

Volunteering and the National Folk Festival - A Positive Approach

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The 1998 National Folk Festival

'The National Folk Festival is a significant national cultural event in that it exists to bring people together for the purpose of showcasing Australia's rich and diverse culture.'⁽ⁱ⁾

The National Folk Festival is a major festival in the Australian Capital Territory, held for four days over the Easter weekend. It is one of Australia's premier folk festivals, including over 1200 performers in 600 hours of programmed events. Visitor attendance at the festival has continued to grow since 1993, when it was moved to a permanent location, with attendance increasing from 8,000 in 1992, to 42,000 in 1998.

The Festival relies on volunteers for its organisation and success. Before, during and after the 1998 Festival approximately 700 volunteers will have assisted in the running of the event. This article looks at the importance of the volunteers, outlining the essential role of a successful volunteer program and the significance of volunteer evaluation, as a means of meeting the needs of volunteers, and running a successful festival.

The Volunteer Program

'People do things that are impossible and do it regularly'⁽ⁱⁱ⁾

'an event...run by the participants themselves...to be enjoyed through participation, by making it happen'⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾

These quotes really typify the amazing feats carried out by the volunteers at the Festival. The National Folk Festival's volunteer program is a year long commitment. However, most of the activity involved with the program (eg. publicity, recruitment, selection, meetings, social events) takes place in the four months directly before the Festival.

The Festival's volunteer structure consists of 35 key volunteer coordinators who plan and manage their respective areas. In 1998 they were supported by a team of 300 'core volunteers': those volunteers who contribute 16 hours or more of their time either before, during or after the Festival. There was also a huge team of volunteers who contribute fewer hours. Coordinators and their teams are required for many operational areas, including: ticket office, performer reception, festival shop, childcare, Master of Ceremonies, festival office, camping and parking, security, bar, performer transport and instrument lock-up, stall holders, garbology, and the volunteer

management team. As you can see, this includes virtually every operational aspect of the event.

There has been an effort to 'professionalise' the volunteer program, necessary as the festival gets bigger. This incorporates informing and educating volunteers eg. policies and procedures, job descriptions, rights and responsibilities, communication chain, insurance, orientation. This year a training day was also created in conjunction with Volunteering ACT to provide the coordinators with skills for 'Managing Volunteers'.

The sense of community is an important motivation for the festival's volunteers. Social activities are offered, alongside the training, orientation and debriefing meetings, to provide the sense of being part of a team. Rewarding volunteers is crucial for providing recognition for their efforts. Benefits during the festival include: complimentary tickets (plus camping), badges, volunteer kitchen, a healing room (massage and healing therapies), volunteer party (dinner and lots of prizes!), training, T-shirts. During the 1998 Festival a video was filmed of the volunteers - a great way to capture the wonderful energy and spirit of the volunteers!

In 1997 it was decided to run a survey of the volunteers at the festival. It was conducted in an effort to develop a stronger understanding of the planning and organisation required to run a volunteer management program that attracts and retains its volunteers. The research was based on a self completed questionnaire handed to volunteers during the 1997 Festival. Demographic information, past festival involvement, roles undertaken, hours worked, volunteer motivations and expectations, experiences and likelihood of return were the type of questions included in the survey. Questions also provided an opportunity for the volunteers to offer their own qualitative insights into what they considered key issues, concerns and potential areas for improvement with respect to the volunteer program. Results, on the whole, provided an optimistic response from the volunteers. For example, 92.5% indicated that their expectations had been met, and 92% of former volunteers indicated that they would like to work at the 1998 Festival. The results have been invaluable in providing a volunteer program that meets the needs of the volunteers. A similar survey was also carried out at the 1998 festival; the results have yet to be processed.

The Future - More Happy Volunteers

An efficient and effective volunteer management program becomes increasingly complex and important as the festival continues to rely on an increasing number of coordinators and core volunteers, who are central to the success of the festival. Demonstrating appreciation of the volunteers' contribution to the festival, keeping them 'happy', and more importantly retaining their dedication towards the Festival are critical. Volunteer evaluation is also integral, if management is to understand volunteer experiences at future festivals, so that necessary changes can be incorporated into the volunteer program to ensure the festival's continued success.

References:

- (i) National Folk Festival 1994. 28th Review and Strategy, National Folk Festival, P1.
- (ii) Ramsden F. quoted in Cameron N. 1995 Maleny Folk Festival: The Art of Celebration, Mimburi Press P113.
- (iii) op cit Cameron N. 1995 P113.

Julie Hodges is the Volunteer Coordinator and a member of the Board of Directors of the National Folk Festival (both voluntary positions). These activities have been integral to her interest in researching event volunteer management. Julie is also a lecturer in the Leisure and Tourism Program, University of Newcastle. She is currently carrying out further research in this area. Julie will conduct a pre-conference workshop at the 1998 National Conference of Volunteering.