



# *Sparkling Action*

Marketing community involvement  
to medium-sized businesses

At Business in the Community we are committed to involving people in all types of businesses with their local communities. In 1988 we commissioned a Marketing Target Team, chaired by Mike Heron, to develop cost-effective marketing techniques for spreading the community involvement message to a significantly wider audience.

The resulting in-depth research and development work has enabled us to involve nearly 1,000 medium-sized businesses with their communities. This is a tremendous achievement and we are indebted to the Target Team, as well as the companies, for helping us broaden the scope of corporate community involvement.

Business in the Community is also committed to sharing its knowledge with its partners in the community and we have learned an enormous amount throughout the unfolding of the campaign. These lessons will no doubt prove valuable for voluntary and not-for-profit organisations wishing to engage the private sector, including Training and Enterprise Councils, Education Business Partnerships, Local Enterprise Agencies. We hope *Sparking Action* will help to enrich the quality of all partnerships between businesses and their communities.

Businesses help stimulate local economic growth by providing new entrepreneurs, such as this Welsh business woman, with valuable marketing and managerial advice.

**Julia Cleverdon**

*Chief Executive, Business in the Community*

### **Promoting community involvement: the need for alternative marketing techniques**

As part of its mission to promote the quality and extent of corporate community involvement, Business in the Community (BITC) invests considerable effort in attracting new businesses to the community involvement movement.

Although BITC members are traditionally drawn from larger companies in the Times Top 1000, it is clear that firms of all sizes have a role to play in their local communities.

Historically BITC has sought to influence major companies through one-to-one contacts. However, marketing community involvement to a large target audience of medium-sized businesses would necessarily require the development of alternative, less resource-intensive, communication techniques.

### **Developing the Community Involvement Campaign**

In 1988, Business in the Community (BITC) asked Michael Heron, then of Unilever, to form and chair a Marketing Target Team whose goal was to involve medium-sized companies in locally-based economic and social activities in their local communities.

The key question was whether conventional marketing techniques, supplemented by BITC staff providing links to local voluntary organisations, could persuade a large number of businesses to become involved with their communities without requiring a significant increase in staffing levels.



The national objectives were:

- to reach and persuade 1000 medium-sized companies to become actively involved with their communities within two to three years;
- to involve those companies in economic and social regeneration activities in their local communities;
- to ensure the developed methodology could be passed on and used by BITC staff in each of its regions.

A pilot test conducted in Yorkshire indicated that direct mail to businesses in a small geographical area, with BITC staff responding rapidly to link up respondees with local voluntary organisations, would be the most effective technique to engage companies in community activities.

### What was achieved

The resulting Community Involvement Campaign rolled out in nine BITC regions covering approximately 60 per cent of the UK, activating some 920 companies out of an initial mailing to some 45,000 businesses. The overall quality of business involvement was rated as 'medium' to 'high' in terms of its value to the final beneficiary.

Response rates were better than those of other direct mail operations, with approximately 3 per cent of the total number mailed replying through either a response card or by telephone. Approximately 2 per cent of the original number mailed became active in the community after follow-up contact with BITC and voluntary organisation partners.

Businesses became involved with a wide range of initiatives, particularly those involving support for education and small business development. In Northern Ireland, for example, the campaign resulted in the establishment of a Newry Education Team, linking five companies with five secondary schools in the Newry and Mourne area. Following a BITC West Midlands meeting with the chairman of GKN Axles, the Witton Business Group, representing 260 local companies, was launched to take action on local environmental concerns, economic regeneration and school links with the support of Birmingham Training and Enterprise Council and the City Council.

### Why the Community Involvement Campaign is important

The Community Involvement Campaign broke new ground for BITC in a number of important ways:

- It was the first campaign aimed to extend the involvement of medium-sized businesses with their communities.
- It was the first community involvement campaign to apply mass marketing techniques.
- It was the first attempt to quantify the cost of securing active business involvement with the community.
- It was the first attempt to correlate the level of campaign investment with the resulting quality of business involvement.
- It was the first systematic investigation of the motives underlying business involvement in the community, focusing on both those who become active as well as those who do not.



Business leadership teams, such as this one in Northern Ireland, bring local leaders together to take direct action on important community issues.



## What was learned

The campaign identified critical success factors for connecting with businesses, securing their commitment and producing effective action in the community, all encapsulated in the acronym SPARK:

### **S**ELECT audiences and techniques carefully

**Reaching the target audience.** To achieve the best response from the business community, the target audience needed to be precisely defined. Mailing lists were assessed carefully to ensure the mail-out reached a maximum number of individually named chief executives of medium-sized businesses (those employing 20 to 1000 staff).

Larger and "newer" non-manufacturing companies were more likely to respond, suggesting that larger companies might have more resources or that newer companies are more innovative in developing community relationships.

**Developing a cost-effective technique.** The campaign demonstrated that direct mail can be a powerful, cost-effective method for engaging smaller companies through their chief executives. Compared with press advertising and television, direct mail was most effective in reaching the target and communicating a complex message as well as enabling respondents to obtain more information without creating pressure for further action. Direct mail also proved effective in raising BITC's profile and proved a strong vehicle for promoting key BITC initiatives.

