

Women Ambassadors, Sweden

This case study presents an approach to inspiring women to consider business creation and self-employment. It describes the project's objectives and the rationale for launching it. The case study describes how the project works and presents data to show its impact. The key challenges faced in implementing this project are discussed along with the conditions for transferring it to another context.

Objectives

During the 1990s, several small- and mid-sized initiatives to promote women's entrepreneurship were launched in Sweden. Most of these initiatives were funded and coordinated by the national government, often providing funding and training for potential entrepreneurs and business advisors working in the local municipalities. These initiatives were revamped in 2007 when the government decided to allocate SEK 100 million annually (approximately EUR 10 million) over a period of 3 years for policy initiatives aimed at promoting women's entrepreneurship. The ambassador scheme was set up as a key component within this integrated approach.

This scheme uses women entrepreneurs as role models to share their experiences for the purpose of:

- increasing the visibility of female entrepreneurship;
- inspiring and promoting female entrepreneurship through personal stories and role models;
- making it easier for women to identify themselves with entrepreneurial role models;
- encouraging more women to view entrepreneurship as a potential career choice; and
- helping women to address their entrepreneurial challenges through the sharing of experiences.

The primary target groups for the scheme were female high school students, university students, vocational training students, career advisors and women with an immigrant background.

Rationale

The main motivation behind the project was to influence the behavioural norms related to individuals' occupational choice by challenging the mainstream image of the "entrepreneur" as an activity for men. A national survey asked the general population to name a business-owner or entrepreneur; only 6% mentioned a woman, even though 30% of Swedish enterprises are run by women.

To address this perception, 880 women entrepreneurs were selected as ambassadors to help promote female entrepreneurship and to increase the desirability and feasibility of

entrepreneurship among women. The perceived desirability is “the degree to which one finds the prospect of starting a business to be attractive; in essence, it reflects one’s affect toward entrepreneurship” (Krueger, 1993) and depends on an individual’s values, which, in turn, derive from the individual’s social and cultural environment (Shapero and Sokol, 1982). If the social and cultural environment tends to portray entrepreneurship as a “male” occupation, the perceived desirability for this career choice may be lower among women (Bruni et al., 2004). Perceived feasibility, in contrast, highlights the degree to which an individual feels capable of starting a business (Krueger et al., 2000). Individuals’ perceived feasibility stems from their knowledge and training, as well as the availability of role models which they can relate to (Wilson et al., 2007).

Policy initiatives such as the ambassador project aim to affect individuals both directly – by providing and disseminating role models affecting the perceived feasibility – “I can also do it” – among women, but also indirectly by affecting the perceived desirability of entrepreneurship as a career choice – “This is a good and proper occupation” – for women at large.

Activities

The ambassador’s project was launched in 2008 and was originally extended to 2010. It was then renewed for the period 2011-14. The project concluded at the end of December 2014.

The Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth was responsible for co-ordinating and implementing the project at a national level. Regional co-ordinators could apply for funding to co-ordinate the ambassador’s project in each region. Most regional co-ordinators came from the business organisations and employers’ organisations, and hence had experience from running similar projects. The regional co-ordinators worked closely with the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth to secure policy coherence and correct implementation. For example, the regional co-ordinators were responsible for organising meetings and networking opportunities for the ambassadors in their region, and for informing local authorities and interest groups about the project.

The selection of ambassadors, who were identified through an application process launched in regions and at the national level, was key to the success of the scheme. The application process was advertised in public radio broadcasting, online and through different numerous non-governmental organisations. Interested women entrepreneurs could apply online. While assessing the ambassadors’ applications, an emphasis was put on creating a diverse group in terms of ethnicity, age, industry, company size and geographic region. Priority was given to women who had been running an enterprise for more than 2 years. The Swedish Agency for Regional and Economic Growth did research on the companies run by the prospective ambassadors, to ensure the enterprises were still active.

The task for the ambassador was to tell their own story, covering the challenges met and how they were overcome, and why they enjoy being an entrepreneur. Examples of ambassadors’ activities include speaking in schools, sharing experiences with women who are interested in starting a business, and developing networks for women in business. Since 2008, the ambassadors have met about 170 000 people and participated in about 11 000 activities within the project.

Another important role of the ambassadors was to promote women’s entrepreneurship more broadly by making information and statistics about women’s entrepreneurship more visible. The Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth aimed “to inspire the

audience”, but at the same time “provide a realistic picture of running a business”. By spreading knowledge of the impact of women-owned businesses, the ambition has been to highlight the importance of getting more women into business.

In addition, some of the ambassadors have also been engaged in being a soundboard to other women starting up their own businesses. As such, the ambassador programme has provided direct advice and coaching to females wanting to start their own business. On occasion, ambassadors have also provided interested women the opportunity to follow them in her daily work to gain practical experience of everyday life as a business owner. The project has thus been a combined effort to promote entrepreneurship and to share experiences with potential entrepreneurs.

The project had its own web page, which could be used to schedule meetings with the ambassador and disseminate information to the public. In addition, a podcast was launched, where some of the ambassadors were interviewed.

The group of ambassadors has consisted of approximately 800 women at any single point in time and approximately 2 000 women have been ambassadors over the duration of the project. Some of these women were also appointed European Union ambassadors and participated in workshops and meetings with ambassadors from similar programmes across the EU. For example, both Germany and Scotland have launched similar policy initiatives.

