

EDUCATION

communicating effectively

The UK telecoms company BT has reinforced its position as one of the leading proponents of corporate social responsibility by committing at least £8.5 million to the BT Education Programme, which will involve more than two million schoolchildren

It's not often that a company is prepared to let people have a laugh at its expense, but that's exactly what Britain's largest telecommunications business has done over the past two years with its groundbreaking support for a travelling show serving the UK's schools.

BT's light-hearted national educational roadshows are put on by the theatre-in-education company CragRats, which is the country's largest employer of professional actors. More than a million schoolchildren in primary and secondary schools have already seen the roadshows, and they will be brought to another million between now and the end of the school year 2003.

'This is the largest theatre-in-education project in the UK,' explains Mark Greenop, creative director of CragRats and one of the authors of the roadshow. 'The big difficulty we have is satisfying demand. We've already visited 5500 schools, but there are over 28,000 in the UK, and given that the roadshow costs them nothing and supports the national curriculum, we are visiting 20 schools a day during term time, day in day out'.

The two shows – one specially written for primary schools and the other for secondary schools – help the children to appreciate the importance of effective communication. At least 40 actors are involved. 'The idea is to provide an educational resource to help young people

improve their communication skills,' says Greenop. 'For primary schools, four actors play two families who live next door to each other – the Muddles, who aren't good at communicating, and the Crystals, who are. It shows the importance of having good speaking and listening skills.'

Greenop points out that the national curriculum formally tests reading and writing, but not speaking and listening. 'Competence in dialogue will have a huge effect on your life, but it's one of the few things that isn't taught,' he says. 'We help to plug that gap.'

The national schools roadshow is one element of a new two-year education programme run by BT that began at the start of the current school year, building on the work of its previous education programmes.

Apart from the roadshow, which will visit an additional 5050 schools before the end of the school year 2003, BT is backing a volunteer programme, running awards for teachers – with £100,000 (\$140,000) of funding per term – and providing schools with educational support materials including videos, a CD-Rom, and a web site.

The web site (www.bt.com/education) is proving particularly popular. The company set itself the ambitious target of 20 million hits for the length of the scheme. By Christmas 2001 it was well on the way to achieving this, with more than 3.5 million hits recorded. There are separate areas devoted to teachers, parents and children. Teachers, for example, can use message boards to post notices and access a database of schools taking part. Teacher training events help schools to make the most of the various elements of the overall programme.

'Quite simply, we think the BT Education Programme is absolutely brilliant', says Greenop. 'They're trying to help Britain without "selling" BT and they gave us a free hand. They came to us, said they wanted the programme to be effective in schools and then left us to get on with it – though obviously they like to be kept in touch with how it's going.'

'We got over 11,000 letters in the year 2000 alone from children, parents and teachers saying how much they liked the show and how it helped their schools,' Greenop added.

Clearly schools, children and parents all benefit from BT's financial commitment, which will amount to more than £8.5m between 2001 and 2003. But what are the benefits to the company? Alison Garner, BT's marketing manager, social responsibility,

the BT Education Programme helps young people to improve their speaking and listening skills

■ the national educational roadshows funded by BT will have visited a total of 10,550 primary and secondary schools before the end of 2003



CragRats



explains: 'There are a number of ways in which this element of our social investment programme fits with our wider business objectives. First, there's the "local BT" element. Many people think of BT as a national monolith. But the education programme helps to overcome that misconception and the roadshows particularly help in this – the accompanying regional public relations, for example, are always excellent.

'BT also aims to be a sustainable business that provides society with a net substantial benefit and being a good citizen is an important part of this. And, of course, through the programme we reach existing and future customers.'

Precisely pinning down the commercial benefits of any social investment programme is always going to be difficult. To help tackle this problem, BT has recently pioneered ways of measuring the impact of such factors on customer satisfaction levels, which it has identified as critical to its continuing success.

The conclusion of this research, published late last year in a study¹, was that BT's overall image and reputation is a 'major determinant of customer satisfaction' and is of considerably more importance than other factors, such as how customers feel about the billing process or the cost of calls and rental charges relative to those of its competitors.

All of which is of great interest to corporate social responsibility practitioners, and indeed investors, but almost certainly of no interest at all to the 2.1 million children who will ultimately see the roadshow. The pleasure and instruction they gain from it, surely, is the greatest benefit of all.

¹You can access the study, *Enlightened values: is shareholder or stakeholder value the better path?* at www.bt.com/betterworld – click on 'Standards and Publications'

■ Further information: Alison Garner, marketing manager, social responsibility on +44 (0) 20 7356 6842, email alison.garner@bt.com

the company

BT is one of the world's leading providers of telecommunications services. In the UK, BT serves more than 28 million exchange lines as well as providing network services to other licensed operators. In the year to 31 March 2001, BT's Group turnover was £20.43 billion, with pre-tax profits of £2.07bn. It:

- invests a minimum of 0.5 per cent of its annual pre-tax profits back into the community. In 2000/1 this was worth £16million, including direct donations to charity of £1.2m
- is the UK company whose pension fund has the best socially responsible investment policies and practice, according to research by the pressure group Friends of the Earth
- contributes to the company's payroll giving system. This donates money directly to charities chosen by its employees and generates almost ten per cent of all UK payroll giving.

■ more than 40 professional actors are involved in the BT Education Programme, and at least two million children will see the shows they put on. BT also provides follow-up support for teachers, parents and school governors

ibc comment BT

This is one of an increasing number of examples of how business can get involved in projects that benefit UK schools and education while furthering company efforts to market products and compete successfully. It also shows how a corporate social responsibility initiative can effectively put profits back into the community while investing in the company's own future.

Features of note include:

- The initiative is both socially responsible and commercially astute
- It is possible to compete (in this case presumably with mobile phone companies) and be socially responsible
- BT has found some ways of measuring the impact of intangible factors, although it is unlikely ever to be able to measure the pleasure given to the children by the roadshows
- BT demonstrates the potential for business involvement to help address pressing social concerns, such as diversity issues, within school communities.

ELISE MORE, INSTITUTE OF BUSINESS ETHICS