
How can training and development specialists develop a CSR strategy for a win-win scenario?

Much has been written about corporate social responsibility (CSR) as a crucial element of business strategy today. Indeed the idea of a triple bottom line, with its focus on “people, planet and then profits” is almost ubiquitous amongst blue chips and consumer facing businesses. As widespread as the adoption of CSR is the number of definitions used to describe it. For some it is philanthropy, donating a proportion of company profits to charity. For others it is cause-related marketing, using worthwhile ventures to basically win brownie points for your brand with consumers. In the majority of these cases the companies involved are end-consumer facing rather than providing services to business, as is the case for training and development specialists. They undertake CSR for stakeholder management reasons, because they need to improve their company’s green or social image and reputation, or because they need to ward off activist groups. But why would companies in the B2B space do CSR?



First of all, one needs to consider your organisation’s initial motivations. The management theory academic, Lantos suggests there are three different forms of CSR – ethical, which companies undertake in order to comply with regulatory requirements, altruistic, which is straight-forward corporate giving, and strategic. This latter variety describes a scenario where doing good is also directly good for business, because initiatives are linked in some way to an organisation’s goals and strategic planning. Few companies are so open about their motivations to “do CSR” as to openly define them as “strategic”, yet this form is precisely what offers the biggest benefits. Strategic CSR offers the potential to bring about social and environmental improvements which at the same time help a company to identify new markets or to pilot a new venture. This is exactly what Axia Interactive Media has done by

becoming involved in an initiative to bring e-learning to 3000 health workers in Kwa Zulu Natal (KZN), South Africa. Nurses in this area are often working in isolation, with very few resources, trying to support and improve the health education levels of local people. KZN is one of the poorest and worst affected regions of sub-Saharan Africa with HIV and AIDs, yet the region also boasts one of the best IT infrastructures in South Africa. So, working in partnership with SISA, a local consulting company, we have offered the local Department of Health our e-learning platform on an at cost basis, to allow them to provide their health workers with the latest treatment information on a range of health topics including HIV/AIDs and other sexually transmitted infections and, in doing so, trial the effectiveness of Internet based training methods. As well as providing an educational resource, Axia hopes the system will create a sense of community for nurses in this region and play a part in reducing the considerable stress and isolation suffered by nursing staff who often work autonomously and with little peer support in remote, rural areas. Indeed, retention of health workers is considered a major problem within the Department of Health, and the creation of a virtual community could help to reduce this.

We see the relationship as a win-win situation for all the parties involved – the South African's get the benefit of our many years of experience developing LearningZone, the Royal College of Nursing's e-learning environment, and we have the opportunity to explore the potential of a vast, untapped marketplace. Crucially, the initiative has been designed to be sustainable locally from day one. All the educational materials offered on the KZN Learning Zone are written locally, by South African health workers and so culturally appropriate for the audience. Our vision is for one day, to see a team of local writers and web specialists employed to maintain the system on an ongoing basis. And, from our own strategic perspective, for the KZN team to act as "ambassadors" for computer based learning in their own homes and communities.

Since the initiative launched last year, we have made some significant developments, but there is still a long way to go to achieve our aims. But in a very short time it has proven a very exciting and worthwhile project to be involved with from both a personal and professional level and I would urge other companies who are as yet unsure about whether CSR has a place in their business strategy to explore all avenues with a view to reaching new horizons and with them, new audiences for their products and services.

About the Author

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AIM specialise in providing internet based solutions to support lifelong learning and development. Its customers include the Royal College of Nursing, Learn Direct, Council for Administration, Society College of Radiographers, Institute of Forestry and the Royal Society of Archaeologists.

Axia's Now.Net technology enables professional associations to implement an effective and efficient output based CPD system, regardless of size and resource constraints, with no requirement for technology development. Now.Net was short listed for the prestigious WOLCE Generic Solution of the Year Award 2006.

