Simple Secrets of Successful Community Groups

Over 400 tips on running a successful community group

Foreword

When people ask me for ideas on how they can improve their community group, it is rarely the latest you-beaut theory or major new innovation that makes the most impact. It is more likely to be the little things or the simple ideas that may have been overlooked in the search for a quick fix or immediate solution.

The reality I have found in more than 30 years of being involved in the community sector as a participant, member, board member, CEO, advocate, stirrer and, at various times, as a grantmaker and grantseeker, is that there is no miracle cure for community groups. There is no one single thing that will guarantee a group's future or turn it from a struggling outfit into a comfortable organisation.

Instead it is a series of small advances and incremental improvements that help groups to grow and flourish, and to expand the impact they have on their local community. Very few community groups stand still which is why we have such a thriving, vigorous and exciting community sector in Australia, a sector that has been responsible for so many of the advances in our society over the past two centuries.

So what is this book about? It is about trying to supply some of those little secrets, tips and ideas that come from successful community groups and spread them around. We don't want one group having a "secret to success". We want that knowledge passed on so other groups can save time, money and resources.

It is about taking a good idea of what you see happening with a self-help group in Lakes Entrance and then finding a forum to share that information with an indigenous group in Moree or a sporting club in Dalby. It is about providing common-sense advice for groups so they can build and improve and hopefully be able to do so in a more efficient and effective manner.

For me the columns are also about celebrating the great resourcefulness and community spirit of our community groups and the massive impact they have had on all our lives.

All of these columns have appeared in newspapers around Australia and I would like to take the opportunity to extend a special thank you to all the newspaper editors from around the country who have run the columns. We appreciate their ongoing strong support for their local community groups. The response I have had from local community group staff and volunteers has been fantastic, particularly those who have read the columns and felt inspired to try something new or even just felt encouraged that they are heading down the right path.

There is no doubt that many of the victories achieved by local community groups over the years could never have been achieved without the active support of their local newspapers and for that we are grateful. I hope you find this book a useful resource in managing your group.

RHONDA GALBALLY AO
Chief Executive Officer

Contents

Introduction

Since March, 2001, Rhonda Galbally, the Chief Executive Officer of www.ourcommunity.com.au has produced an informative and entertaining weekly newspaper column which each week looks at a specific aspect of managing a community group and offers ideas, tips and advice to those who have taken up the task of running community groups.

From small beginnings, the column has grown in both popularity and spread and is now distributed to many newspapers across Australia each week as well as going to many peak associations and groups for use in their own publications.

The weekly columns were never designed to be a comprehensive treatise on an issue (you can never do that in 500 words) but more a basic, common-sense guide to help groups, particularly small and medium organisations, to navigate their way through a range of topics. Those topics have included risk management, grant submission writing, fundraising and special events, marketing and communications, improving and expanding your supporter base and running a more effective board, newsletter production, running a special event, or using technology to best effect.

These columns are aimed at opening the discussion rather than providing the last word. We suggest you use them as a starting point and seek expert advice and opinion where required.

All in all, the columns in this book contain more than 400 individual tips and pointers. Whether you are a sports group, self-help group or community progress association, this book contains essential advice to get you thinking about new methods to help your group run more efficiently and effectively.
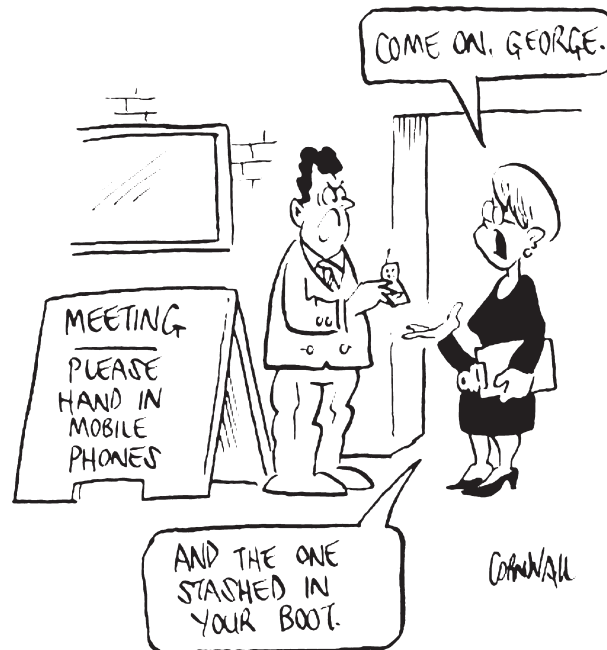
Making your media release work for you

WHEN it comes to getting their message into the local media, some community groups are world champion spruikers, rarely letting a week pass without some mention.

Other groups ignore the media, preferring to concentrate on their work and believing that sooner or later people will find their organisation and write glowing words about their good work.

