

## PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

# raising health awareness

The food company Nestle's work in Russian schools to make children more aware of the links between diet and health is a rare example of the use of western marketing expertise to achieve a socially desirable objective

Russians have an unhealthy interest in sausages – and their government would like to tell them so. The national obsession with fatty foods is putting the nation's health at risk, and experts believe there is an urgent need for a campaign to help change eating habits.

Yet since the massive social and economic upheaval that took place in Russia in 1992, resources for public health education have been scarce.

Ironically, in a country once dominated by the state, it has fallen to a private firm, Nestle's Russian arm, to try to help fill some of the gaps.

In an initiative that has cost it almost \$1million (£710,000) to date, the food company has set up a highly popular schools education programme that aims to instil good eating habits in Russia's future generations.

The Good Nutrition Programme provides hundreds of thousands of Russian 6-8 year olds with beautifully-produced workbooks that steer them through basic messages about healthy eating.

After initial piloting in Moscow, the ministry of education has taken up the idea, and with its help the company has now extended the programme to cover 22 regions. In its first year, 1998/9, 10,000 books were distributed to 160 schools in the Moscow area, but by 2001/2 that number had risen to 170,000 books in 5000 schools.

Nestle Food LLC, which was formed as the Russian arm of Nestle in 1996 and now has seven factories employing 4500 staff as far east as Siberia, decided to develop the programme as a response to the post-Soviet debate about the decreasing life expectancy of Russia's citizens. Though this is mainly due to tobacco and alcohol abuse, it is also thanks to the poor Russian diet, which is calorifically adequate but often nutritionally unbalanced and dogged by a national penchant for fatty meats and artery-clogging items such as the ubiquitous 'butter bread'.

The key aim of the programme was to get the message across in a fun way that would engage the children, and Nestle realised it had the perfect vehicle on its doorstep. The company was already sponsoring the Russian TV version of the globally popular children's show Sesame Street (known locally as Ulitsa Sezam). It would use the cartoon characters to illustrate its programme in book form.

Linking up with the Moscow-based Institute for Developmental Physiology, it put the design of the programme in the hands of Russian education and nutrition experts, asking them to base it on Russian

## the company

Nestle is the world's largest food company, with nearly 500 factories in 77 countries producing brands such as Nescafe, Nesquik and Maggi. Founded in 1867 in Switzerland, where it still has its headquarters, it employs 230,000 people and had net profits of £3.9billion on a turnover of £34.5bn in 2000. It:

- adopted a 16-page set of corporate business principles in 1998
  - has given financial support to drinking water projects run in South Africa by the EcoLink NGO
  - has set up a joint project with the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to work out the best nutritional composition of food programmes during emergency relief operations
  - has distributed, through its Nestle Foundation, more than £25million to 650 projects in 36 countries with the intention of improving the nutritional status of people living in underdeveloped parts of the world
  - joined with other food firms in 2001 to devise a strategy to tackle child slave labour in the West African cocoa industry
  - published its first global policy on the environment in 1991
- the background Life expectancy for men in Russia is 59. The equivalent figure in the UK is 75.

■ the Russian ministry of education now recommends the Nestle Good Nutrition programme, which encourages children to experiment with healthy recipes, as part of the national curriculum



culinary tradition and to take into account the tight budgets faced by many households.

The result is a full-colour, 72-page children's workbook of stories, recipes, exercises, lessons and quizzes presented by Sesame Street characters.

When the books are sent to new schools they are backed up by workshops for teachers, and a Good Nutrition Programme phone line has been set up for teachers wanting further support. A background explanatory leaflet is sent to the schools, which are also given posters to hang in the classrooms. An educator is employed full time as a consultant to the programme, which the ministry of education now recommends as part of the national curriculum.

Nestle says the response has been extremely encouraging. Russian textbooks are generally of poor print and paper quality, and the bright workbooks, with their high-quality paper, 70-odd pictures and an especially-prized double-page spread of stickers, have been eagerly snapped up by schoolchildren. They are also free, which is a rarity in a country where non-basic school books usually have to be bought.

The children keep the workbook and take it home to show their families, which has the benefit of bringing the dietary lessons to a wider audience. The lessons, which are written in narrative form, focus

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mainly on affordable changes to eating habits and lifestyles, such as doing plenty of exercise, eating a balanced diet, taking more fruit and vegetables, chewing properly, and cutting down on fatty foods.

'If you can influence eating behaviour in children at a young age

it's hopefully something they will carry for the rest of their lives,' says Jennifer Galenkamp, head of Nestle Food LLC's external corporate affairs. 'But we are also reaching teachers and parents with these nutritional messages, and we've had many comments back from adults saying they've learned things they didn't know through the materials.'

Apart from its logo on the front cover, Nestle has been careful not to use the workbooks as a vehicle to plug its products. As a company making and selling coffee, chocolate and ice cream as well as more recognisably healthy products such as breakfast cereals, it is also aware that it could be accused of manipulating health messages, which is why it gave editorial independence to the nutritionists and educationalists who compiled the programme.

'We feel we are taking a responsible approach,' says Galenkamp. 'What we're saying is that within measure there's nothing bad for you *per se*, it's just a question of keeping a healthy balance.'

Galenkamp says that although the company has run the programme primarily because it feels it is 'the right thing to do', the reputational benefits have been significant, with 'fantastic' goodwill from



pupils, teachers, parents and government officials. She claims it has also helped to establish the company as a positive force in people's minds even though it has been in the country only a few years.

'We want to be part of Russia and this shows we have a long-term commitment,' she says. 'We've been accepted warmly here and want to be part of society by giving something back.'

Nestle plans to keep up the current coverage of the programme, and to spend nearly \$300,000 next year alone. During 2002/3 it will also launch part two of the programme, aimed at children aged 10-12 years. This will be freshly written, not using Sesame Street characters, and will initially target 20,000 children at 400 schools in eight regions.

The ministry of education is offering its continued support. 'Naturally in a country with Russia's history there are going to be questions about the role of private companies in something like this,' says Galenkamp. 'But I think the government is satisfied that our motives are good and, most of all, that the programme is successful. That is the main thing.'

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■ By the end of last year more than 170,000 Russian schoolchildren in 5000 schools had received a free copy of the workbook, which uses Sesame Street characters to raise awareness of the importance of a healthy diet

## ibc comment NESTLE

The Russian Government had a public health policy objective it found difficult to meet and a Swiss corporation subsidiary, Nestle in Russia, had a need to make its principal brand name, together with its reputation, known to potential customers. This is a case of mutual benefit recognition: together, each could contribute to the other's goal. With the help of a leading educational institute, the younger Russian generation is given help to adopt healthy eating habits while Nestle is paying for the education programme.

The outstanding features are:

- A public-private partnership working in unlikely circumstances
- Editorial independence for production of education material
- The continuous relationship that has developed – the programme is being extended in 2002/3
- The project was made possible because a win-win outcome was seen to be feasible.

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