

# FIRE NOTE

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## RECRUITING YOUNGER FIRE SERVICE VOLUNTEERS

*An example of 'research adoption' of Bushfire CRC research outcomes by an end user agency.*

**In the first survey of its kind, a Bushfire CRC survey following firefighting volunteers 6, 12 and 24 months after recruitment, is providing research for improved volunteer recruitment strategies for CRC partner agencies.**

Australia's population is ageing. Consistent with this trend, the volunteer memberships of Australia's volunteer-based rural fire services are also ageing. In response to this trend, CFA initiated the New Volunteer Members Tracking Project in collaboration with the Bushfire CRC.

A preliminary survey of new volunteers conducted after six months in the CFA found that self-oriented motives (career advancement, new skills, new friends, new challenges) were more relevant for younger volunteers (<35 years) compared with older volunteers. These findings informed CFA's October 2006 recruitment campaign. Those who responded were younger overall than those who joined in the period April-September 2005. It was also found that younger enquirers made much greater use of CFA's web site and on-line download facilities, compared with older enquirers.

### BACKGROUND

Australia's annual birth rates have declined over the past three decades. This has resulted in an ageing population. In 1970/71, 31 per cent of the population was aged 15 years or younger. By 2002/3 the corresponding figure had declined to 22 per cent. Over the same period the percentage of the Australian population aged 65-plus grew from 8 per cent to 13 per cent. It is predicted that the percentage of the population aged 65-plus will climb to about 25 per cent by 2040, while growth in the traditional workforce age range (18-60 years) will slow to almost zero (McLennan & Birch, 2005).

Australia's volunteer-based rural fire services are not insulated from these demographic changes. Almost all agencies report concerns that the age of their volunteer membership is rising. Over the period 2001-2006 the median age of CFA's volunteer membership rose from 40 years to 46 years (Figure 1). This is a potentially serious development for fire agencies since operational fire fighting can be a very physically demanding activity.

Clearly, volunteer-based fire agencies would like to halt and reverse the ageing of their volunteer

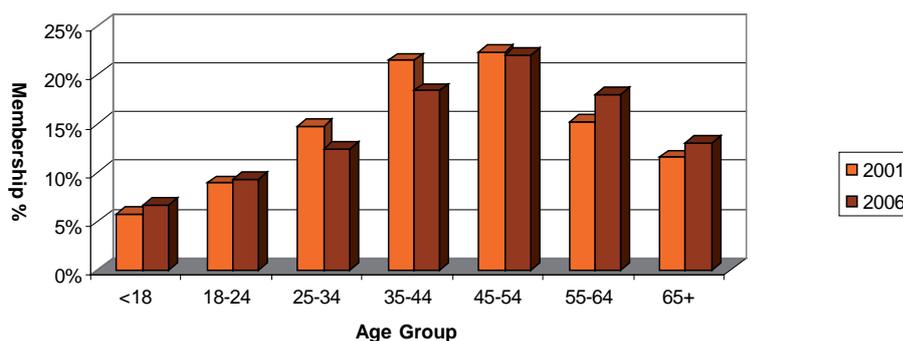
memberships by recruiting and retaining greater numbers of younger (<35 years) volunteers. However, other social factors, including changes in the nature of work in Australia, make this difficult.



### ACTIONS AGENCIES CAN TAKE TO TARGET YOUNGER VOLUNTEERS:

- Emphasise the *what's in it for me?* aspects—career enhancement, new skills, new friends, personal development.
- But NOT at the expense of community safety and community contribution aspects.
- And make sure your web page dealing with volunteer recruitment is state-of-the-art!

Figure 1: CFA volunteer age profiles 2001 and 2006



## A SURVEY OF NEW VOLUNTEERS

As one component of enhancing volunteer recruitment and retention, the CFA, in collaboration with the Bushfire CRC Volunteerism Project team, initiated the New Volunteer Member Tracking Project. This involved surveying all new volunteers approximately six months after joining. The survey questionnaire asked what prompted them to join, their reasons for joining, how easy it was to make contact, and what their initial experiences were on joining their brigade. Demographic information was also sought: including age, gender, education, occupation, marital and family status.