Unfortunately it rarely works like that. The truth is, you can't write about something you don't know about.

The best way to increase your chances of having your local newspaper, radio or TV station run stories about your organisation is to tell them!

This is easier if you consider the media an important element of everything your group does. If you have an interesting story, your local media should be among the first to know.

Many groups will have strong contacts with local editors, chiefs-of-staff or individual reporters and can call them personally. Others will rely on distributing a press release that provides reporters with the basic points of your story.

- Work out your audience and whether your story is of local, state or national interest, or if it is relevant to a special interest or industry-based magazine.

- Before writing the release, list the most interesting points and then order them from most important to least important.

- Try to find a human angle rather than talk about inanimate objects. Instead of writing about the 27th annual town fair, talk about who will be the headline act, who will open it, march in it or lead it.

- Work out an attention-grabbing or clever headline for the top of the release to grab attention immediately. Make sure you date it and address it to the attention of the relevant person (i.e. chief-of-staff).

- In the first two paragraphs, answer the obvious questions such as: WHO? WHAT? WHERE? WHEN? WHY? And HOW? List the points of interest in descending order from the most interesting down. Don't bury the best bit at the end.

- Include quotes from your group's spokesperson to add life to the release as well as clarity where needed.

- Use clear, concise, simple language and avoid jargon.

- Type the release with enough spacing between lines and paragraphs to make it easy to read.

- Highlight details such as the location, date and time (if your release is about an upcoming event/announcement etc) and also the contact details for your spokesperson. Include all phone numbers where they can be contacted on the day the release goes out.

- When finished, double-check all spellings, titles, phone numbers and details.

- Send it to your targeted media outlets.

The power of the words "Thank You"

COMMUNITY groups are often very good at asking for donations or support but at times not quite so good at saying Thank You - probably the most important phrase in the fundraising handbook.

Think of it yourself. How many times have you donated money or given support to a group and never learned how much was raised, how the money was used or whether the project was a success? And how many times were you actually thanked for your support? The answer is probably not enough!

People don't give to be thanked but it does make us feel good and does make us feel appreciated. Saying Thank You is good manners but it is also good business because the fact that you said Thank You the first time certainly increases your chances of future success.

You don't just want one-off donors. You want to convert those people into donors who love your group, who want to get involved in it and who have an active long-term interest in your group's future success.

Community groups need to nurture donors and supporters in the way that good businesses look after customers. It is far easier and more cost-effective to work to maintain the donors you have than to go out and find new ones to replace them.

Hopefully these tips will help groups set up a system to ensure thanking and cultivating donors and supporters becomes second nature.

- Set up a process where you record donations and support from individuals, businesses and foundations/grantmaking bodies and whether they have been acknowledged.

- Develop a policy for saying Thank You. You could make it where any donation over $10 receives a letter of thanks, a donation of $150 will receive a letter plus phone call from the president, while a donation of $500 or more results in a letter and invitation from the president to be a guest at a future event. Tailor a system to suit your group.

- Draft a Thank You letter you can tailor where necessary. In it thank donors for their generosity, tell them how the money will be used and the practical effect of their donation i.e. provide meals for 20 homeless people, provide uniforms for the under 10s, buy 50 books for the kindergarten.

- Tell them about future events where their support would be again appreciated.

- If it is a major contribution, you may want to consider whether to invite the donor onto an advisory group to increase their involvement in your group.

- Publicly acknowledge your donors and supporters whether in an event program, your newsletter, website, in a speech, or in your annual report (ask their permission first)

- Offer to send your regular newsletters and project updates so donors maintain ownership of the project their money helped finance.

- Build the relationship and the regular communications and encourage them to become part of the group. You not only win a long-term supporter but a new member as well.

Drafting new talent onto your board

ONE of the hardest things for any community group is to ensure you have a vibrant, energetic, enthusiastic board that can not only deal with the problems of the day but map out a vision for the future - and guide you along the path to achieving that vision.

For many groups, board or committee election time is a nightmare. Often, positions on the board are filled by the same hard-core supporters and volunteers who turn up and give their time come rain, hail or shine.

While this method ensures you have committed people who are genuine supporters of your organisation, there are times when you may also need to inject specific skills to make your group more effective.

One thing I have found in recent years is that many successful community groups are adopting the tactics of corporate boards in aggressively targeting and recruiting board members. They are seeking out people with specific skills they can bring to the table, whether it be marketing, the law, finance, IT, construction or whatever.

On our website we have a number of help sheets on effective boards but here are a few thoughts to help groups work out how to target and recruit potential board members.

- Work out your group's key objectives over the next three years, what skills you need to achieve them and if you have gaps in your present committee. For example, if you are embarking on a major construction project look for someone with construction/building experience who can provide expert knowledge.

