

HEALTHCARE

cutting to the chase

L'Oreal is encouraging hairdressers – who use its products on a daily basis – to learn more about HIV/Aids so they can apply their knowledge to keep customers better informed of the disease. It hopes the worldwide scheme, which has United Nations backing, will reduce ignorance and lower infection rates

At the Vimax Beauty hairdressing salon in Curitiba in southern Brazil, Vicktor, like any self-respecting salon owner, spends his day interacting with his clients. Standing behind each chair and each pair of ears, he listens to his customers – and responds with enthusiasm. This is part of his customer service, as well as, for the most part, a source of enjoyment and stimulation. But for L'Oreal, the French multinational that supplies Vicktor and his ilk with hair and beauty products, the hairdresser's chatty, intimate client relationship has turned out to be the inspiration for an imaginative piece of strategic thinking. The company has realized that it provides an ideal opportunity to spread knowledge and awareness of HIV and Aids.

In January 2006, 'Hairdressers of the world against Aids' was officially launched at L'Oreal's headquarters in Paris, with the aim of introducing modules on HIV and Aids into the company's international training programmes for hairdressers and salon workers. The scheme recognizes that to turn the tide on the Aids epidemic it is essential for everyone to know the facts and to be able to talk about them openly, with understanding. The World Health Organization describes information as one of the 'strongest weapons against the Aids epidemic ... to fight denial, inaction, ignorance, discrimination – the key forces that allow this epidemic to spread'.

By targeting the estimated 500,000 salons affiliated with L'Oreal, the company hopes that information can be disseminated on a global basis through an army of informed professionals who have regular and informal contact with their customers, delivering their message across socio-economic and geographical boundaries. To put it simply, if L'Oreal can train hairdressers to talk confidently to their customers about the lifestyle and treatment issues surrounding Aids, then thousands of lives may well be saved.

While the campaign is now international, it began as an experiment five years ago in South Africa when SoftSheen Carson, a L'Oreal hair products subsidiary, began offering an education, prevention, treatment and support service, including anonymous HIV testing and anti-retroviral therapy, to all its employees and their dependents. A year later an Aids-specific education module had become an essential part of staff training programmes. There was a practical side to this service, as it meant that individuals were less likely to be affected by Aids-related illnesses, reducing the risk of their untimely deaths or the need for long periods off work. But recognizing the potential of such

the company

L'Oreal is a Paris-headquartered hair care, clothing and beauty products group with 19 global brands that include Lancome, Garnier, Ralph Lauren, and The Body Shop. With a €15.8billion (\$23.4bn, £11.3bn) turnover in 2006 and a presence in more than 130 countries, it made an operating profit last year of €2.5bn. It:

- is a member of the Dow Jones STOXX Sustainability, FTSE4Good, ASPI Eurozone and Ethibel Sustainability indices
- set up its 'For Women in Science' programme in 1998, promoting the role of women in scientific research. Each year five outstanding female research scientists receive awards under the scheme
- includes educational leaflets about HIV in its Dark and Lovely hair straightening product packages
- gave away €22million in charitable donations and philanthropic activity last year
- runs a 'Look Good...Feel Better' programme to help women in over 16 countries offset appearance-related changes following cancer treatment
- has women in 54 per cent of management positions.

■ L'Oreal hopes that a worldwide army of well informed hairdressers and salon workers – such as these programme participants in Nascimento, Brazil – will help spread information on how to counter the Aids epidemic, saving lives in the process



an initiative outside the company walls, L’Oreal then decided to weave it into its entire Africa Aids education programme. In May 2005 it signed an agreement with The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) to further the initiative.

Since then, Hairdressers of the world against Aids has spread throughout L’Oreal’s hairdresser training programmes and is now operating in 24 countries of sub-Saharan Africa, having been launched in the US, UK, Mexico, Brazil, China, India, Thailand, France, Germany, Italy and Spain, among other countries.

