

## **Wired to WII-FM: Staying in Tune to the Benefits of Good Public Programs<sup>1</sup>**

Thomas Graham – Senior Curator of Exhibitions, Old Parliament House

Standing here this morning I'm conscious of the fact that what I'm about to say is nothing new and has probably been said, or written about, many times before. Your immediate reaction might well be, why bother then! Spare us the boredom and let's move on to morning tea!

Not so quick!

The value in what I'm about to say is the ideas *work* and therefore are worth repeating and listening to. I can assure you if you apply the principles or formulas mentioned in this paper your museum will derive benefits and rewards. How can I be so sure? Because they have been tested and applied in a regional setting over a lengthy period and they brought us success. So stay tuned to WIIFM. Which is another way of answering the question on your minds, '*What's In It For Me?*'

I would like to point out that although I have recently moved to Old Parliament House, and acknowledge that I'm here on their time, my comments reflect on my experiences as Manager of the *Museum of the Riverina* in Wagga Wagga over a five year period. I haven't come to lecture you from the federal capital. I stand here *with* you as someone very familiar with regional issues and the challenges smaller museums face. And that explains the Akubra which I will be wearing for the duration of the talk as I have no other visual aids!

Public programs as I'm sure you are all aware come in many forms. If we did a quick brain storming sessions I'm sure you would name the following:

- Educational activities, kits and programs
- School holiday activities
- Anniversaries and commemorations
- Performances of theatre, music, poetry, dance or film
- Book readings and book launches
- Oral history programs
- Talks, guided tours, lectures, conferences and seminars
- Demonstrations, open days, crafts and interactive possibilities
- Community projects, travelling exhibitions, 'museum in a box'
- Web based programs or activities
- Sporting events
- Television or radio broadcasts and interviews
- Festivals, tours, field trips, social activities and special events<sup>2</sup>

All these events are part of public programs and the scope is really only limited by our imagination. If you regularly present diverse public programs your museum will derive benefits. The remainder of my talk will focus on eight such benefits illustrated by examples from the *Museum of the Riverina*.

The benefits are:

- Increase your visitation levels
- Provide incentives for repeat visitation
- Attract new audiences
- Encourage community participation
- Increase your capacity to stretch limited resources
- Develop partnerships and networks
- Provide training and development for volunteers and staff
- Initiate renewal of regional museums

### **1. Increase visitation levels**

We all have our masters whether they be local government, state government, federal funding agencies, governing or advisory boards or in many cases a combination of these. Any of you who have ever written an annual or quarterly report, a strategic plan, a grant application or acquittal will know that our masters love numbers and statistics. They like them even more when your budgets are in the black, your income is up and your visitor figures have increased.

#### **Good quality public programs presented on a regular basis to diverse audiences will increase your visitation.**

This will make your masters happy, your audiences happy and you happy. Very happy. It is recommended you produce good public programs and derive the benefit from them. A word of advice: place the emphasis on quality programs that make an impact on your audiences rather than simply playing the numbers game. If your focus is simply on getting numbers through the door you could lose sight of the real objective which is to present engaging programs that excite your audiences and get them talking about what you do. Concentrate on quality and the numbers will follow.

At the *Museum of the Riverina* we managed to increase our visitation by 400% over a five-year period through a program of hosting a wide range of traveling exhibitions and combining these with good public programs. And if you added our visitor figures together for our two sites over the same period the increase was 700%. This is a very strong indicator that the formula worked and can be adopted and adapted by others.

## 2. Provide incentives for REPEAT visitation

There was a time when you would visit a museum twice in lifetime. Once on a school outing and secondly, as a grandparent, when you took your grandchildren to see the same exhibitions in the same museum! Those days have gone. Museums are now part of the leisure and tourism industry and compete with a wide range of other attractions. No local institution can survive on two visits in a lifetime.

**Encouraging repeat visitation is a desirable outcome for the contemporary museum, no matter its size.**

In many cases your viability depends on it. If you have nothing new in your museum for lengthy periods visitors will lose interest and not return. People like choices and expect new things. You probably don't need reminding that we live in a world that is obsessed with instant gratification. The fad of fast food has been replaced by extreme makeovers; sitcoms with professional actors have made way for reality TV where the participants could well be your friends or neighbours. Cash in the pocket has been overtaken by extended credit. If your mobile phone doesn't possess a camera or minicomputer you're no longer part of the communication loop. It's a fast, crazy world out there.

