

The 'S' in ESG...

Lessons learnt by a new boy...

Stephen Yorke

In 2021 some distinguished real estate figures, and me, started an entity to help the UK's most disadvantaged students and, specifically, to introduce them to the huge range of jobs available in real estate and real assets.

This was hardly an original idea, but we thought we would approach it in a slightly different way.

One year on and The Academy of Real Assets is established and active. Here are some of the things I have learnt along the way...

Numbers matter

It became clear very early on that many schools, particularly those in the most difficult areas, were not particularly responsive to one-off approaches from business. Teachers told me that they were too hard pressed to respond to every company that contacted them by email with some offer of help.

So, lesson one, to get the attention of teachers and students at the most hidden away schools the offer needs to be 'big' and the communication personal. Scale helps.

Initial contact with schools should not be via a generic email address or a third party provider/marketeer.

Numbers do not always matter

We started by asking asset-owning firms to become members of The Academy. Inevitably, if you are from a returns-focused world it is in your DNA to ask, "How do we/you measure the success of this initiative?"

In many CSR, or Social Impact reports, the main emphasis is often on *the number* of students engaged with.

After a while I realised that these bare numbers could be manipulated. If your main motivation is to make contact with lots of students then, quite simply, you would concentrate on those schools that already have existing active programmes of engagement with the commercial world. At a stroke you could demonstrate your programme was 'impacting' large numbers of students.

But, but, but... We all felt strongly that the very point of The Academy should be to help those students who are at the moment outside this sphere of regular contact with business. By definition these schools are hard to reach and very unlikely to respond to a round-robin email or social media push.

To get to these most hidden-away students you need patience, a little bit of ingenuity and imagination. If an

Academy initiative managed to encourage just one student from a school without a history of connections with the business world then, to my mind, this would be at least as big a 'social impact' as getting to a hundred students from a better-connected, better-resourced school.

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Funding the model

The philanthropic world is a competitive one, make no mistake. Once you realise that most charities have a funding model based on a few large donors it is no surprise that they are not going to fall over themselves to help you if they think you are after the same donor money. This classic funding model has arisen, I imagine, because most philanthropic entities are started by good people, often outside business, who have identified a need and want to raise the money to do that work as quickly as possible. Inevitably this tends to mean a narrow fiscal base and a vulnerable one when any donor disappears.

We thought we would try to do it differently in two distinct ways. First, The Academy would be run as a social enterprise business. Second, we felt there would be more financial stability with a wide fiscal base of members, each paying a relatively small annual amount. This was a risk, as it relied on being able to persuade lots of firms to join up front in what was, in effect, a social start-up.

In fact, we got to 55 members within a few months. We then concentrated on delivering the student programmes for this academic year.

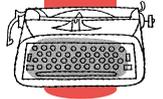
The Academy charges each member only £2,500 for the first year, rising to £3,500 pa where it will stick. For that £2,500/£3,500, the whole firm gets to join as a member, giving it a stake in The Academy and its social impact.

The Academy, as a social business, will need to deliver the impact, student engagement and philanthropic outputs that its members require if it is to thrive. As well as providing the platform and the opportunities, The Academy will also hold the hand of members as they volunteer.

The editorial board (remember those distinguished figures I mentioned in paragraph one) will oversee the ethics and direction of The Academy.

The big and little picture

Say you are a firm that has decided to make a difference with your 'S' strategy. What are your options?



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You could find a specialist 'S' marketing company and pay them for access to schools and students via big email blasts. This could cost between £10,000 and £50,000 pa.

You could pay charities for the same access (this is likely to cost between £5,000 and £60,000 pa depending on the scale of the programme) or you could settle for your own local initiatives.

But if you are ambitious to make a big/national impact, and you do not want to budget tens of thousands of pounds, it requires someone to put in the time and grunt. You need to get involved with youth programmes, community schemes, school engagement officers, small-scale youth centres right across the UK. You need to get onto the really deprived estates and ask the leaders there what you can do to help.

We have made a start on this with The Academy and have built relationships with those who are helping students in the most deprived areas of the UK. It means taking the time to find these community leaders, going to meet them, in rough, tough places, and then engaging with, often, small group of students whose attention they have.

Use your Imagination

Most students will have absolutely no idea what 'real estate' is and have even less idea what a job in it looks like. If you work for a tech firm or a media brand or a football club the students will be keener to hear what you have to say. If you work in a less-fashionable business, like ours, you need

to use your imagination to find ways to get in front of the students and open their eyes to the possibilities.

So, again, you need to ally yourself with groups that have already got the attention of the students and ask if you can come and speak to them or offer them opportunities for a work experience or site visit. There is no short cut to relationships with the people who are running lots of small, effective entities that already have the respect and attention of the students.

Stay very humble

Being part of The Academy has been one of the most rewarding things I have done in business. We have 55 of the biggest and best UK real estate companies behind us and we have, in our first year, completed a number of programmes (including the summer 2022 publication of a book of student essays that will go to 3,000 schools, the media and leading employers and universities). But next year we will have regular physical and virtual events up and down the UK where our members get to meet and help students from some of the most deprived backgrounds in the country.

Don't lose sight of what it's all about

A teacher at a south London state school, a 30-minute walk from the City, told me that many of his students have never seen the Thames.

Next year, among many other things, The Academy will put that right.

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