

Presenters Application.

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Title of Presentation – Engaging the Community

Key Issues – Effective Communication and development of efficient distribution mechanisms.

Length of presentation – Approx 20 mins.

Style of presentation Address

Summary Discussion of the idea of communicating Bushfire protection and the Fusing of the Elements

Abstract. Bushfire prevention, management and protection are a continuing problem for the public at large. The public maintains an indifference to the threat and part of the problem is the absence of an established mechanism creating a relationship with the public and an information and product delivery distribution system. This is a Marketing problem. This paper elaborates and explains the practical implications and responses in context.

Engaging the Community - education, safety, information

To provide a satisfactory response to the title of this paper we start from the standpoint that there is a perceived need for particular products or services that we put under the general title of “Bushfire prevention”. Whilst that may not seem to relate to this concept since it is not categorically a service or a product it is still an issue with which concerted efforts are made to “engage” the community.

We all know that this is not something that, in the Bushfire protection/preparation context, can be said to have been conducted with any great success. We know that there is vast unengaged ignorance in the wider community and the task of making connection has been frustrating to say the least.

Products and services must be offered to end users in an economically and practically viable form.

In other words they have to be “Marketed” which necessarily involves “engaging the community”..

How to communicate and how to elicit response? This is essentially a Marketing question.

Marketing.

Marketing is not simply selling. Marketing is responding to need for a product or service with appropriate material or service capacity in an economically sustainable framework. It covers product definition, product development, product specification, manufacturing and development through training to use product and deliver services, advertising, public and corporate relations, promotion, delivery and sales.

The question is asked in two parts because there are two distinct issues involved

To be able to communicate ideas, concepts and opportunities the first thing to be considered is distribution.

Unless there is a mechanism by which ideas or product can be delivered to the target population progress will be slow or absent.

The common view is that “the media” is the cure all – a one size fits all answer to this question but fails to realise that “the media” has the same problem. If this was not the case it is hard to explain media consolidation and the proliferation of alternative outlets.

Distribution is product or idea specific. Someone wishing to purchase paint, or timber or potatoes knows where to go to get them. Therefore it is a simple matter to offer product to those mechanisms and, provided it is acceptable in terms of quality and price, see it taken up by those for whom it was intended.

So the first task is to identify an appropriate mechanism serving the target client. This may exist in different forms and generally is hierarchical. For example a filmmaker will have to

use the film distributors to present his product to the market. If he has any sense he will be guided to some extent by the distributor when creating his product as the distributor has a huge reservoir of experience upon which to draw in dealing with the “end user”. The Distributor is the conduit to the cinema and so to the audience. In general it is pointless trying to sell a film to individual cinema managers.

It is also essential that recognition of the realities and actual nature of the target community is understood rather than accept a media mediated view that is not necessarily accurate and certainly not without apparent asserting of things said to be when they are not.

Emergency Services suppliers are subject to particular problems when it comes to communication. Firstly these services are lumped together in the mind of the average consumer who never expects to avail himself of their services. To a large extent their activities are mediated through various land managers – councils, parks and wildlife people and environment departmental staffs and so on. What is not appreciated by the wider public is the extent to which these managers are constrained by politics.

Democratic pressures are easily applied but implementation of resolution of the many problem elements of bushfire management cannot be expeditiously conducted because wider subscription to the debate is considered necessary and therefore heavily regulated and as a consequence slow. Studies are conducted, results published, plans prepared but rarely are quite definitive recommendations carried out shortly after publication. Some of these plans are designed to operate over a five year time span. It is not difficult to imagine how long such a plan is in the preparation and the multiplicity of elements to which it has to be presented for approval.

Attempts by successive governments to create economies of scale have foundered because of the widely held perception of bureaucratisation that simply and perhaps unfairly, sees resources absorbed by non operational staff who do nothing but interfere the frontline troops who actually know what they are doing and are deprived of the appropriate resources accordingly.

Fortunately the Fire Services, both Metropolitan and Country still hold a special and warm place in the hearts and minds of the average consumer. However, it is clear that these services struggle with developing what can be considered a working relationship with their “constituency”.

