

What is important to your garden visitor

Jack Hobbs¹

In a nutshell, what is most important to your garden visitor is the quality of their gardening experience. For most people this is the enjoyment factor: how pleasurable it was, how much fun they had, how many ideas they came away with. The chances of providing such a high quality experience are optimised when garden planning is based on feedback from visitors to establish their needs and desires.

Obviously the way to find out what people want is to ask them, and there are plenty of market researchers who (for a sizable fee) will do just that. Having intimated that market research is not inexpensive, it is an essential precursor to the launch of any new business or product (or revamp of an existing business). In retrospect it will probably be the best money spent.

This is as true for garden ventures as for any other type of business. But how often is market research commissioned prior to project commencement (or when revamping old gardens) to establish just what customers would best respond to?

Most commonly, I suggest, keen supporters of the garden are consulted, and all other potential user groups ignored. My market researcher dubs such enthusiastic garden supporters as 'fanatics', not in a disparaging way, but to describe the single-minded passion they typically exhibit. Often they are experts in their field, and an invaluable source of ideas and suggestions. They are not, however,

typical visitors, and what appeals to them may not interest your average punter. Our research indicates they represent less than 10% of the visitation to the Auckland Regional Botanic Gardens (ARBG), which is probably typical of most public gardens. I suspect the proportion of fanatics visiting private gardens to be higher, but still a significant minority.

So where am I going with this? Simply put, if only our beloved fanatics are consulted, our product (otherwise known as our garden) may well not appeal greatly to the vast majority of potential visitors.

Most private gardens are, quite rightly, the indulgence of the garden owner. If visitors happen to enjoy the garden, that is a happy bonus. This changes, of course, when the private garden is intended to be a viable commercial enterprise.

Public gardens are fundamentally different, with an obligation to meet the needs and expectations of those that fund them, usually ratepayers.

As a former director of my Parks Service used to quip, "he who pays the piper calls the tune".

The first serious qualitative market research we commissioned at the ARBG was undertaken in 2001, and repeated in 2004. The results certainly challenged many of our paradigms, and eventually led to significant changes both to the physical layout of our gardens and the services we deliver.

The stated objective of this research was to understand our visitor needs and perceptions so we could better meet their needs and ultimately grow our business. Previously our research had entirely comprised intercept interviews of garden visitors to gauge their satisfaction levels. Since 2001 we have surveyed not just garden visitors but also non-visitors and lapsed visitors (those that have previously visited but have not returned). Telephone interviews and focus groups were used to understand the perceptions and desires of these latter groups better.

Findings

Somewhat disconcertingly we learnt that the single most popular activity at ARBG was "feeding the ducks". This "family" activity is just part of the single main reason most visitors choose to visit us: recreation! More than 80% of our visitors come primarily for this purpose.

These findings are comparable with those for the commercial horticultural sector. A leading Australian nurseryman once told that his research indicated only around 20% of his potential customers were keen gardeners, with the majority being dubbed 'occasionals'. In his view this latter group, by virtue of its size, is the more important to his bottom line.

Recreation is, of course, a vital component of our increasingly busy modern lifestyles, and an increasingly important role of gardens. What can

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be more relaxing and ultimately therapeutic than a stroll through a beautiful garden? Although gardens are part of the increasingly competitive leisure industry, it can be argued that they are also providers of primary health care. One major Australian park annually puts a dollar figure on the health benefits it directly provides to its community.

As a garden manager I have always aspired to provide a garden that inspires and informs visitors, and helps to make them better gardeners. It is, therefore, consoling that those who take no note of our plant displays and associated information are still legitimately benefiting from an enjoyable stroll in their local park.

Another key finding was the very high proportion of people who did not know what we offer. Most "non-visitors" had a completely inaccurate understanding of botanic gardens, considering them to be small, formal and structured: "not a place to take children". Interestingly, 80% of non-visitors expressed keen interest in visiting when they did learn what was on offer. This clearly indicated that effective marketing could significantly increase overall visitation by this group.

What people want

Is it possible to please everyone? Obviously not, but across the different segment groups we surveyed several common themes emerged, which, if satisfied, should enable us to please most people.

I hope I have not given the impression that the needs and wishes of real enthusiasts ('fanatics' as previously described) should be subordinate to those of the less discerning (and demanding) majority. Certainly a true botanic garden should meet or exceed the requirements and interests of our keenest visitors. When it comes to consultation and planning, though, they should not be the only voice heard.

As a generalisation, what people indicated to us they want from their garden destination is a complete package. This might include a café, music, guided tours, events, and interesting activities.

