

# Employer Recognition Programme – Building the Strategic Alliance

Heather Clark

New Zealand Fire Service, P O Box 68-444, Newton, Auckland, New Zealand,  
[heather.clark@fire.org.nz](mailto:heather.clark@fire.org.nz)

## Abstract

Volunteer fire brigades throughout NZ and Australia are dependent on the goodwill and support of employers, with development of these strategic partnerships one of the key success factors in any emergency service. Without their support and commitment to their people and community we would not be able to function at the high level we currently do.

The NZFS's annual All Personnel Survey identified employer recognition as an area where improvements could be made in these strategic relationships. This was further validated by exit surveys and feedback from our partnership conferences. Using this feedback it became apparent a large number of volunteers were actively voicing the sentiment their employers gained little recognition for their contribution to the Fire Service. This support can come at a commercial if not personal cost, so the ability to recognize this contribution in a more formal approach is critical to the ongoing viability of our brigades.

We have developed an Employer Recognition Programme pilot to address these concerns. This programme incorporates a number of components utilizing both formal and tangible resources and is being piloted across 9 brigades throughout New Zealand. Some of these brigades have a large percentage of self employed individuals through to the other extreme where we have 9 members from one brigade employed by a single corporation over two sites. Components of the recognition programme include a NZFS sponsored newspaper advertisement and recognition evening; presentation of a certificate, lapel badge and window decal as well as a fire truck decal with the names of the participating employers.

Feedback at this early stage from our latest All Personnel Survey indicates an increase in the positive responses from the pilot brigades even prior to it's completion. A post pilot survey will further validate these results.

This is the story of the programme, its journey and impact.

## History

Within the New Zealand Fire Service we conduct annual All Personnel Surveys to ascertain attitudes and issues within the Fire Service. When this information is laid alongside other data coming from our annual partnership conferences with the United Fire Brigades Association it was apparent that volunteers did not have a sense that the Fire Service provided any specific or meaningful recognition for the employers of volunteers. This is further supported by ongoing data gathered from our 6 monthly exit surveys.

Fire Service volunteers never operate in isolation and without the support of employers many of the services we provide would not be able to occur. It is this strategic partnership that forms the cornerstone of our recognition programme and is very much based on mutual benefit and contribution. Within this context we are very clear that employers come in many different permutations, from the self employed, the small business owner and on through to the large multinational corporations. A recent study completed by Auckland's University of Technology (AUT) found that 61% of New Zealand's large corporates' are seeking "long term sustainability and initiatives that provide long term benefits to business as well as the community". Bearing this in mind the employer recognition programme has a clear

alignment to this approach and highlights the need to further develop these initiatives. As an organisation that is receptive to changing environmental and social factors and having the ability to do so head on is key to any organisations success.

A working party of individuals from throughout the Fire Service and the United Fire Brigades Association put their thinking caps on and the Employer Recognition Programme was born.

## **Branding**

The first step in the programme was to develop a 'brand'. For this to be meaningful it needed to reflect the Fire Service crest to impart the commitment for the programme and to establish public recognition and acceptance. The Fire Service crest is one of those easily recognisable symbols that most people can identify with-out too much effort, so the importance of its inclusion was paramount. For many organisations the 'brand' is their most important asset they own, and often carries intrinsic values such as trust and reliability both of which are hugely valuable. Within the New Zealand context and I am sure this is replicated here in Australia, firefighters and the NZFS are considered to be a 'superbrand' which is reinforced by annual surveys conducted by BRC.

Needless to say there were some difficulties around this approach as the ability to amend or meddle with a registered crest can meet with opposition from the keepers of such things. However after some perseverance we managed to convince the powers that be of the importance of this approach and to overcome the initial obstacles to the thinking around this. The brand is used in all material relating to this programme and as I will touch on further in this presentation is available for employers usage.

## **Pilot Programme**

To ensure the programme was going to meet our expected outcomes we undertook a pilot programme using 9 brigades of varying sizes and locations throughout New Zealand. Some of these brigades had a large percentage of self employed individuals through to one brigade that had 9 individuals employed by one corporation over two local plants. What we found quite interesting was that even the talk generated about the introduction of this programme was sufficient to start positive feedback about employer recognition.

## **Programme Elements**

Critical to the success of this programme has been the need to keep the process as simple as possible. If it was too complex and placed too much of an emphasis on the Chief or management team to implement or facilitate it wasn't going to be as successful as it otherwise could have been.

