

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

learning at the workplace

School visits to factories are hardly unusual, but Coca-Cola Enterprises has taken the concept a step further by establishing state-of-the-art education centres at three of its facilities that offer qualified teachers and sparky presentations tailored to the curriculum

Twice a day, three times a week, the robotic efficiency of the Coca-Cola factory in Edmonton, North London, is leavened by the appearance of a group of excited schoolchildren.

Dressed in high-visibility jackets over their school uniforms and hygienic hairnets that make them giggle, they are led around walkways above the complex to discover how their favourite soft drinks move from a secret recipe syrup to the finished product they so often see on the shelves.

It's a school visit, but not as we know it. The 14-16 year olds have already had an hour's lively learning and discussion at a swish, purpose-built education centre inside the factory, and the tour round the plant is the icing on the cake of a fully-fledged educational experience which Coca-Cola Enterprises Ltd (CCE), the company that runs the factory, sees as part of its efforts to engage with the community. CCE has three such education centres in the UK – the other two are at its factories in Wakefield, Yorkshire and East Kilbride, Scotland. Each offers a similar experience; each is staffed by a fully qualified, fulltime teacher (known as a centre manager) and each tailors the two-hour

visits to meet the demands of the national curriculum, as well as new requirements for schools to deliver five days of work-related learning a year.

After an introductory video, the group of between 12 and 25 secondary school children moves into a classroom

where the centre manager takes them through a presentation on how the business works, often accompanied by an overtly fun element, such as a blind drinks-tasting. Then the hairnets are on and the children are guided round the factory before a final question-and-answer session.

The centre manager will have discussed the specific needs of the pupils with their teacher before they arrive, choosing a particular focus – product design for those studying design technology or marketing for those doing business studies, for example – that fits with their course. Teachers are also given support material.

The Edmonton education centre is the newest: it opened in 2004 and is already on the way to exceeding its target of working with 3500 students

the company

Coca-Cola Enterprises manufactures, bottles and distributes Coca-Cola products such as Coca-Cola, Fanta and Sprite in Britain, employing 5000 people in 21 factories, offices and depots around the country. It:

- has produced a document, *Acting responsibly, making change*, outlining its approach to health, wellness, and active lifestyles
- operates a consumer contact centre and freephone consumer helpline offering nutritional advice about its products. In 2004 it received more than 24,500 enquiries about its brands
- has developed a partnership with the business education and enterprise charity Business Dynamics, in which employees volunteer to go into secondary schools to run business education workshops for students
- runs the Coca-Cola English Schools Cup, the country's biggest schools football tournament for 12 and 13-year old boys and girls in partnership with the English Schools Football Association
- recently published a *Corporate responsibility review* with The Coca-Cola Company in Great Britain

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each academic year. The Wakefield and East Kilbride centres, which opened in 2001 and 2002 respectively, have between them had more than 25,000 visitors, and there are thoughts of opening more centres at other sites.

'For years we'd been aware we had fantastic facilities that could help us maintain our strong focus on contributing to the local community,' says Suzanne Rutledge, CCE's corporate affairs manager. 'Our factories had always had requests from schools for visits, and we'd had to say no as the facilities weren't available. So with a bit of investment we realized we could produce what we have now.'

The financial input has been significant – the Edmonton centre alone, with its gadgets, interactive whiteboards, video theatre and internet access, cost £550,000 (\$977,000) to build from scratch – although that figure included a £300,000 grant from the London Development Agency – and the running costs of the three centres amount to £30,000 a year.

But the response has been tremendous. Craig Green, education centre manager at Edmonton, says news of the initiative has spread like wildfire. 'It doesn't really need any marketing at present because it just spreads by word of mouth throughout London,' he says. 'The problem is



■ the employment of fully qualified, fulltime teachers at each of the education centres ensures standards remain high

actually having to tell disappointed teachers that they can't come next month because we're booked up well in advance. We've had teachers say that one of our sessions pretty much covers all the elements of their entire business studies course, and that they can keep referring back to it over the year.'

Green acknowledges that Coca-Cola has something of a head start, given that the brand is seen as 'cool' by teenagers who might be far less enthusiastic about a factory that makes ball bearings or toilet rolls. Nonetheless, CCE has made great efforts to ensure the experience works on all fronts. The centre managers allocate three days each week to presentations, while the other two are given over to planning improvements. They spend much of their time developing new ideas that can be linked even more closely to the curriculum, often in conjunction with government advisers and education specialists.

Having qualified teachers to run the centres, rather than a competent employee seconded from some other department, is also essential. 'This is not just a factory visit, it's a legitimate learning experience, and it needs someone who can talk teacher talk and engage the children,' says Rutledge. 'A teacher gives it credibility.'

Coca-Cola's strong brand has its advantages when engaging with teenagers, but it also has its dangers. The company has to be careful that the centres are not viewed as a marketing ploy. Although, with the permission of teachers, children are given a free sample of a soft drink as they arrive, they are not handed out Coca-Cola branded merchandise – often to their chagrin. All the rubbish bins in the factories are emblazoned with Coca-Cola logos, but those in the centres are conspicuously blank. The company has strict marketing policy guidelines that forbid the targeting of young people under the age of 12, which is why only secondary school children go on visits.

Although the company does inevitably generate much goodwill from the education centres, it says it doesn't see the initiative solely in those terms. 'For us this is really about getting involved in the community and improving local education,' says Rutledge.

'As a business we see it as our responsibility to give back to the community we're working in, and in some small way we can help raise educational standards in catchment areas of employment for the company, then that can only be a bonus.

'But it also motivates our employees, even if they're not directly involved. They know we are doing this sort of work and they're interested in it; they get to see the letters that the children write. It makes them feel good about the business they work for.'

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This is one of an increasing number of examples of how business can get involved in projects that benefit UK schools and education, as well as furthering company efforts to market their brand and compete successfully (others include HSBC, Sainsbury's and Tesco). CCE demonstrates the potential for business to contribute to the educational experience of the local community and thus helping to ensure that its workforce of the future continues to come from the locality.

features of note from this case are:

- the investment of significant resources to produce a learning experience that is tailored towards the particular educational focus of each class
- the hiring of a qualified teacher as centre manager adds credibility to the educational aim
- the awareness of reputational risk attached to the perception of using education as a marketing vehicle. The company limits this by allowing only secondary school children to visit

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