



BarbeCURE ambassadors (from top left) Kim Terakes, Adam Moore, Steve Flood, Aaron Harvie, (from bottom left) Lyndey Milan OAM and Michele Chevalley Hedge.

HOW CURE CANCER SURVIVED COVID-19

Andrea Riddell spoke to **Cure Cancer's** CEO, Nikki Kinloch, about how the organisation not only survived COVID-19, but became even stronger

I spoke to Cure Cancer's CEO, Nikki Kinloch, on the phone one May afternoon. Melbourne had just recorded four cases of COVID-19 that day. Little did we know that Victoria would be plunged into its fourth lockdown only a couple of days later.

While a crystal ball would be nice, keeping one finger on the pulse at all times is just as good for Cure Cancer, and their ability to adapt at pace meant that they not only survived during the pandemic, but thrived. They responded to the unfolding situation in each state, understanding that a one-size-fits-all approach wouldn't work.

This was all propelled by the organisation's global perspective, which comes from their belief — and the sad reality — that cancer is a global issue. But, it has meant that the organisation was heavily invested in diverse and digital activations prior to 2020.

Taking on the role of CEO in 2018, Nikki brought with her this international approach to work and fundraising. Prior to her role at Cure Cancer, Nikki was based in Singapore where she was CEO of Asia's largest online

fundraising platform, Simply Giving. Before this, she was Managing Director APAC for JustGiving, the world's largest fundraising platform.

She's lived and worked in Australia, Hong Kong (during SARS, no less), Europe, the Middle East and Africa, making her no stranger to remote working, global workforces and Zoom meetings. So when she took the helm at Cure Cancer, she began to instil in the organisation a sense of a unified global community.

Their tagline 'Every cancer. Every Australian', was changed to 'Cancer doesn't discriminate. Neither do we'. They dropped the 'Australia' from Cure Cancer Australia and became just Cure Cancer.

"While we're incredibly proud of being an Australian registered charity, and we've been here for 54 years, we wanted people to know the impact of their dollar is going global," says Nikki. "Cancer research is not like >

corporate IP. Researchers share their breakthroughs, but they also share their failures too. What we're trying to be is borderless."

This has created a borderless donor base, which also acknowledges the fact that many researchers start out their lives in other countries before moving to Australia to join our world class cancer research centres.

"Expat communities still have ties to their home country. To be able to communicate with your home country, I think, is really important. And when it comes to a disease like cancer, it's really powerful as well," says Nikki.

The rebranding meant that they could include expats, researchers and their networks and families back in their home country in their fight against cancer.

Attracting and communicating to a global audience requires digital activations and offering multiple currencies, so Nikki also embedded her corporate acumen, ensuring they had a technology-first mindset and the ability to scale.

LEADING A TEAM THROUGH COVID-19

Even with the global mindset and focus on the online experience, nothing could have prepared them for COVID-19. "Whilst I'm used to managing teams across 20 countries and remote working, many of my staff weren't," says Nikki.

From May 2020 until February this year, the team worked from home. For their researchers, especially those based in Melbourne, remote work was impossible.

"Not only were our donors being impacted by uncertainty, not only were our staff being impacted by the change in work environment, but our researchers couldn't get into their labs. People couldn't get to hospitals for treatment like chemotherapy, and people who had found a lump weren't going to the doctors," says Nikki.

Nikki focused on communicating to the point of over-communicating to help staff through the uncertainty. When staff were put on reduced hours, Nikki joined them

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and took a reduced salary.

"It's just as important for me to be transparent with my staff as my donors. They have to know what's going on," says Nikki.

To help deal with stress, they introduced yoga and stretch classes, which people could join in on virtually.

Nikki was also aware that each team member had different concerns, often depending on what stage of their life they were in. "It is really tough if you're on calls all day sitting on one seat. It's also really tough if you're living alone or if you're a parent and your husband and kids are all at home too," says Nikki.

CURING CANCER THROUGH COVID-19

But they had no time to wallow in the uncertainty — cancer didn't care that a global pandemic was unfolding. Within two weeks, the team had assessed all their fundraising activities and determined what they could do online.

"Before COVID-19 we had a good spread of products. We do have those traditional events — fitness and sporting events and one major fundraising dinner that we've done for 12 years — but the rest of what we do is very much online," says Nikki. "For us it was about making sure that we couldn't rely on any one sporting event."

Their fitness income stream, consisting of funds raised from sporting or physical events, dropped by 50% compared to year-on-year results. They cancelled their fundraising dinner, World's Best BYO. BarbeCURE, their large community fundraising event, lost about 10% of income.

So they pivoted. They moved to a rolling budget which they reviewed and reforecast on a monthly, as opposed

to half yearly, basis to respond to the evolving situation.

