

CBI West Midlands, Coundon Court School and London Taxis.

A successful Coventry comprehensive school works with CBI West Midlands to add an innovative link with a local manufacturer to its already extensive programme of employer engagement. There are significant gains for both the employer and the school.

Coundon Court School is a Coventry local authority school with 1400 students aged 11 – 18. It is a technology specialist school, a training school and a leading edge school, judged “Good” at its last Ofsted inspection.

CBI West Midlands “Business in the Classroom”.

Coundon Court has a well-established programme of employer engagement events and projects. With that track record, the school was a natural choice to be part of CBI West Midlands’ “Business in the Classroom”. The programme has so far partnered twenty schools and businesses across the region, and further partnerships are in the process of being agreed. Of current partnerships, that between Coundon Court and LTI Vehicles, the Coventry firm which builds the iconic London Taxi, sold across the UK and worldwide, has been particularly successful.

The LTI/Coundon Court Link.

Once the link was established, two separate projects were developed between Coundon Court and LTI Vehicles. Both were focussed on marketing, led at LTI by UK & International Marketing Manager Maria Holmes. At Coundon Court, the two projects – the production of a marketing DVD, and a market-research exercise and presentation -- involved separate curriculum areas.

- ***The Marketing DVD.***

The DVD was envisaged, planned and produced in the school’s media department. It involved two groups of

students – a sixth form group who started the project off until they became too heavily involved in examinations, and then a Year 10 group which took the task forward to completion.

The completed DVD, which uses models recruited by the students, emphasises the accessibility of the purpose-built taxi for everyone. It is of the highest professional standard, down to the background music which was composed and performed by a student.

- ***The market research project.***

Devised and run by twelve A Level Applied Business students, this project was developed in the Information Technology and Business Faculty. Much of the school's employer engagement work stems from this area, which is headed by Faculty Leader Helen Marsay.

The project was based on a questionnaire, developed in class by the students, which explored public perceptions and expectations of using taxis. The group overcame a number of practical challenges around finding suitable questionnaire respondents, but eventually gathered a remarkable 300 responses. The students then made a presentation to senior people at LTI – in itself a daunting challenge to which they rose extremely well.

The students were stretched by both of these tasks, and wondered if the marketing survey, particularly, would be taken seriously.

In fact, they had no cause to worry. LTI regards the students' work as genuinely helpful to its marketing programme, and Faculty Head Helen Marsay says,

“I rather naively thought the LTI people might go easy on them, but in fact they questioned them as closely as they would have done a research company. Two or three of the students were very strong in answering the questions. “

Both projects were directly related to the students' courses, feeding straight into coursework. Of the Market Research project, Helen Marsay says, “

“I contacted the exam board with brief details of the project before we began it and they were particularly pleased to see the real life context being used.”

Both tasks also involved literacy, numeracy and ICT, as well as developing ‘soft’ social and employability skills. Helen Marsay feared at one point that the expectations placed on the students might be too high. She needn’t have worried.

“I wondered if it made the task too hard. But when I asked if it was worth the effort, I got an emphatic ‘yes’.”

In fact, the pressure was highly motivating for the students. One commented, “Working for a company made you feel professional. You wanted it to be the best you could as you knew it would be used by proper people.”

Two students were so taken with the experience that they are considering a career in marketing. One, in fact, was approached by an LTI manager and offered helpful advice and materials.

For their part, LTI were delighted with both projects, which address company needs in entirely professional style. and there were warm complimentary remarks and letters to the school. Summing up from the most senior level, John Russell, CEO of LTI’s parent company, Manganese Bronze Holdings said,

“We have been delighted with the quality of the output from the projects we have commissioned with Coundon Court and the market research study and the promotional DVD will make a significant contribution to our business in the coming months. The enthusiasm, skill and commitment of the students have been outstanding and their teachers and families should be very proud.”

Coundon Court’s Head Teacher, Debbie Morrison OBE, believes that employer engagement, as well as carrying tangible benefits for social and employability skills – “It’s about developing the whole individual” -- also enables students to look ahead into the world they’re about to enter.

“So often they can’t see beyond where they are now – they have no real picture of that. Working with businesses helps them to have a realistic vision of their own future. “

The view from LTI.

LTI Vehicles UK & International Marketing Manager Maria Holmes ascribes the success of the project to a number of factors the chief among them being careful preparation.

“We started by asking ourselves what straightforward projects we had outstanding that we would normally be paying agencies to do. That’s the advice I’d give to companies – to prepare and think it through, think wisely. Don’t rush into it.”

As a result, what came back exceeded expectations. Of the presentation by the marketing group, she says,

“It was brilliant. Most teams in business have few people who feel comfortable presenting and who also do it well. The school team all spoke, sharing it between them.”

Maria compared the students’ experience with her own school-based work experience.

“We did something in a bank or a shoe shop, not a real life project working with Managers and Directors like this one. If I’d had their kind of experience my life and career path might have been different.”

She went to pay the Coundon Court team a considerable compliment.

“I did my Chartered Institute of Marketing qualification where very early on you learn how to produce a good report. They had all of that -- they were almost at that stage already.”

Next year’s LTI/Coundon Court project is already at the planning stage.

“We’re sitting down and brainstorming our next projects for Coundon Court. Faced with their new projects the students will often find an idea that’s staring you in the face.”

She confirms that the project filled genuine needs – “Market research is always important, and the DVD may be found on our website and published on YouTube as viral marketing.”

“Business in the Classroom” – the background.

A project of West Midlands CBI, “Business in the Classroom” was started in September 2008 with the aim of promoting sustainable partnerships between businesses and schools. Regional CBI Chairman Geoff Percy, whose enthusiasm for the project is clear, points to two sets of aims for the project. One is to do with employability skills, developed, he says --

“...around real life projects which are not box ticking, and will add value to CBI members, and are also in line with the curriculum.”

The second concern is for supporting STEM skills (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) and so addressing the West Midlands ‘skills gap’ – “The gap is closing but we have a long way to go yet.”

Adding structure and guidance to the “Business in the Classroom” programme is the

“Seven Point Framework of Employability Competencies”,

All of these were clearly present in both of the Coundon Court/LTI projects. They are

- Self management
- Teamworking
- Business & Customer awareness
- Problem Solving
- Communication & Literacy
- Application of numeracy
- Application of information technology.

“We’re proud of what’s been put together,” says Geoff Percy. “Our objective is to set a benchmark for school/employer engagement.”