



Egan fostering a healthy appetite for success

Redbranch aims to promote healthy eating and living among Irish schoolchildren, writes

Alex Meehan

With a prestigious award for social entrepreneurialism under his belt and growing support for his company's goals, David Egan, chief executive of Redbranch, is bullish about the future.

"To take us forward, we need more of the kind of business we've already got and more partners to work with. That's our goal for growing the company in the next year, and we're already moving that way," said Egan.

Redbranch is a health and lifestyle consultancy which specialises in fostering healthy eating habits in children. The company works with schools, parents and commercial food manufacturers to promote lifelong healthy eating and exercise habits among children; resources and templates developed by it are now used in 30 schools across Ireland.

Egan established Redbranch in 2004 as a vehicle to take his existing part-time efforts to promote health to kids to a more serious level. An exercise physiologist by profession, he was working with the Irish Olympic team when he was asked to give a talk at the school his children attended.

"I found the experience quite shocking. I talked to parents and children, and had a Damascene conversion. I hadn't realised how bad the situation was," he said.

"I started a voluntary effort with some colleagues from the University of Limerick and we worked with some schools in offering advice on things like diet and exercise. After about a year of doing that informally, we decided to put some shape

on our activities and we formed a company."

Egan conceded that, in the early stages, he approached the running of Redbranch with some naivety. "I came from academia, and I thought what we were doing was so valuable that people would beat our door down to do business with us.

"That didn't happen, and instead we found that the state agencies were a bit disinterested and that we needed to be more innovative," he said.

"It became obvious that we'd have to widen our remit to work with food companies, and that's when the company started to take off for us. We began to look at the issue in a more holistic, business-like way, and we also stopped waiting for grants to fund us and began generating our own revenue streams."

Today, Redbranch works with a number of different stakeholders – parents, children and schools – and Egan's achievements were recently recognised when he was presented with the Ashoka-Social Entrepreneurs Ireland (SEI) Fellowship.

Ashoka is an international organisation which promotes positive social change by investing in social entrepreneurs with innovative solutions that are both sustainable and replicable.

With many companies struggling to keep their heads above water in the midst of a recession, non-standard outfits like Redbranch have their work cut out promoting ideas such as building social capital. "It's challenging, but I think it highlights some of the benefits of social entrepreneurial busi-

nesses," said Egan.

"For example, the sector we're in is an area which is traditionally handled by the state, but when you look at what a social entrepreneur can do in terms of creating social capital, we can usually get far more bang for our buck than a state agency could."

Egan said the advantage his company had over state bodies, with the same or similar stated aims, was its corporate culture and independence. "It is about being able to apply some of the drive and hunger that is traditionally associated with the private sector to the motivations, goals and aspirations of the public sector," he said.

"It isn't that people working in the public sector aren't motivated – they do their jobs to the best of their abilities – but rather it's that there is a different culture and feel to how private sector business is conducted.

"As an independent businessperson, I need to perform in order to take home a wage cheque. If I want my business to succeed and to generate social capital, then I have to perform," he said.

"Because of this, we're constantly looking for innovative ways to perform and ways to bring in partners to further our aims. We're thinking laterally and creatively all the time about how to solve the problem and improve our business."

Egan said Redbranch aimed to empower schools, parents and children by giving them a deep understanding of the issues surrounding children's health. "The state's health promotion message is usually very top down in focus, but we also try to change environments for

people," said Egan.

"In schools, for example, it's all very well to go on about making healthy lifestyle choices, but if the only food kids can access at school is junk food, then you're wasting your time. We work as honest brokers between schools, kids and the food industry, so that kids can have access to healthy, nutritious, tasty and good-value food in school.

"It is a very effective way to improve eating habits and, of course, it's also good for the commercial companies involved."

While Redbranch must pay its own way and needs to generate an income, the company's goal is to produce social capital.

"The traditional entrepreneur is in business to create a healthy bottom line and a profit, and while we need to be financially self-sufficient, the prime aim of our business is to produce social capital and to work with parents, children and schools to help children make healthier lifestyle choices. We go about that in a business-like way," said Egan.

"As a nation, we are in major trouble when it comes to chronic, degenerative illnesses. Many of us drop dead from heart disease, stroke and cancer, all of which are related to lifestyle choices.

"When we look in the schools, we see lots of children who eat very little fruit and vegetables, eat a lot of junk food, take very little exercise, watch a lot of TV – those children are being lined up for a lifetime of ill health."

According to the Health Behaviour in Schools study con-

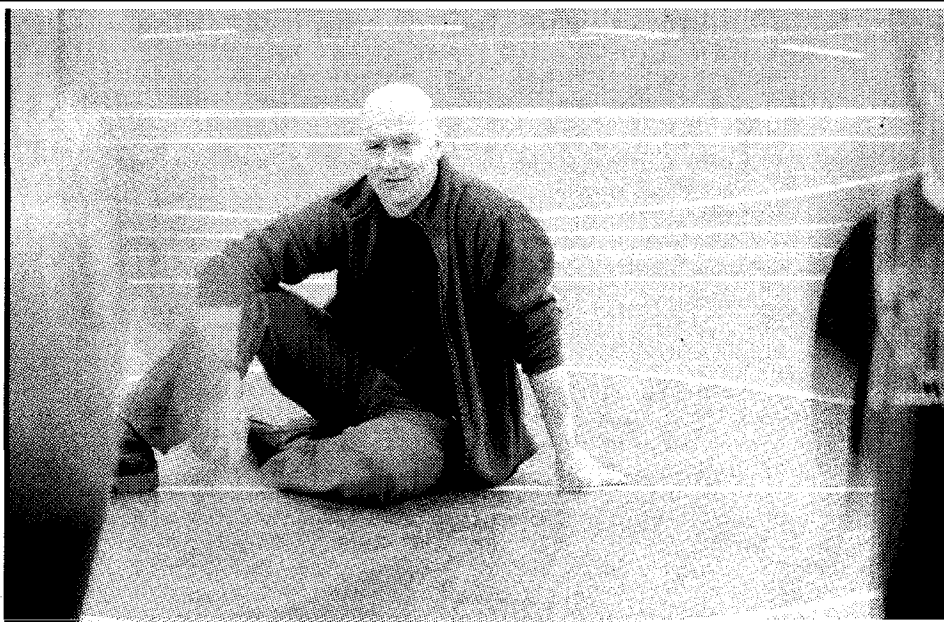
ducted in Ireland, only 19 per cent of Irish children eat fruit or vegetables more than once day – that does not compare favourably with the recommended amount of five pieces per day minimum. Only 30 per cent achieve the minimum recommended amount of physical activity.

The incidence of childhood obesity in Ireland has trebled in the last ten years. More than 25 per cent of Irish children are overweight. “The vast majority of the HSE’s spend is linked to what the medical profession calls ‘morbidity’, but we’re doing very little in the way of prevention,” said Egan.

“Everyone knows the HSE is over-burdened – the root cause of that is chronic, degenerative illness and the fact that 40 per cent of us are dying from heart disease. If we can impact that at an early stage, that will turn things around in terms of the health spend situation.

“This really isn’t rocket science. In many cases, schools are under-resourced but one thing we have done to help get girls more active in sport, is to ask them what kind of sport they would like to see on offer.

“Some girls are interested in basketball and camogie and all the traditional offerings, but many aren’t. Instead, they tell us they would like to try salsa dancing, hip hop dance, yoga or aerobics. When those are offered, you see a spike in participation rates.”



David Egan, chief executive, Redbranch