



Organising a Smogbusters Forum

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Introduction

On Saturday, 12 August 2000, Smogbusters Queensland held a one-day forum entitled "Clearing the Air in South East Queensland". The purpose of the Clearing the Air Forum was to draw public attention to the existence of the Queensland Government's South East Queensland Regional Air Quality Strategy (SEQRAQS), which had been "noted" by cabinet in June 1999 but over a year later had not yet received funding for full implementation.

The forum was a great success, receiving positive feedback from participants as well as producing a budget surplus for Smogbusters, and there is no reason why other forums could not be run based on the same proven model.

The Funding Model

Smogbusters Queensland (a joint project of the Queensland Conservation Council and the Commonwealth Government through the Natural Heritage Trust) was able to secure a \$3500 grant from the Queensland Environmental Protection Agency (Qld EPA) to run a forum focusing on SEQRAQS. The grant income, supplemented by a Queensland Conservation Council (QCC) commitment to provide in-kind contributions and support to the forum, was sufficient to enable Smogbusters Queensland to hire a part-time forum organiser (Eric Manners) for 10 weeks at 15 hours per week, at an award salary.

The forum organiser's first task was to seek additional sponsorship contributions of \$500 each from local governments, other departments of the state government, universities, and related industry organisations. Seven such contributions were secured, which enabled Smogbusters Queensland to compensate the Queensland Conservation Council (QCC) for their in-kind contributions and support, increase the number of paid hours the forum organiser could work, and still come away with surplus funds to support Smogbusters activities.

The additional staff member allowed the Smogbusters Project Officer for Queensland (James Whelan) to continue working on other projects while the forum was being organised, although his continued oversight of the forum was invaluable.

Content of the Forum

Because the Clearing the Air Forum was designed to be a discussion rather than to present the views of experts, there was no need to pay high-profile speakers to appear at the Forum. However, the Director-General of the Queensland EPA officially opened the forum (the Minister for Environment was unable to accept our invitation), and key stakeholders and experts were invited to be on a panel to frame the day's discussion.

The second half of the day centred around separating into groups to focus on each of the sections of SEQRAQS itself, followed by a plenary discussion to determine the highest priorities for moving forward towards implementation of SEQRAQS.

This Paper

The purpose of this paper is to outline a range of realistic and affordable options for Organising a Smogbusters Forum, of which Smogbusters Queensland's Clearing the Air Forum represents but one. The following pages may also be of use to other environment and not-for-profit organisations who are looking to spread a key message or begin a public dialogue.

10 Key Steps in Organising the Forum

The following represent some of the key steps you may need to undertake in organising your forum.

1. Identify the purpose of your forum.
2. Identify what forum structure(s) could achieve that purpose.
3. Identify potential partners and sources of funding.
4. Secure sufficient funding and make a final commitment to carry out the forum.
5. Hire a forum organiser if funds allow, to relieve the administrative burden on permanent staff.
6. Finalise the basic details (forum title/focus, when and where).
7. Begin preliminary promotion while attaining additional sponsorship and inviting speakers.
8. Produce a highly professional promotional/registration leaflet identifying all confirmed sponsors and speakers.
9. Further promote the forum and finalise all arrangements well before the date of the forum.
10. Finally, participate in your forum and learn from your successes and mistakes.

The following pages address each of these activities in more detail.

1. Purpose of the forum

If you have begun to consider a forum, you should ask yourself (and your fellow campaigners): What would be the purpose of the forum? Would it be...

- to attract hundreds or thousands of attendees?
- to make a profit?
- to inspire people or to change their opinions?
- to focus media attention on a particular issue?
- to influence government policy?
- to forge a new partnership?
- more than one of these?
- or others?

Once the purpose of your forum is more clear, then you will also have a clearer guide in terms of the focus and title of the forum, the scale of the forum, potential sources of funding, promotional strategies and key messages.

2. Structure of the forum

What kind of forum do you want to have?

- one or several experts presenting their opinions and findings to an audience?
- panel discussions to tease out underlying issues?
- putting government or industry representatives on the spot or under public pressure?
- interactive workshop/s?
- “open-space technology” where structure is not decided ahead of time?
- a combination of these, or others?

The overall structure of the forum is a central question closely related to the purpose, and should be decided upon before going too far into the planning process or seeking funding for the forum.

3. Identifying partners and seeking funding

If you are not in a position to independently fund the type of forum you have chosen, then it is essential to “pitch” your chosen focus in such a way that it will attract not only public interest, but also potential grant and sponsorship contributions. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What other organisations and/or individuals might benefit from this forum?
- What support (money, other in-kind contributions, strategic guidance, physical assistance, clout...) can they offer to the forum?
- How could the proposed forum topic be shifted to increase its appeal to potential partners?
- Will this shift significantly compromise the purpose of forum – in other words, is it still worth doing?
- Are there any ethical or strategic considerations regarding the potential partnerships and sponsorships being considered?

