



GETTY IMAGES

CODES

# HELPING HANDS

*Harnessing the power of connection, tech businesses large and small are providing education, employment and community support to those who need it most. By Victoria Baker.*

Mea Campbell had the idea at night. Her husband Scott was away, and the lawyer and legal writer was at home in Dubbo worrying about the pandemic. Thankful that her late grandfather had been spared the social isolation brought about by lockdown, she was concerned about other vulnerable people like him, with little access to technology.

She reflected on the connection that could be felt through the simple act of writing and receiving a letter – the ultimate in low-tech communication – and considered how she might use modern tools to enable a way to help. The next day, she set up a website and social media accounts for Connected AU.

Just over a year later, Connected AU has hundreds of people registering every day to write or receive letters, and has engaged with more than 15,000 individuals. More than 450 schools have registered students to write letters and Campbell is aiming to impact the 250,000 Australians in residential aged care and 6,000 young people with disabilities in permanent residential care. Campbell admits to being “utterly exhausted” by the incredible growth and the learning it has entailed.

While she doesn’t necessarily think of it as a tech organisation, Campbell concedes the grassroots letter-writing of Connected AU is supported by a platform that’s quite complex. “When I started, everything was DIY – I did the legals, set up a Squarespace website, and did the social media,” she says. “After two or three months of growth, I realised the manual systems I’d set up to match letter writers and receivers weren’t sustainable, so I had to find specialist help.”

Part of the challenge was the vetting required; rather than a simple matching system, Connected AU receives and checks all the letters at their regional New South Wales hub. “What I want Connected AU to be known for, in addition to connecting people, is our foundation of safety and security,” says Campbell. “The people we’re trying to support are vulnerable and we have to protect them.”

She engaged a specialist who rebuilt the website and incorporated an automated workflow that notifies participants what’s happening every step of the way, using off-the-shelf software elements. The website and the backend have both been built to scale and have virtually unlimited capacity. “The learning I’ve done!” says Campbell. “I get impatient, so I had to learn a bit of coding to make changes to the website.”

Connected AU is a social enterprise – that is, a commercial business set up for purpose. The Letterbox Project, as it’s known, is free for all users, thanks to a sponsorship from Tetley, and Campbell says it always will be. Another arm of the organisation, which facilitates online hobby groups, collects fees designed to sustain the business.

Bronwyn Covill is a co-founder of Need a Tutor, a social enterprise launched in 2017 with a mission to remove some of the barriers stopping remote and disadvantaged students from accessing educational support. Its proprietary platform, funded initially by its founders and now supported by corporate partners and donations, connects teachers and tutors with students in real time and has so far enabled more than 7,000 tutoring sessions. “Ninety-five per cent of our students are fully funded through corporate sponsorship, grants, or the charitable organisation itself which utilises our service. We do not receive government funding,” says Covill. More than 90 per cent of the students currently benefiting from the service are Indigenous.

Need a Tutor also runs a Donate A Device program which provides preloved, refurbished computers to children who are seeking tutoring, but who don’t have a device to learn from. “We hope to step up this program considerably over coming months,” says Covill. “So many children could not learn remotely through Covid last year and we want to make sure that never happens again. Technology is so important to closing the digital and educational divide.”

This belief, and Covill’s mission, attracted support from Optus, which included Need a Tutor in its Future Makers program for 2020. Designed to support businesses looking to leverage tech for social impact, Optus Future Makers go through a program that provides business advice and connection through the Optus teams. “The biggest benefit for Need a Tutor was capacity building through the Future Minds program,” says Covill. “This gave us exposure to Optus’s top talent, enabled us to pitch for funding and also allows us to connect with them in relation to future opportunities. Optus has been extremely important in allowing us to scale and connect, and reach more communities.”

For Optus, and for many larger businesses, creating social impact is no longer a siloed ‘corporate social responsibility’ sideline; it’s a key part of ensuring alignment with the values of their employees and their customers. The Future Makers program is designed to share the business and tech talent within the organisation with startups seeking to do good. Another key initiative, again designed to make best use of Optus resources, is the Donate Your Data program, which was launched in 2019.

“For many of us, data is something we take for granted,” says Optus CEO Kelly Bayer Rosmarin. “However, for some young Australians, accessing the internet

“For some young Australians, accessing the internet and staying connected with the world is a real challenge”

and staying connected with the world around them is a real challenge. This entails everything from studying through to searching for jobs, watching videos or even doing a quick internet search.”

Through the program, Optus customers are invited to donate unused data using the Optus app and, in partnerships with charities including The Salvation Army and Aboriginal community support network KARI, those in need receive a prepaid SIM. “This project makes it incredibly simple for eligible Optus customers to make a real difference and with just a simple tap have the opportunity to contribute to the future of Australians in need,” says Bayer Rosmarin.

Data donations are pooled monthly and distributed to boost the service. “By partnering with charities such as The Smith Family and the KARI Foundation we want to enable connectivity to vulnerable members of our community. This includes young people in need, those experiencing homelessness, people facing domestic violence, and people living in disadvantage and seeking a job,” says Bayer Rosmarin. “We believe all Australians should be able to stay connected and not feel disadvantaged.”

Mea Campbell and Bronwyn Covill are part of Vogue Codes 2021. Find out more and book tickets at [vogue.com.au/vogue-codes](https://vogue.com.au/vogue-codes).