

THE FUTURE OF VOLUNTEER MANAGED FESTIVALS – WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

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ABSTRACT:

Agricultural shows are community based festivals that represent a majority of festivals staged in rural destinations. These shows are predominantly volunteer managed festivals which are finding it difficult to survive in an increasingly competitive and challenging environment. However little is understood about the volunteer managers of these festivals in terms of their motivation, skills and effectiveness in managing these festivals. To address these issues this paper has three aims. First it will present a review of the literature on volunteer managed festivals. Second the paper presents preliminary findings from a study conducted during 2005/2006 on rural agricultural shows. Third this paper discusses the implications for the management of future rural agricultural shows.

Keywords: volunteer festival management, rural agricultural shows

INTRODUCTION

Festivals originate from within the community in response to a need or desire to celebrate a community's unique identity (Small, Edwards and Sheridan, 2005) and have been defined as 'themed public occasions designed to occur for a limited duration that celebrate valued aspects of a community's way of life' (Douglas, Douglas and Derrett, 2001, p. 358). Agricultural Shows are community based festivals that seek to 'promote and celebrate agricultural endeavours and produce as well as providing social and recreational opportunities for a community' (Meyer, 2004, p.1). Agricultural shows are part of the festival calendar in many countries that have an agricultural industry focus including the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, New Zealand, the European Union and more recently some African nations.

These community based festivals have a long and important history (Darian-Smith and Wills, 1999). In Australia agricultural shows are established festivals that have been held in many rural communities, regional towns and metropolitan cities since early European settlement (Broome, and Jackomos, 1998; Darian-Smith and Wills, 1999). Originally these shows were developed as a vehicle for agricultural and produce display. In the 1960s the agricultural show was described as 'almost a characteristic feature of Australian life' (Gilder, sourced in Broome and Jackomos, 1998, p.21). In Australia the agricultural show encompasses many themes and has grown to include a wider focus of entertainment and leisure (Darian-Smith and Wills, 1999; Australian Council of Agricultural Shows, [ACAS] 2000) for the communities that they represent. However there has been a decline in the number of shows being staged in Australia, primarily in rural communities. In 1999 there were 657 agricultural shows in Australia (Darian-Smith and Wills, 1999) and the following year this dropped to 617 shows (ACAS, 2000). Anecdotal evidence suggests that this figure has continued to decline (Cuthbertson, 2001; Harris, 2001; Bolling, 2003; Briggs, 2004) along with attendance numbers. Should these trends continue the sustainability of agricultural shows will be threatened. These festivals are organised and staged by agricultural show societies. Show society membership is drawn from the local community and is often comprised of persons who have had connections with the show movement.

Volunteering has been a consistent and important component of agricultural shows (Getz, 1997, pp 7-8). Similar to other community based events, agricultural shows rely on volunteers to manage, organise and stage the event. For the purpose of this paper volunteers are defined as 'people who give unpaid help in the form of time, service or skills' (Volunteering Australia, 2005). Although the study of volunteer involvement in festivals and events is extensive much of this research is focused on festivals with a sports theme including; volunteer expectations and motivations (Williams, Dossa and Tompkins, 1995; Andrew, 1996; Ralston, Downward and Lumsdon, 2004; Johnston, Twynam and Farrell, 2000); volunteer dependability (Cuskelly, Auld, Harrington and Coleman, 2004); volunteer learning, demographics and motivation (Elstad, 1997); and dependence on volunteers (Harrington, Cuskelly and Auld, 2000). However the management skills and effectiveness of volunteers who stage festivals is not well understood (Getz and Frisby, 1988). The following section will present a review of the literature as it relates to festival management and the participation of volunteers in festivals with an emphasis on rural agricultural shows.

VOLUNTEER MANAGED FESTIVALS

An increasing body of knowledge argues that the majority of festivals start out or remain as community based and managed by not for profit organisations that have primarily developed from a community 'grass roots' connection (Getz and Frisby, 1988; Getz, 1993; Higham and Ritchie, 2001). However the planning and administration of shows is becoming more complex and time consuming for show societies to manage (Truss, 2002, p.i). Truss states that 'many committees are finding that they need to behave like small businesses in the way that they prepare for each show and plan for their long term futures' (2002: p.i).

