CSR case studies

CE Electric UK

"Stay Away – Stay Alive" Programme to educate young people about the potential dangers of electricity.

The company

CE Electric is the electricity distribution business for the North East, Yorkshire and Northern Lincolnshire, delivering electricity to all 3.7 million electricity consumers in the region.

The company's origins can be traced back 110 years when electricity was first supplied to the region by Newcastle Electricity Supply Company. Privately owned since 1996, its parent company is Mid-American Energy Holdings (part of the entrepreneur Warren Buffett's group of companies), which supplies electricity and gas to the mid-west of America and the Philippines.

The company's approach to corporate social responsibility, which it terms corporate responsibility (CR), is through six key priorities that drive all decisions and actions. These areas are: customer service; employee commitment; financial strength; environmental respect; regulatory integrity, and operational excellence. The company aims to be regarded in the top 10% of all companies in its industry for each of these key priorities, with a vision to be the best all-round performer in its sector.

This case study focuses on the awareness campaign "Stay Away – Stay Alive" which seeks to reduce accidents involving electricity.

The drivers

CE Electric considers that an important part of its responsibility to its communities is to promote a better understanding of the potential dangers of electricity. The company sees this as a business driven customer service action rather than simply driven by a CR agenda. This is because delivering electricity is also providing a service to the community and the company's operations have a visible effect on the community, for example, if the lights went out in a street or power to a train was interrupted. In the same way, the company believes it has a responsibility to try to prevent people getting injured through electricity.

The Stay Away – Stay Alive programme is seen as helping to meet the customer service priority.

Taking action

The "Stay Away – Stay Alive" awareness campaign started back in 1990. CE Electric decided to target 11-12 year old children as evidence from national accident statistics and CE Electric's own records suggested that this age group was most vulnerable to the dangers of electricity. The company decided that the best way to reach this group was through school visits and working with other partners, for example, the emergency services to deliver engaging talks to the schoolchildren.

Until 2003, CE Electric was able to utilise resources produced by the Understanding Energy Educational Service run by the Electricity Association. The Service ceased in 2003 when the Association was dissolved but CE Electric decided its programme was too important to stop.

A challenge was how to prioritise which schools to visit. It was decided to prioritise the

visits to schools in areas where there had been a recent incident involving electricity, or those in high-risk areas. These are areas where there are electrical installations, higher than average levels of vandalism, and generally coincide with the deprived areas of the region.

Two approaches were taken to ensure effective engagement with the target age group. In Yorkshire, the company uses an experienced, fully-trained individual to visit schools and give safety talks to children about the dangers of electricity. Typically over 120 schools are visited in a year and over 30,000 children participate. The materials produced are developed in consultation with teachers, through meetings, phone calls and feedback forms. The consultation helps to ensure that the materials are relevant to the national curriculum, and help teachers meet their own objectives. This also helps to ensure that the talks and materials are as practical as possible. Feedback is constantly also sought from the teachers, so shaping the evolution of the programme. There are also questionnaires for the children before and after the sessions, so the schools and the company can evaluate the effectiveness of the talks.

Further North, the other approach is the company's work with the Crucial Crew Initiative. The Crucial Crew involves the emergency services working within national curriculum activities on general safety issues with school children. The Crucial Crew run workshops that attract 25,000 of the target age group. At the workshops the children are presented with various dangerous or challenging situations, such as a football going over the wall of a substation, or a role-play involving a dare. The children receive practical advice over what to do in those situations. As well as taking part in the workshops, CE Electric sponsors the safety workbooks used in them. The work of the Crucial Crew is publicised through local media.

To further help the promotion of the initiative, CE Electric have developed and sent free copies of interactive Crucial Crew CDs to over 3,000 schools. This computer game enables younger children to learn in the classroom about the potential dangers of overhead cables, electricity substations and vandalised streetlights.

School holiday times are potential periods when children may be more exposed to the dangers of electricity, through boredom and having more time to get into mischief. To keep the awareness high through these periods, CE Electric conducts local and regional newspaper and radio campaigns on seasonal themes relating to the safe use of electricity, and runs competitions about electricity safety for children in local newspapers. For example, CE Electric's Easter 2006 competition ran in 26 newspapers, with a combined circulation of 1.2 million. More than 450 entries were received from children in the Middlesbrough area alone. Commercial radio stations are also used to broadcast safety advertisements aimed at teenagers.

In July 2005 CE Electric launched The Fusebox – a bright, fun and action-packed new interactive website (http://thefusebox.ce-electricuk.com/page/index.cfm) – developed in conjunction with both parents and teachers. It aims to allow children to cleverly explore dangerous everyday situations via entertaining interactive games and quizzes that reinforce the 'stay away, stay alive' message.

Cool characters like Vic Voltage, Lola Livewire and Billy Brightspark lead users through animated real life simulations, explain how electricity works and provide a history of important electrical developments and inventions. The site also contains a great project section including advice on how to build an electrical circuit with downloadable educational resources that can be used alongside these activities.

Suitable for children from six to 15 years of age, the site reinforces the national curriculum in Science, History and Citizenship.

Since 2004 there have been only two reported injuries to children aged 11-13 due to accidental contact with the 33,000 km of

overhead lines in the region. Jon Bird, Director of External Affairs said, "Whilst we agree this is still two too many, we hope the programme has made a positive contribution to preventing accidents. Of course it's hard to measure its real impact".

The business benefits

The regulators Ofgem judge the company, not just on how it delivers value for money, but also on how it treats its customers and this community initiative delivers value in meeting this objective.

Feedback from CE Electrics call centres, and evidence in the press suggests that the public does not think about electricity distribution companies until there is a problem with supply. So anything that helps address this balance is seen by the company as a benefit. The Stay Away – Stay Alive initiative not only creates a positive profile for the company but helps reduce the likelihood of an accident.

Why is it CSR?

Understanding and managing a company's impacts in the community, specifically the safety of the community, is a vital component of CSR. The awareness programme goes beyond compliance, whilst delivering to the business objectives in customer service.

What next?

The company aims to build on its community approach and has launched a new initiative "Get switched on to 2012". This seeks to support potential athletes through funding of professional coaches in the Yorkshire and Humberside area. It seeks to attract children into sport, and away from the dangers of boredom and electricity. It built on the experiences of the safety education work, and was launched in the summer of 2006.

Contact us

Any comments on this profile?
Would you like your organisation to be profiled? For further information, please contact Dr Paul Toyne at Article 13 on 020 8840 4450 or email ptoyne@article13.com.

For more information on CE Electric, please contact Jon Bird by email jon.bird@ce-electricuk.com.