

Theatre and Corporate Social Responsibility

Our experience in using theatre as a tool for social responsibility is extensive, and our ideas and methodology is ever changing. Here I want to provide a basic case for theatre, as well as share our wider views and approaches.

There are brilliant pieces of corporate social responsibility and there are terrible ones. We have been lucky to work over the years with companies whose approaches to CSR have been genuine, positive, and about making a difference. But why? Well, increasingly companies know that brand awareness goes deeper than marketing. People want to know that the product or service they are buying is as ethically and environmentally sound as possible. Loyalty stems from an alignment of values between the consumer and company. Just think about those brands you like, and feel good about. Why do you like them? Is it any surprise that people are queuing up to buy organic, environmentally friendly, fair-trade, sustainable products. We all want to give something back.

So we know there is the need and desire for people to want companies to giving something back. Let's make an important distinction here. There is a big difference to being 'seen' to give something back... and actually giving something back. I remember a project where a multi-national company advertised that it was running a campaign where books were given to students who were involved in a self-esteem project. The company must have spent hundreds of thousands on advertising. Guess how many books were given to the kids? 35. You can see through it. It's not sustainable and the project died.

Farsighted companies realise that everything they do has to be real – helping them achieve real sustainability – either in health, ethical, environmental, educational, social and many more arenas. What's more, that a series of donations to charities might serve to satisfy some stakeholders or make members of staff feel good, but CSR can go far further. CSR is about an integrated campaign of activity which;

- Is based upon the values of the organisation
- Links in to those touched by its product
- Involves staff in a practical way
- Has reach (achieves a tipping point where it can change things for the better)
- Has solid positive, measurable outcomes
- Is 'owned' by the company – unique to the organisation
- The company can develop a positive image as a result
- Innovative approaches which move thinking on

So where does theatre fit into all of this. It doesn't, not on its own. The projects we run which use theatre fit into a far wider CSR strategy. Here, all the normal arguments for and against theatre in education rear their ugly heads. Is it sustainable? Can it achieve solid, measurable outcomes? And on we go. This is where theatre can be its own worst enemy. Using theatre as a powerful engagement tool as part of a wider and well-conceived programme of activity in learning works.

We've achieved incredible results in learning programmes (independently evaluated over time I hasten to add), as well as generating very positive community perceptions of the company involved, involved company staff, opinion formed, changed educational thinking, and much more.

One example of this is the BT Education Programme. I ran a TiE project which focused on BT's commitment to improving children's speaking and listening skills. Theatre was the central offer to schools, and secured huge levels of bookings (5,000 schools over two years!). But on its own could not have been sustainable.

The project elements included;

- A highly robust educational theory on speaking and listening skills, designed by experts, which underpinned every element of the programme, giving it consistency across all its platforms
- A series of high profile launches which engaged the leaders in education and opinion formers in government
- A dedicated website with areas for students, teachers, parents, and volunteers containing resources for pre-emption of the theatre visit as well as ongoing activities, projects, competitions etc
- Theatre and Workshop package for secondary and primary school students
- Accompanying teachers events to ensure effective follow up
- Parents events to help parents promote good speaking and listening in the home
- A comprehensive volunteer programme, which used the theatre events as a springboard to BT volunteers going into schools to run ongoing, sustainable pieces of work around different aspects of communication
- A school by school web log of the visits, ensuring children would go online to view their visit and engage with the further activities on the site
- Independent evaluation of the programme using quantitative and qualitative data
- Regional PR campaign based around the theatre tour, which promoted the importance of speaking and listening skills and the wider resources available online
- DVD packages for schools to use to capitalise on the theatre with further interactive programmes of work
- Special events, competitions, and awards programmes for teachers and students

The project achieved;

- A million young people participated in the programme of work in the first two years
- Teachers were trained and resourced to continue integrating speaking and listening into the classroom
- The project was included in a government white paper which led to speaking and listening becoming a key part of the curriculum
- BT's education programme achieved unprecedented levels of PR at a local and national level
- BT became top of the Dow Jones Sustainability Index
- BT staff (10,000) were genuinely, actively involved in a programme which was aligned to their skill sets and values

So what did I learn from that experience? Well, that theatre in education is an incredibly powerful engagement tool, but functions like any other piece of educational intervention. It needs to be integrated with a wider strategy which ensures sustainability for the programme, providing benefits to all the stakeholders. Achieving this is about understanding what CSR is, and the role theatre has to play in that process. What theatre in education achieves is an innovative, engaging, guaranteed direct intervention with students, teachers and parents. It guarantees consistency of message direct to source rather than relying on intermediaries.

Teachers these days have sets of resources; badly designed lesson plans and DVDs on all manner of topics sat on their shelves all over the UK, sent to them by companies and charities. But it doesn't guarantee usage in any way whatsoever, as it is yet another thing a teacher has to crowbar into incredibly tight lesson plans. It gives the teacher a headache, not help. What theatre achieves is the opportunity for the school to offer something to students which it can't on its own, and it is then motivated to build upon,

which generates incredible goodwill. Post event resources should incentivise the teacher, students, and wider school to participate, and if designed well, with training to demonstrate how it fits like a glove to their schemes of work, WILL be used. With the BT Education Programme we achieved this and more.

Furthermore, essential to delivering great CSR programmes using TiE is to understand the company and its values, what *it* needs from the programme, as well as the schools and students, then design accordingly. Working in partnership with its volunteer programmes and other CSR activities can bring resources to the programme which will help it achieve far better value.

PR and marketing of the programme is also crucial. We live in a world now where young people identify with brands and slogans. Tying in all the imagery used for every aspect of the programme creates a sense of journey for students – and key words and phrases used repeatedly can help embed key learning messages. PR is equally important in ensuring the wider community knows what's going on and how they can participate. Good PR benefits all stakeholders, including the school. It helps spread the word to parents about what is going on in schools and opinion forms about the 'campaigning' element of the programme – e.g. speaking and listening is a vital part of the curriculum (BT) and how you can help promote it.

So Collingwood's approach when working with companies on CSR is about understanding them, their values and desired outcomes. We can then take a view on how we can meet that need, and working with them, create a fully integrated offer which harnesses all the resources available. This is what creates value – for the company and the educational market place. Our task is to keep our feet firmly in both camps and draw together talents and inspiration, backed up with hard outcomes.

If you want to discuss your corporate social responsibility needs with us, just give us a call.