The ambassadors’ project was a part of a larger programme aiming to promote women’s entrepreneurship. The overall programme during its two phases 2007-10 and 2011-14, had governmental support of about SEK 600 million, of which SEK 29 million (approximately EUR 2.9 million) was initially invested in the ambassador’s project. The money was used for implementing and co-ordinating the project on the national and regional level, by arranging meetings for the ambassadors, running information campaigns and undertaking evaluations.

Challenges encountered

The ambassadors’ project relied heavily on volunteer ambassadors to promote entrepreneurship to women. This kept operating costs down but has presented a challenge for keeping ambassadors engaged, particularly in rural areas where the tasks required substantial travel to participate in events. For example, an ambassador may require several hours of travel to attend an event where they give a short presentation. Thus, there can be a very high opportunity cost for the ambassadors. This issue has been raised by both ambassadors and regional co-ordinators.

In addition, the selection of ambassadors has been difficult. An evaluation report criticised the self-selection process used to identify ambassadors because some of the ambassadors did not have the experience or skills to be role models. In many cases, the entrepreneur operated a business that did not have any employees. Ambassadors who had large and growing enterprises may have been better-placed to be inspiring role models. Regional co-ordinators recognised this but did not have any grounds to reject the potential ambassador because the programme does not have a screening mechanism.

The programme has also faced questions about its impact and whether it is cost-effective. The fundamental question is whether “soft” policies can affect behavioural norms related to entrepreneurship. While the general acceptance for government interventions to promote behavioural norms related to health, consumer safety, and environmental concerns has become more accepted (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008), there are

obvious limits in terms of socio-political and ethical boundaries of how governments could and should influence its citizens in economic behaviours such as entrepreneurship.

Moreover, the Swedish National Audit Office has noted that while inspirational and mentoring programmes targeted at social target groups (e.g. women and immigrants) are appreciated by those who participate, there tends to be a very small effect on an aggregate level. This has also been noted internationally, especially when it comes to affecting broader cultural issues affecting women's perceived desirability for entrepreneurship (e.g. Marlow and Patton, 2005).

Impact

From programme launch (May 2008) to its conclusion (December 2014), the programme's ambassadors had reached more than 170 000 people in approximately 11 000 activities. The programme conducted a questionnaire for each experience, measuring the views of participants and the ambassadors.

The surveys asked participants to rate ambassadors on a 1-5 grade scale in terms of content and execution of presentation. Overall, 70% of the audience listed the content and execution of the presentation as "fair", "good" or "very good". Participants were also surveyed on their "interest in entrepreneurship" and 50% of those listening to an ambassador expressed "more interest" in entrepreneurship after meeting the ambassador.

Based on ambassadors' self-assessment of experiences from the project, 50% of the ambassadors considered the role as ambassador as having been helpful for them as entrepreneurs. Factors considered helpful included stronger personal brand, expanded social network, and enhanced competencies. Based on the ambassadors' assessment of how the programme has been administered, 70% were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the co-ordination of the programme on both a national and regional level.

During 2013, a special effort was made to promote the programme among high school teachers, as female high school students has been one of the primary target groups for the programme. According to survey data, 55% of teachers working with business and entrepreneurship for high school students knew about the ambassadors' programme.

According to statistics from the Swedish Agency for Growth Policy Analysis, the project's website (www.ambassadorer.se) has had about 800 unique visitors per week since inception in 2008. The scheme was been visible in media approximately 200 times per year during its operation.

Conditions for transfer

In 2009, the European Union launched a European Ambassador Network for Women's Entrepreneurship, inspired by the scheme in Sweden and other pioneers such as the United Kingdom.* The ambassador concept is now implemented in 21 other European Union countries. The major success factors for such programmes can be defined as follows:

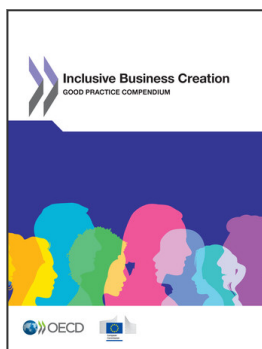
1. *Build a pool of dedicated ambassadors.* Ambassador commitment and ability to volunteer is vital for successful implementation. However, it is also important to have a selection process in place to ensure that the ambassadors are qualified.

* For more information, please see: http://ec.europa.eu/growth/smes/promoting-entrepreneurship/we-work-for/women/support-networks/index_en.htm.

2. *Ensure that ambassadors are representative.* Since behavioural norms vary within populations and sub-groups of populations, a variety of ambassadors in terms of age, business experience, cultural background, etc. needs to be active in order to have credible impact on listeners (both men and women).
3. *Promote heavily.* Outreach mechanisms such as a websites, social media, etc., are imperative to reach citizens in general and young citizens in particular.
4. *Deliver positive messages.* Ambassador activities should, to the extent possible, be constructed as to have a potential to affect the theoretically identified mechanisms of perceived desirability (“This is appropriate and potentially attractive as a career choice”) and perceived feasibility (“I can also do this”) among participants.
5. *Assess impact.* Evaluations should be based on a variety of indicators, including ambassadors’ self-assessment of experiences, impact on participants, and secondary statistics such as media coverage. Evaluation should be conducted by independent parties, as in the Swedish case.

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