

Giving Business New Heart

A top businesswoman who escaped the corporate world to establish a charitable foundation, Jude Mannion now helps companies put new heart and soul into their operations.

by Vicki Jayne



One of the first things that strikes you about Jude Mannion is the sense of energy she emanates – she moves quickly, talks fast, even her hair looks irrepressible – plus she is absolutely passionate about her work.

It's an unusual job. She could be called a relationship broker, although she prefers to see herself as interpreter. What she does is find the common language between business and non-profit organisations (NFPs) that helps them build meaningful partnerships from which both parties benefit.

Forget traditional concepts of charity – this is all about putting new heart into New Zealand corporate bodies.

Through the Robin Hood Foundation she established two years ago, Mannion has been helping both profit and non-profit organisations break through the language and cultural barriers that tend to alienate one group from the other by digging back to the basics of what each really stands for.

"We run workshops – about nine a week – where we deconstruct businesses and deconstruct NFPs and find out what they have in common with each other. So it's a process of taking you out of the world, pulling apart your real reason for existence, then putting you back into the world. It's finding out 'why' you exist, not what you do."

So, for instance, you deconstruct a company like Elizabeth Arden and what it stands for is self-esteem in women, explains Mannion.

"The process usually involves thinking of a world before you existed and what difference you've made by being there. What came out of that exercise for Elizabeth Arden is that it exists to make women feel good about themselves."

Put it that way and suddenly you see the synergies between a cosmetics company and the work being done by an organisation like Rape Crisis. This enabled Elizabeth Arden to take on what most corporates would find a fairly tough issue, says Mannion. Working with Rape Crisis offshoot, Urban Goddess, the company funded a programme called Body Safe that is run through New Zealand schools.

“Businesses inevitably get approached by a lot of charities and feel bad about saying ‘no’ – because they can’t say ‘yes’ to them all. Once they know what it is they stand for, they can get some clarity and direction about who they support and why.”

“The outcome of that is young women growing up with a sound self-esteem and sound safety practices. That is where those two match,” says Mannion.

It’s also good for companies to know what they ‘don’t’ stand for. Elizabeth Arden, for instance, is not about animal welfare or funding medical research or any other of many worthy causes, says Mannion.

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Unless the matchmaking is strategic and authentic, there’s a risk the relationship is little more than a one-way, one-off affair and has more to do with the chairman or CEO’s whim than a genuine company-wide connection. That has been the more traditional approach, says Mannion.

“We call it write a cheque, kiss a cheek and run a mile because that is what happens. You hand over the cheque, have a photo taken then don’t see the charity for another year at which point you might think... ‘didn’t

get much out of that relationship’. Well, you didn’t invest much, either.

“We don’t allow that with our business partners. This has to be a real partnership – where you get to know each other, tell each other your problems, then together you put out solutions.”

She reckons the days of “chairman’s choice” where favoured charities are picked as if off a menu are disappearing fast.

“And they need to because it alienates staff when someone in a privileged position decides who to give money to and tells the rest of the company they should feel good about it – when they’re not consulted. Management teams need to sit around the table and collectively decide what the company stands for.”

There’s no shortage of options. Mannion can reel out a bundle of bad stats – how many New Zealanders have literacy problems, how many live below the poverty line, how many women get breast cancer...

“You can put these in front of business and say... which do you give a damn about... what really resonates? Deciding collectively gives an authentic and robust sense of shared ownership.”

It also lights people up to realise they do have the power to make a difference. Take them away from the desks for a couple of hours and remind them of the assets and power they can leverage – via company leaflets, call centres, sales people, ads – and there’s always a few whose eyes really light up, says Mannion.

“Suggest they can use this leverage to make a significant difference to a non-profit and its measurable social outcomes and any human being with a beating heart in their body is going to love it.”

It’s what she calls “third sector blood”

“In any developed economy, you’ve got business, government and non-profit – they’re the three financial sectors. So ‘third sector’ is used a lot overseas; the ‘charity’ word has almost disappeared.”

Mannion tapped into her own third sector blood whilst working as regional director for Elizabeth Arden across 14 countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

What she describes as an “accidental career” has included working with three large United States globals – she was general manager for 16 countries for Kellogg’s and managing director of Hallmark in Asia.

“I lived in Asia for five years and was travelling about 50 percent of the time. That’s when I first woke up to using your business leverage to make a difference socially.”

She spent quite a lot of time in Thailand and one day heard a radio interview about a woman who’d set up an agency which kept children safe who would otherwise be sold into prostitution – often as young as eight and for as little as US\$150.

“It took me ages to track down this agency, which was in the middle of nowhere on the Thai-Burmese (Myanmar) border. When I finally did, I asked them how on earth anybody could send them money, how did they fundraise, who did their marketing? And they said they didn’t have time for that. So I jumped on a plane and went there.”

It was, says Mannion, a pretty adventurous trip because of the fighting going on between drug lords in the troubled border region.

“So we were in a little hut by the river. There were bullets flying around and no Westerners were allowed in town at the time. I’m getting a bit off the track here – but it started me thinking. I flew back to Singapore and after a couple of dozen calls arranged an



uction with business partners in Asia and made \$10,000 in one night just by using favours. It was amazingly effortless."

That was nearly 10 years ago and she not only did more fundraising for that agency but also ended up doing global philanthropy for Elizabeth Arden.

"It made me realise that globals are no different from any New Zealand company in the sense that if people don't have fresh, enthusiastic, adventurous ideas about how you make social responsibility fun, they just don't bother doing it."

When she came back to New Zealand, she realised we were behind the game on business-NFP relationships.

"I talked to CEOs in the business sector who want to do the right thing but, while they're good at running business, they're not good at picking the right non-profit partners. I went to the non-profits and they said we don't speak the same language. So the Robin Hood Foundation (RHF) exists solely

to create partnerships – to bring a common language to the process."

Since then, Mannion's worked with a lot of high-profile companies in New Zealand. Amongst Robin Hood's merry partners are names such as Microsoft, Mainland, Coca-Cola, Kellogg's, INL, Restaurant Brands, IBM, Vodafone, Carter Holt Harvey, Nokia, Westpac and The Warehouse. In terms of wealth redistribution, she estimates the financial impact across, say, 15 to 20 partnerships is over one million dollars a year.

Financial benefit can go both ways. Recent research by ACNielsen (carried out gratis in partnership with the RHF) shows 64 percent of New Zealanders have switched brands to support a company that supports a good cause.

"It's important to have that research because it says to companies that not only will you run a healthier business with more satisfied employees but that your consumer does give a damn and will swap to a brand that stands for something."

There is a growing question around what companies are for – beyond a trading/profit-earning rationale. And, at a time when more people are looking for some spiritual meaning but finding fewer ways to express it, Mannion believes there is more pressure on business to "be the keeper of values".

Building a working relationship with non-profits provides an outlet for employees to legitimately make a difference socially in a way that their company supports. It also allows some of the passion, authenticity and credibility that characterises non-profits to rub off on the company's culture and image.

Developing longer-term relations between company and non-profits takes more effort but, says Mannion, it's also very rewarding.

"It's pretty easy to write a cheque. Being a real partner of a non-profit requires a completely different level of time, input and skill – but what comes back from the non-profit into business is always much greater." 207