

Upper Hunter Shire Council – Excellence in Communication Submission 2018

‘We LIVE Here’

1. Overall Communication Strategy

In September 2018 Upper Hunter Shire Council became eligible for the Drought Communities Programme due to chronic conditions in the Shire. Council staff members had been involved in community consultation, specifically through the Rural Support Service Network – a large group of organisations who were working frontline in the drought, it was imperative that this funding be utilised in a way that would have an impact on the delivery of drought assistance.

Council’s first response was to employ a ‘Drought Relief Coordinator’ who would work extensively with these groups to assist in the planning and delivery of drought relief. The feedback from frontline workers was that farmers were resistant to ‘charities’ and there was a lack of cohesion between gifts and giving. Goods were arriving from capital cities that were not in high demand and being presented to people who did not need them (example, cat food for people with no cats). The traditional methods of assistance including vouchers were based on assessment of needs which in itself eroded the self esteem of the farming community, many of whom felt like failures on the land. The suicide rates were climbing. We needed a method of delivering charity that did not feel like charity. We needed a method of purchasing goods locally to ensure that the money stayed in the Shire.

The ‘We LIVE Here’ campaign involved all community members and businesses through events (sponsorship), radio advertising and an emotive visual campaign (card design, product development) that stimulated interest and support.

2. Strategy Development

Council took a product that was already in use – buy local gift cards and developed this basic philosophy into a campaign that would stimulate our local economy whilst helping deliver assistance to our farmers. We worked with a small local business operating out of Narrabri, NSW <https://www.whyleavetown.com/>

Our strategy was to build on this basic format with a product that would become a staple in every Shire resident’s wallet, not just those that required drought support. This would reduce any sense of shame or embarrassment that our most resilient residents – our farmers might feel in having a card. Time was of the essence as the Christmas period approached, and this was an excellent opportunity to present the campaign to our community for maximum effect.

The image of a dirt road (within our Shire) with approaching rain clouds was chosen as it depicted ‘home’ and a sense of optimism. We knew early in our strategy that we wanted the word ‘LIVE’ in the product (Local Investment Enterprise), as a subconscious message to our farmers doing it tough. The visual product is emotive, and inspires a sense of community pride. With the product branding of ‘We LIVE Here’ we then used these images to promote businesses that accepted the card.

One of our projects major achievements was in securing support from local mining companies. To do this we needed to partner with Muswellbrook Shire Council (also drought

declared, and a major centre for mining employment for Upper Hunter Shire residents). With Christmas approaching our Project team encouraged local companies to purchase ‘We LIVE Here’ investment cards for their staff Christmas gifts, instead of the usual hardware or liquor merchants (neither store in either Shire). In addition, both Muswellbrook and Upper Hunter Shire Council gifted the cards to staff. The impact of this was twofold. Funds placed on the cards were guaranteed to be invested between our two Shires, and with the cards in wide circulation through the Shire(s) there was no stigma attached to the product as a charitable aid.

With the cards now available, charitable organisations were able to ‘load’ funds and provide to our farming communities. There would be autonomy in how they chose to spend the funds (greater self worth) and monies were reinvested locally, supporting business growth and employment particularly over the Christmas period.

3. Budget

Our initial proposal was to fund the production and promotion of ‘We LIVE Here’ through the Drought Communities Program, however the Federal Government revised their eligibility criteria for funding and this excluded the costs of card production. To ensure the take up of the cards, Upper Hunter Shire Council and Muswellbrook Shire Council chose to share the costs of production (\$3.00 per card). The remainder of the budget was on marketing material and strategies including –

Annual program fee (Why Leave Town)	1205.00
Business (window) stickers	1313.00
Card Production	8014.00
Radio advertising	4549.00
Event launch	505.00
Cash register stickers	110.00
Shopping Totes	1534.00
Instagram Photo Board	300.00
We LIVE Here Banners	792.00
TOTAL	\$ 18322.00

4. Distribution Methods

Distribution methods were varied as were our target groups. For the initiative to be successful we needed local business to sign up as ‘participants’ of the promotion, local residents to load up and utilise the cards and for charities to move away from their traditional methods of allocating aid to a program they were not familiar with. To achieve this we utilised:

- Community engagement (networking with charities and community groups)
- Product launches (official events with guest speakers including ‘Why Leave Town’)
- Products (stickers and totes for local businesses to promote the product)
- Direct promotion (door to door with local businesses)
- Radio advertising (utilising our popular breakfast show with high ratings)
- Strong visuals (Instagram photo boards at all events)
- Facebook (Upper Hunter Shire Council’s shared community pages)
- Media Releases (utilising local press)

In addition we sought the assistance of businesses who were happy to provide ‘load and go’ services for individuals to purchase the cards. The cards were available through our local Council office, Visitor Information Centres and in addition local businesses volunteered this service including a Pharmacist, Jeweller, Vet and Stock and Station Agent.