Problematically for these services there is the expectation that the service they provide is inexhaustible. Since the bulk of Australian populations live in metropolitan areas people think that if there is a fire all they have to do is to call the Fire Service and an engine will arrive with firemen to put it out.

Canberra taught us that wherever we live we are vulnerable if we don't follow basic precautions. Our metropolitan areas are fringed with suburbs with larger blocks and usually well covered with vegetation and thanks to the environmentalists plenty of trees. Bushfires are not just a rural issue.

Emergency Services experience tremendous frustration because although the public is well aware of the threat and potential for the complete disaster a bushfire represents (a)

communication is, in the mind of the public, superficial at best and at worst a complete waste of time and the considerable investment of resources and (b) there are no realistic responses that the Emergency Services can offer in terms of practical products and services or if you wish the “hows and what withs’ to convert information into practical utility.

This is primarily because of the perceived need to ensure that there is no accountable sponsorship by the relevant bureaucracies, or even recognition of those materials and services that are being provided in the commercial sector.

This is somewhat paradoxical because many products and services provided in this environment have to comply with State and or Commonwealth Government standards – set to ensure protection of the public interest.

A side issue that is not widely understood is that because bureaucracies grind slow and exceeding small development of relevant product is inhibited. Clearly if it takes years to see product effective for its purpose in this context it is commercially unattractive and is probably why there is so little presently available.¹

¹ The magnitude of such a burning program around Australian cities such as Sydney is immense if the aim is to significantly reduce the bushfire potential in circumstances such as those of December 2001 – January 2002. The following factors would need to be considered in such a burning program. The Warringah Pittwater Bush Fire Management Committee's Bush Fire Risk Management Plan covers land managed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, Council Reserves and Community Land, Vacant Crown Land and Crown Reserves and private property. Under this plan there are a number of matters to consider when proposing a fuel reduction burning regime:

- any environmental assessment requirements that must be carried out prior the burning
- use of appropriate fire regimes which mean that fire should be excluded from mangroves and rainforests, fire frequency should not exceed two fires in 25 years in tall open forests, fire frequency should not exceed two fires in quick succession each five years or greater than 30 years, and fire frequency should not exceed two fires in quick succession each eight years, three fires in quick succession each fifteen to thirty years or be greater than thirty years in tall shrubland/heathland
- smoke management to ensure that smoke from burns does not contribute to hazardous levels of particulate air pollution in the Sydney area or that smoke drift is minimised into smoke sensitive areas such as roads and/or settlements
- catchment protection so as to protect soil and water values to ensure that riparian vegetation cover is maintained which can be effective soil and ash traps after bushfires
- pest and weed management where weed spread can be facilitated by fire, and
- protected lands (lands on slopes steeper than 18 degrees or with 20 metres of specified rivers, creeks and lakes) need to have their vegetation cover protected to protect soil and water quality.⁽⁵¹⁾

Bushfires: Is Fuel Reduction Burning the Answer?

[Bill McCormick](#)

**Science, Technology, Environment and Resources Group
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Now the second issue. In the title of this presentation are the words “engaging the community”

To be able to engage a community that community first has to be defined and understood. This is the first leg in the trio of basic principles of “marketing”.

When I was marketing manager for the South Australian Film Corporation I was presented a folio of films made for “ the general public”. Once I had an opportunity to review these films it was clear that they each were made for a quite specific audience – occupational health and safety workers, educators, tourism promoters and so on. So there was a double problem (a) the film maker perceived that his product had not only general appeal but general application and (b) having misunderstood the “general public” he was absolutely ignorant about what mechanism would be activated to firstly, effectively announce the existence of the film and secondly make the film itself available.

Community

Great care must be taken to establish what community in context means.

Why is this so important ? Because until this is understood the methods and mechanism of addressing that community cannot be identified.

So what is the community in the Bushfire context?

An important feature of the “community” for our purposes is that whilst relevant product may be taken up in a general sense service delivery will be much more localised. Every householder can purchase an “ Evacuation Bag” virtually at any time. However delivery of the service will be in the event of a fire at a specific place. Quite different elements with which to contend.

