

Warkworth Museum: Cultivating a Community of Museum Lovers



Faced with multiple Covid lockdowns over a two-year period, Warkworth Museum drew on its strong community spirit to bring in new volunteers and a new vision to bring locals through its doors.

Perched beside the Parry Kauri Park, the museum used to receive a steady amount of tourist bus traffic, but with the advent of Covid this stream of tourists quickly dried up. Museum kaimahi and the board were plunged into a new reality that required them to think about every aspect of the organisation's existence – its supporters, visitors, volunteers and its purpose.

ABOVE: Shop volunteer Joan Triggs (left) and volunteer ambassador Sue Nicholson-Carter (right) outside the museum entrance.



ABOVE: Museum Manager, Victoria Joule (left) and Vice President, Jo Haswell (right) who worked closely to ensure the sustainability of the museum when Covid hit.

Thanks to help from the Museum Hardship Fund, the team were able to build on their community ties, pivot to target Aucklanders and strengthen their networks within the wider Warkworth region.

“Covid meant that we were forced to think in a more strategic way. Given there were changes from week-to-week we had to become quicker at decision-making,” says the Museum Manager, Victoria Joule. “It really made us think out of the box, so when our visitor numbers were restricted and schools wanted to visit, we offered to open just to the school groups who could then manage their own bubbles and numbers. We also created new roles and thought creatively about all aspects of the organisation.”

A homegrown strategy

The pause created by Covid and the funds provided by The Museum Hardship Fund helped the team to take a more considered approach to developing a sustainable practice in the face of this ‘new normal’.

With only one paid part-time staff member – Victoria – the organisation was organically formed and flexibly structured, so it was important to create a plan that brought everyone along with it.

“We had to acknowledge that we didn’t want to become something that we’re not, we’re not Auckland Museum or Te Papa, it was a balancing act of being professional though at the same time getting input from our volunteers.”

One of the major changes the organisation put into action was hiring a marketing consultant to create a 12-month marketing plan to identify local audiences with support from the Museum Hardship Fund.

Sitting on the doorstep of New Zealand’s largest city, Auckland, the museum had a wealth of potential visitors to draw on. So it quickly shifted its marketing towards those in the surrounding regions to create a more sustainable audience base.

The team knew that the museum touched the lives of many people, from specialist researchers to school groups, though it had a limited understanding of the channels these people used, and where to put effort to expand its reach.

This shake-up required the organisation to be fast-acting, nimble, curious and dynamic which was not how it had operated in the past. Vice President, Jo Haswell, says that before Covid the strategic plan was focused on collections and structure, but funds from the Museum Hardship Fund allowed the museum to develop a long term plan with a sustainable vision.

“Although work was underway on the strategic plan, this was placed into fifth gear during Covid as the museum’s priorities changed to align with the outcome of staying afloat during this difficult time by increasing visitor numbers and engagement and improving the sustainability of the organisation,” says Jo Haswell.

Within months the organisation drew up a plan to bring locals through its doors. Despite being on a well-trodden tourist bus route, foot traffic to the museum is almost non-existent as it is on the outskirts of Warkworth township, so the team went about creating more signage and produced a set of eye-catching brochures.

Though this marketing campaign proved to be effective on one level, it was recognised that it was somewhat faceless and that a more human touch was required to deepen its outreach efforts. That’s where the museum’s volunteer base proved to be useful.

Volunteers to the rescue

Woven into the fabric of community life, the museum is one that is alive with volunteers. If you happen to come along on its “worker Wednesdays”, all you need to do is open a door and behind it you’ll find a group of volunteers working away on everything from archival research to textile care.

With over 80 volunteers on its books, the museum has an open-door policy for anyone wanting to share their talents with the museum and, during Covid it became a critical community hub. During that unsettling time, Victoria welcomed in new volunteers looking for connection and purpose by quickly identifying roles that matched their skills and experience with the museum’s aspirations.

One such volunteer is Sue Nicholson-Carter, who had worked as cabin crew for many years, and was looking to fill her days after being made redundant. To put her skills to good use, Victoria invented a role as a museum ambassador. “It was the perfect role given this fortuitous turn of events, we needed someone in an outreach role and Sue was craving social connection after months of being locked up.”

The role – which Sue helped to define – involved travelling to local accommodation providers to drop off brochures, promote the museum’s activities and gauge awareness of the museum across the wider region.

“There was no existing ambassador role, so they really gave me free rein to make it my own by trusting me and allowing me to do what I had learnt through decades of customer service – to treat everyone like a friend. This place is just a little gem for me now, I moved up here six years ago though because I am often travelling overseas, I didn’t get to meet people and feel like I was part of the community. Through the volunteering, I got to meet an eclectic group of people, I felt so fortunate, everyone was so incredibly welcoming and nice.”

Through Sue’s work the museum has been able to strengthen its relationships with local businesses, share ideas and bring them into the fold by inviting them to visit and share morning or afternoon tea with them.

One of the key funding streams for the museum is an opportunity shop in town and its retail shop within the museum, which focused on international visitors, though during lockdown these two steady income streams dried up.

Faced with this dire reality, the museum shop looked to change its offering by bringing in the wares of local producers, so Victoria put a call out to artisans and food producers on their doorstep.



The call was answered and now the shop is filled with a number of locally made items, from kauri-gum jewelry to home-made preserves and embroidery which helped to support the community during Covid and became another vital community connection point.

Harnessing the hive-mind

As part of its plan, the museum also looked to strengthen its online communities, and its exhibition “Made in our Backyard” worked to do just that by putting a call out to locals for significant objects and stories. After restoring two American army huts, the museum looked to source keepsakes and memorabilia to capture the times when American marines were stationed in Warkworth. Victoria says the response from the community was remarkable.

“We brought in people to do oral histories and locals brought in artifacts, photographs and stories. I like these kind of exhibitions because once you ask the question you don’t know what you’re going to get. It has not only strengthened our relationship with the community, it also strengthened our story” says Victoria.

A scroll through its social media channels demonstrates the museum’s growing online presence, something that will be further enhanced with the launch of their new website in the coming months. In the future Victoria hopes to draw on this community more to create connections and solve some of the long-held mysteries held within the collection.

“Our digital presence is playing catch up marketing-wise, though this remains one of the centrepieces of our strategy because it’s critical to keeping up a wider conversation about Warkworth and its history. As part of our marketing plan, we created targeted Facebook adverts and we’ve created a one-hour a week social media role,” says Victoria.

“Now we’re regularly posting stories about our collection items, events and our much loved volunteers. Those board members who were once skeptical about its worth are some of its biggest champions. Our social media advisor has done a great job of setting up our channels, now we just need a keen volunteer to take up with role and ‘own it’.”

ABOVE: Volunteer Jenni McGlashan inspects one of the shoes they have in storage.



This case study was produced by National Services Te Paerangi

The Museum Hardship Fund is a COVID response funding stream from the Ministry for Culture and Heritage