As you will be aware behind the scenes work is often the most important feature of any programme and as such one of the important components is the database. Participating brigades registers for the process identifying who the employers are and which volunteers are employed by them. This data is verified using our main HR database and is used to revalidate the brigades information on an annual basis to ensure this is an ongoing and evolving process, and not just a one off approach.

The key components from the employers perspective is seeing their name on the side of the Fire Truck, where they are identified as a supporter of their local brigade and also in their local newspaper where once again their support is acknowledged along with the appreciation the Fire Service has of this. Both of these approaches are paid for by the NZFS.

An annual employer recognition social event is held at the brigade and to date this has taken a number of different approaches; from the formal sit down meal, to the casual wild food barbecue, through to a hands on demonstration of motor vehicle extrications where employers are able to try their hand with some of the tools to cut up a vehicle to give them a greater understanding of the skills and techniques their employees are developing whilst members of the brigade. In addition to the employers, local dignitaries such as the Mayor or Member of Parliament have been included which re-emphasizes the bigger impact that volunteers and their supportive employers have in their communities and these events are often reported on by local media. Each of these events is a direct reflection of their brigade and in all cases has been extremely well received and appreciated. As part of the evening employers receive a folder, enclosing a framed signed certificate, window decal (with instructions to ensure correct placement) and a lapel badge. A contribution of funding to this event is made by the Fire Service.

A draft speech is provided as part of the programme package should the CFO choose to use it when making the presentation to employers. This ensures a consistent message is provided about the process at any social function recognizing employers of volunteers and reflects the importance of their ongoing support to the NZ Fire Service and their local community.

Subsequent to this evening a letter is sent to the employer from the Chief Executive /National Commander and a copy of the brochure. This brochure reiterates the offer of access to the 'brand' for use on their stationery, promotional and sponsorship materials, website and email addresses.

### **Current Situation**

The pilot programme has now been completed and feedback from the brigades and employers has been gathered. Without exception all of this has been more than favorable. Our latest All Personnel Survey which was undertaken prior to the conclusion of the pilot identified some very positive trends even at that early stage. The research company who undertakes the survey tagged the nine pilot brigades to monitor any movement in attitudes related to employer recognition. These brigades recorded a 42% positive response to the recognition from the Fire Service to their employers, as against 30% recorded by all others. Even allowing for an acceptable margin of error this 12% increase is most reassuring and we hope to grow this response even further.

Based on these results and supporting questionnaires gathered from the brigades and employers, the NZ Fire Service Commission has agreed to roll this programme out to a further 100 brigades. This staged roll out allows us to continue to evaluate and monitor the success of this programme whilst identifying potential areas for improvement. When considering how best to select the 100 brigades to participate in the next stage it was decided the most appropriate model was to base the allocation on the number of brigades in the region as a percentage. Regions were encouraged to consider brigades who had a high component of employers within the community actively supporting them and where volunteers are not having to travel outside their community to work.

The latest *Consumer who cares* report compiled by Nick Jones & Associates from Nielsen Media Research showed amongst other things that 58% of people bought a product or service because the company supported a worthy cause in the last six months, compared with 53% overall, and 48.7% of them bought a product or service for the company's support of a worthy cause, even if it cost more, compared to 41.7% overall.

By factoring in this philanthropic approach which is more commonly being adopted by consumers and organisations it provides us with the opportunity to develop strategic partnerships based on mutually beneficial outcomes. Providing employers with the opportunity to communicate their support for the community in tangible and easily recognisable ways builds on the strength of these relationships and hopefully will encourage further uptake of employer volunteering partnerships.

### **Where to from here?**

To foster this approach our next step in the programme is to develop a handbook for employers which outlines the benefits of socially responsible approaches to community relationships. This handbook "The Fire Service is your Business" builds on the work by leaders in this field and also on our own experiences to date. If we are able to tap into some of the larger corporations and business networks and actively encourage and sell the benefits of this to all parties i.e. their employees and the community it is hoped that some of our day time manning issues may be eased.

At the conclusion of the current staged rollout we hope to be able to offer the programme to all brigades nationally. We are thankful for the support from the NZ Fire Service commissions commitment to the process which has been invaluable particularly when it has come to financing the programme.

### **Conclusion**

This has been an exciting journey, not without its highs and lows, but one that I believe will provide a cornerstone for future initiatives within our communities. I look forward to continually developing and extending the programme and fostering new relationships to support this. The interest to date being shown by external parties is heartening and I believe this initiative will provide the impetus for other organisations to explore similar approaches that we can all benefit from.

In the words of Alfred Sheinwold "Learn all you can from the mistakes of others. You won't have time to make them all yourself".