

Making Contact



Get your foot in the classroom door by understanding the end user.

Using the Trojan Horse approach by disguising your marketing objectives as company sponsored educational gifts sounds like a clever idea, but could set a course for disaster. Company's interested in performing these 'goodwill gestures' by supplying classrooms with computers and pencils may shy away from these marketing opportunities due to the negative publicity caused in the past. In 1997, the Peel Board of Education had approved screen saver ads on classroom computers for participating high schools. But lack of revenue and concern from some parent/teacher groups soon forced the program to be 'disconnected'.

In today's world of sponsored educational materials, Heather MacTaggart is one woman with the right connections—Classroom Connections, that is. She's the executive director for this Toronto-based non-profit organization that has been providing community supported educational resources since 1997. So far she has linked government and private sector firms with over 10,000 publicly funded schools across Canada. Subway, Tetra Pak Canada Inc. and Ralston Purina Canada Ltd. are just a few of the food/beverage industry sponsors that have participated.

"We've had meetings with several food companies (Quaker, Christies, Mott's). Sometimes we have to explain that their original idea for a school program was actually a school promotion,

and we're not involved with school promotions as they are counter to our mandate and don't work. The only company I would say we 'turned down' was a chocolate bar company who really wasn't interested in education or enhancing their goodwill, but strictly in marketing candy in schools," MacTaggart explains. "What we do not do is start with a corporate objective and somehow drive that through the system. I don't think there's any room for that in education anywhere and I'd agree with the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF) that commercialization does not belong in the classroom."

The paper MacTaggart refers to is a recently released OSSTF 2001 report called *Commercialization in our Schools*. Basically, the federation is concerned that further corporate injection in schools exists mainly to "mold students into future workers and consumers." The first line of the paper clearly states their position. "The OSSTF is opposed to the commercialization of Ontario's classrooms, particularly when our students become a captive audience for commercial predators. Cradle-to-grave marketing is increasing and business interests target schools because they house millions of 'evolving consumers'."

To help businesses understand the educational climate and get their foot in the classroom door, Classroom Connections is conducting a workshop at the upcoming 6th annual Kid Power

Canada conference in Toronto. MacTaggart's workshop will offer tips on how to avoid negative press, recognize the benefits and dangers of in-school programs, coach participants interested in the school market, and assist marketing professionals in developing an outline for their own in-school program.

One successful in-school program developed by The Campbell Soup Company Ltd. is Campbell's Labels for Education. In Canada, there are now 4,900 schools participating in the four-year-old program that offers participants the opportunity to redeem labels and other proofs of purchase from Campbell's products in exchange for free educational resources and equipment. According to their web site, "...students can get involved at all levels of the collection drive. Besides collecting labels, teachers/parents can include students in sorting, counting and bundling labels." An opportunity that helps kids learn the benefits of cooperation and teamwork.

Food and beverage corporations wishing to stride into this segment must tread very lightly, MacTaggart cautions. Matching the appropriate cause to your organization's mandate is the main ingredient in the mix.

And if you make chocolate bars then it's probably best to support literacy, parent-child homework programs or after school babysitting courses—and not necessarily nutrition. ●

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