Certain elements of the general population can be immediately excluded. The inhabitants of the inner CBD for example. Also to a large extent residents in suburbs close to the city i.e. those suburbs where there is a low fuel load and low likelihood of spot fires and the attendant ember attacks.

Is it safe to exclude such groups as this? Practically yes, philosophically not necessarily.

They can practically be excluded because they are not likely to be involved nor at risk. Philosophically yes because their political support is necessary to be applied to the decision makers usually located in the City centres.

So within the target community are a series of sub communities. Land managers, Local Authority and State bureaucracy workers, architects, builders, business owners, transport organizations, schools, all of which have internal communications processes. To this not exhaustive list should be added as the most important group, the householder/property owner.

Why is this the most important group ? Because their loss is potentially very personal. In general this group is incapable of effective response to a bushfire threat as neither they nor the members of their households have done anything to prepare either their property.

Against this admittedly superficial background it is clear that there is no single community and this must be recognised when considering modes of address. By this I mean that there will be no single piece of information that will satisfactorily deliver information comprehensive enough to cover our subject.

It is necessary to break down the information that it is intended to convey preferably into a series of related packages. As a good example remember the “Slip. Slop, Slap” anti-skin cancer campaign. Quite specific – the first part only addressed one part of the issue i.e. that of raising awareness of the problem and providing guidance as to what to do practically. There followed – through doctors surgeries, clinics and so on more information about the types of skin cancer and further guidance.

Motivation.

Another important issue is that of *motivation*. That is what motivates the enquirer and how do make sure that contact is converted to dialogue.

Take for example a Website that is dealing with a Caravan Park. If you look at the access and response there is a very good relationship. Compare this with a site that is providing information to motorists about various aspects of the politics of road safety. There is a high hit rate but low relationship development.

Why is this? Caravan Park users rarely research Caravan Parks – they are looking for somewhere to stay at a certain time and within a certain budget. If the time, place and budget are acceptable a transaction is completed.

The imperative is personal need for specific product.

So what is the imperative in the Bushfire context? Based on the analysis of access to a Website that is a location for information related to fire prevention and protection with which I am familiar, the imperative is regulatory legislation.

State and Commonwealth governments have responded to bushfire threat by passing a variety of legislative instruments to be administered not only by State and Commonwealth bureaucracies but also by local authorities.

Rules, and particularly standards for new buildings that must be met have been put in place. Now, administrators are in the same boat as the average homeowner and, aware that there are things that must be done and therefore have a need to know where the various materials might be obtained to fulfil the intention of these dictates.

It will be important to understand this regulatory environment so that these answers are provided in context and in media appropriately designed and delivered.

**Fusing the elements – This is relevant when considering that a raft of information exists and must be reorganised into subsets that address particular interests. The needs of a Chicken Farmer in an exposed location are clearly quite different to a nursing home and they are quite different communities. There has to be a point where all this information is fused together and that is when critical mass has been achieved.*

Now, to examine the second part of the proposition that is, to “engage” the community. There are plenty of options available for distributing information. Most are wasteful because they lack feedback capability – that is contacts are not recorded. This means that neither the effectiveness of the media nor its penetration can be measured. Furthermore no information is gleaned that will contribute to the understanding of who is active in the target community.

It is axiomatic in marketing terms that one of the first things to be done is to carefully analyse and identify the existing “client” group.

Distribution.

To return to the film example, which is extremely useful because at that time there was a very low base of activity. The Film Corporation was distributing its output through its Library. For the most part films were lent rather than sold but very occasionally, someone wanted to obtain a copy for their own library or purpose.

There were very few of these but even though the numbers were small each individual was a representative in some sense of a larger community of users.

These communities were researched, codified and material prepared to fit into their frame of reference. The response was immediate and had the most profitable effect of providing a mechanism for film need to be expressed which of course led to more relevant production which in turn led to increased sales of a significant proportion.

There was still a fundamental element lacking and that was a means of communicating with these user communities. Once again careful analysis of the users led to the rather obvious fact that there was a common denominator – libraries.

Librarians are very clever people and, in my experience deeply committed to providing service. Probably because their survival depends upon being depended upon.

