

# New ways to create partnerships and revenue opportunities

BY CRAIG HOBBS

The global economic recession has set the media industry back as broadcasters and others struggle with decreased ad sales and reduced budgets for content. But nothing inspires innovation in the marketplace like a financial downturn.

One result of economic turbulence has been an increase in the awareness of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and the opportunity it provides to develop competitive advantages. Cost-conscious consumers look for more responsible brands that are cognisant of the weakened economy's impact on sustainable development.

For media companies, relying on their "core competency" (advertising space, editorial and entertainment content) on which to base their CSR and contribute to social causes is not only easy, but also creates more impact on mass audiences. Media companies have the opportunity to deliver on their social responsibility through in-kind contribution of ad space to pro-social issues. They also have the opportunity to develop new forms of partnerships with globally marketed brands, advertising and media agencies, governments and international development agencies. These also provide revenue opportunities, no matter how marginal.

MTV International figured this out years ago with the launch of its annual "Staying Alive" campaign on HIV/AIDS. What started in 1997 with the creation of a public service ad (PSA) rapidly became a one-hour documentary, initially funded by the World Bank and UN AIDS. The campaign quickly grew into a music concert, additional documentaries, films, events online and mobile content with additional corporate sponsorship coming from global brands such as Levi's, The Body Shop, H&M, Rolls-Royce and Hard Rock Café International.

Today, Staying Alive exists as a self-sustaining foundation, which has provided MTV the ability to perpetuate its CSR and has led to its being seen among international development and corporate circles

as one of the more pro-social media companies reaching one of the more important target audiences — the youth.

The music channel has successfully repeated its model more than

once. In 2004, MTV Europe launched its EXIT campaign on human trafficking with initial funding by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). In 2008, the initiative received a US\$3-million grant from USAID for an extensive campaign focused on Asian countries which has included documentaries, PSAs, local tours and concerts, and website content. Not only has MTV benefited from reflecting its Asia-regional social responsibility to its viewing audiences, but it was also done through third-party funding. Of course, MTV contributes an equal, if not greater, proportion of in-kind ad and content space to EXIT as well. Nonetheless, pro-social campaigns and partnerships provide additional means for attracting revenue for content, filling space and demonstrating the broadcaster's own CSR, in addition to that of the sponsors.

The broadcaster also benefits from the reach that the EXIT campaign provides. Wherever local and national artists head off to in the remote towns and villages of Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia and elsewhere in bringing awareness of the human-trafficking issue and the EXIT campaign to rural, marginalised audiences, there too goes the MTV brand, thus helping to deliver the broadcaster's brand and products to audiences who have so far not been exposed to the channel through pay-TV or Internet. And there are still other benefits that MTV has been able to eek out of this pro-social campaign, such as in providing additional recorded material for use again on-air and online.

Do the same opportunities exist for national terrestrial broadcast companies? Absolutely. In fact, the first question from the development community is, how will the more local audiences — those most susceptible to health issues and suffering from poverty and who do not have access to pay-TV — be reached?

Traditional broadcasters can learn from the experience of these multi-sector/cross-platform social campaigns by replicating the model and interpreting it to apply on a national level. Use a pro-social media that matters to your specific audience. Engage audiences in local and national issues, and use the multiple technological platforms of your website, blogs, social media, mobile telephony and events to perpetuate not only the message, but also the broadcast brand. And in addition to international development agencies and global marketers working in the region, national and local broadcasters can look to in-county NGOs, national/representative offices of the international development agencies, and national companies and brands, including their

national telcos, print media, websites and others, as partners.

While MTV provides some of the best examples for public awareness and behaviour change campaigns, it is certainly not the only model. Discovery Networks Asia has had documentaries funded by UN agencies, which have benefited the channel both in generating content and in reflecting its CSR. This year, Discovery partnered with the UN to spread awareness of the International Year of Biodiversity to increase the understanding of the role biodiversity plays in sustaining life on Earth. Discovery utilises a wide range of company resources, including its education unit, international networks and special programming such as LIFE, Discovery Channel's co-production with the BBC.

Nokia partnered in 2008 with World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and IUCN World Conservation Union on an environmental initiative called connect2earth.org, which encouraged the use of mobile phones as an increasingly popular way to access the Internet and online communities. The connect2earth site was optimised for using mobile phones to create short films, capture photos and submit comments. While there wasn't a broadcast component to this campaign, it certainly provides fodder for one additional tie-in of social media and telecoms technology to pro-social broadcast initiatives. It also provides additional sources for corporate partnership, sponsorship and funding.

Private sector and corporate interests have traditionally focused on straight, profit-driven commercially oriented sales. But in a global economic downturn, and in markets such as Asia, Latin America and Africa, which are dominated by newly industrialised economies, a more sustainable approach to developing markets might be useful.

"Multi-sector partnerships" (the buzz phrase among the development banks, donor and multi-lateral institutions for more than a decade now) between public sectors (government and multilateral such as the UN), private sectors (global marketers and major corporations), and civil society (NGOs and the general population) are seen as the strongest, most effective approaches to sustainable development. There are both opportunities for and responsibilities of the media industries in achieving sustainable development.

The broadcast and media industries have the greatest ability to reach mass audiences, making them of great interest to potential donors for CSR campaigns. By the same right, the media and broadcast industries have a certain responsibility to participate with the development community on pro-social issues. But what's more, CSR partnerships are good business, which can provide at least partially funded content to play across multiple platforms. It also provides opportunities for partnering among ad, media and creative agencies, global marketers and international organisations and others in developing relationships for application in more traditional scenarios. It also provides opportunities for the development across multiple platforms.

While the practice of multi-sector partnering on pro-social media initiatives across multiple platforms is one that the Asian market specifically is maturing to now, it predates even the MTV examples of Staying Alive and EXIT.

The Advertising Council, commonly known as the Ad Council, is a US non-profit organisation that helps to produce PSA campaigns (about US\$18-million worth per year) and then distributes the content on behalf of various sponsors, including non-profit organisations and government agencies. In addition to being highly effective at achieving public awareness and behaviour change on issues such as car safety-belt usage through its "Crash Test Dummies" spots and environment through its "Crying Indian" campaign, it's proven to be a great networking platform between corporations, ad and creative agencies, production houses and media outlets.

As increasing public concern grows over issues such as climate change, access to safe water and pandemic health issues, media cannot really afford not to engage in CSR. As these issues impact local communities, the need to engage more local media interests will increase. National terrestrial broadcasters who are wise will look to engage the development community and the private sector sooner rather than later.

*Craig Hobbs is CEO of The Media Alliance, a Singapore-based non-profit organisation, newly formed through the involvement of a group of Asia-regional media industry executives and their companies.*



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## APB PANELLISTS



**Andrew Anderson**  
General Manager  
Group Broadcast  
Services  
Seven Network Limited



**Graham Stephens**  
Technology Consultant  
Digital Content  
Management &  
Distribution



**Yeo Chun Cheng**  
CIO & Director -  
Broadcast & Music  
Media Development  
Authority of Singapore