

Firms seek social projects with relevance

Better tracking means business is now getting a bigger bang for its buck

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AUSTRALIAN business is generally becoming a lot more sophisticated in how it measures the impact of corporate community investment programs. We might be lagging slightly behind the rest of the world on some levels but we're fast catching up, says London Benchmarking Group's CCI director for Australia/New Zealand, Simon Robinson.

He says Australian businesses are asking all the right questions in regard to how best manage their CCI and gaining a better understanding of how they can get more "bang for their buck" from their programs.

He says some of the 58 LBG members in Australia still choose to invest in pure philanthropic pursuits while others look at how they can make their CCI investment work in their business and have the most impact in their communities and importantly, with their employees.

"Business is finally asking itself: what makes sense for the business," Robinson says.

He says many companies are reviewing what sorts of programs and organisations make strategic sense to align with and they're increasingly asking their employees: "What should we align ourselves with?"

And the answers coming from those conversations more often deal with the fact that companies should involve themselves in projects, which reflect their core

business. "A good example is ANZ who support financial literacy programs in disadvantaged communities and it makes sense for them to do that," Robinson says.

Other good examples of companies aligning themselves with issues close to their core business practices include Woodside and Grocon. Woodside, which is involved in offshore drilling, supports groups such as the Surf Lifesaving Association of Australia and other coastal advocacy organisations.

"It makes sense for them to engage with organisations involved in coastal issues," Robinson says.

Grocon is working in partnership with a number state governments and community groups, building facilities for homeless people.

According to Jane Wilson, Grocon's corporate affairs manager and chair of its community committee, the company decided to build the facilities after meeting with the founders of Common Ground in 2007.

Founded in New York, Common Ground builds and operates a range of housing options for homeless people and low-income earners – housing that is attractive, affordable, well managed, and linked to the services and support people need to rebuild their lives.

"It's an excellent initiative designed to tackle homelessness as we're building homeless people a place to live with the essential ser-

vices they need wrapped around them. It's important to have medical and employment services nearby because these people can't afford to travel. What's more, research shows it makes good economic sense to give people a home and access to these services," Wilson says.

For Daniel Grollo, Grocon's chief executive, the move into social housing projects was an important one and a practical CCI project for the construction giant.

The first facility was built in Melbourne after the Victorian government bought land in Elizabeth Street. It was completed last year and was built at cost by Grocon with the savings handed back to the government and Yarra Community Housing.

Wilson says the government and community housing budgeted \$43 million for the project and Grollo was able to complete the project for \$34 million with the excess dollars now being used for other community projects.

Grocon not only brings its considerable planning and building expertise into the project but it also gets to work with community groups every step of the way.

"It benefits our own people enormously as they get involved in building for the homeless and they get to work closely with community service providers. Daniel Grollo says the project has in many ways brought more to our own organisation than we have

given in many ways," Wilson says.

"It's a great opportunity for our people to work with charities, work with homeless people and work in the community and they've become quite enthusiastic about the program and the facilities we have built.

"We have since gone on to build similar facilities in Sydney's Camperdown (opening November 15) and in Brisbane."

Wilson says it has been a rewarding experience working with community organisations from the planning stage as issues surrounding security, apartment layouts and medical facility needs are discussed.

Grocon's core building expertise has also been used in a number of other community projects such as helping communities rebuild after the Victorian bushfires and building a facility in Melbourne for the aged at cost price.

"We build these things because we're builders," Wilson says matter-of-factly.

The company also supports Kids Undercover and is develop-

ing a community employment program with the Brotherhood of St Laurence for disadvantaged youth. It also runs workplace giving and volunteering programs.

LBG's Robinson says while the bigger companies look to get involved in larger projects aligned to their businesses, smaller companies are realising the importance of getting involved in their local communities.

"In regional areas, many companies are part of a community's social fabric and it's important they align themselves with local festivals and charities," he says.

Importantly, Robinson says there are now a number of tools available for companies to assess the impact of their inputs into CCI programs and the outputs they generate.

"Twelve of the 48 Australian LBG member companies that reported this year have used the tools to assess their inputs and they directly impacted on 1.1 million people," Robinson says.

He says the impact assessment tool looks at five key areas such as

the impact company CCI projects have on a community, the company's employees, the business and the environment.

The next step for Australian companies, Robinson says, is for them to look beyond financial programs and grow as a proportion of contributions, the level of volunteering among staff.

"In the United Kingdom they do this very well and business has been a little more clever in how they use their staff in the community. They use volunteering as a way to develop leadership, personal and communication skills.

"In the long-term, companies should simply look at the community as part of their corporate social responsibility and integrate LBG into their business processes. They should be helping community organisations function day-to-day because they're part of the business. The challenge for LBG is being able to incorporate and report a return on investment for these programs."