

PUBLIC RELATIONS FOR A LIVING MUSEUM

("A young shoot on an old stem" (Van Vleuten, 1986))

Summary

The communication role of a modern botanic garden using Geneva as an example is outlined. The communication policy of the Conservatoire et Jardin botaniques de Genève (CJB) is recognised at three levels: -

- scientific
- political - economic
- media and public

A successful showcase (garden) indirectly encourages the development of the herbarium and library - the "hidden side" of the garden. A living museum benefits from a high attendance and the publicity directed towards this audience is developed in accordance with the communication policy of the garden based on information, education and public interaction.

Several channels can be used for this policy: media, information, education and public relations. This paper analyses the Geneva situation, looking at the different channels, possibilities and ways in which it complements and contrasts with the "Green space and environment services".

Introduction (Figure 1)

During the past 10 years botanic gardens have gradually evolved from being cloistered old-fashioned institutions to living open-air museums. Botanic gardens still keep their scientific objectives, but now tend to be more public-oriented rather than collection-oriented. With new policies being run by the Public Relations Service, education and conservation are the keywords. The perception of what botanic gardens stand for began changing with the desire to increase the numbers of visitors to the garden and the quality of contacts. Objectives of the garden are reached by improving the following aspects of its activities:

- information inside and outside the Gardens
- perception, image and knowledge of the Gardens
- guidance and the interpretation in the Gardens

- motivation of the staff
- interest from the sponsors and from the political authorities

The complexity public relations in a botanic garden

Using Geneva Botanic Garden as an example, the following themes can be discussed:

- the diversity of the public and their motivation
- the complex configuration of a garden
- the natural seasonal changes of a living collection
- the receptivity, the needs and the fluctuation of the public.

The presentation involved a series of slides which illustrated the characteristics of Geneva Botanic Garden (geographical, historical and technical), the well known conservatory which houses one of the best libraries and herbaria in the world, the medium size garden (18-25 ha. in extent), the lake, the entrance to the garden (there is no control and no entrance fee), a publication workshop, greenhouses, including the new temperate greenhouse known as a monument in Geneva and used as the public image of the institution and for its logo.

Once a botanic garden has decided on the message it wants to give to the public, it needs to consider how the message will be transmitted. Information can be given to the public entering the Garden through information boards, panels, signs, arrows and labels. In Geneva Botanic Garden, for example, information



The temperate greenhouse, a "monument" in the garden and its logo

and directions are given on interpretative signs designed to compliment the labelling of the plants. Information concerning exhibits in the

institution is displayed in special poster holders, also produced in the same design as the signs and information in the garden.



The effect of seasonal variation in visitor numbers on communication

It needs to be borne in mind that seasonal fluctuation of visitors will have an influence on how a

garden communicates its message, whether it is in the winter or summer or even during the week or weekend. The motivation and the receptivity of the public is related to the fluctuation in numbers of visitors.

The Geneva Garden aims to be simple, clear and aesthetic in its message, to avoid elitism and segregation. Scheduled events such as Botanic Jazz session held every Sunday during May are effective ways in which to gain the attention of the visitor.



Conclusions

Successful achievements and experiences are based on good public relations, moderate costs, selective educational activities and interpretation in the gardens. Although the following examples are based on events that have taken place in Geneva Botanic Garden, they

can be adapted to suit many other gardens according to their budgets, staff resources, etc. Funding sources are mentioned in brackets.

- open-air display (joint-venture with other museums and sponsorship)
- audio-guided tour (internal budget and private sector sponsorship)
- educational co-ordination (collaboration with the public school system, co-ordinators paid by the school system)
- jazz concert (institutional sponsorship by the City of Geneva)
- artistic exhibition, painting, photography, sculpture (private sector sponsorship, individual sponsorship)
- "Scent and Touch garden" (institutional and private sector sponsorship).

"Botanic Jazz", a traditional day in the Garden



Although a garden's distinctive features are complex, they represent the originality of the garden and need to be developed to the garden's advantage. This requires creativity, imagination and, last but not least, more collaboration between botanic gardens, indoors museums and private companies on an international multidisciplinary level.

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