

LIFE SAVIOUR IN A CRATE

ColaLife is one man's life-saving idea that has tapped the immense potential of social networking sites to engage a multi-national corporate institution to save children's lives in third-world countries...

In May 2009 there appeared a news in the pages of *The Guardian* that there was good news for ColaLife, since the beverage giant Coca-Cola had agreed to team up with it for its crusade to help the afflicted by distributing medicines in Coca-Cola crates throughout rural Africa. The news may be a small one, but for Simon Perry, an entrepreneur and social activist of over two decades, this was a dream come true. The founder of the voluntary movement finally had succeeded in persuading Coca-Cola to try his innovative idea of reaching out medicines and health messages to vulnerable communities via the company's own distribution network.

The origin of ColaLife dates back to 1988 when Perry, working as a development worker on the British Aid Programme in North-East Zambia had discovered a shocking fact: one in every five children under the age of five died in the remote areas of Africa due to as simple causes as dehydration. The reason: shortage of medicines. And interestingly, commercial soft drinks were readily available in those remote parts of Africa, and it was this realisation that Perry decided to marry the both for a social cause. And now with Coca-Cola agreeing to his idea was a significant step to meet the shortages of medicine for easily-preventable illnesses which had been accounting for 75 per cent of premature deaths in Africa. And the contraption that was agreed between the two were air-tight, insect-proof 'AidPods' which would fit around the necks of the bottles being shipped, and would carry rehydration salts, malaria tablets, and other simple medicines that could make a huge impact on people's lives. It was Coca-Cola to the Zambian rescue.

But what led to the birth of an idea twenty years earlier, it was with the announcement in 2008 only, spurred on by the prime minister



Photo Courtesy: www.colalife.org

Gordon Brown's Business Call to Action, that Simon Perry started all over again. The difference is that this time was the support of social media which made the idea turn into a reality very fast. With more than 8,800 Facebook members, a strong and involved Twitter following and features on more than 300 different blogs from across the world, Simon Perry's idea was there. His request always has been simple: dedicate one compartment in every 10 crates as 'the life saving' compartment which would carry rehydration salts. This simple request has been slightly modified according to ColaLife's current objectives, wherein a 'ColaLife Pod' is now being incorporated in the life-saving crates and the contents will not be restricted to ORS but will be determined by local health professionals.

ColaLife's ultimate goal is to reduce child and maternal mortality in developing countries; to increase

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availability of condoms and awareness regarding HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other diseases; to reduce the prevalence of HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other diseases. According to the ColaLife website, the objectives that they need to achieve in order to reach their goal are: to engage Coca-Cola for using their

distribution networks in developing countries to distribute 'social product' to help engage international NGOs to partner with Coca-Cola on this initiative; to help the international NGOs in enlisting the support of local NGOs and health institutions; publish research reports and gather opinion in this area, and ensure that the group on social networking sites and its supporters are well-informed to establish a core group of workers to lead on this campaign and monitor the progress of the campaign.

ColaLife workers have already completed extensive ground research in remote African areas, in order to understand the key needs of local distributors and their views on how they could be key partners of Coca-Cola in the ColaLife campaign. Tanzania had been chosen as a research and pilot market and the campaign has entered into partnership with the Corporate Social Responsibility Initiative at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard and a partnership with International Finance Corporation in order to add focus and structure to the research process.

The key takeaway from the ColaLife campaign is the emergence of social online networking medium as a life-saving vehicle. Simon Perry, a one-man army, who - aided with the immense power of social networking groups - has managed to catch the attention of a giant company like Coca-Cola. Though the current number of ColaLife supporters on Facebook group appears dwarfed by the numbers of Coca-Cola consumers around the world, it is a testament to the mammoth proportion of this campaign of this nature can finally take. And what is most heartening is that the concept is highly replicable and can be used for various charitable causes across the world. But it is up to Simon Perry to take the first step! Are other Simon Perry's listeners