A number of arguments have been developed to explain why show societies are facing these challenges (Darian-Smith and Wills, 1999; ACAS, 2000). First rural communities are in decline and as populations are dwindling, there are fewer people to carry on the role of festival committee member. Second in the past the role of a festival committee member carried with it a certain prestige due to the importance of agriculture in the community as well as the festival itself. With the importance of agriculture declining in many areas the prestigious nature of the role is also diminishing. Third, the population of these communities is aging with fewer people able to carry on the roles of festival committee member. Even though some rural communities are experiencing an inward migration, new community members have little connection with agriculture and therefore limited interest in the festival as a participant let alone a volunteer. This suggests that shows are not producing festival experiences that meet changing interests whilst retaining an agricultural focus. Fourth, increasingly people must travel outside their communities for employment resulting in less available time for voluntary work. Finally show society volunteers do not necessarily possess the management skills required to deal with the external environmental challenges they are facing.

Getz and Frisby (1988, p. 27) argue that 'management sophistication in festivals is more likely related to the size of the community than the age of the event'. This is because larger sized communities potentially have more community members who possess the required levels of skill and a greater number of people from which to recruit volunteers. Later Getz (2002) found that small and unsophisticated festival organisations' go through cycles of success and decline, or fail completely in part due to volunteer problems. Volunteers either 'burnt out' and left the organisation or the number of volunteers required to stage the festival was difficult to sustain. Declines in volunteer participation were also likely to result in a stale product. He argues that external factors, outside the control of the festival manager or committee, whilst often difficult to predict, can be managed if those in charge have the capacity to develop strategies to respond to these changes. These studies demonstrate that the role and involvement of the volunteer festival manager was a contributing factor to either festival effectiveness or failure.

FESTIVAL VOLUNTEERS

Agricultural shows as community festivals are characterised by a heavy reliance on volunteers for their management and organisation and it is argued that without commitment from volunteers many events would not take place (Elstad, 2003, p. 99). Although many festivals rely on volunteers for their operational requirements, within rural agricultural shows volunteers take on the roles of initiators and drivers as well as managers. In this context volunteer managers are responsible for all stages of the festival production including program content, operational activities and management of other volunteers who become involved in staging the festival. There is an expectation that these managers are skilled in all areas of business management and are able to negotiate and comply with increasingly complex legal and operational requirements imposed by government and other agencies. Yet Getz (2002) argues that volunteers lack experience and training in event management and operations.

From his observation of festival volunteers Getz (1997, p 197-198) suggests that there may be specific and unique traits for these volunteers, compared to volunteers who are involved in other activities. Festival volunteers are enthusiastic and supportive of the cause behind the event or for the event itself rather than the organisation responsible. He also noted that festival volunteers want to have fun during the experience. This brings in the notion that volunteering is a leisure activity, a view that was first developed by Henderson (1981) and then furthered by Stebbins (1982). Edwards (2005, p. 5) considers the concept of volunteering as a leisure activity as important because 'it raises the notion of self-interestedness, turning the focus onto the volunteer and what they get out of volunteering rather than the contribution they make to the wider community'. Implications for sustaining agricultural shows will arise from better understanding festival volunteer managers who carry out the duties similar to that of a festival team who are normally remunerated for their work.

To address the issues discussed here the paper presents an exploratory study of volunteer management of a rural agricultural show. The following sections present the preliminary findings from this study and discuss the implications for the management of future rural agricultural shows.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in late 2005 and during 2006. The festival used in this study was chosen on the basis that it was held within a community that had a growing population, it had been staged over a number years and was located in a rural area that was classified as having an agriculture industry and history.