The cost of achieving active community involvement averaged £500 per business. Direct mail with telephone follow-up and limited action targets cost approximately £300 per business, whereas a full-scale effort involving resource-intensive BITC follow-up cost approximately £700 per business but generated a significantly higher quality and level of response.

### **P**ERSONALIZE approaches to business

Although direct mail is a mass market medium, the process of making a commitment to the community is highly personal. Qualitative research indicated that to secure commitment from chief executives it was essential to:

**Appeal simultaneously to the heart and the head.** While it was important to highlight business benefits of community involvement, it was equally important to "tug at the heartstrings" of chief executives to tap their natural desire to play a positive role in their local communities.

**Demonstrate how to get involved.** The brochure was seen as particularly helpful in outlining the range of activities in which business could become involved. BITC staff played a critical role in matching businesses with specific community initiatives.

**Prove businesses can make a difference locally.** Chief executives of medium-sized businesses needed to be persuaded that they could make a real difference to their local communities by working in partnership with public and voluntary sector organisations.

**Make personal contact.** The mail pack was personalized by including an individually addressed letter, signed by a recognised local business person, accompanied by a response card bearing photographs of other local business personalities who were already involved.

Top Education Business Partnerships enable busy executives and pupils to learn more about the worlds of education and work.

Bottom Companies can raise confidence and build skills of young people by providing places on training courses.



## **A**IM for precise geographical areas and time periods

The quality of BITC follow-up and the ensuing links between business and voluntary organisations were better in small areas which could be covered quickly and where BITC managers' knowledge of local initiatives was most accurate.

Businesses located in smaller, more discrete communities were more responsive than those in and around major cities. These businesses may have shared a stronger sense of community responsibility and perceived better opportunities to achieve greater local profile with customers, suppliers and recruits in a smaller, closer-knit community.

Timing of mailings was also important in securing maximum attention from business people, with Christmas, summer school holidays and the Easter period all to be avoided.

## **R**ESPOND quickly and appropriately to those who show interest

Rapid, in-depth follow-up after the direct mail shot proved to be a critical variable, with the level of investment in the follow-up procedure correlating with the quality of resulting business action. Face-to-face contact and the presentation of tangible options for action were crucial in persuading businesses to get involved.

BITC managers played a critical role in maintaining the respondent's interest, providing information and advice on local initiatives and introducing the business person to potential partner organisations in the community.

Education and training, particularly work experience were of greatest interest for companies wishing to get involved with the community, followed by support for small businesses and the environment.

## **K**NOW your local partners and their abilities

Businesses needed guidance in choosing among the many initiatives and organisations with which they could become involved. Rapid follow-up by voluntary sector organisations was a critical success factor in securing active business involvement. BITC staff needed to ascertain in advance that partner organisations would be capable of responding quickly and comprehensively to business people wishing to become active with their local communities.

### HOW TO 'SPARK' COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

**S**ELECT audiences and techniques carefully

**P**ERSONALIZE approaches to business

**A**IM for precise geographical areas and time periods

**R**ESPOND quickly and appropriately to those who show interest

**K**NOW your local partners and their abilities

## Acknowledgements

In 1988 I was asked to chair a Business in the Community Target Team to develop a marketing campaign which would engage medium-sized businesses in community initiatives. That campaign is virtually complete and the results have been gratifying and positive.

Over 900 companies, many with no previous community involvement, will be active in a wide variety of areas ranging from skills training to environmental improvements to advice for start-up ventures. Many of these companies have undergone a 'conversion' and are active in more than one initiative, working to develop a longer term relationship with their local community. The results of the campaign will be of considerable interest to all organisations interested in securing business involvement, and particularly to Business in the Community.

The methodology described in this report is well developed and has been used to roll the campaign forward into new regions within the UK. More importantly, the skills developed in each regional office of Business in the Community as a result of the campaign are retained there and can be put to further use.

This campaign has only been possible because of the generosity of the following organisations who have supported the campaign.

Barclays Bank PLC\*

BT PLC

Central Independent TV PLC\*

Dragon International\*

Grand Metropolitan PLC

The Department of Trade and industry

Reed International PLC

Rowntree PLC\*

Unilever PLC\*

Yorkshire Bank PLC

Young & Rubicam Ltd\*

### *Pilot Test Stage*

Ogilvy & Mather Direct Ltd

Yorkshire Television Ltd

Young & Rubicam Ltd

Unilever PLC

Barclays Bank PLC

Brand New Product Development

Central Independent TV PLC

\*Target Team Members

The results are also a tribute to John Banks, Simon Fortescue, Michael Green, Bill Hay, Dorothy Mackenzie and Trevor Thomas, who all gave generously of their time and experience, as well as Ros Merfield and Sibylla Tindale, who in turn led the project with the enthusiastic support of the BITC team and the professional assistance of many others, particularly Jonathan Wilson and Helen Hemingway.

### **Mike Heron**

*Chairman, Marketing Target Team*

*Chairman, The Post Office*



**BUSINESS in the COMMUNITY**

8 Stratton Street, London W1X 5FD, Telephone 071 629 1600, Facsimile 071 629 1834

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