Combined state nursery conference: Expand your horizons, July 2002, Gold Coast

Donald Scotts
Queensland Nursery Industry Association

Project Number: HG02020

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Horticulture Australia

Combined State Nursery Conference
Expand Your Horizons

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Queensland

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2002 COMBINED STATE CONFERENCE

Nursery & Garden Industry NSW & ACT

Nursery & Garden Industry Queensland

EXPAND YOUR HORIZONS

23 - 25 July 2002

HAL Project Number: HG02020

Project Title: Combined State Nursery Conference Expand Your Horizons

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Organisation: Nursery & Garden Industry Queensland

Horticulture Australia

CONTENTS

1. Summary of Achievements

A number of significant Marketing and Research and Development (R&D) outcomes can be identified as a result of the project. Conference attendees and in turn others associated with the respective businesses would have a better understanding of: -

- Positioning of the Nursery & Garden Industry Australia (NGIA) and the industry to take advantage of future opportunities.
- Rationale and role of industry Marketing and R&D plans developed in conjunction with Horticulture Australia Limited (HAL).
- How to develop a Business Plan and the critical role a Business Plan plays in ensuring the business remains on track.
- Financial planning – accessing funds, keeping and investing funds and passing a viable business onto future generations.
- Key marketing trends for the future.
- Flora for Fauna promotion and how you can work in conjunction.
- Water scarcity and the need for planning.
- Climatic weather patterns and using them to predict crop success.
- Human Resource Management and starting staff on the right path.
- The need to plan for organisational and personal success.
- How signage and staff fit into the Marketing Equation.
- Monitoring Plant Nutrient levels to achieve optimum growth (HAL NY00043)
- How to clear up Nursery Runoff using constructed Wetlands.
- Training and the multiple options available today.
- Nursery Industry Accreditation Scheme Australia (NIASA) and the benefits.

From an organisational perspective there were other significant outcomes:

- First ever combined State Nursery Conference with involvement by over 250 people at economical $288 per person earlybird registration.
- Established and enhanced operating guidelines between State Association's for co-operative events.
- Developed on integrated theme "Expand your Horizons" which attracted 30 plus speakers on 24 plus topics.

- Reinforced importance of speaker notes in hard copy or on CD for presentation or information of others not able to attend Conference.
- Importance of supportive bus trips or tours to encourage R&D transfer clearly identified.

It is clear that State Conferences with economical registration fees can attract a different range of attendees compared to National industry Conferences. This in turn ensures that industry Marketing and R&D reaches another sector of the industry.

2. Introduction

The Nursery & Garden Industry NSW & ACT (NGINA) and the Nursery & Garden Industry Queensland (NGIQ) have held independent State Conferences for several years. This is the first time that two State nursery associations have combined to hold a joint Conference. Cooperation between State nursery associations is generally not strong and in some cases discouraged. This project builds on the previous Conferences held by the individual State Associations and provided an extensive exchange of ideas on business, technical, human resource and general management issues. The project was held over three days.

Optional bus tours to retail nurseries/garden centres and wholesale/production nurseries were held on the first day. This was followed on the second and third days by an extensive conference program involving over 28 speakers. The venue was the Twin Towns Services Club located on the Queensland/NSW border providing optimum access for members from both States.

3. Organisation

Initial planning for the Conference commenced in February 2002 with the formation of a Combined Conference Committee (CCC) comprising three representatives from NGINA and NGIQ along with the relevant State Industry Development Officers and Garden Centre Development Officers. The later being an important link to existing HAL projects and initiatives.

NGIQ accepted the primary responsibility for management of the project including development of the conference program, liaison with speakers, venue consultation, attendee registration and financial accounting. There are clearly difficulties in trying to split responsibility in these areas.

The CCC collated a number of ideas to present a strategy under the general theme "Expand Your Horizons". The segments were linked to ensure that there was a natural flow through the speakers to the conclusion of the program.

The project was promoted to members of NGINA and NGIQ through state publications and national magazines such as Australian Horticulture and Greenworld Magazine and by way of direct mail. Potentially over 900 NGINA and NGIQ member businesses were contacted and advertising in trade publications ensured that non-members were also aware of the activity.

The long term success of the project will depend on the uptake and changes made by Conference attendees and this is difficult to assess. In the short term all Conference attendees completed an assessment form rating topics and speakers for relevance and effectiveness, the outcomes in Appendix F appear to be quite encouraging and will be discussed later.

4. Program

The program was designed to provide attendees with practical information along with knowledge, skills and opportunities for them to utilise in their business. This provided attendees with a better understanding of the industry, knowledge of financial and business planning, understanding of environmental conditions, appreciation of HRM, merchandising and technological developments to aid production. Please see Appendix A for more details on the program.