Data Collection

Document analysis was conducted to understand the show society's history, current operations and to develop a community profile. In depth, semi structured interviews were undertaken with seven show society volunteers involved in the festival as show society member, competitor/exhibitor and advertiser/sponsor. A total of three questionnaire 'prompt' lists were developed to focus on the three different roles of respondents. The questionnaires were focussed upon several key areas including length of volunteer involvement; type of involvement; planning and operations; decision-making in terms of show programming; marketing and pricing; and festival evaluation. Limited demographic information was also collected. Interviews were designed to last approximately one to two hours however some respondents were extremely willing to discuss questions in great detail. As a result some interviews lasted over three hours.

Seven interviews were conducted. A combination of expert, snowball and purposive sampling methods were used to select respondents. This realised a total of six (6) interviews with volunteers from various positions within the show. The President and Secretary of the show society were interviewed as these positions are seen as crucial to the planning and management

of the show, particularly in relation to the focus of management practices. Persons who were committee members and competitors and exhibitors were also interviewed to obtain the perspective of a group who are stakeholders as well as target customers. An advertiser/ sponsor, the seventh interview, provided an external stakeholder view. The advertiser/sponsor has supported the show in both cash and kind for over 16 years. All interviews were conducted either at the show society office or in the homes/businesses of the respondent; locations where each respondent felt most comfortable. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. Respondents were sent a copy of the transcript for interview cross check. Transcripts were then entered into Nvivo and analysed using content analysis of aspects relevant to the study. The following section presents the findings of this study focusing upon the management practices of the volunteer managers of the show.

FINDINGS

Background to the Case Study

The show is held in a rural Local Government Area (LGA) that has experienced consistent growth rate. In 2001 the population of this LGA was approximately 40,000 people. The township where the show is held has a population of 3,081. From 1996 to 2001 the LGA's population increased by 9.5%. This population increase has occurred due to a number of factors including the areas rural lifestyle, location next to a major metropolitan area and attractiveness to new residents who are seeking affordable housing. Consequently the LGA has a young community. In 2001 68% of the population was under 49 years of age. Approximately 36% of the population has some form of educational qualification of which 22% was vocational. Employment is at 65% with the major sectors being in wholesale and retail trade (19%), education, health and community services (16%) and manufacturing (14%). Compared to the 1996 census those employed in agriculture, forestry, fishing and mining have declined by 26%. Key agricultural ventures are in market gardens, lavender farms, small olive groves, bee keeping, orchards, dairying and poultry undertakings.

Background to the Show

The show is a two-day festival that has been operating in the community since 1880. In terms of overall show society membership there are 19 life members, 175 members and 41 junior members. The latter two groups pay an annual membership of \$15 which is just less than the current price for entrance to the show. To be a committee member, show membership is required. Show membership entitles a person to free entry for the period of the show each year.

Respondents were either on the show executive committee or the general committee. The only exception was the sponsor/advertiser. The four members of the show society executive spanned three age groups; 45-54 years of age, 55-64 years of age and 65 and over. Three of the four management committee members work full time in non agricultural sectors whilst the older member devotes much time to other volunteer groups in addition to their role as secretary of the show society.

