

Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne **Eleanor Bridger: Manager, Marketing and Communications**

The product

The Royal Botanic Gardens Board Victoria manages two gardens – 363 hectares of remnant bushland and wetland at RBG Cranbourne and 38 hectares of heritage landscapes at RBG Melbourne.

To complement the bushland experience, the Australian Garden was opened at RBG Cranbourne in May 2006. The Australian Garden showcases the remarkable plant life of this continent. The bushland experience at RBG Cranbourne is less well known. However, since opening the Australian Garden, awareness of this precious area is being raised.

RBG Melbourne is well-loved by Melbournians and is popular with tourists as well. Its beautiful heritage landscapes showcase plants from around the world.

The issue

While research had been commissioned in the late 1990s to identify the value segments of visitors to RBG Melbourne, no visitor satisfaction research had been conducted at either garden for many years.

In 2002 the Corporate Management Group agreed that it would be useful to commission research “to provide reliable information which will assist in deciding where we should direct our scarce resources to maximise visitor satisfaction and improve the visitor experience”.

The objectives of the research were to:

- ascertain the drivers that influence satisfaction with services and products
- highlight possible ways to improve service and product delivery
- assess the needs of Royal Botanic Gardens visitors and stakeholders
- identify critical factors affecting Royal Botanic Gardens visitation
- explore effective ways for the Royal Botanic Gardens to communicate with its visitors and potential visitors
- **describe the visitors to the Royal Botanic Gardens.**

The research

Four stages of the research programme were implemented. The research consultant met with key managers to clarify their needs, as well as to gain more detail about key aspects of the services and activities on offer.

Two group discussions were held at RBG Melbourne and one with visitors to RBG Cranbourne, to identify key issues of importance to customers and to develop the quantitative instrument for the next stage of the research.

During the third stage of the research an intercept survey of visitors leaving the Gardens measured the relative importance of key needs and the performance of the Royal Botanic Gardens in meeting these needs and identified improvement opportunities.

The final stage of the programme involved reporting and presenting the results to senior management.

Results

The research identified six key factors that visitors considered important. These were then ranked in order of how these factors influenced overall satisfaction. Most usefully, the research report identified key areas for action. These were categorised as:

- Key Strengths – issues on which the Royal Botanic Gardens performs well and which were of critical importance to respondents;
- Maintain Performance – areas where performance was good, but which were not of critical importance to respondents;
- Critical Weakness – areas where performance was not up to expectations and these areas are of critical importance to visitors; and
- Secondary Weaknesses – areas where performance was low, but these were of lesser importance to respondents.

Royal Botanic Gardens management used the research findings to make a number of changes to services and facilities. Some of these changes took some time to fully implement as they required additional funding, others were simple changes to existing practices.

Some examples of how the research findings were used include:

- a major review of the seasonal information provided to visitors, with a new seasonal guide format being developed. The new guides include information about tours, as well as the garden highlights for that season. A new format for presenting information on the map boards was also developed.
- using the feedback from visitors to support applications for funding the construction of new toilet blocks at RBG Melbourne.
- additional interpretation of the bushland area at RBG Cranbourne, to explain the diversity of the flora on that area.

Key lessons

- Visitor satisfaction research provided valuable data about the Royal Botanic Gardens visitors' expectations and needs, and how it was meeting those needs and expectations.
- The identification of key areas for action helped management focus on making changes that would affect visitors' satisfaction. This process meant that RBG did not waste efforts on things that were of low importance to visitors, or that would have little effect on their overall level of satisfaction.

New research is being conducted during 2006, so that the Royal Botanic Gardens will be able to compare changes and improvements to visitor satisfaction, as well as identify new areas for improvement.

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