

COMMUNICATING WITH GENERATION Y

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ABSTRACT

The power of effective communication in the area of science and medicine has been well established in the literature and also by many practical examples by successful science communicators. However, there are few examples where organisations have undertaken a strategic and long term approach to communicating with the current youth market, who could be referred to as “Generation Y”. The Murray-Darling Basin (MDB) covers an area of over a thousand square kilometres in south-eastern Australia. Whilst sparsely populated (a little over two million people reside in the Basin) it is Australia’s food bowl and home to a wide array of unique flora and fauna. This paper provides information on how the Murray Darling Basin Commission (MDBC) has developed a strategic approach to youth education. It summarises four initiatives that the MDBC has undertaken over the last decade in promoting a message to an emerging generation of youth within the Basin.

Keywords: Murray-Darling Basin Commission, youth education, education investment, investment principles, youth teaching other youth.

INTRODUCTION

Science communication has come a long way in the last three decades. Today many organisations have and will continue to undertake a deliberate and serious effort to communicate and encourage the emerging generation of scientists within our youth. Youth are benefiting from work behind the scenes by science communicators in dedicated education programs, in national science competitions and festivals that are deliberately focussed on science for the youth market. Who would have thought thirty years ago that in Australia there would be a national science question or even an entire week devoted to science?

However two important questions remain: how can we ensure that the emerging generation are provided with the capacity to consider, engage and utilise science? and how can an organisation establish a more strategic, long term approach to youth engagement?

Science communication objective - *to establish a long term investment strategy in the education of youth about natural resource management in the Murray-Darling Basin.*

The Murray-Darling Basin Commission (MDBC) was established in the early 1980’s in recognition that the long term future of this basin needed a whole of catchment approach to the management of its natural resources. This recognition also posed a range of questions relating to how to engage the public in valuing the basin and its many unique assets. A range of education projects and programs were established and were very successful in raising

awareness of the basin for a wide range of people, particularly school children. The emphasis on promoting the value of the resources of the basin has provided an excellent foundation to the current generation of land managers and scientists who are now grappling with the many issues that effective natural resources management poses.

In 1999 the MDBC reviewed its investment in education. As the MDBC is funded from each of the six governments that have an active interest in the basin, (the Australian Government, the state governments of New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria and South Australia, and the Australian Capital Territory), a jurisdictional working group was established to develop a new long term strategy for education investment.

This strategy built on the successful work undertaken during the 1980's and 1990's but established agreed principles for education investment and defined desired education outcomes for each of the communication partners identified in the Murray Darling Basin Initiative's Communication Strategy (MDBC, 2000).

This communication strategy has divided the target audiences into four partner categories:

- Basin resource users and managers;
- Basin resource use regulators and policy makers;
- Basin resource use advisers and funders; and
- Broader Australian Community.

Education providers for the emerging youth market were placed into the Basin resource use advisers and funders category. The placement into this broad category is recognition at a strategic level that education providers are providing an important role in the preparation and provision of advice on the future management of the Basin.

THE SCIENCE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

The process that was utilised was based on establishment of an agreed investment framework and then implementation through well researched projects.

Step one – development of an education investment strategy. The process for the development of this education investment strategy was guided by a number of reviews of current education material but also a unique scoping study that was undertaken by the University of New England. In this study a range of options were canvassed on how the MDBC should invest in education at a primary, secondary and tertiary level. The study specifically looked at institutions within the basin and provided an overview of the current and future needs of students, teachers and lecturers. As an internal scoping document, this study has provided an invaluable foundation for the current work undertaken in the area of education investment.

The report provided a basis for the development of a number of education investment principles. The following common principles are now used for all future MDB education activities undertaken either by the MDBC Office or sponsored by individual program areas:

- Investment in education will reflect the definition of education as: *A process in which a society shares knowledge, skills and attitudes with its citizens either formally or informally;*

- All education investment must take into account the specific needs of diverse partner groups;
- Education investment by the MDBC will primarily be in basin-wide activities.
- All education investment will have an agreed MDBC quality assurance process in place prior to investment occurring;
- All education activities will have a clearly defined internal and external communication plan (including evaluation and feedback loops);
- All education activities will ensure that evaluation of the education outcomes is considered and appropriate strategies incorporated in the project design before proceeding;
- Education action moving from short term to long term commitment;
- Education activities must (through the MDBC communication planning framework) clearly define the partner category, the desired relationships and how this will enhance the implementation of Integrated Catchment Management (ICM) across the Basin;
- Education investment will be integrated across the newly formed program areas delivering ICM outcomes; and
- Priority will be given to education activities that fulfil a defined education gap in the proposed ten-year implementation of the ICM Policy Statement.