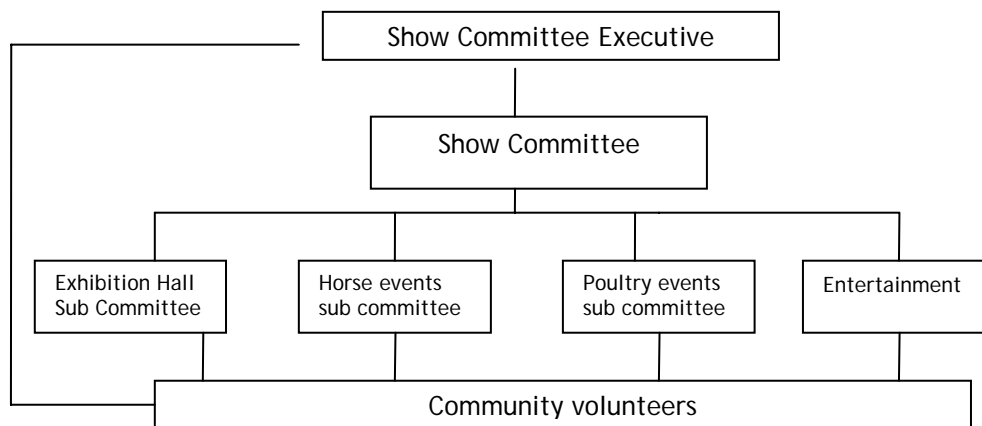
The length of time respondents have been involved in the show and the show movement depends largely upon the age and family history of the respondent. The longest serving committee member has been involved in the show for 46 years. This is due to their family's farming history over several generations in the area. This respondent has held almost every role in the show executive except president. He is reluctant to take on this role and indicated his commitment now is based upon a desire not to see the show cease to operate. Other respondents were involved with the show for between eight and ten years. Only one respondent has previous experience in a management role. Respondents' education level is predominantly vocational with one committee member who is a registered nurse. The nurse along with her husband currently manage the exhibition hall of which neither has a personal interest.

The show event schedule for 2005, included poultry, alpaca and dog displays, sheep shearing demonstrations and vintage cars and reptile displays. The main pavilion featured cooking, art, needlework, crafts, photography and jams and preserves. Competitions with horses, poultry, woodchop and a Big Ute Muster were featured over the two days. Fireworks provided the Saturday evening entertainment in conjunction with the announcement of the Showgirl competition. Previously a rodeo was part of the show entertainment however this is now held at another time of the year.

Committee Structure and Staffing

A diagrammatic representation of the show structure is presented in Figure 1. The show management executive comprises the roles of President, Vice President (there are three), Secretary and Treasurer. The Treasurer is also the Associate Secretary, the Hall Booking Officer and the Ring Mistress, as well as being married to the President. There is also a position of Publicity Officer. The general show committee is divided into sub committees related to the activities and events staged during the show. At the time of conducting this research there were four sub-committees focused on events that provide a basis for the show: horse events, the poultry competition and exhibition; entertainment; and exhibition hall. Respondents stated that their involvement on the show management committee was only to focus on their part of the festival - even to the extent that they did not know or really care what other events and competitions took place.

Figure 1:
Agricultural Show Society Organisational Structure



Show Planning and Operations

The Show Society has operated in the same manner since its origins. Respondents indicated that the major difference between early operations and the present is the pool of volunteers involved in the management, operations and staging of the event. The current committee is made up of much smaller numbers of people. To illustrate these changes, in 1935, the Show Society had 24 Vice presidents and 27 committee members. One President held this position for a period of 27 years, the longest period for this Show Society.

The Show Executive Committee and the Chief Stewards (those who head the sub committees) determine the events and activities to take place each year. The show committee officially meets once a month during which minutes are taken and financial statements reported. These are the only records of decision making with some respondents perceiving it to be a 'rubber stamping exercise'. Outside the monthly meeting each chief steward meets with their own sub committee to make decisions about their respective part of the show. Sub committee members are also known as stewards and rarely attend the monthly official meeting. They rely on their chief

stewards to advise them on relevant matters. Sub committee members have overall responsibility for the management of their part of the show. Their role is to determine the schedule, the competitions that will take place, sponsorship and the involvement of other volunteers for their particular area. No variation to this structure occurs. A show girl competition was conducted in 2005, after a forty years absence. The reinstatement of the show girl competition arose from a suggestion from youth committee members who belong to another show rather than interest from within their community.

Planning is undertaken after the previous show has taken place. This involves the show committee's personal assessment of 'how things went'. The Secretary and the Treasurer manage the overall management and operations under the President's instructions. The Secretary communicates any requirements on an operational basis, although it is clear that there is no consistent, reliable or requested record keeping except for the horse events and competitions. The Chief Steward (or Ring Mistress) is required to keep records for the horse events in order for competitors to prove their eligibility for Royal Shows. Otherwise records are kept only if those responsible consider it essential. Consequently there are enormous gaps and inconsistencies in tracking information on show events, competitors and miscellaneous activities. It is only the show schedule which provides a written history of each show's features, competitions and sponsors. As not all respondents have had extensive years of service at this particular show, there seemed to be a lack of awareness of what previous shows featured.