After asking yourself these questions, you may also wish to discuss them directly with your potential partners, either before or after providing them with a brief proposal to fund your forum. There are really only three possible responses: “Yes!”, “Never!”, or “Perhaps if it were a bit different here and here...”. Their response may send you back to the drawing board, or may send you to the next potential partner or to a slightly different topic.

4. Making a final commitment

Considering the funding commitments you have secured to this point, and considering the worst case scenario in which you are unable to gain *any* further funding, can you afford to deliver the forum?

If not, seek more funding. Or alternatively, seek guarantees from supportive organisations, partners and even individuals to underwrite any losses your forum should incur.

If you do have the minimum funds necessary to deliver at least a basic, no-frills forum, and the overall direction is still consistent with your purpose and what you were hoping to achieve, and your team members are also happy with the situation, then you are ready to make a final commitment to run the forum.

5. Hiring a forum organiser

If you are able to dedicate \$1000-2000 to hire a dedicated person to carry out the administrative functions in bringing the forum together, it will be worthwhile. The forum will be delivered better if someone is dedicated to doing nothing but the forum, and you and your team members can provide guidance and assistance only where required.

Keep in mind that more hours dedicated by the forum organiser to organising the forum will probably result in a better forum overall, more sponsorship for the forum, more promotion for the forum, and therefore more income (or equivalent success) coming out of the forum. An investment now will probably lead to that money being *at least* returned to you through increased support at the forum or in the future, if not many times more – so feel free to spend that cash!

6. Finalise the basic details (forum title, when and where).

While you can secure some early funding commitments from partners before finalising every detail of the forum, you will want to have the central details finalised before beginning to spread the word too widely, and minor sponsors and potential speakers or attendees will want to know more about it than generally what you’ll be talking about and during what month it will occur. They will want to know:

- the title and/or focus of the forum;
- the exact date and times; and
- where it will be held.

Of course if you are waiting to see if you can secure additional funding to upgrade to a more expensive venue, then you may want to simply book an emergency venue and hold off on publicising the “where” until a final decision is made. But you may need to verbally discuss possible venues with

potential additional sponsors; and the other questions will need to be finalised before you move to the next step.

In choosing a venue, be sure to consider accessibility, not only in terms of people with disabilities or difficulties, but also in terms of the ability of attendees to reach the venue without using a car. Ensure convenient public transport services serve the venue and that bike parking is provided.

7. Preliminary promotion, gaining additional sponsorship and securing speakers

Once you've finalised the basic details, you can begin to spread the word, and to seek additional minor sponsors to supplement your core funding.

First go back to your list of potential partners and consider...

- what you can offer to sponsors (promotional opportunity, positive association with your organisation/movement/event, and the positive outcomes of the forum itself;
- how much they would be willing to pay for these opportunities; and
- how best (or who best) to approach those potential partners – i.e. sometimes a letter outlining the opportunities will be enough to gain commitments; other times you may need to meet in person, and the forum organiser may or may not be able to do this on their own.

If you send letters or leave phone messages while seeking sponsorship, remember to follow-up to get a final answer. You don't want to lose potential sponsors who were interested but have merely forgotten to send you a cheque. (And remember, you'll have to send a tax invoice before most organisations will be willing to send a cheque.)

Meanwhile, go back to your notes from early discussions of the purpose and structure of the forum and decide what speakers, panel members, chairs and special guests you would like to invite to the forum. Identify fall-back invitees in case any first choices cannot attend.

Pay close attention to political and cultural protocols, and be sure your team (including the forum organiser) are aware of the subtleties of treating potential speakers, guests and attendees with respect.

Be sure to consider the traditional owners of the land where your forum is to be held, and contact them to gain their permission to hold the event; or if relevant, invite them to participate or speak at the forum.

8. Producing a promotional/registration leaflet

Don't just do the best you can "in-house". Invest in a professional graphic designer who will come up with appropriate images and colours to translate your abstract words about the content of the forum into meaning for people who see the leaflet. While hiring a professional will increase your costs, the additional expense will pay for itself in increased attendance and possibly even additional sponsorship.

You may also wish to have the graphic designer provide an A4 version of the leaflet, in both hard-copy and Adobe PDF forms. The first will be helpful for faxing out to potential registrants, and the second can be made available for download from your website. In certain circumstances you may also wish to allow electronic registration over the internet, but this requires (sometimes expensive) security arrangements with your internet service provider. An easier option is to simply allow download of the registration form so that the registrant can complete the form and fax it back to you.

The leaflet should tell the reader what the forum will generally be about. Any speakers and sponsors who are already confirmed can be listed, but you need not have every detail finalised before it is printed. Remember to include the date and venue; your telephone number, email address and website for more information; your fax number and postal address for returning the registration form; costs (including concessions, community vs. industry/government pricing, cancellation fee if any, etc); any

meals/refreshments that will be provided (and space to list special dietary requirements); and a small map showing nearby landmarks and detailing how to reach the venue by public transport and where to park bicycles. Mention wheelchair accessibility and whether childcare is available.

