

# Connecting with your communities

It's not just about sending out the staff to pick up rubbish at Takapuna Beach. By **SARAH LANG**

**"IT IS** always sound business to take any obtainable net gain, at any cost and at any risk to the rest of the community." A century after American economist Thorstein Veblen penned this phrase, business is looking beyond the rape-and-pillage model. No, they're not perfect, but the advent of concepts like corporate social responsibility sees them treating their communities a whole lot better.

Given community means different things to us all — our nation, neighbourhoods, and workplaces — it's not surprising that companies, too, are poles apart in how they define their community. It is the towns or the countries they operate in; it's their staff, their customers, their stakeholders, but it's more than that. A cynic might say it's about looking good. Profile polishing. But Sustainable 60 contenders aren't just throwing a few bucks to a local charity — they're connecting with, listening to, involving and giving back to their communities in ways that matter.

Take our biggest company, Fonterra — winner of the Sustainable 60 community category. While its community doesn't end where the ocean begins, it's New Zealanders — particularly children, the biggest dairy consumers — who are the heart of its community. So a community-needs meeting was called in 2008 by new corporate marketing manager Sarah Rissell. How might Fonterra do its bit? By concentrating on kids and on what Fonterra is good at. Namely, science and milk.

Today the Fonterra Science Roadshow tours experiments, demos and interactive exhibits to 96 school halls countrywide to get kids excited about science, and to address declining levels of school science achievement.

And, evoking those school-milk days of yore, Fonterra's KickStart Breakfast scheme serves up a free breakfast (Sanitarium chips in with Weet-Bix) to thousands of kids in 300 low-decile schools once or twice a week. Mushrooming since its April 2008 pilot, KickStart is set to reach 500 schools in 2010 and put a serious dent in an awful stat: that 10% of Kiwi kids start the day hungry.

## COMMUNITY FINALISTS

- Accor Hospitality
- **Fonterra (winner)**
- Hayes Knight (NZ)
- IAG NZ
- Locus Research
- Westpac

Yes, there were hurdles to clear first. To avoid stigmatising empty bellies, KickStart was presented as a fun, competition-packed club fronted by cartoon character Eddie. And rather than patronising parents, it got them involved. Mums, dads, teachers and other community members volunteer to help student leaders run the clubs. "The schools and communities really took ownership," says Rissell.

As did staff. Building support for KickStart through the Fonterra and KSB websites and staff magazine *Big Picture*, Fonterra also encouraged staff to take part in competitions and a 'tell us your breakfast stories' campaign. Out in the countryside, enthused farmers who had read all about KickStart in shareholder publication *Farmlink* started referring schools and volunteering on KickStart mornings.

Coordinators, parents, teachers and students are kept up to date via the website and e-newsletters, and are regularly interviewed by phone to help fine tune the initiative. This year that's seen Fonterra answer the call for more curriculum materials.

Another company that can vouch there's more than a verbal tie between community and communication is Mt Maunganui-based design-and-development company Locus Research. In May, it launched the Sustainable Design Group for New Zealand: a group that represents the local design community and champions sustainable design in Aotearoa.

Although Locus managing director Timothy Allan offloads credit for the idea to the Sustainable Business Network's Rachel Brown, he admits he has driven the group's

creation. "Rather than send our guys off to volunteer at Trade Aid, we want to influence the products we design that people use all the time."

At every juncture, Allan has ensured that everyone in New Zealand's design community knows what's going on and has a say. In June, the group's first physical get-together, an educational and professional development forum, got different 'thought leaders' — design professionals and design schools — brainstorming the group's vision, objectives, image, agenda, action plan and management, as well as the future of sustainable design in New Zealand. Such face-to-face meetings can't be replaced by virtual interaction, Allan says. "They're how you thrash out the big issues and part of building consensus."

But what has cut down expensive face-to-face meetings, and enabled easy access and knowledge-sharing without email-wading, is the group's Microsoft SharePoint server. It's a collaborative workspace and virtual bank for all SDG information and projects: SlideShare presentations, Issuu documents and Vimeo video files.

Meanwhile, Locus Research has harnessed the power of online networks to "box a bit more clever", in Allan's words. You'll find the SDG on social networking site Twitter (one sentence answers to "what are you doing?") and professional networking site, LinkedIn. "People are already on there, so adopting our group is straightforward," says Allan. "Membership can grow exponentially and very quickly." Unlike often intrusive email, such 'on-demand' sites let you choose when and where you access information. Meanwhile, SlideShare presentations and Twitter feeds are also accessible via the LinkedIn group, and the cash-strapped group can communicate for free.

Locus Research isn't the only entrant trying new approaches. One man used to getting strange looks for his leftfield approach is leading sustainability and not-for-profit researcher Nick Jones from Sustainable Advantage, a subsidiary company of Auckland accountancy firm Hayes Knight.



Kids from Lincoln Heights School, the 300<sup>th</sup> to join the programme, enjoy a KickStart breakfast

Accountants don't immediately spring to mind when you think of community champions. But Hayes Knight turned that stereotype on its head when it hired Jones in September 2008 as Sustainable Advantage's one-man band. "It's a pretty big move for an accounting firm to hire a guy with no accounting experience. I'm not allowed near the chequebook at home!" Jones grins. "But that's the power of the collaboration model."

Tackling the fraught issue of trust in business head-on, Sustainable Advantage developed, conducted and released 'A Matter of Trust', pioneering research that identifies ways organisations can retain and rebuild trust by becoming more sustainable. Now, clients both old and new — from two-person not for profits (NFPs) to big multinationals — are queuing up for advice on their sustainability approach.

But you've got to clean up at home before you go out. Setting up an internal Sustainability Council and launching CSR-based sustainability initiatives, Hayes Knight improved its lacklustre environmental performance and stepped up its already strong community work with NFPs. It's not

about sending out the staff to pick up rubbish at Takapuna Beach. Rather, Hayes Knight directors and employees contribute their business and financial nous to organisations like the Promoting Generosity Group (which supports community participation); some sit on NFP boards. "They sit of their own volition, they're not put," cautions Jones.

For instance, Hayes Knight provided project management and report writing skills to help the HOPE Foundation for Research on Ageing develop a study of the over-65 market. Both backs got scratched. Hayes Knight wove research insights into its services for an ageing client base, while HOPE's profile was elevated and its research widely welcomed.

With this mutual-benefit approach writ large, Jones facilitates conversations and relationships between the voluntary and business sectors, such as TV3 and the

community partners it supports with advertising time. He's quick to point out this isn't a one-way street: NFPs need partnerships with business; business needs NFP knowledge to make informed decisions.

A strong category theme is that companies aren't afraid to plug their own knowledge gaps, or to share strategies within and across sectors. The SDG is all about information sharing; Fonterra collaborates with other school-supporting charities; Hayes Knight presents free workshops on its trust research.

As Jones points out, some companies "compete like hell" work wise but collaborate on community projects. "In this area there's a fundamental responsibility to share, help others develop, and learn from others. That collaboration model is what we've got to be a lot better at in New Zealand, and we're getting there." ■

## "THE SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES REALLY TOOK OWNERSHIP"

SARAH RISSELL