The aim of the project is to provide the CFA with information about who volunteers, why, and how, so as to inform improvements in recruiting, training, supporting, and retaining their volunteers.

It is proposed to re-survey a sample of the new volunteers after:

- 12 months to find out about their experiences during firefighting operations;
- 24 months to find out the impact of fire service volunteering on work and family life, health and fitness, and personal development.

A more detailed description of the project is available in McLennan, Birch, and King (2006).

## OUTCOMES FROM THE PROJECT

Survey returns from 455 new volunteers (311 men and 144 women) were analysed. Ten potential motivations for joining CFA were listed on the survey form and participants were asked to rate the importance of each. These ratings were analysed and three clusters of motivational factors were identified:

1. Self-oriented motivations (4 items).
2. Community safety oriented motivations (4 items).
3. Community contribution motivations (2 items).

The ratings for the items making up each cluster were summed to generate for each volunteer three motivations scores: self-, community safety-, and community contribution-oriented motives.

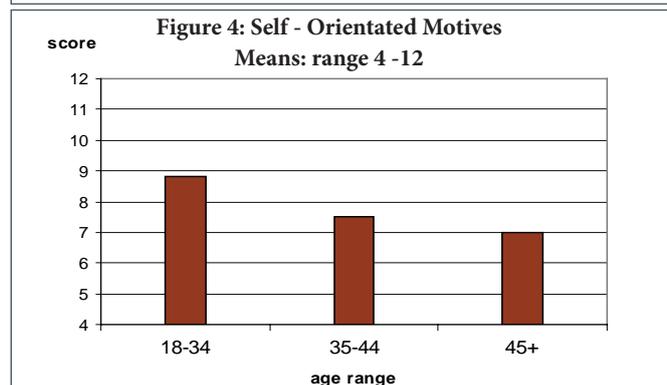
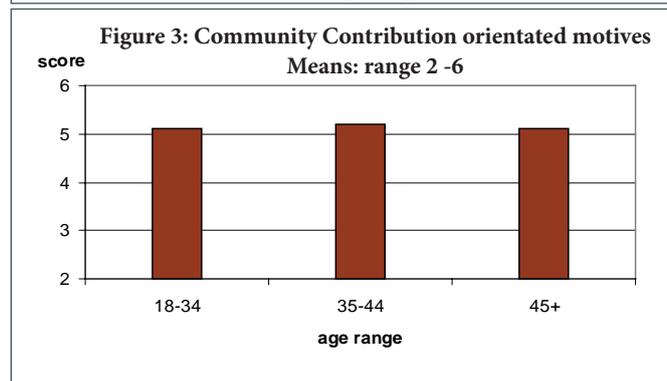
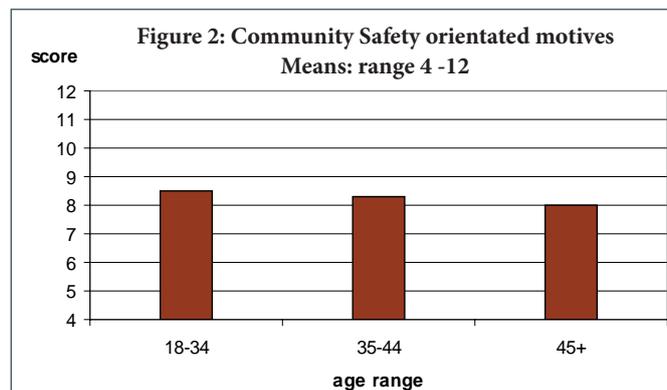
To investigate age and motivation to volunteer, the means of the three motivation scores for volunteers aged 18-34, 35-44, and 45+ years were compared.

There were no significant differences across the three age groups for mean scores on community safety and community contribution motivations (Figures 2 & 3). However, self-oriented motivations were more important for volunteers 18-34 years compared with volunteers in the two older age groups (Figure 4).

This suggests that while younger volunteers are no less motivated by community safety and community contribution issues, they are rather more likely to be motivated by self-oriented issues (career, new skills, new friends, personal development) compared with older volunteers (Birch & McLennan, 2006).

