

CHANGING IMAGES

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ABSTRACT

The introduction of a new Board of Management offers the Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne exciting new possibilities for expanding its public image. The review of the Gardens publications and sign system, the employment of a media consultant, the establishment of an annual exhibition program, and the building of a new Visitor Centre at one of the major gates, are all helping to raise and change the profile of the Gardens.

RESUMEN

La introducción de un nuevo Consejo de Gestión ofrece al Real Jardín Botánico de Melbourne nuevas posibilidades interesantes para la divulgación de su imagen pública. La revisión de las publicaciones de los jardines y los sistemas de señales, el empleo de medios de consulta, el establecimiento de un programa anual de muestras y la construcción de un nuevo centro de visitantes en una de las entradas principales, están contribuyendo a levantar y cambiar el perfil de los jardines.

The Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne has for some years known suffered from an identity crisis. In the minds of the general public and our many overseas tourists we are simply the most beautiful public garden in Australia. While it is a justly deserved reputation, it is in fact not the primary public image that we want to promote. We

would far rather be known as an excellent botanic garden than as a lovely tranquil backdrop for a family picnic. While the provision of recreational opportunities and the conservation of the Gardens' beautiful cultural and heritage landscape are legitimate objectives, it is the other objectives as described under the recently introduced Botanic Gar-

dens Act, namely the conduct of scientific research, the conservation of endangered species and the curation of plant collections, that we want to promote in the wider community.

Recently we set about to change deliberately the public's perception of the role and functions of the Melbourne Botanic Gardens. It is this process, which is still on-going, that I want to describe to you this morning as an example of an integrated public relations exercise in a botanic gardens. I have used the term "public relations" in its widest possible sense and have taken it to include all those activities undertaken to promote the Gardens and its programs (including education) throughout the community (ie to private individuals, public bodies, corporate organisations and other scientific and cultural institutions), in line with the institute's mission and corporate identity. Consequently it includes media liaison, advertising and tourism.

I don't for a moment imagine we have all the answers and what worked in one garden may not necessary work in another. However there may be some principles here that are useful to you in your own situation. Certainly many of the things will be "old hat" to some of you. In our case we have been significantly helped by the introduction of an independent Board of Management after 146 years of direct control by a State Government Department. This has allowed us to develop new marke-

ting and sponsorship policies as part of the formulation of a five year Corporate Plan.

Here are some of the strategies we using to change our image.

1. We reviewed our current range of publications, discarding some and introducing a new booklet "A Gallery of Plants" which described the Gardens in terms of plant collections rather than in terms of landscape features and views which the earlier guide books had done. This modest publication is "desktopped" and is in a comparatively cheap format to allow easy updating. As well we desktop Seasonal Leaflets and Garden Notes both of which are distributed freely on site. We are looking now at a more colourful brochure for the tourist market; this will be widely distributed through tourism organisations. In all publications we want to stress the concept that the Gardens is an ever changing museum of living plants.
2. We are in the process of reviewing our entire signage system and are looking to introduce an integrated hierarchical system of signs. This will mean that service /amenity type information will clearly visible but will be differentiated and subservient to plant name and interpretation information. Emphasis is being placed on the "tone" of the signs for we believe that how you convey a message is as important as the messa-

ge itself. For the first time we are also erecting "prime" signs and banners around the perimeter of the Gardens, to announce the site.

3. Although we do not have a permanent Media Liaison Officer, we recently hired a professional journalist to place those stories we wanted to get across to specific audiences. One of our biggest problems in the past has been getting the right sort of media coverage when we wanted it. Inevitably it has been our ubiquitous black swans and groups of milling school children that have been photographed, not the plants! So far we have had limited success but we are working on it.
4. With the new board came the opportunity to develop our own Corporate Identity. Again we used a consultant. Although the application to stationery, uniforms, vehicles, etc., is being phased in gradually because of budget constraints, the new corporate identity has given us a much higher public profile and has helped lift staff moral at a time of severe economic conditions.
5. The Visitor Centre, at present located in the Herbarium building and only accessible from the street, not from inside the Gardens, is to be moved to a cottage at one of the main entrances. This will allow us to expand the exhibition space and bookshop area and to strengthen the Gardens' image as a centre for information about plants. We are also considering housing some of the Gardens' associated groups, such as the Friends of the Gardens, the Australian Garden History Society in the cottage along with our own horticulture extension service. Again we are trying to build up our public profile as the provider of reliable, diverse information about plants for both professionals and the home-gardener.
6. The Melbourne Botanic Gardens has enjoyed a very successful Voluntary Guides Service for the past 12 years. We currently have some 40 volunteers who provide daily walks for the general public as well as for special interest groups. Through on-going training programs run by the Gardens' staff, the Guides are now offering walks with plant collection themes and concentrating far more on the roles and functions of the Gardens and Herbarium than they did in earlier years. They are also taking our message out into the community with a lecture and seminar series. This frees up staff considerably. I can't speak highly enough of our volunteers and if any of you would like to know more about our particular program, I'd be pleased to talk with you later.
7. One of our biggest challenges comes with the need to find sponsors and "market" the Gardens - the site,

the facilities, the services, in ways that do not compromise the Gardens' objectives, but project a positive image. Traditionally the Gardens has not sought any corporate sponsorship so at present we are perceived as being "environmentally pure" in more ways than one! We are slowly working our way through the contentious issues of "naming rights", "sponsorship guide-lines" and "product endorsement" and if any of you experience in the areas, I'd love to meet with you later on.

8. As part of our strategy to lift the Gardens' profile, we are planning an annual exhibition program. In the past we have held a number of "blockbuster" events which have been highly successful and given us excellent media coverage for a limited time only. The "wear and tear" on staff as a result of these exhibitions, fine botanical art shows etc has been considerable. Now we are devising a program, backed up by exhibition staff, that will raise the profile of the Gardens consistently and hopefully establish the Gardens in the mind of the general public as a lively museum with an exciting and diverse program. Our first exhibition, timed for 1994, will probably have a "Plants in Medicine" theme and the exhibition itself will be accompanied by temporary trails out in the Gardens to look at Victorian Aboriginal (Koori) traditional uses of native plants, Chinese herbal medicine plants, as well as some of the plants which form the basis of the modern pharmaceutical industry. There will be a strong conservation message in all of this. The exhibition will be promoted in the wider community and also in the primary and lower secondary schools with Teacher In-services and Curriculum Materials being developed by the Education Officer.
9. Our final strategy involves the Education Service. The first Education Officer built up a very strong environmental education program through the production of Curriculum Materials and Teacher In-services. With the appointment of a new Education Officer with a horticulture background, we are looking to expand the program across the curriculum - art, craft, history, geography, maths, as well as the more usual horticulture, biology, environmental and general sciences. We are also strengthening our ties with the nearby kindred institutes - the Museum, the National Gallery and the Zoo, and will be offering joint programs.