5. Communication of Message

Our powerful visual image and ‘We LIVE Here’ message was a strong brand that was utilised in all marketing materials to ensure recognition of the product. ‘We LIVE Here’ stickers were designed for businesses to place on their windows and doors to advertise the fact that they would accept the investment card. We then introduced smaller (business card stickers) with the full colour image on them for businesses to place on their cash registers to ensure visual reminders when paying for products that the card could be utilised. Shopping tote’s were distributed freely among participating businesses to increase recognition of the brand.

It was an important strategy to market the investment card as a ‘shop local’ initiative rather than a charitable aid, even though this was a critical factor. This was to ensure that the card would have zero stigma attached to it if given by charities to assist struggling farmers.

Additional promotional activities were then implemented to strike home the ‘shop local’ message with guest speakers from ‘Why Leave Town’ invited to showcase the benefits of the ‘shop local’ culture and how to best implement the program utilising sales strategies.

6. Results

The ‘We LIVE Here’ investment initiative has achieved outstanding results, as a product to assist drought stricken farmers, local businesses and community pride. The multi-faceted approach towards stakeholders, and support networks and resources to support the implementation of the product worked with great effect. The total funds loaded on the ‘We LIVE Here’ cards to be spent in Muswellbrook and Upper Hunter Shire’s is currently in excess \$130,000 – money which must be spent locally to support our local business and ensure economic stimulation and growth. There is a pride within the community for the product, with a sense of connection taking place when making a transaction.

That the card continues to grow in uptake is a strong indicator of its success with its flexibility increasing. Most recently the local RSL Club began loading cards for inclusion in their raffles – a clever move, as it is possible that the winner of that card will then stay for dinner and reinvest in the local economy.

Lastly, Why Leave Town, who have implemented similar programs across Australia over the past twelve (12) years, have recognised ‘We LIVE Here’ as their most successful uptake of a buy local program.

The ‘We LIVE Here’ initiative continues to have strong support from business, charities and the local community with a forward plan for its continued growth and recognition.

7. Evaluation

Evaluation has taken place through ongoing community and business consultation. Regular business events and promotion through our local Chamber of Commerce continue to receive positive feedback and support for the initiative.

The company Why Leave Town are able to provide direct figures for the loading of cards and subsequent expenditure, providing us with real time figures to measure effectiveness of the program. As our initiative is their most successful in over twelve (12) years we believe this to be a strong indicator of its success. In addition we regularly liaise with local charities who are still purchasing and distributing the investment cards, and businesses operating as 'load and go' stores.

Investment in promotional aids such as banners and the Instagram booth have been utilised many times and can continue to do so, ensuring ongoing promotion and support for the brand. We recognise that the utilisation of funds through the Drought Communities Program were a key factor in being able to promote the initiative, and were fortunate enough to create a partnership with Muswellbrook Shire Council to share the costs of card production not covered by the funding.

In addition we received feedback from businesses who participated in our events through Survey Monkey, with positive results.

With \$136,000+ invested into our local communities we believe this has been an outstanding success, worthy of recognition.

8. Unique Features

In times of drought there are many factors and barriers to be addressed, and one of the most difficult is providing aid to our most resilient and proud workers, our farmers. What grew as an initiative to remove that stigma was a program that stimulated our local economy, created a sense of community and local pride. It is our experience that locals feel proud of having a 'We LIVE Here' card and using it for local purchases. In addition to removing the sense of failure that one might have, approaching a charity and asking for aid for a particular reason (pay the electricity, buy new shoes) the 'We LIVE Here' card also provided autonomy to purchase what was needed, with the card accepted at almost every local business (including Doctors, Pharmacists, supermarkets, feed stores, restaurants and café's, boutiques. The only businesses that were not able to utilise 'We LIVE Here' were those without EFTPOS machines, and they were very few. We believe the visual marketing of 'We LIVE Here' was a powerful component of its success.

Our secondary unique feature was the ability to tap into the local mining industry, an asset unique to our Shire. By encouraging the uptake of 'We LIVE Here' investment cards in preference to major merchant gift cards we kept expenditure local and also ensured the wide distribution of the cards amongst our business community (no stigma). Upper Hunter Shire Council are extremely proud of our 'We LIVE Here' investment initiative.

