‘wow’ and then you feel better about the company that you work for.” (Volunteer)

“I found this program very rewarding because you’re doing something different and giving something back to help someone else.” (Volunteer)

In the two years since the program started over 250 children have participated in the Reading For Life program, and by the end of Term 4 this year, an additional 210 children will have graduated — bringing the total approaching 500. But with one in five primary school age children in Australia experiencing some degree of learning difficulty — equal to five children in every classroom — the nearly 500 children we will have helped by year-end is but a small number. This is not to downplay our corporate community involvement program, because we know we are making a real difference. But the size of the task ahead — to improve the literacy of the next generation of children — is going to take more that Unilever can do alone.

To this end, having developed Reading for Life into a viable and measurable corporate community engagement program, we are now giving it away. Not giving it up, but gifting the program to other like-minded businesses and community groups that share in the same vision for our next generation we do. We have set ourselves a stretching goal of enabling 10,000 children to have graduated from the Reading for Life program by 2010. In conjunction with Learning Links, our not-for-profit partner, we are actively seeking out organisations who are searching for a proven, cost-effective, outcome-driven community engagement program, and working with them to deploy the Reading For Life program in their organisation.

Conclusion

For us, community involvement is part of doing business — it is not an add-on, and not something we have taken up because it’s ‘flavour of the month’, but for the past 100 years we have known that we have a responsibility to the society in which we operate. This responsibility is to help people in their everyday lives — to look good, to feel good and to get the most out of life. We do this through our products, our practices and our programs in the community. This paper has outlined just one of our community involvement programs — Reading for Life — and we have others operating in Australia we are equally proud of — and globally, we have yet more truly inspiring programs.

No one said community–business partnerships were easy, but they are rewarding — for the community, for employees and, done correctly, for shareholders.