Now I'm not suggesting we feed this elusive Holy Grail for instant gratification or add more pace to an ever-quickening world. What I am suggesting is that competition, mobility and choice are part of our lives. To have ongoing *appeal* you do need to build *some* element of change into your museum to maintain interest. Your average visitor, even those on the home front, are accustomed to change, are bombarded with choices and are selective about what they do with their time. Good public programs are a great way of offering something new in a variety of formats without having to backyard blitz your museum every week.

**Public programs are a great mechanism to encourage or stimulate repeat visitation.** Make a conscious effort to turn your museum into a venue of *choice* rather than one of *chance*. Add diversity to the mix. Over the past four years the following themed programs which stimulated repeat visitation were offered at the *Museum of the Riverina*: musical concerts, poetry readings, star gazing nights, military commemorations, training workshops, lectures, book launches, motivational talks, craft demonstrations, oral history programs, public forums to discuss local issues, film evenings, textile workshops, wine tastings, forensic evenings and others.

As stated in the beginning: be creative, use your imagination, make it happen.

### 3. Attract new audiences

**Targeting new audiences through focused public programs is an essential part of a successful museum.**

There are great rewards in reaching out to others and expanding your traditional programs to include other groups. One of the best ways of doing this is to host traveling exhibitions with different themes or to develop a range of public programs aimed at different audiences. Or combine both traveling exhibitions with public programs and have the best of both worlds.

There was a time when the Museum in Wagga Wagga operated in a very insular and one-dimensional manner, essentially serving only the interests of its governing body. This resulted in a very low public profile, poor image and meagre visitor figures. Through traveling exhibitions and innovative public programs we did manage to reverse this negative trend. And part of the formula was a strategy to develop new audiences.

We went looking for them!

In the beginning people were surprised, shocked, even stunned when we came knocking on their door! They just didn't expect their local museum to be so bold! By following through on promises, delivering quality programs and sharing our success the tide did turn in our favour. The word got out there and we were able to build up awareness and develop a positive public profile. And this process is never complete – you're only as good as your last successful public program!

One of the key requirements for building new audiences is that you need to put personal taste or prejudice to one side. How often has a particular theme or activity being put on the table and the reaction is:

“Oh! I don't like that!”

“How could we possibly do a public program on that theme?!”

“We couldn't work with them!”

Personal taste and self interest, like gatekeepers, can prevent wonderful programs from developing with the loss of associated rewards. If I had allowed my own personal taste and interests to completely dictate the traveling exhibition and public programs at the *Museum of the Riverina* new audiences would not have emerged. By reaching out and offering a truly *multi-themed approach* we were able to attract these audiences. Themes included sport, textiles, environment, pottery, aboriginal issues, local history, immigration, ethnic groups, war, evolution, Federation, women's issues, art, architecture, photography, animated cartoons, science, smuggling, café culture, crime, embroidery, astronomy, oral history and a host of museum related issues. With this spread,

our aim of attracting new audiences and winning new friends was made that much easier.

#### **4. Encourage community participation**

Generally when we think of public programs we think about presenting something *for* others. This need not be the case. Public programs provide a great opportunity to do things *with* others. And *with* can mean co-planning, co-organizing, co-presenting and co-funding with other sections within an organization or with outside community groups.

**Generally, a strategy that encourages joint community participation in the presentation of a program brings the best results. For this to work well the museum needs to provide leadership and direction.**

Many of our events in Wagga we could not have done, and the programs themselves would not have been as successful, or as well supported, without the involvement of targeted interest groups.

For example:

- When we hosted *My Vietnam* the local Vietnam Veterans Association got their members to lend personal items for the exhibition, they helped to promote the event and did a gold coin donation on the night we held a concert in their honour.
- For *Wine! A Social History* we gained tremendous support from the local wine farmers who created a market style atmosphere for the opening function, offered their vintages to our guests and followed this up with regular wine tastings on Sunday afternoons, an activity that considerably increased our Sunday attendance.
- During the past three years students from Charles Sturt University were involved in *Science Week* at the museum, developing and presenting hands-on activities and interpretation for school children.
- With *Moving Thread* a local embroidery association gave demonstrations of their craft as part of the Sunday public programs.

These are a few examples of the benefits of reaching out to others and inviting them to participate in public programs to the mutual benefit of both parties. In *all* these instances it was the first time these groups had been invited to work together with their local museum. There is a lot to be gained by looking for new audiences. One of the best spin offs is that the families and friends of these

participating groups automatically get drawn into being supporters and by doing so become new visitors.

## **5. Increase your capacity to stretch limited resources**

All our organizations are stretched when it comes to resources. I don't think I've ever met a Museum Manager who has said, "Money isn't an option! I have enough staff!"