In planning the Conference the CCC asked speakers to present an outline of a particular problem, the solutions they have developed and exactly where attendees can obtain additional information and backup support. Further details were provided to attendees by way of an extensive set of Conference notes - See Appendix H.

5. Speakers

As indicated in Appendix A a wide variety of speakers were obtained for the program. The program recognises that different attendees have different needs and it is therefore essential that the program provide a broad base of experience and exposure for attendees. Apart from the main conference sessions concurrent sessions were held in the retail/garden centre and wholesale/ production areas.

Overall the response to speakers was very positive. Specific comments were captured on evaluation forms and these are shown in Appendix D and discussed below.

6. Evaluation Forms

Attached as Appendix D are copies of two evaluation forms distributed at the end of each day. While most forms were returned on the day it was necessary to follow up registrants to ensure that as many as possible were returned and input was received. Overall forms were returned by 65% plus of attendees although some husband/wife partnerships may combine to complete only one form.

Appendix E provides the Evaluation Form results. Overall ratings suggested that the event was successful. Key issues of further consideration include: -

- Requirement for all speakers to provide a paper. There was some resentment against speakers who had not provided a paper, this is clearly an expectation on part of all attendees.

- Speaker notes on CD. Consideration may need to be given to the supply of speaker notes on CD or disk, particularly where there are forms or policies that attendees could use in their own business. They are more likely to take up the suggestions if they are provided in a readily available format for immediate use.

- Need to avoid advertorial sessions. Despite the organisers best intentions a few speakers saw the opportunity to address attendees as an opportunity for a personal or business advertorial. Despite advice in briefing notes this needs to be avoided.

The evaluation forums did not ask for comments on the professional Master of Ceremonies (MC) who had been employed to keep the program running, but general adhoc comments provided suggested that the skills demonstrated were not as high as they could have been. The decision to combine an MC and entertainer was probably inappropriate and further work needs to be done in selecting an appropriate MC.

In other forums there have been suggestions that there are currently too many Conferences in the nursery and associated industry areas. This was not raised as an issue by any member or sponsor, although clearly some decisions need to be taken on the part of sponsors, organisers and attendees as to which events they will or will not attend.

7. Attendance

Appendix D provides a comprehensive list of attendees and this is summarised below.

Retail Bus Trip	21
Wholesale/Production Bus Trip	65
Full Registrations	171
Wednesday Registrations (including day)	197
Thursday Registrations (including day)	199
Conference Dinner	222
Number of Businesses Represented	155

The bus trips were well received with visits to Australian Garden Centre Accreditation Scheme (AGCAS) and Nursery Industry Accreditation Scheme Australia (NIASA) businesses.

It was disappointing that more than 30 full registrations (or day registrants) registered with less than 7 days to go with 3 registrants registering at the desk on the first day of Conference. This makes planning very difficult. Overall registrations were higher than expected and the CCC delighted with overall numbers.

8. Conference Publicity

NGINA through their monthly "Nursery and Garden NEWS" and the NGIQ through "Leaflet" provided considerable pre and post Conference publicity. In addition there were several articles in the trade press highlighting the Conference. These included: -

- Greenworld September 2002 Pages 32-34
- Australian Horticulture November 2002 Pages 28-30
- Australian Nursery Manager October 2002 Page 30
- Australian Nursery Manager December 2002 Page 27

These are attached as Appendix G

9. Acknowledgement of HAL Support

The CCC acknowledges that without the support of Horticulture Australia Limited (HAL) projects such as this would be more difficult to conduct.

The support of HAL was acknowledged in the Conference Program – Appendix A, the Bus Trip Details – Appendix C and in the Conference Papers – Appendix H. Additionally HAL was provided with display space in the Trade Display area and a HAL Banner displayed in the main auditorium.

Special thanks to Sarah Pennell and Libby Abraham from HAL and Richard de Vos from the Nursery & Garden Industry Australia.

10. Combined Conference Committee

A special thanks to the Combined Conference Committee Members

- Carmen Wilkat – Vice President NGINA
- Mirella Jakimoff – Vice President NGIQ
- Dave Sallaway – Go Grow
- Lorraine Schiller – Walsh's Seeds Garden Centre
- Jocelyn Johns – Office Manager NGINA
- Donald Scotts – Executive Officer NGIQ

For their tireless input into the project.

11. Conclusion

Ultimate success for any Conference must be measured by the attendees and overall comments were very positive. The Combined Conference Committee was satisfied with the overall program and organisation as well as attendance. The basis has been laid for further combined events in the future.