At that time the Victorian Education Department were expanding their Media resources and a very energetic activist had started a monthly publication called ATOM. He has diligently sought out and identified all the media outlets he could as well as a very comprehensive variety of libraries and was successfully penetrating this juvenile market.

I offered to pay to have an insert with all my films included in his magazine and invited him to review, without editorial interference, any of the films I was distributing. The effect was very gratifying not the least reason being that there was a symbiosis. Librarians were afforded a previously absent credibility because they were possessed of important information for their users. The users grew in confidence in their libraries and fed very useful marketing data back through that device.

We had successfully established a distribution system where there was none by responding to specific needs.

There is a wealth of data held, not only by those attending this conference, but the whole range of individuals both employee and volunteer alike that work alongside each other.

Whilst there is a natural tendency for organizations to “protect their turf” to ensure that they maintain their level of funding and preserve their autonomy a case can certainly be made in the context of “Bushfire” issues for management to at least co-ordinate their public information processes.

Where Fire is the issue the organizations with the highest and least controversial profiles are the Country and Metropolitan Fire Services. They are perceived as highly motivated and service oriented. What politicking takes place is certainly opaque and what effect it has on service delivery is not an issue in the public mind.

Again a good case could be made for organising for these organizations to take the lead in public communication but in both cases there would be a need for a significant management change to provide the flexibility and acceptance of involvement in the business of product delivery.

What is needed is for that information to be fused, analysed and represented to capitalise on the direction it provides for packaging and distributing information.

Test and Tune

One of the key factors in this discussion is the fact that there is a continuing and dominant imperative that changes little in fact. Such change in its identity is largely a matter of increased understanding of the related facts and their interpretation of – bushfire.

A great deal is known and much understood about bushfires, their behaviour and ingredients. There is not a lot that is new as far as practical management, prevention and protection is concerned.

The variables are in the manner of dealing with the issue. It should therefore come as no surprise that in evaluating our responses we need to be diligent in reviewing the effectiveness of our initiatives.

The third leg in the triumvirate of principles in what is in effect the “marketing” of competent response to bushfire is that of Testing and Tuning.

Again it is necessary to examine the history of bushfire response to see if there is any clear pattern of the sorts of communication practices that worked and why and where they did not why not. It is a great mistake and poor attitude to the expenditure of resources if this investigation is not undertaken. Negative information is as much use as positive in building a picture of the environment under discussion.

A good example from contemporary practice is to look at what can be the sheer waste of energy involved with the setting up of a WebSite.

Clearly with over 4billion websites available to the Internet user there is a phenomenal potential to communicate through the Internet.

However, the fact of the matter is that very few website proprietors have the slightest idea of how the Internet works and even less about how to capitalise on its potential.

Even if they have understood the elements of metatags and keywords, presentation to search engines and taken some steps to ensure that vital things are in place they have no idea about tuning and testing.

Very soon they are saying “ I don’t now why we have a WebSite because no one ever goes there” and make no effort to understand the deficiencies of the Website. They are generally unaware of the site promotion software and the considerable array of programmes that will provide the capacity to analyse important details about who accessed their site – in what they were interested and so on.

This is vital information and difficult to obtain from other “marketing” strategies.

I hope that it is clear from the foregoing that regardless of the product and or service concerned there are principles that must be recognised to ensure successful prosecution of objectives. Attention to these principles is the pathway to delivering the desired resolution of the problems encountered by the stake holders in the important issue of Bushfire management.

Certainly much has already been done at the operational level to answer practical issues that have been recognised by the various instrumentalities with true professionalism. The reality is that much of this quality activity will pass unnoticed by the population at large.

The principle elements are clear. The processes must be executed sensitively and intelligently over time. How much time it will take to reach the relevant critical mass will be reflected by the commitment and dedication of those resources largely represented here.

So these are the three elements needed when considering the issue of “Engaging the Community”

- ❑ Analyse your community.
- ❑ Work out how you are to distribute information and your product and service.
- ❑ Test and tune to understand what’s happening and whether your work is productive, build on the plusses and weed out the negatives.