Resources are usually tight but they shouldn't *immobilize* us. Public programs paradoxically can provide opportunities to increase your capacity for stretching your limited resources. It's a question of using your imagination and persuasive powers.

Be bold! Sometimes you can get others to pay for your public programs, or at very least make a contribution, to ease the pressure on your own resources. This can often enable a project to proceed when at first it may not have seemed possible. And there are times when you can achieve a lot with very little. Some examples.

When we hosted *Wine!* we approached our Commercial Response Unit at Wagga Wagga City Council to assist us with public programs. They were a new unit. We had a great exhibition in a great space. CRU wanted to promote business opportunities in the city. We had a product. They had the contacts and money. We didn't ask for their money, however, we asked them to work with us to host a series of events.

In discussion it became known that they had started a series of functions aimed at new comers to the city and at business people. The events were sometimes dull. We could add value to these events by offering to host them in the Historic Council Chambers - which was part of the museum - and provide a conversation piece through an exhibition with a theme that suited business interests and their palates – wine!

As a result of our discussions we were able to host two Welcome to Wagga functions aimed at new residents, and a business reunion function for business people, at no costs to ourselves. CRU paid for them and in the process we attracted new audiences and increased our visitors. CRU were delighted as they didn't have to organise the function and their guests were impressed with the venue and the exhibition. The guests were happy as they were made to feel welcome and special. This is a good example of how a museum can bring together different parties for mutual benefit. And the approach was not about traditional sponsorship, it was about selling an idea, finding positive outcomes for all parties, and out of these discussions good public programs flowed. In the end

we got much, much more than our original resources could ever hope to fund. Tap into your creative powers.

A further example of stretching resources without sacrificing quality or diminishing profile occurred when we had to open the MGF's *Milkshakes, Sundaes & Café Culture* exhibition. It was the last exhibition of the financial year, our funds were low and we were not quite sure what we would do to create an event that had a profile. One of my staff heard on the radio that the Cancer Council were holding their annual Biggest Morning Tea and invited organisations to join in. Council normally took part in this annual event. The theme of café culture and a giant morning tea had a natural synergy about them. We approached the person within council who normally organised this event and asked whether she would mind if we hosted the tea as the official opening for the exhibition - with the guarantee she would still receive all the proceeds for the Cancer Council. She was delighted. The event was widely publicised and a great success. It got many council staff members into the museum for the first time (none of them were going to miss the ritual of a morning cuppa!). There was a big crowd for the TV cameras and in the process we raised the most money ever given to the Cancer Council by Wagga Wagga City Council. Winners all round!

One further quick example. When we hosted *Women with Wings* I asked pilot Allana Arnott, a paraplegic due to a plane crash, to open the exhibition and provide a motivational talk to all Year 12 students in Wagga Wagga. It took a couple of phone calls and not only did Allana agree she also flew herself from Hobart to Wagga in her own purple helicopter at no expense to us. She is a great motivational speaker and inspirational human being, which made the event one of our best ever.

**The lessons in these examples is don't be limited by your limited resources – think of ways in which you can work with others to create exciting inclusive events with winners all round.** Luck tends to favour those who extend themselves and public programs provide a good excuse for doing so.

## **6. Develop partnerships and networks**

The previous two benefits are directly linked to the next benefit, which is the value of developing partnerships or networks. Public programs provide opportunities for developing partnerships and networks. And the flip side is equally true: **You increase the success of public programs considerably by developing partnerships and establishing networks.** And once again if these partnerships or networks don't exist you need to take the initiative and go out and either establish or find them. Pick up the phone and make that appointment!

In Wagga developing partnerships was an integral part of our museum culture. Unlike large museums we did not have a big staff; we started with two and a half

members, spread over two sites. And as public programs were simply one of a number of museum activities we engaged in - collection management and regional outreach being the other two - we had to raise the intensity of our individual performances. And this included my own. The reality of small or regional museums is that you do have to be turn the familiar phrase, *Jack of all trades, master of none*, on its head and be both jack *and* master of museum work. Delegation is normally a quick circle back to yourself! A tough ask as any one who has run a regional museum will know. By developing wider networks and establishing partnerships you make life so much easier for yourself, and achieve good results in the process.

Some examples. Over the years we worked very well with our library, theatre and art gallery on a wide range of public programs. This included co-hosting events, loaning one another exhibition material, use of each others facilities, sharing staff, joint mail outs, promotions and co-funding of projects.