Each year the Show Society President determines the primary forms of entertainment of which a common feature is the fireworks. The President seeks to engage a variety of amusements and rides through the Showman's Guild, in order to cater for a variety of age groups, who may attend the show. Also during the planning phase committee members can report or suggest other activities and entertainment for consideration in the next show. Consideration is based on available funds which often limit the activities chosen. This is of some concern to the committee as the entertainment is needed to attract crowds.

To assist with the show's operation community organisations' like sports clubs and emergency service volunteers are invited to be involved. These community organisations' provide services such as the collection of entry fees and a barbeque. In return for their support, these community organisations' receive a financial contribution from funds collected. For instance, all funds raised from the barbeque to a certain amount are given to the football club that operates the barbeque. Not all respondents were aware of whom these groups were. In some cases respondents questioned their involvement as they took revenue away from the Show Society. Others interviewed supported this initiative because of wider community benefits:

So we're helping to support other community organizations' at the same time, mindful that if we help them well the whole area's going to be better.

Very little information is collected on visitor attendance, satisfaction, or overall market needs. Complaints are put down to disgruntled competitors. There is some loose recording of visitor numbers based upon entry but these are not accurately collected. There is no evidence of marketing planning except a repeat of 'what we have always done' or a trial of something 'affordable' with no measurement of marketing success. This demonstrates a product approach rather than a marketing concept approach to the staging of the festival.

Some respondents felt strongly that societal changes have had a marked impact on show attendance either as spectators or competitors. There is a view that the skills displayed at the show are not skills that younger members of the community possess because these skills are no longer taught or valued within the community. The show committee perceives this to lead to a further downturn in interest in attending the show.

Revenue for the show primarily comes from entry to the show, with less contributed by competitors, exhibitors and sponsors/advertisers. This reliance on revenue means that the show cannot resource the following year's show adequately if attendance declines. Whilst other events and activities occur throughout the year to raise revenue for the show society there are costs of maintaining the buildings and grounds that the show society owns. Costs of exhibiting and competing are kept to a minimum as these provide a backdrop of entertainment for the show and increases may result in lower participation. These practices, similar to other shows as supported through other studies (ACAS, 2000) present many operational challenges for the show society.

Show Management Committee Motivations

Respondents explained that they became involved with the show management committee after being a competitor and then, in some cases, a judge. Therefore the prime motivation was due to their interest in a particular event at the show.

This involvement was stimulated usually through the encouragement of a friend or family member who either competed or was on a show management committee. Having knowledge of their chosen interest was seen as an asset and skill that could be utilised. Overall most respondents have become involved in the show by being a competitor in their area of interest. They then move on to become competition judges and subsequently approached to be on the management committee.

Another motivation was the investment of time and effort by a family to the show over many years:

Because of his family heritage, I think he – if you want my understanding and that, he felt that he'd invested, his family had invested too much time and money and effort into the show and he didn't want to see it go under.

The eldest respondent is involved in other community based volunteer organisations and other agricultural shows due to her husband's interests. For them the motivation was about being community minded:

So we grew up in a family that did things in the community. And I think that sort of just carried on.

In the past the role of a festival committee member carried with it a certain prestige due to the importance of agriculture in the community as well as the festival itself. Respondents considered their part of the show to be the most important, and stated that if it was not for this interest they would not attend the show or volunteer for it. These members were so passionate about their particular area of interest that they regularly compete at other shows and related events (club membership, guilds and so on). Therefore involvement in the show is motivated by personal interests. As these personal interests are not widely held within the community it appears that prestige no longer plays a role in people's reasons for being involved in the show.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study have a number of management implications for show societies. First, motivation to be involved in the show is primarily driven by personal interests and knowledge of a particular area of the show. This coupled with the way in which the show is structured and operationalised has implications for the show's management. The structure forces people to be narrow in their show focus ignoring or not taking an interest in other areas. One committee member described their feelings:

I was a bit shocked by everyone's disinterest I suppose in our pavilion, there's no support I suppose, you know, for each other a lot of the time, if I can be a bit critical there, and I found it segregated.