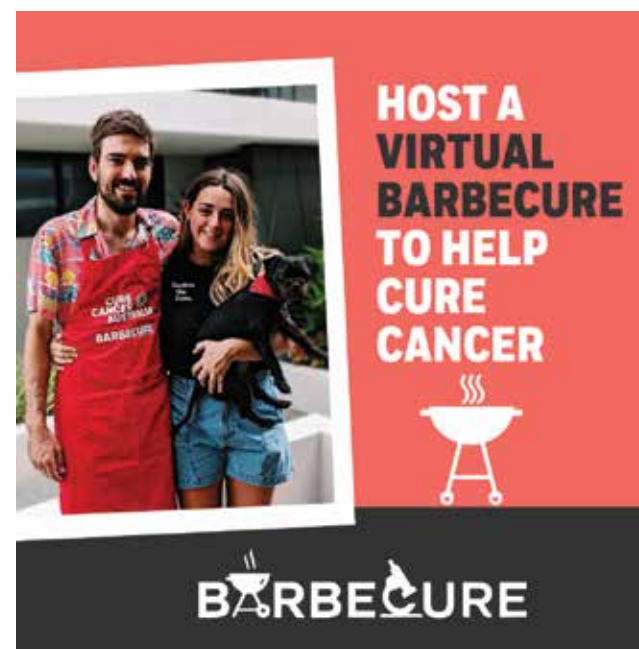
They launched an app called HIIT Cancer Back via which people could work out and fundraise for cancer research by doing High Intensity Interval Training (HIIT) in their living rooms. They started an online auction and raffle which raised \$25,000. Their gaming and streaming campaigns took off. And they saw a huge growth in regular giving and general donations.

"There are lots of traditional ways of fundraising, but we need to acknowledge that those are changing, and the younger generations respond to different forms," says Nikki. "We all have different interests. Someone that will come to a black-tie dinner may not be gaming or streaming or running a marathon. It's important that we reach out to different people in our community and understand what motivates people. And then we think about how we can wrap a fundraising activity around what motivates them."

During her time at JustGiving, Nikki had seen the potential of gaming and streaming fundraising activations. Cure Cancer's campaign, Superhero Streamers, asks people to stream any activity whether it's baking, singing, shaving your head or gaming to raise money for cancer research. For Cure Cancer, their researchers are their superheroes — people saving lives, yet no one knows their names — and their cartoon superhero mascots reflect this. Since launch in June 2020, Cure Cancer's streaming and gaming activations have raised \$247,000.

They turned their virtual BarbeCURE into an attempt at breaking the Guinness World Record for the biggest virtual BBQ with the goal of getting 6,000 Australians to participate. Unfortunately, they didn't break the record, but this proved another way for them to connect with their global audience, with people participating in places like Dubai and Russia.

Their quick thinking meant that most of their virtual campaigns were out to market by April, capitalising on being the newest, shiniest thing.



Cure Cancer was also intentional with their communications to donors, understanding that — just like each of their team members — people were experiencing and reacting to COVID-19 in different ways. Their initial messaging communicated to donors how the pandemic was affecting their researchers and their continued commitment to fighting cancer.

Adapting by state was crucial to their strategy. While Western Australia was relatively unscathed, Melbourne was in lockdown, so they created different versions of their monthly newsletter to tailor it to each state and promote fundraising activities that were relevant and suitable. They kept a close eye on which activations were being clicked on and what people were responding to.

When Melbourne was thrown into a 112-day lockdown, they developed an initiative called 'Give Melbourne a Hug', allowing people to donate \$25 for a small box or \$75 for a large box of treats for someone going through cancer treatment. They raised \$7,340 and delivered 115 boxes to cancer treatment centres and hospitals.

LIFE AFTER COVID-19

Nikki sees remaining flexible as key to building on their growth in 2020. This allows them to respond to trends and opportunities. When people started to return to the office, they noticed more people shaving their heads and their beards.

"We sent out some communications: 'Are you going back to work? Smarten up for the workplace.' We had a great response."

A week prior to our conversation, Nikki attended Cure Cancer's first physical event in 18 months. The event speaker, Associate Professor Phoebe Phillips, shared her team's breakthrough in pancreatic cancer research and the exciting news that they would soon be starting clinical trials.

"Although we delayed the event for over a year, our breakthrough happened the night before our lunch, so it was perfect!"

You couldn't plan for such serendipitous timing. But for Nikki and the team, nothing is guaranteed, so they're continuing to look to their donors to decide what they do next.

"For me, it's about having that mindset that it can be done. We've got a strategy and a structure and that's great, but at the end of the day you have to adapt to the market conditions and at the moment, they're changing quite frequently — and state by state," says Nikki.

Their new donors are up by 25% on last year, and they plan to find out more about them and what interests them. And with recent major breakthroughs in research, they're keen to share this impact with donors and fundraisers.

Their fundraising dinner, World's Best BYO, was due to happen in Sydney at the end of July. Nikki is calm when she says they'll move it online if they have to (although ultimately they made the difficult decision to postpone the event). "It's about understanding what donors want to do."

That's a pretty good strategy to live by. **F&P**