

Connecting People with Plants

Mr Steve Clancy

Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne

Introduction

The Royal Botanic Gardens manage two very diverse sites that offer unique experiences for visitors. The Royal Botanic Gardens Cranbourne (RBGC) is situated on 363 hectares of remnant bushland and reclaimed farmland, enticing visitors with heathlands, wetlands and woodlands. The opening of Australia's newest botanic garden "The Australian Garden" in May this year has thrust RBGC into the spotlight and dramatically increased visitation and interest in the site.

Established in 1846, the Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne boasts impressive landscapes featuring rich and vibrant living collections from both Australian and overseas origins.

Early in 2005, the Royal Botanic Gardens released a new charter and three-year corporate plan. The plan provides direction for activities across both the Melbourne and Cranbourne sites through the identification of strategic goals. The goal relevant to this paper is stated below:

Enhancing on-site experiences and providing programs for a broader spectrum of the community. (RBG Corporate Plan 2005 – 2008)

The corporate plan outlines the Gardens intention to increase the relevance and diversity of programs and to make these available to a wider audience than has previously been reached.

Formation of Working Group

The Gardens have a strong record in the provision of schools education with a range of programs catering for early childhood, primary, secondary and tertiary groups. The opening of an award-winning Children's Garden in 2004 has seen these programs grow in popularity, peaking in 2005 with a total of 27,523 participating students. Independent visitors to the Gardens are also engaged through interpretative signage and a robust program of guided walks.

The RBG was looking to continue to deliver these programs without compromise while exploring opportunities to reach new audiences in an effort to connect more people with plants. The RBG applies the term "community engagement" to this diversification of programs and increased community involvement and partnership.

In July 2005, a multi-disciplinary working group was formed to develop the strategy to achieve the objectives set out in the corporate plan. Consisting of members from executive management, RBGC Public Programs, Marketing, Development, Plant Sciences and RBGM Education and Visitor Services the working group set about defining the Gardens approach to community engagement. It was acknowledged that the Gardens existing programs directed to current audiences were well regarded and were achieving stated goals. The challenge lay in targeting new audience segments to raise awareness and appreciation of the Gardens and of the importance of plants. The working group initiated a review of programs, activities and outputs of the whole organisation with a view to developing a new strategic direction.

The Framework

The following is an outline of the framework for the Gardens' long term community engagement vision based on the work done to date by the Community Engagement Working Group.

Two streams have been identified:

- Sustainable Gardening
- People, Plants and Culture

Target audience segments:

Schools learning

Programs and activities available on- and off-site to the schools audience, including facilitated on-site programs, web-based activities, self guided activities, etc
Currently supported by Department of Education and Training and Catholic Education Office grants.

Vocational learning

Programs and activities providing specialist job-based knowledge and skills, and competency building in specific disciplines to defined industry-based or professional audiences.

Tertiary learning

Programs and activities provided to tertiary audiences, either on- or off-site.

Adult Learning

Includes short courses delivered on- or off-site, potentially with partner organisations, and accredited training courses

Visitor discovery

Static (eg. signs), electronic (eg. web-based, podcast) and face-to-face interpretations, holiday programs, delivered by RBG staff and others.

(Moors, 2006)

In defining the streams of Sustainable Gardening and People, Plants and Culture the working group acknowledged the programs currently being delivered by organisations such as community groups, Friends groups and education and training organisations. It became clear that developing long term strategic partnerships with some of these organisations would be a very effective way for the RBG to achieve its community engagement objectives.

The RBG has recently developed an event based on a partnership approach with RBG tenants and Friends of the RBG called Spring Open Day. This event can be held up as a working example of how effective partnerships with supporter groups such as the Friends can be used to achieve the objectives of the RBG.

Inception of Spring Open Day

In early 2003, the Visitor Services branch of RBGM was looking to develop a vehicle to build awareness and appreciation for the work of the Royal Botanic Gardens and inspire new visitors to come and experience the Gardens.

On any given weekend, there is a multitude of events and tours available to visitors in the Gardens. These events and tours are offered by a variety of groups. A typical Sunday in the Gardens may see

Plant Craft Cottage holding a plant weaving workshop, Friends of the RBG providing a lecturer on Landscape Design, the Visitor Centre promoting guided walks and the Gardens shop organising botanical illustration demonstrations or a musical performance by the resident harpist. It was through looking at these activities that the idea for a new RBG event was born. The philosophy behind Spring Open Day is to co-ordinate all these activities under the one umbrella and produce an event that will benefit all stakeholders while achieving Visitor Services' overall objective of new visitors to the Gardens and an increased profile and appreciation for the work of the RBG.