Second, it suggests that current managers do not see the need for management skills or expertise; rather they see an interest in a particular aspect of agriculture as being of paramount importance. Third, it suggests that market needs may not be considered if they lead to a change in program that jeopardises a show members interests. It suggests that new ideas are not welcome at the cost of personal interests. The sponsor stated they were reluctant to become more involved in the show because:

I'm frightened that I'm going to step on someone's toes. And to step on people's toes it makes it very difficult because some people then end up holding grudges and I don't like that sort of scene so I try and keep my words to myself.

Although the population of the community is growing the number of people involved on the committee is declining. Those working in the agricultural industry have also declined with fewer people having a connection or linkage to the agricultural history of the area. Additionally the President stated that almost 70% of the community now works outside it which has resulted in extended travel time to and from work. A shift that may be connected to the declining pool of volunteers for the show as people have less available free time to be involved.

The need for more volunteers was a common complaint and yet there is little done to recruit new members onto the show committee. Respondents felt that people in the community did not have time to volunteer as they may have done in the past. This is supported by other studies (Darian-Smith and Wills, 1999; ACAS, 2000). Being involved on the show committee requires a large commitment of time and the common view was that people today had too many other pressures on them.

Yes, whether they work outside the area, they're just busy with other things now aren't they? Don't you think? Just life in general is different to what it was back then. People are busy with their kids and haven't any time, that was their main thing for not getting involved was lack of time for one reason or another isn't it.

Linked with decreasing attendance it appears that a younger, newly arrived community may not have the same connections with agriculture as their predecessors and therefore limited interest in the festival as a participant or volunteer. This study indicates that the show may no longer be producing festival experiences that meet the interests of the population. However population size does present an opportunity. As this community is represented by a young population, these people are capable of carrying out the roles required of the show provided there are incentives and experiences on offer that encourage them to participate. There is an opportunity for the committee to explore the needs and wants of the community rather than just repeating the same formula each year.

The show management committee do not necessarily possess the management skills required to manage a show. Respondents experience or application of common management practices in terms of formal planning, decision making, organising and staging a festival are minimal. Little documentation exists to monitor changes in the market or record what takes place at each show unless required by external players. There appears to be an enormous amount of good will on their behalf but a sense of reluctance and an inability to change how things are done. Most of the management committee believed that current problems occur from external forces, outside of their control. These external forces are a lack of volunteer support, disinterest within the broader community and increasing insurance costs. These were things that they felt they could

not control. Yet as Getz (2002) pointed out these are the very factors that managers with the appropriate skills and knowledge can overcome.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study provide preliminary discussion for the future of volunteer festival management of a particular type of festival, the agricultural show. This study contributes an understanding of how one rural agricultural show operates. These findings provide depth rather than broad assumptions to all shows and their management, even though similar findings have been reported (ACAS, 2000). As agricultural shows are declining in number and attendances this study presents arguments for why this may be the case. First the study indicates that there is no link between the size of the population and the level of attendance or volunteer involvement at the festival. Rather the level of interest and community relevance of the festival appears to be the key to addressing future declines in these areas. A lack of management skills amongst the show committee may prevent these factors from being considered. Second the study reveals that the driving motivation of the current management committee was of self interest based upon a particular skill or skills. Combined these skills are seen as of paramount importance – more important than management skills or expertise. Third, these motivations result in a show program that will not change if that jeopardises a show members interests as new ideas are not welcome at the cost of personal interests. Last these factors combined suggest that an investigation into community interests could result in the continuation of an agricultural show but one with current and greater community relevance.

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