

Mansfield YMCA

Main theme: Mission related training / changing perceptions of stakeholders

Mansfield YMCA is an autonomous local branch of the worldwide YMCA organisation. They support a wide range of vulnerable and hard to reach groups across the Mansfield and Ashfield area. In 2007 they opened a café called 'Y59' which provides training opportunities for homeless young people who are being supported by the YMCA. After working in the café many of the young people have subsequently found employment and the café has changed the local community's perceptions of the young people who work there. Café manager Karla Cook explains how the café has developed over the last three years...

"The café was born out of a realisation that a lot of mainstream programmes to support vulnerable young people don't actually meet their needs. Most of those programmes need the people to be retained for three to five months but the young people involved aren't used to getting up every day to go to a college or training programme. Our programme was designed so that people can drop in at any time between 9am and 2pm when the café is open and develop their skills. This makes our programme more inclusive, which is an important part of being a resident at the YMCA hostel.

We opened the café in September 2007 to serve the local community but also to reach all the businesses around us. We are located in the Portman ward of Mansfield and we are surrounded by recruitment agencies, solicitors and the Job Centre Plus is just around the corner. We do a lot of external catering and drop-offs of sandwiches but we also benefit from a lot of passing trade.

The café was funded through the Big Lottery and if you compare the outcomes we have achieved with the ones wrote in our grant

application then you can see we have really excelled. We set out to work with 45 young people over the course of three years and we have already supported more than 75. we didn't expect that the young people would find jobs as a result of being on the programme but nine of them have already found employment. This might not sound like much but this is not a formal training programme; it is about young people volunteering and giving their time to enhance their skills."

Although the café has been a success it has also faced some challenges...

"Our goal was to make the café financially self-sustaining but unfortunately because of the recession we have seen a dip in our takings. However we can see great potential in the outside catering so we are constantly putting proposals together to try and make it sustainable that way. In the long-term we hope that the café will be entirely self-financing.

Also while being with the YMCA is great because it is a recognised brand, being right next to the hostel has been an issue as there are some local residents that misbehave. Anybody out on the street causing trouble is always thought to be from the YMCA hostel and that has also affected our takings. The association with the YMCA and the good work they do has been amazing, but being right next to the hostel probably wasn't the best location for the project."

Karla explains that as well as improving their skills the café has helped to change customer's perceptions of the young people who volunteer there...

"One thing we did find really interesting at the start was that people initially refused to have their food served by homeless people.



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This was frustrating because anyone who works with us has to make sure they are washed, in clean clothes and well turned out like anyone would be in a professional catering business. We scored 4 out of 5 in the environmental health check, which is the highest score you can achieve as a training organisation. We have excellent standards but to really change perceptions we had to go into the wider community and start talking to people.

We went to the local Connexions centre with two of our learners who are homeless young people and the Connexions advisors asked; "What's it like working next to the YMCA hostel where there are homeless people?" They were surprised when we told them our learners were homeless because they were well presented. There is a big stigma out there and that is something we have to chip away at.

Though the Future Jobs Fund we have two employees who are engaging in a continual process of marketing, talking to other partner agencies and business promoting what we do and getting feedback. It has taken a long time but I think people can see the benefits the project has had for the young people."

Key lessons:

- Using vulnerable and hard to reach service users in trading activities can have a powerful social impact, but you need to make sure you engage them in a way that will meet their needs and is achievable
- Being part of a professional organisation can change local perceptions of marginalised people

Legal structure: Charity
Main activity: Catering services
Number of employees: 4
Location: Mansfield and Ashfield,
Nottinghamshire
Date formed: September 2007

Date written: March 2010

Website:
www.nottsymca.com

This case study is one of a series produced by the Capacity Builders funded 'Stepping Up To Enterprise' project in the East Midlands.

The case studies tell the stories of voluntary or community organisations and how they moved to developing trading. The case studies are available on the website www.oneeastmidlands.org.uk/sute.