Be sure to use paper and inks that are consistent with your organisation – e.g. 100% recycled paper, or at least not that horrible glossy paper that can't even be recycled.

9. Promotion and final arrangements

While your highly professional leaflet will be a central part of your promotion, there are a number of other media you should be sure to use.

- Promotional leaflet: If timed cleverly, you can send the leaflet to members and supporters with regularly scheduled mail-outs of newsletters or other material. Also distribute copies to local shops and community centres according to your target audience for the forum.
- Website: Make your promotional/registration leaflet available for download in an easily printable format (such as Adobe PDF – not HTML); but don't stop there. Provide additional background information on your site so that interested registrants can read up in preparation for the forum.
- Email: To make optimal use of your email networks, be sure to provide all relevant information and contact details for the forum *within the text of the email*. Many email recipients will not bother opening an attachment unless they have already decided they might be interested. Also be sure to choose a good subject line, as many people *will not even open the email* unless the subject line is relevant. Don't send unreasonably large attachments – instead, upload the file to your website and provide only the a link to the file. Finally, encourage recipients to forward the message to other networks.
- Media: Brainstorm ways of using the media to get free publicity. Radio, television and newspaper coverage are all good, but don't underestimate the value of the local newspapers and community newsletters from relevant organisations.
- Advertising? Might be useful in certain cases, but better to get it free!

Once promotion and registration is underway, all that is left is making sure everything comes together for the event itself. Recruit volunteers, create name tags, produce a program, compile a list of delegates, etc. The Appendix contains a number of detailed issues that are worth considering.

10. Participate! and learn for next time

If you're still finalising arrangements on the day of the forum, then you will lose a valuable opportunity to make the most out of your forum through your own participation. Having a strong team of volunteers will allow even the volunteers to catch at least part of the forum.

Provide attendees with anonymous feedback forms to ensure you get their positive and negative feedback in order to improve your next forum. The feedback form can also be a place where people ask to receive relevant information in the future, though this can undermine the anonymity of the feedback form.

And finally, remember to send thank-you letters to all speakers, presenters, sponsors and volunteers. One way to do this efficiently is to compile a summary of the forum outlining key outcomes, resolutions, etc, and post this with your thank-you letters as well as to all participants.

And good luck!

[This document has been prepared by Eric Manners based on experience gained organising the Smogbusters Queensland Forum entitled "Clearing the Air in South East Queensland", 12 August 2000. The Appendix borrows much from another unlabelled document possibly from Christine Laurence, Smogbusters New South Wales.]

Appendix: Other details to be considered for the event itself

- Invite and confirm chairs, facilitators, notetakers and back-ups, and prepare guidelines and notes for them
- For chairs and facilitators, is any training/briefing necessary?
- Make catering arrangements early (remember to consider ethical and environmental implications)
- Consider lunchtime performance/entertainment
- Are bike racks and end-of-trip shower and change facilities available?
- Perform a wheelchair accessibility test on the venue
- Will accommodation be required for interstaters?
- Will posters help to promote the event? If so, ensure design is consistent with promotional leaflet.
- What electricals might be required? overhead transparency projector (and spare bulbs), electronic data projector, slide projector, photocopier, extension cords, double adaptors, television and VCR, CD/tape player, mobile phones, laptops for presentations or forum organising, fax machine, “laser” pointer, etc
- Be sure to double-check all electricals just before the forum.
- Have any necessary stationery and office supplies on hand in case of emergencies (ball-point pens, whiteboard markers, permanent pens and cardboard for signs, one-sided scrap paper for notes; name tags (remind attendees to leave them behind on departure), clear tape, masking tape, gaffer tape, “blue-tack”, push-pins, safety pins, spare labels/nametags, rubber bands, string, whiteboard cleaners, scissors, Stanley knife, hole-punch, stapler, paper clips, white-out, etc
- Other items to have handy: public telephone cards, spare coins, first aid kit, bell for time-keeping, basic tool kit, etc
- Have relevant public transport timetables and maps available at registration desk
- Is all necessary furniture arranged?
 - How many seats will be required, and in what configuration?
 - Are any tables required – for workshops and group activities, for sponsors’ stalls and other displays, or for registration desks?
 - Noticeboards? Whiteboards?
 - Rubbish and recycling bins?
- If concurrent sessions are planned, prepare attendance lists for people to sign on (if necessary)
- Be sure to get photographs of the event for later promotions
- Gifts for key-note speakers and special guests? (flowers, wine, gift certificates, etc)
- Are toilet locations well marked?
- For stall displays, prepare a map ahead of time showing floor layout
- Prepare a roster for the volunteer team
- Prepare receipts for registrants beforehand, and place with nametags
- If cash will be taken at the door, organise to deposit at a nearby bank