To hook visitors it certainly helps if the destination is somehow unique, or at least has unique features. Aspects of our gardens that we may take for granted may well be different and intriguing to others, and if well marketed these aspects can dramatically increase visitation.

Visiting gardens is for many a form of escapism, transporting them to a haven away from their busy, everyday environment.

To increase visitation it is necessary to overcome the surprisingly widely held perception that gardens are static places where little changes. Knowledgeable gardeners fascinated by the subtle changes constantly occurring in gardens will surely find laughable any suggestion that they are static places. But remember, we are 'fanatics' and our perceptions are not shared by all.

To attract families it is necessary to provide special children's attractions. When my children were younger it took a real 'hard sell' to convince them of the merits of a garden visit. Although private gardens often discourage children (for good reason), public gardens have a role in engaging young people with plants. To do this we must overcome the perceptions that there is nothing for kids to do, that gardens are places for older people, and where visitors can "look, but not touch". Creating special places where people can interact with plants can do this.

At focus groups even those describing themselves as having little interest in gardens often mentioned the Ellerslie Flower Show as a "must visit" destination. Ellerslie Flower Show has managed to appeal successfully across a broad section of society by positioning itself as a complete entertainment package focussed on lifestyle, entertainment, shopping and all aspects of gardening. Particular appeal is generated by cutting edge garden design and artworks (particularly sculpture).

Butchart Garden on Vancouver Island in British Columbia is another resoundingly successful commercial operation that is worth analysing. Butchart attracts huge visitation (1,000,000+ per annum @ \$20+ entry fee) by effective marketing of highly visual displays, night lighting, fireworks, and other attractions. The array of offers includes restaurants, souvenir shops, and guided tours. It is the ultimate in garden escapism, providing a Disneyland-like experience with great photo

opportunities. It is compact, accessible, and keeps its stories simple but strong.

One can easily be forgiven for thinking that people today are less focussed on plants than they were, say, a decade ago, and correspondingly more motivated by the 'garden look' that contemporary landscape design provides. Often greater emphasis seems to be placed on hard landscape features than on the soft, with plants little more than a decorative final embellishment rather than the main focus of attention. The ubiquitous garden makeovers of television certainly indicate what television research is finding: people desire trendy looking gardens that suit their lifestyle. And they want them immediately.

Instant gardens brimming with potted colour and blue pots are of course anathema to serious gardeners. For me real beauty lies in plants and the way they are combined both with other plants and hard materials. But then again, I am a 'fanatic'.

According to our research there is virtually no public realisation of the active role ARBG plays in plant conservation. But when informed of the work being undertaken with rare and endangered plants, people were overwhelmingly supportive. Such feedback bodes well for the future of such programmes in public gardens.

Consistently, feedback has indicated a desire by many garden visitors to meet the garden owner or expert staff. Other areas of high current interest include low maintenance gardening, and pesticide avoidance.

Key marketing messages

1. Have a plan. Create business and marketing plans with clear objectives. If affordable, commission market research as a basis for future planning. For commercial ventures, some would say you cannot afford not to have market research.
2. Tell people what you have and what is different about it, e.g. garden sculpture, expert advice, an aspect of design, or a special plant group.
3. Emphasise why visitors should come now rather than later. Gardens that are always open tend to be perceived as infinitely delayable.
4. Highlight family friendliness if that is a target market. Include something for children in your product and services.
5. Provide a variety of attractions and activities. Where possible link up with other local destinations (other gardens, wineries etc.) to broaden the offer and enable people to make a day of it.
6. Give clear directions. Ensure directional information on how to get to your garden is widely available and easily understood. This also applies to getting around your garden when visitors arrive.

7. Ensure staff are friendly, well trained, and treat visitors as valued customers.
8. Do not over-promise and under-deliver. Successful businesses are those that ensure repeat visitation.
9. Create a 'great' garden that expresses the creativity and passion of you and your staff. Visitors will then feel as though they have experienced something special.

Conclusion

To remain relevant any garden must constantly re-examine itself, regularly reinforce market perception of its uniqueness and quality, and communicate effectively what is on offer. As the quality and volume of competition increases, those gardens that do not constantly change and improve will gradually see their visitation decline.

Jack Hobbs is President of the RNZIH, and Curator-Manager of the Auckland Botanic Gardens. In recent years the Botanic Gardens have undergone a major transformation resulting from the implementation of marketing and development plans based on extensive market research. Jack has been involved as writer and/or photographer on several gardening books. He is also a contributor of articles and photography to the New Zealand Gardener, and a regular presenter of television gardening programmes.