- Work out how many people you want on your board/committee. Too many makes it unwieldy and ineffective.

- Compile a list of possible board members. Talk to other members, staff, business colleagues, local leaders and other groups for potential talent. Follow up stories in local papers about interesting, enthusiastic "doers". Keep in mind the skills that your group needs.

- Once you have your "possibles" list, approach them and explain what your group does, its vision and where you think they could help out.

- Ensure they have the qualities you need. Can they work in a team situation? Do they have a genuine interest in your group? Are they prepared to put in the time?

- One way to get an idea about someone's suitability for a committee or board position is to trial them on a sub-committee or in an advisory position for a particular project. This is also a good way to nurture emerging leaders.

- Keep an open mind. Often the best convert and keenest board member is someone who you had previously never considered.

You've got email. You've got power

COMMUNITY groups are always looking for the latest edge or boost to make their group or organisation more effective.

Whenever I am asked by people what essential tools community groups should have, my first response is usually a question: "Do you have email?"

It is without doubt one of the most powerful tools in the armoury of any community group, enabling speedy communication with their own members, supporters, donors and friends as well as potential supporters.

Probably the greatest bonus with email is that it is inexpensive. It costs no more to send out 500 emails than it does to send out one. It can save community groups an enormous amount on printing and mailing or faxing of newsletters, invitations, alerts and regular letters.

Email can provide immediate benefits for community groups. Here are a few examples:

- You can use it for quick communication. Unlike mail where it might take a day or two to reach the target audience or faxes where you have to send out to everyone, your email arrives in seconds.

- You reach your targeted audience. Your email arrives on the computer screen of the intended recipient and enables you to have a direct person-to-person contact. With mail, sometimes other people decide if it is worth passing on.

- As well as saving money on design, printing, postage or fax sendouts, email saves you time. If you send out a newsletter you don't have to have people putting it in envelopes, addressing envelopes and putting stamps on. It's a great timesaver.

- Email enables you to receive instant feedback to your communications. It is essentially a call to action that people feel they must respond to, whether it is a proposal, an invitation to an event or a response to a request for donations.

- Email allows you to communicate with like-minded groups around the country and/or the world. You can exchange ideas, take part in email forums or community discussion groups, download relevant advice from the www.ourcommunity.com.au website and send to others as well as quickly spread your own group's message.

- You can use it as a powerful fundraising tool by keeping an up-to-date list of donors and possible donors that you can reach in an instant and also keep them up to date with how your group is putting their donations to use.

- It provides another contact point. Add your email address to all correspondence along with your phone number, fax number, address and web address.

How a budget drives your dollar further

A RENTAL car company made famous the line that "Budget drives your dollar further". It's a motto that could just as easily apply to community organisations.

Framing a budget is certainly one of the most important duties for any community or not-for-profit group.

Accurately predicting how much money will come into your organisation and how much you will need to spend is crucial to your ability to continue your community work and will help avoid any nasty surprises.

Sadly, one of the main reasons community groups cease to exist is not because the need for their services diminishes but because of money. Or, to be more accurate, the lack of money.

While Our Community has developed the EasyGrants and Raising Funds newsletters to help groups find funding, every organisation still needs an effective, realistic, properly-researched budget.

Here are a few essential tips:

- Use a computer rather than pen and pencil. These days most spreadsheet programs are very user-friendly.

- Start early. Ensure you have all the necessary details on programs, staffing, equipment needs, expenses etc to produce a budget for Board approval well before the new financial year begins on July 1.

- The best place to start is last year's budget. Look at what you spent and where you under-estimated or over-estimated. How much have costs gone up since last year? Have you employed extra staff? Are there areas for savings?

- Coordinate the budget with your strategic plan. You will need to make allowances in your budget to pay for the new projects or services.

- Spell out all your expenditure. This includes salaries, equipment, rent, electricity/gas, telephone, stationery, photocopying/printing, insurance, advertising, internet access, mail, travel and sundries.

- Work out how much money is coming into your organisation (income). This will include items such as grants, donations, charges for services, sales, memberships and money from major fundraisers.

- Go through and estimate how much each item is going to cost you (expenditure) or make you (income). A sound rule is to be conservative about estimating income and expansive about estimating expenditure.

- Check the bottom line. Then go back and repeat the process, checking to make sure all your assumptions on income and expenditure are realistic and allow room for any unforseen problems/emergencies.

- If your planned expenditure is more than your income, you will need to ask if there is a way you can raise more money or cut costs. Or are you prepared to use savings to pay for your expanded service?

- Monitor your budget on a weekly/monthly basis. There will be seasonal fluctuations but it is there to help you to identify a financial problem before it becomes serious.

Developing a budget takes time but it ensures your group makes the most of its limited resources and - more importantly - helps to ensure your survival.