

# CASE STUDY

## How to make Your Volunteer Expo More Inclusive

### Background

The Ballarat Foundation has been looking at ways to make our annual Volunteer Expo more inclusive. The purpose of the Volunteer Expo is to connect, inspire and mobilise the community to get involved in volunteering. The Expo is held to:

- **Promote volunteering** as a valued and accessible opportunity by showcasing the diversity of roles available and highlight that there's "a role for everyone", including those living with a disability, First Nations people, newly arrived migrants, youth and vulnerable women.
- **Support volunteer organisations** by providing a platform to share their mission, recruit volunteers, and connect with other organisations for collaboration.
- **Celebrate the contribution of volunteers** by publicly acknowledging the impact volunteers have on the community, reinforcing a culture of giving back.
- **Educate and inform the community** by raising awareness of social issues, community needs, and how volunteering helps address them, including issues around inclusion.

### Event Snapshot

Ballarat is a regional centre with approximately 80 volunteer organisations. The Ballarat Foundation holds the Volunteer Expo during National Volunteer Week. The event takes place in a Church Hall in the centre of town and is free for stall holders. The Event runs for 4 hours during the middle of the week from 10am to 2pm. The Expo is preceded by a celebratory morning tea, which includes a guest speaker talking about their volunteering experience and a public acknowledgement of the value and contribution of local volunteers to the community.



## Why it works

Each year the Ballarat Foundation has sought feedback from stall holders and the community regarding the morning tea and Expo with a view to finding the best format to ensure volunteer recruitment is more inclusive. Bringing community, volunteer organisations and service agencies together in a single place gives a great chance for cross learning and collaboration. These are the lessons we have learned:

### *Invest in marketing and track it*

The level of marketing in the lead up to the event will often play a huge role in determining the success of the event. The Ballarat Foundation has never had trouble getting volunteer organisations to join the Expo. However, in the early years we did have eager organisations with little to no foot traffic through the venue. If we are looking to bring new types of volunteers into the room, then marketing is important. This is what we found worked to improve foot traffic:

1. **Free only goes so far.** Previously we used free community radio slots to advertise the event. However after paying for commercial radio advertising with a clear campaign message about inclusivity, we increased foot traffic to the Expo by 193%. We used lived experience in our radio campaign utilising interviews with VIOs who had engaging stories of inclusivity success to share.
2. **We paid** to boost our Facebook campaign. As a result our reach was exponential with more than 52,000 views from 587 engagements. Each engagement cost \$0.43, making it a very modest investment. The main audience reach was women (70 percent) aged between 35-64.
3. To improve the diversity of the audience, **we targetted schools and employment agencies** where youth volunteering was part of the curriculum with direct marketing material.
4. **We invested in a big banner** to draw foot traffic from the main street. Don't date the banner so it can be used in subsequent years!

### *Combine celebration with recruitment*

In previous years the Volunteer expo was held separate to the celebratory morning tea. Combining these events encouraged flow-through, increased foot traffic and added a sense of community celebration. This is what we found worked:

1. **It should be all about the volunteers.** In the past we had 'dignitaries' speak at the morning tea. While this is important, we found that when volunteers get up and describe how volunteering has changed their lives this touches people in a way dignitaries can't. .
2. **Spread the love.** We try and get as many volunteer organisation to send us photos of their volunteers in action and create a slide show that runs of a loop during the morning tea. People love to see themselves and it is good to show community members the breadth, depth and increased inclusiveness of volunteering experiences.



### ***Lower barriers for volunteer organisations***

Offering free stallholder participation with funding from grants and business sponsorship allowed smaller organisations with limited budgets to attend the Expo.

### ***Create inclusive, engaging experiences***

Modelling inclusion in action while drawing visitors helps to create more inclusive experiences. We have done this by:

1. Ensuring that volunteer organisation that work with volunteers from newly arrived migrant groups, people with disabilities, First Nations people, vulnerable women and youth have a booth at the Expo.
2. We invite a coffee van and food van run by disability trainees to operate at the entrance to the Expo. This shows volunteering and inclusion in action and also is a great way to bring people off the street into the Expo.

### ***Location, location, location***

Beggars can't always be choosers, but the venue and the venue location is important. We found that a central venue brings more foot traffic and somewhere where stall holders can easily network. We once tried a venue with different rooms and the Expo was far less cohesive. When choosing a venue keep in mind access for the elderly and people with mobility issues. Consider hearing loops and ensure people know where to access disabled facilities, for example, we chose a location that was close to a public changing station.

### ***collect data to ensure best practice***

We found that collecting feedback and attendance numbers isn't enough. The value comes from how you use the data to improve and advocate for the event. For the Volunteer Expo, stallholder surveys, visitor counts, and marketing analytics provided clear insights into what worked and what could be improved. This is what we found worked:

1. We tracked key metrics including attendance numbers, volunteer enquiries, social media reach and visitor demographics. This year we saw a 193% increase in attendance compared to 2024, a clear indicator that marketing efforts worked. We also had more youth groups and people with disabilities come through the doors.
2. We linked outcomes to action and by asking about post-Expo actions we could show that the Expo didn't just generate interest but it also led to volunteer recruitment. In one instance the Foodbank made a subsequent policy decision to create volunteer roles suitable for those with a disability and have subsequently filled that role.



3. We used data for storytelling. Metrics can tell a powerful story, which helps make a compelling case for future funding and sponsorship of the event.

4. We created a feedback loop. We designed the survey to get honest and open feedback from visitors and stallholders, which helps guide planning for future Expos and focus on action that will improve inclusivity.

## Impact

Identifying lessons learned is important because it turns an event into the starting point for improvement and future success. By trying to identify lessons, and setting up a framework to capture these lessons year-on-year, the Ballarat Volunteer Expo is now more inclusive, efficient and more effective in terms of outcomes (refer to Figure 1). This year we saw huge increases in foot traffic, and more importantly, a significant conversion rate from enquires to volunteer sign-ups:

*“As a result of the Expo we had a record 6 volunteer interviews, which is a record. Three of these people said they heard the radio interview and came to the Expo looking for our stand”*  
*Shana Love: Volunteer Engagement Officer, Uniting Agewell*