Respondents were also asked to rate the importance of seven sources of information about volunteering with CFA. The source rated overall as least important was the CFA web site. Further, there was no difference between younger volunteers (18-34 years) and older volunteers in the rating of the web site for importance in their recruitment. This finding runs counter to what is known about e-marketing and e-commerce generally, where the web is generally the preferred medium for people under 35.

For CFA, the findings identified a need to update the volunteer recruitment related pages on the CFA website.



**BUSHFIRE CRC RESEARCH MAKING A DIFFERENCE**

As part of the planning process for CFA's October 2006 volunteer recruiting campaign, the web page providing information on becoming a CFA volunteer was upgraded and a downloadable enquiry form made available, which could be emailed or faxed to CFA. In addition, the finding that younger volunteers were more likely to be motivated by Self-oriented issues compared with older volunteers was noted and incorporated in the previously successful *Does the hat fit?* volunteer recruitment strategy. A key aspect of the marketing component was the preparation of five different newspaper advertisements, each to run once over five weeks in local and state-wide newspapers. These different advertisements featured a mix of self-oriented, community safety oriented, and community contribution oriented motivational messages—see example on Page 4.

At the conclusion of the campaign, a total of 320 enquiries had been received by CFA. As well as requiring contact details, the enquiry form also asked how the enquirer found out that CFA was seeking volunteers. Figure 6 shows the relative importance of each of six possible listed methods of finding out about CFA's need for volunteers. Advertisements in a local newspaper was the most frequently reported prompt to seek more information.

The median age of the enquirers aged 18-plus was 33 years. The median age of those who volunteered during the period April-September 2005 was 40 years. This suggests that the campaign was effective in engaging the attention of younger potential volunteers. Of course, it remains to be seen how many of the enquirers proceed to become volunteer CFA members and what is the age profile of those who do so.

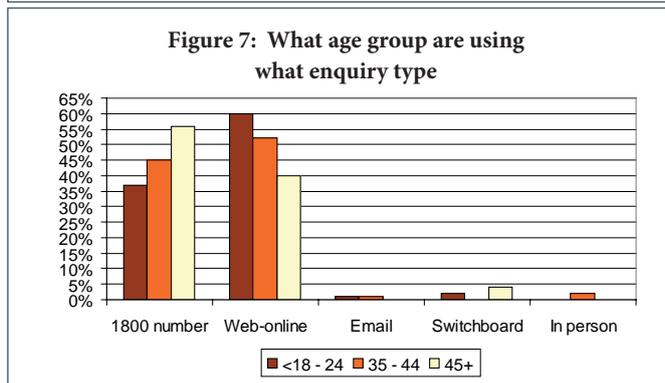
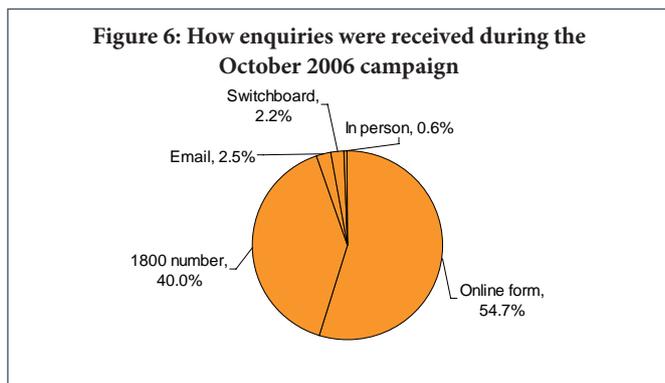
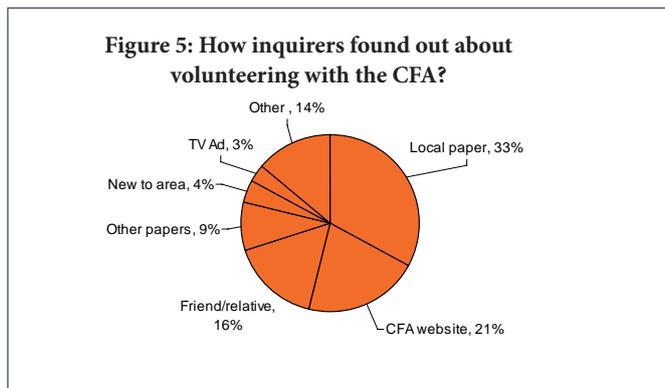
While many factors determine the number of enquiries in response to a state-wide volunteer recruitment campaign, the number of enquires (320) was substantially greater than those received following the October 2004 (69) and October 2005 (137) campaigns.