Step two – Define generic desired education outcomes. The investment document also outlined the desired education outcome that the MDBC aimed to achieve for each of the four communication partners. The desired generic education outcomes for education providers were:

- Enhanced training and professional development opportunities for those developing environmental education;
- All basin-wide education activities use best practice in research, evaluation and quality management;
- Partners using an expanded partnership and education network across the basin based on a cross sectoral approach between all jurisdictional partners; and
- Resource allocation for education is coordinated across the basin and delivered in a targeted manner between the community and jurisdictional partners.

Step three – Establish projects to invest in. After the agreed investment principles, four main areas of investment were identified and projects activated. It was agreed that the MDBC would undertake a long term investment strategy that would comprise of:

- **capacity building for primary school aged children** (4 – 11 year old) – delivered through an expansion of the successful Special Forever program;
- **youth teaching other youth in secondary areas** (12 – 16 year old) – delivered through major sponsorship of a biannual MDBC International River Health Conference and follow on youth conferences across the basin;
- **provision of accurate and accessible information for the tertiary sector and specific work with visual arts students** (16 year old plus) ; and
- **Establishment of a specific Murray-Darling Basin Leadership project** (for the over 18 year olds).

Results – This approach has led to the establishment of an agreed and long term approach to education investment.

The involvement of primary aged school children across the Basin in Special Forever has now been an active MDBC project for 11 years. It is a long term partnership with the Primary English Teaching Association (a national organisation) and aims at giving young children the capacity and ability to express what they feel about their part of the Basin. This is delivered in poetry, short stories or artwork. In 1999 the project was revised and each year approximately 20 000 children are registered. Evaluation indicates that there are indeed many more people influenced by this successful initiative and it has been selected as an example of best practice for education at an International conference in 2001. Further information about the project can be found at the project website (Anon).

To complement this initiative a large section of reference material on the MDBC website (Anon A) has been incorporated, rewritten and developed into a dedicated education section. This section was developed by education specialists and tested extensively before use. A link to the education section is found on the home page of the MDBC website.

Youth teaching other youth in secondary areas – To encourage older youth an alternative approach based on youth teaching youth was favoured. This has been delivered through involvement in a biennial MDBC International River Health Conference. This conference was developed by a young person, Arron Wood, who is passionate about youth development and capacity building. Since 1999 Arron has run three conferences with the last in 2003 involving over 460 students and 140 teachers from across Australian and overseas. The MDBC has recently committed to being the major sponsor of the next conference in October 2005 following the success of the concept of youth teaching other youth. This conference is based on the premise that if we want youth to take charge of their environment it must be youth who teach other youth. Whilst accepted as an existing education principle, this conference is unique in its scope, size and emphasis on ensuring that youth teach other youth about how to make a long term commitment to the improvement of the natural resources that sustain us.

To maintain the momentum that emerges from such an event the MDBC expanded this investment into a series of 7 regional two day conferences around the Basin. Each conference involves approximately 200 – 250 youth and is based on the same foundation of youth teaching other youth about how to manage natural resources. The conferences feature a range of presentations and workshops and field activities. Additional information can be found on the project website (Anon B). In addition to this an allocation has been provided for smaller one day youth workshops where youth can teach other youth about local natural resource issues.

Provision of accurate and accessible information for the tertiary sector and specific work with visual arts students. The third investment area is with tertiary students. Whilst a priority was provided for the expansion of Special Forever and the development of youth conferences, the MDBC has provided considerable resources in the development of its web site to ensure that information aimed at the tertiary level is accessible and accurate. It has also invested in the production of major texts that outline scientific work on rivers as ecological systems and reports on research into riverine areas. All publications are now provided free of charge to each of the 189 public libraries and 23 catchments within the Murray-Darling Basin. Commercial distribution and promotion has been improved through a partnership with CSIRO Publishing (Anon C).