This cross sectoral approach will soon be more widely known as Wagga Wagga was selected by DCITA for a case study as one of first two sites in Australia to investigate how our museum, library, art gallery and archive collaborated as collection based institutions. The National Forums Council are keen that this approach be adopted widely with regional hubs being established around the country. Chris Brophy, the consultant who won the tender for this contract, will submit her final report to Council next week and soon become widely available to the sector.

You don't necessarily have to be part of a city or shire council to develop partnerships. If you are an independent operator you could reach out to other institutions. One of the most rewarding in Wagga was the partnership we initiated with Charles Sturt University that produced mutually beneficial results. This included:

- students developing and presenting children's activities,
- final year graphic design students using the museum as a client for a major assignment,
- lecturers devising and presenting programs,
- co-authoring academic publications,
- and the use of the museum as a venue for special lectures organized by university staff.

If you have a university or a TAFE in your town test them out as a potential partner.

The media can also be coaxed to become partners. In the past couple of years we developed a good partnership with ABC Radio that improved our profile and gave them regular news stories. This included a live radio broadcast from the



museum as part of the station's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations and most recently regular fortnightly interviews about the museum and its programs.

## **7. Provide training and development opportunities for volunteers and staff**

A chicken or the egg question: Which comes first, a public program or the trained staff member to produce such a program? The reality in smaller museums is that you do it yourself or train a volunteer to do the task for you!

### **Public programs provide wonderful training and personal development opportunities for volunteers or staff.**

In my 5½ years at the *Museum of the Riverina* undoubtedly the most gratifying part of the job was taking volunteers on board and developing their innate talents to become successful practitioners in developing and presenting good public programs. It took a bit of time and effort and some were lost as they moved on to bigger and better things – in many instances thanks to our training!

To answer the chicken and egg question: As a guide don't let the absence of designated staff prevent you from developing and presenting public programs. Use your own talents. Combine these with the skill of volunteers. Throw in some creative thinking. Follow through and you will succeed!

And use your success to develop new staff positions. In Wagga all our public programs were started by myself and volunteers. Over time we managed to secure a casual position for this role. Later it became permanent part-time and hopefully next year it will have evolved into a full-time permanent and designated position. Like many things, think big and start small.

Vanessa Keenan, from the *Museum of the Riverina*, who is in the audience today is testament that the process works. She started as a volunteer, moved to a casual position and now holds the permanent part-time position. On each step along the way she showed tremendous enthusiasm and dedication, was eager to learn, experiment and make our public programs even better. She is one of our successes and proof that public programs do provide great opportunities for personal development and training while at the same time getting the job done.

## **8. Contribute to regional renewal**

To the last benefit. If you had to ask me what was the most important reason for regional or developing museums to present good public programs it would be this, **to improve your profile and performance over the long term and contribute to regional renewal**. Regional and local museums do not at present share the same level of public awareness or high visitation levels as our regional

art galleries and libraries do. We lag behind in this regard and if we are true believers in the museum cause, which I'm sure we all are, then there is a heightened sense of obligation, even duty, for regional museums to improve their act. The challenge for doing so rests squarely on the shoulders of the current generation of people who manage these facilities. Good public programs are one mechanism where museums can fill their sails and move out of the cultural doldrums to compete and earn the same respect as our art galleries and libraries. We need to increase the intensity in this regard to make up the lost ground. There is so much scope for regional museums. What is needed is a unity of purpose amongst you all to make the next ten to twenty years the era when regional museums finally come of age. It would be a great legacy to leave behind. Presenting engaging, regular, diverse and ongoing public programs is a good place to start.

**To conclude.** *What's in it for you?* There are no short cuts to success. As Vidal Sasson once said, "The only place where success comes before work is in the dictionary!" To derive each benefit you have to put in the effort and to quote Gary Player, "The harder I practice the luckier I get". If you put in the effort, embrace others and develop partners you will be helped along the way. Think big, start small. Make sure you provide time to renew your energy levels. Reward yourself, and others, for each success, no matter how small. Bring life and vitality into your museums. And most importantly of all *enjoy* the process.

Thomas Graham  
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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a sequel to *Cultural Viagra for Regional Museums: Making the Most Out of Traveling Exhibitions* presented at the MGF Regional Symposium in the Blue Mountains in 2003. It is available on the *Museum of the Riverina* website.

<sup>2</sup> I've added to a list taken from the excellent publication *Significant Events: A Museums & Galleries Training Program from Museums Australia Queensland* written by Dr Sharron Dickman & Kylie Winkworth, 2001. The publication is essential reading for anyone developing or presenting public programs. It is available on the AMOL website.