Visitor Services Branch agreed that the logic behind the event was sound and there was general support for the initiative from senior management. However, the multitude of stakeholders and wide ranging logistical considerations meant that the developmental phase of the event would require significant effort. A major challenge facing Visitor Services staff was to change the way stakeholders viewed other events in the Gardens. Initial meetings with stakeholders focussed on selling the benefits of having a multitude of events and activities for visitors. Supporter groups and RBG tenants needed to be convinced that a coordinated approach could not only generate higher and longer visitation, but that it would result in a better outcome for their particular event. In consultation with stakeholders a marketing plan with a particular focus on media contact was developed. The plan was an operational document but it also greatly assisted in gaining support for the event. Instead of competing for the same audience, stakeholders could see the benefit in attracting visitors with a range of activities that constitute a day out rather than an isolated activity.

To support the goal of attracting new visitors to the Gardens, a deliberate strategy of utilising entertainers from different backgrounds was employed. Local school bands were invited to perform on the Dunlop Plaza and a jazz band consisting of students from the Victorian College of the Arts was hired to perform on the one of the lawns. Through these interactions, the RBG was able to engage with younger members of the local community and diversify its potential audience.

The proposed program for Spring Open Day featured a variety of free walks and tours delivered by Voluntary Guides. These walks would provide members of the public with an opportunity to see areas of the Gardens normally closed to the public. The Nursery and National Herbarium of Victoria would be open for regular tours booked through the Visitor Centre. This element of the event was aimed at increasing the awareness of the work of the RBG.

For the Spring Open Day to be a true partnership with stakeholders, the RBG recognised that for tenants such as the Observatory Café and Terrace Tearooms participation in the event needed to make business sense. This also applied to fundraising areas of the RBG such as the Gardens Shop and even the Friends of the RBG who raise funds through plant sales twice a year. Naturally, it was these stakeholders who wanted to know how activities on Spring Open Day would impact their bottom line. To support these stakeholders, it was decided all the guided walks should conclude at the Friends plant sale. Botanical Illustration demonstrations would be situated in the Gardens Shop and musical entertainment would be positioned near retail outlets. These initiatives coupled with the predicted increase in media exposure were well received by stakeholders and all were keen to be involved.

The inaugural Spring Open Day was held on Sunday 12 October 2003. The media interest in the event was better than expected and included television coverage, radio interviews, editorials in the major newspapers and event listings in many local newspapers. This coverage was achieved through a long lead media release, and media releases just prior to event. The majority of walks and tours were fully booked, RBG tenants reported increased business and the Gardens received overwhelming positive feedback on the Open Day concept from visitors.

In 2004, the RBG's energies were directed towards the opening of The Ian Potter Foundation Children's Garden and it was decided to wait until 2005 for the next Spring Open Day. The positive experience of the first event saw many of the stakeholders increase their involvement in the 2005 event. A snapshot of statistics and feedback from stakeholders is provided below:

Snapshot of Results: 2005 Spring Open Day

- Highest ever recorded sales at the Growing Friends Plant Sale
- Hundreds of visitors enjoyed live music at two sites in the Gardens
- 220 visitors participated in walks and tours
- Gardens Shop sales were 20% over budget for the day
- Total of 6,500 visitors in the Gardens. (Average daily visitation for October is 3,235 visitors)
- Both the Observatory Café and Terrace Tearooms reported increased sales on the day

The RBG has secured sponsorship to the value of \$5,000 from the City of Melbourne for the 2006 Spring Open Day. This sponsorship is part of an event partnership program that will see the RBG and City of Melbourne working in collaboration to promote the event. All stakeholders have confirmed their participation in this year's event and the program of entertainment, walks and tours has been expanded in anticipation of increased interest from the public.

Conclusion

The new Community Engagement Framework provides purpose and direction for the activities of the RBG over the short to medium term. Connecting people with plants is about facilitating engagement of a more diverse audience at both RBG Melbourne and Cranbourne. It is through this engagement that the RBG will achieve greater relevance to more of the community.

The Spring Open Day is an example of an event that has succeeded in engaging new visitors and raising the awareness and appreciation of plants and the important work of the RBG. This has been achieved by developing partnerships with key stakeholders that reflect the needs of all parties.

References

Moors, P. 2006, Working Together, Issue No. 113, March 2006, Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne, Australia.