

Highlights of the discussion

Training the Hippo: Communication and the Education of India's Rural Kids

5 April 2016



This brown bag is part of a how-to series that the DER Project Communication group regularly conducts for operations staff. Project leaders share practical strategies on how communication was effectively designed and used to engage stakeholders, change behavior, and mitigate risks - for better project results.

Case for discussion:

Hippocampus Learning Centers Rural Education Project (2014-2016) in India

- HLC is a company that pioneered an affordable supplementary education offering kindergarten and after-school programs for rural kids 3 to 11 years of age in Karnataka
 - Established in 2010 as a company backed by venture capital
- PSOD identified HLC as an investment opportunity in education to balance commercial viability with the development objectives of providing affordable, high-quality education
- Equity investment of US\$2 million in Hippocampus Learning Centers (HLC) aims to:

- Expand its pre-school network programs to 702 villages in Karnataka by 2016
- Increase student enrollment in kindergarten and after-school programs from 5,800 (2013) to 89,848 by 2017
- Train and employ 2,615 women to become teachers in HLC by 2016 (from 272 in 2013)
- Review and revise curriculum and training materials to remove gender stereotypes and provide positive images and female role models

Speakers:

- Ani Patil, Principal Investment Specialist, PSIF1
- Umesh Malhotra, Founder and Chief Executive of Hippocampus Learning Centers

The state of primary education in India

- While India has significantly increased the enrollment rates in primary schools, its 2012 and 2013 education reports showed a steep decline in student learning outcomes. The percentage of students who can read or solve simple math problems have dropped from 2010 to 2012.
 - These deficits left kids unprepared for secondary schools. Many students simply drop out.
- In rural areas, preschool education is not widely available as the formal educational system does not recognize pre-schools.
 - Most of India's rural kids have no exposure to formal development of literacy or cognitive skills putting them at a significant disadvantage compared with urban kids

HLC's identification of its communication needs

HLC used the pooled experiences of its Founder, Board of Directors and staff in early child education and knowledge of the education sector and market to identify the tactical and strategic communication challenges of setting up and sustaining private primary centers in rural India:

- With no public or private pre-schools in rural areas, parents had to be convinced to invest in sending their children, 3 to 6 years old, to attend the HLC's full day program depending on their age: pre-kindergarten, lower kindergarten and upper kindergarten
 - Tuition is between Rs. 2,000 to Rs. 3,000 (around US\$37-US\$50) annually which can be paid in installments
- Parents also needed to see the "evidence" that pre-school education can better prepare their kids for primary school
 - Most parents are familiar and comfortable with the traditional "Victorian –style" method where teachers know everything and the curriculum is based on memorization. Since HLC's curriculum is activity-based, child-centered and "joyful," parents had to be convinced of the benefit of these methods to improve learning outcomes
- HLC needed to attract, retain and motivate suitable applicants based in the villages to become teachers
 - Women who have graduated from college opt to find jobs elsewhere and those who remain in the villages have no teaching experience

- As there are limited economic options for women in rural communities, parents of young girls have arranged their marriages early on, and suitable candidates for teaching positions needed their husbands' permission to apply and work
- To be continually socially relevant at the same time, sustain its commercial viability, HLC needed to forge a good relationship and get the buy-in of the community where the schools are located

To address the communication challenges to increase enrollment, recruit suitable teacher-candidates and get the support of the community, HLC conducted the following activities:

- Developed paraphernalia with aspirational messages aimed at different audiences
 - To encourage parents to invest in pre-school education and increase student enrollment posters, banners and marketing videos were positioned prominently outside HLCs
 - Aspirational messages (i.e., something that audiences wish to have) were emphasized – “international teaching methods” to push the point that quality education is provided at an affordable price; “focus on English” to show the value-added of HLCs in giving students an edge for primary school
 - HLC produced videos for an insider’s look to explain the schools’ unique curriculum and “child-centered” and “activity-based” teaching methods to parents. These address the traditional expectation of parents that learning methods should be teacher-based and focused on memorization
 - To attract and recruit local young women, big posters were positioned to create a buzz about HLCs and promote the message that applying as teachers was something they needed to involved in
- Intensified visibility and branding
 - The façade of HLCs were painted with vibrant colors and murals to attract parents and draw attention to the schools. Uniforms, bags, books and report cards were branded with the Hippocampus colors and logos to command attention and instill pride in the students and their parents and reinforce their decision to invest in private pre-school education
- Provided capacity building and sharing among teachers
 - Strong and competent teachers are HLC’s “face” in the communities and their main relationship marketing channel. HLC invested in finding suitable candidates through six rounds of interviews, rigorous reference checks and 18 days of intensive training
 - These 6-step process promoted the message that parents were investing in teacher integrity, competence and capacity -- while instilling confidence in the young women
 - Successful candidates were trained to use information technology that tracked enrolment and student progress – and also to ensure accountability and efficiency in running an increasingly larger operation
 - Teacher conferences made the women feel that they are part of a movement – which reinforces their commitment to the objectives of HLC

- Conducted activities outside of schools to engage community members' participation
 - HLC's business model that focuses on local recruitment is both a tactical and strategic approach.
 - Tactical, because having teachers from the community helped build trust among parents and significantly increased student enrolment
 - Strategic, because:
 - the young women helped forge long-term support and ownership from communities where the schools are located and to which they and the students belong
 - HLCs invested in revising the curriculum and teaching methods as a long term response to address gender stereotypes. Biases that cause differential and discriminatory treatment that lead girls to have a low self-concept are removed.
 - strong, competent teachers provided the students and communities with positive female role models who displayed increased economic and political status in communities where young women previously had limited options
 - girls in schools (as teachers and students) send a strong message that education plays a critical role in halting the vicious cycle of poverty and inequity
 - HLC conducted "Annual Days," or "Village Days" in community squares and open spaces. Students showcased their art performances, learning and talents for the community -- building pride in themselves and their parents.
 - HLC has also maximized these events as an important feedback mechanism for community stakeholders to help the schools improve their services
 - Village elders and other sector in the community play significant roles in these events to solidify HLC's long-term relationship with the villages
 - To signify ownership, members of the communities provide counterpart contributions to sustain the events

Communication lessons

- Forging the support and ownership of the community through continued engagement and local recruitments – makes for good business.
 - This has already been tested when local education officials put pressure on certain HLCs threatening to disrupt operations. While HLCs enjoy the support of the education officials at the state level, this sometimes does not translate to the local bureaucracy. Parents and key local members of the community protected the HLCs from closure and disruption.
- "ADB's timely engagement in July 2014 for a small venture like HLC already boosted rural child enrolment from 5,000 to 11,000. Intensifying communication approaches is needed to sustain the delicate balance between commercial sustainability and affordability, and providing quality education to increase learning outcomes
 - While big ticket investments continue, providing equity investments to social enterprises with sound business models such as HLC, ADB helped bridge the risk between "angel investors" (HLC's friends, family and circle of early believers) and private equity, and test innovative practices like these before they are upscaled.