

SOCIAL ISSUES

making the web safer

Cable & Wireless has worked with a non-governmental organization to improve internet safety for the last six years. The partnership has provided a way for the telecommunications company to begin tackling a social issue that it regards as a social responsibility

When you're the world's biggest hoster of websites, a number of responsibilities inevitably follow, not least in the area of internet safety. Cable & Wireless has long been conscious that while the net brings many benefits for children, it also holds dangers – from adults who may contact them in chatrooms, to indecent images and other inappropriate material. Given the enormous worldwide virtual traffic, internet safety is an extremely difficult issue for any single company to address. But C&W has made a start through a partnership with a children's charity.

In conjunction with Childnet International, a London-based non-profit body set up eight years ago to make the internet a safer medium for children to enjoy, the company has set up the Cable & Wireless Childnet awards, which reward innovation on the web by young people or those working with them, and also stress the importance of internet safety.

The first awards were held in London six years ago, and the event has since grown rapidly, with ceremonies in Washington DC, Barbados, Sydney and Paris. This year's awards, which have come back to London, have attracted almost 300 entries from 50 countries.

For the main award, a judging panel chooses the most innovative projects, such as 2002 winner matmice.com, which helps young people design their own home page. The judges said this site would have been 'an outstanding accomplishment for the best silicon valley internet

company', let alone the three Australian sisters who set it up in their bedroom without adult help. Finalists this year include Sarah Bowler, a 12-year-old British environmental campaigner who set up the Cool Kids for a Cool Climate site (uk.geocities.com/coolkidsforacoolclimate), and Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital's Kids and Teens site (www.gosh.nhs.uk/kidsandteens), which allows children to share their hospital experiences.

Each group of finalists, typically up to 50 people, is invited to spend the week before the ceremony in the country hosting the awards. The winners share a prize pool of £15,000 (\$24,000, €22,000) to develop their programmes.

While one of the main aims of the awards is to encourage children to enjoy the net and to learn

the company

Cable & Wireless is a global telecoms business with an annual turnover of £5.9 billion (\$9.3bn, €8.5bn) in 2002, 300,000 employees, customers in 80 countries and pre-tax profits of £61 million. It:

- spent £5.3m on community initiatives in 2001/2, of which £2.5m was in the UK
- has produced an annual environment report since 1999
- has given a board member responsibility for social, environmental and ethical matters
- works with the UK organization You Can Do IT, which provides internet training for disabled people
- was one of only 18 companies given 'premier league' status in Business in the Environment's 2003 Index of Corporate Environmental Engagement, which covered 207 businesses.

the background

Three-quarters of adults say they are 'extremely concerned' about children's web habits, according to a UK survey by GetNetWise, a telecommunications industry coalition on internet safety.

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from it, an important objective is to get across the importance of using the internet safely. This is partly achieved through the publicity for the event, and also by working with entrants to ensure their sites include safety information. The initiative is linked to another joint venture between C&W and Childnet International, called Kidsmart, which has produced leaflets for parents and children and a website offering practical advice on how to ensure the safety of children surfing the net. For children, the key messages are that they must never give their personal details or meet alone anyone they have contacted on the net. For parents, there is advice on how to keep an eye on the material their children are viewing, especially through the use of free software packages to filter out unsuitable sites.

Coupled with this, C&W has played a prominent role in setting up two industry-funded bodies. The Internet Watch Foundation runs an international hotline for web users to report sites with suspected criminal content such as child pornography or racist material, and the Internet Content Rating Association offers a self-labelling system to web owners to rate their content.

'The aim of the strategy is to enable people to understand that the web can have a positive effect on their lives, but that they also need to be careful.'



■ a panel of teenagers reviewed submissions to this year's Cable & Wireless Childnet Awards, which attracted 300 entries from 50 countries

says Joe Franses, C&W's community investment manager. 'Our business is the internet, so it is absolutely our responsibility to encourage young people to use it safely and recognize the dangers.'

The partnership with Childnet International began six years ago. 'Childnet approached us for financial help with a website on internet safety, and we worked together on it,' says Franses. 'The awards slowly grew out of that'.

The relationship has grown stronger over the years. 'Over the past couple of years we have focused on the internet as an area for future growth, and as a result the issue of internet safety has become more important for the company,' says Franses. 'We have tried to pioneer and lead on the issues, and this work is part of our community investment programme.'

Stephen Carrick-Davies, deputy chief executive of Childnet International, says constant contact has been crucial to the success of the partnership. 'Good communication is vital. On average we meet at least once a month,' he says. 'But you also have to recognize the different skills that each partner brings. Both need to play to their strengths – for example, in the case of the awards, we find C&W's media savvy and expertise in special events management very valuable. It's also important to evaluate and review regularly what you are doing.'

For the company, the link with Childnet International has provided a way to begin tackling a complex issue that it regards as a social responsibility. But it has also made sound business sense. Franses points out that because internet safety is 'a social issue that is core to our business', it is therefore a key reputational issue for the company. But promoting safer use of the internet brings other benefits to a company whose business in part depends on the volume of internet traffic.

Swati Patel, community investment executive at

C&W, adds: 'We've had very good employee involvement with a range of people who've offered to go into their local school and talk about internet safety as a direct result of the awards, which is something we want to capitalize on more.' Another company department – public policy – offers further evidence that the combination of the awards, Kidsmart and involvement with industry initiatives on internet safety has had wider benefits.

'As a business we have a commitment to promoting self regulation, and these measures are a clear message that we take this seriously,' says Emma Ascroft, C&W's political manager. 'What we are doing has resonance in government circles because it shows that self regulation, through partnership, can work.'

■ Further information: Joe Franses, community investment manager, at joe.franses@cw.com



comment CABLE & WIRELESS

Responsibility can be a slippery thing – not least when it comes to the internet. In this partnership, Cable & Wireless has taken a clear stand in recognizing its share of responsibility towards child users of the internet. It's an issue that could easily have been lost between content providers, internet service providers, public authorities and civil society stakeholders. This is a good example of how apparently opposing agendas can be accommodated when they are made explicit to all partners.

outstanding features of the partnership:

- explicit acknowledgement of the particular skills and resources each partner brings to the partnership
- strong focus on internal communication as an essential means of keeping the partnership alive and dynamic
- the use of regular evaluation as an instrument of partnership governance
- the wider impacts of the partnership (such as its bearing on the debate about regulation) are also an important spin-off.

FLEMMING SCHULTZ, THE COPENHAGEN CENTRE