The ultimate reach of the campaign is L’Oreal’s network of 190 training centres and 3000 instructors, which train 400,000 hairdressers and salon workers a year. Those who take part receive advice on HIV/Aids as an adjunct to their general training, which L’Oreal provides as a free service to those who work with its products.

Pierre Simoncelli, L’Oreal’s sustainability development director, says the company has found ‘overwhelming support’ for the campaign both in developed and developing countries. ‘We were prepared for a “Why us? Why now?” mentality, but found exactly the opposite’, he says. Simoncelli identifies the impetus of the programme as coming from the salon owners themselves: ‘We began the programme to take care of our people in South Africa, the employees of SoftSheen Carson, but gradually became more aware of its potential when salon owners started asking to be involved on their own initiative,’ he says.

A training session will normally have about 15 participants, says Simoncelli, but this number may extend into the hundreds where used at NGO-organized events, or at participating schools and colleges. Each training session is expected to last a maximum of 25 minutes. The facilitator of the course, who is not generally a specialist in HIV and Aids, uses guidance provided by a specially prepared information package to introduce the programme. Participants fill in a short quiz prior to watching a film called *Vertigo*, which uses powerful metaphors from life and nature to raise awareness about the universal impact of the Aids epidemic.

Afterwards, they are invited to review their original answers to the quiz, before an answer sheet is distributed along with a list of local information sources for HIV and Aids. The training encourages hairdressers to introduce the topic of HIV/Aids with their clients, but warns them not to make any personal recommendations. Their goal is to refer people on to these information sources, typically the government health authorities and NGOs.

The company has an annual budget of €200,000 (\$300,000, £143,000) for the production and distribution of *Vertigo* DVDs and the accompanying

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support package, but maintains that ‘the biggest cost is really the time and effort that L’Oreal employees have expended in support of this campaign’.

Simoncelli says that the partnership with Unesco is part of the strength of the programme. Unesco acts as an intermediary party between L’Oreal and the local authorities, ‘lending legitimacy’ to the programme. ‘They also helped us to develop the training tools,’ he says. ‘There’s not one word in the module that has not been worked out and approved with Unesco experts’.

For its part, Unesco says the extra reach provided by L’Oreal is an invaluable addition to its work on helping governments develop and implement a comprehensive educational response to HIV/Aids. ‘When we partner with the private sector, we can learn from a performance-oriented way of working and tap into a wider network,’ says Lady Cristina Owen-Jones, Unesco’s goodwill ambassador for HIV/Aids prevention education, who argues that support from business is essential if headway is to be made.

Simoncelli says the main benefit to L’Oreal of the hairdressers programme is in terms of its image. ‘You can’t put a monetary figure to this project and say this is its value to us, just as we have no way of quantifying the number of people who have benefited – directly or indirectly – from the campaign,’ he says. ‘But any company would consider it wise to invest in a campaign that serves to protect its stakeholders from an international epidemic.’

For Victor, however, the campaign has certainly had tangible benefits, not least by further improving the relationship with his customers. He estimates that the subject of Aids comes up with one in every four of his clients. ‘Some told me they have relatives with Aids and we became special friends,’ he says. ‘They’re pleased to see someone fighting against any kind of discrimination.’

Further information: Pierre Simoncelli at psimoncelli@dgc.loreal.com and www.hairdressersagainstaids.com



L’Oreal has created an imaginative and effective social responsibility project with its ‘Hairdressers of the world against Aids’ campaign. Although the company admits that it can gain great publicity benefits from the campaign, it is a good example of a multinational using its ability to reach many people in a positive way.

Points of interest include:

- the imaginative use of a worldwide network of hairdressers to train them in the necessary skills and knowledge to disseminate information about HIV and Aids
- building upon the skills and the natural relationship of the hairdressers and their clients to get very important information across in an informal but sensitive way
- L’Oreal’s partnership with Unesco to ensure that the training meets its requirements.

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