Figure 6 shows that downloading the on-line enquiry form and emailing or faxing this was the most common means of enquiry (54%), followed by using the 1800 telephone number (40%).

The enquiry form asked enquirers to report their age. This allowed researchers to compare younger and older enquirers on how they made their initial enquiry contact with CFA (Figure 7).

For younger enquirers the most common method was to visit the CFA web site and download the enquiry form (60%). For older enquirers, the preferred method was to phone the 1800 number.

It appears clear that younger potential volunteers do, indeed, have a strong preference for using the web as a source of information about volunteering.



## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

CFA will follow-up the enquiries to see who became a volunteer and what factors differentiated between those who did and those who did not.

This report illustrates how an agency can identify potentially relevant information from a Bushfire CRC research project and immediately implement it within an existing system for subsequent evaluation

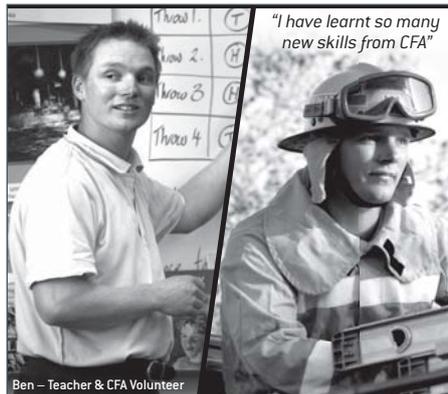
For more information about the *Does the hat fit?* volunteer recruitment strategy contact Charles King, c.king@cfa.vic.gov.au

For more information about the Bushfire CRC Volunteerism Research Project go to the Bushfire CRC website: [www.bushfirecrc.com](http://www.bushfirecrc.com) or contact Jim McLennan: [j.mclennan@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:j.mclennan@latrobe.edu.au)

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Ben – Teacher & CFA Volunteer

### Does The Hat Fit?

Become a CFA volunteer today and make a difference in more ways than one. Give back to your community. Benefit from being part of Victoria's largest volunteer team. Meet new people, learn new skills and involve your whole family.

If you think the hat fits, free-call

**1800 232 636**

for information on how to join.

[www.cfa.vic.gov.au](http://www.cfa.vic.gov.au)



▲ ABOVE: CFA RECRUITMENT ADVERTISEMENT.

▼ BELOW: CFA WEBSITE

## ABOUT THE BUSHFIRE CRC VOLUNTEERISM PROJECT

The Bushfire CRC's Volunteerism project is working with Australian volunteer based fire agencies on research into factors impacting on the recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters.

The research involves conducting interviews with current volunteers, developing case studies of best practice brigades, and surveys of employers of volunteers. It is tracking the experiences of new volunteer recruits as they move through recruitment, induction, training, and initial deployments to fires and related emergency incidents.

The project is also exploring attitudes of employers of volunteer firefighters, increasing diversity in volunteer workforces – including women volunteers and volunteers from culturally and linguistically diverse background backgrounds and the impacts of volunteering on families of volunteer.

The results are providing fire agencies with valuable information to help strategic planning and policy development concerning volunteers and highlighting new ways to recruit and retain volunteer firefighters.

## REFERENCES / FURTHER READING

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McLennan J, Birch A and King C (2006), 'Holding on to what you have got: the CFA longitudinal study of new volunteers'. Papers from the inaugural volunteering research symposium 7-8 March 2006, Melbourne, pgs.82-89, Supplement to *Australian Journal on Volunteering*, vol. 11 no. 2.

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Bushfire CRC is a national research centre formed in partnership with fire and land management agencies in 2003 to undertake end-user focused research.

The Centre is part the national Cooperative Research Centres Programme.