Another area where the MDBC has invested in communicating with Generation Y is in the arts. In a collaborative venture with the Australian National University (ANU) School of Art

field research program, the MDBC has supported visual arts students travelling to areas within the Basin to seek inspiration from both the physical landscape and the communities that live there. The art produced in response to this consultative field experience invariably interprets a range of environmental issues facing these areas. The students and staff also exchange knowledge and experiences with local artists and through resulting exhibitions make a contribution to community debate and provide another way of highlighting the unique features of the Murray-Darling Basin. Artwork from exhibitions has been photographed and is now included in a number of major MDBC publications as an illustration of an alternative view or documented experience.

Establishment of a specific Murray Darling Basin Leadership project. A final area of investment is in the area of leadership for the basin for people over the age of 18. Investment in social change will be enhanced by ensuring that leaders within the basin are nourished and encouraged to take on the many challenges that confront resource management. Building on a successful existing rural leadership program the MDBC partnered with the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation to develop the Murray-Darling Basin Leadership Program (MDBLP). The program is designed for people who are passionate about the Basin and want to develop their understanding and skills to protect its environmental, economic and social assets.

The MDBLP develops understanding of integrated catchment management in the Murray-Darling Basin and participants gain leadership skills that will enable them to work with their communities and others in the long term interests of the basin. Each program involves up to 15 participants drawn from diverse sectors within the basin community and basin governments. To reflect the diverse population in the basin, the program aims to include participants from indigenous people, women, and people from non-English speaking backgrounds.

EVALUATION

Evaluation is incorporated into each area of investment before commencement and is an agreed investment principle. The Special Forever project has an allocation in the project funding of approximately \$30 000 AUS to undertake a mid term, external evaluation based on a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods. The result of two formal evaluations has meant that the MDBC has been willing to continue an investment of \$1.2M AUS over a three year period in this project. Numbers of registered participants have been steady at approximately 20 000 per year.

The youth conferences have evaluation incorporated throughout the event and is carried out by independent evaluators. The 2003 youth conference was externally reviewed by the Tasmanian University and supervised by an expert in sociology. Each large conference attracts in the order of 500 students and additional 140 teachers. The regional conferences attract between 150 – 200 participants, resulting in approximately 1600 youth over the entire program of 8 conferences. An additional 4 000 students are also engaged in smaller one day workshops. Evaluation is undertaken at each conference either through qualitative or quantitative methods. Copies of this evaluation can be provided by the author.

The investment with tertiary art students is also reviewed annually independently using quantitative and qualitative techniques. Each year between 15 and 20 Australian National University final year fine art students are involved and the course is fully subscribed.

Information on the education section of the MDBC web site is monitored constantly for revisions with feedback invited and statistics on use, page visits, length of visits and downloads collated monthly and analysed. Current monthly statistics indicate that there are over one million hits on the website, 40 000 visitors, and on average downloads of 42 Gb of data. Less than 4 complaints a month are received a month.

CONCLUSION

Communicating with youth can be achieved if an organisation is willing to take on a long term strategic approach. The investment in “Generation Y” is not easy and requires an organisation to think outside the square to ensure that it is able to successfully engage with these young people. Before an organisation invests in this area it is crucial that a review of existing activities is undertaken, that it defines and scopes what can or should be done and then ensures that a long term and agreed set of investment principles are developed.

This work is required as a foundation for investment and should also include an assessment or statement of the desired education outcome that the organisation would like to have with that communication partner. The MDBC is investing in a long term education strategy that aims at providing a tiered approach from primary to tertiary. It has now been recognised that to be successful with the next generation an organisation needs to invest and encourage youth to be able to express how they feel about the natural resources in their area, ensure that youth are encouraged to teach other youth about environmental issues, continually ensure that information is accessible and invest in providing training to future leaders. To science communicators I would encourage you not to be daunted by Generation Y, embrace what they have to say and work with them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The assistance provided by Mr Andrew Connolly (Primary English Teaching Association), Mr Julian Prior (University of New England), Mr Arron Wood (Firestarter Communications) and Mr John Reid (Australian National University) in the preparation of this paper is gratefully acknowledged.

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