



THE FUN **IN THE RUN**

IS PARKRUN WORLD LEADING INDUSTRY BEST PRACTICE FOR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY PROGRAMS?

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I have heard many in the industry ask, "So why is parkrun so popular?" The response to that question has three separate answers: It is an effective physical activity program; it is a successful community engagement program; and, it activates or reactivates Australia's iconic parks and open spaces. I will come back to unpack those answers in a wee bit, but first...

In May 2016, PLA CEO Mark Band wrote to parkrun Australia to congratulate the organisation on its outstanding success. Mark wrote, "Parks and Leisure Australia (PLA) is writing to parkrun Australia to congratulate your organisation on the significant success that you are experiencing with your parkrun events."

At that time parkrun had been operating in Australia for five years and many within the industry, from local government, state government and federal government, had seen or

heard of the growth in the 'movement'. Most parkruns are conducted in parks managed by LGAs (not all) and parkrun Australia needs to gain permission to hold their events in each specific location. Council officers needed to be approached, applications submitted, and in most cases councillors briefed by the local event coordinators.

As you can see from the below statistics, parkrun has spread far and wide. The result is an increase in parkrun's profile within the industry, due to the interaction of local parkrun volunteers and government officers.

In his letter, Mark went on to state, "PLA and its members are very aware of the work being done by parkrun, both in providing a best practice physical activity program for individual communities and also in bringing awareness of Australia's diverse parks to their communities."

In writing to parkrun, PLA had

already started to notice the three components that were leading to its outstanding success as a physical activity program and its value in introducing Australians to their parks. I will quote Mark further later, but let's now unpack the reasons for parkrun's success.

INDUSTRY BEST PRACTICE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY PROGRAM

Parkrun, in its simplest form, is a free 5km timed run, or walk, conducted each and every Saturday morning at local parks in 253 individual locations around Australia. Before running their first run a new participant obtains a unique barcode from parkrun's website, which they present to the scanner at the end of the run/walk. Their time is recorded and within approximately an hour an email arrives in the participant's inbox with their time, their position compared to everyone else that

participated, how many runs they have completed and an age grading, which compares their performance against their peers from around the world, based on the 5km distance.

The two guys that created parkrun in Bushy Park in London got the IT right, and everything else has flowed from there. Parkrun attracts world class runners, first timers, walkers, women (and men) with prams, people with dogs, people in hairy suits, in Santa costumes, and people in fairy outfits. They do it on Christmas Day, on New Year's Day, in the rain, in the snow, in mud, and most importantly, in very large numbers.

Governments of all stripes have been trying to develop successful physical activity programs that the community will engage in, and stay engaged in, for the last 10 years or more. In the early 2000s, Peter Beattie, then Premier of Queensland, called an Obesity Summit in Parliament House in Brisbane to try and work it out. I was personally involved in delivering programs such as the *Club Development Program* and the *Active Inclusion Program*, whose focus was providing physical activity programs in the community through initiatives such as *Yoga in the Park*, *Mum's with Prams*,

and *Energise*.

Local governments are so committed to the cause that some of them have employed Physical Activity Officers to deliver programs. But in my 17 years in the industry, I have not come across one program that had the "stickiness" and the sustainability to see it grow and be embraced by the community as a whole, until parkrun.

The ongoing and sustained success of parkrun has been registered most notably by universities and researchers. A number of research programs

have undertaken an examination of parkrun and its success. Researchers at Loughborough University in England have run a longitudinal study named *SparkLE* (Study of parkrun on Lifestyle and Exercise). The aim of the research was to "study participants in terms of demographics, current physical activity, the perceived impact of involvement and parkrun performance statistics".

The *SparkLE* research was published in the *International Journal of Behavioural Medicine*. Researchers

AUSTRALIAN PARKRUN STATISTICS AS AT 16 MARCH 2018

253 Events	38,749 Participants	2,606 Volunteers
5,144 First Timers	7,846 PBs	585,941 Registrations

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observed, "The evidence suggests that parkrun is attractive to non-runners; with women, older adults and overweight people well represented. Fitness improvements were observed and there were many positive perceived benefits, suggesting parkrun may be an effective community-based intervention for improving public health."

In that short sentence, delivered by some of the smartest and most dedicated people, were all of the deliverables that millions of dollars of grant funding had been striving for but was unable to find. A physical activity program that was attractive to "non-runners, women, older adults and overweight people", producing "effective community-based interventions for improving public health".

SOCIO-CULTURAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The second reason for parkrun's success is one that has received less attention, but is inherent and obvious to those that participate, and that underscores the socio-cultural nature of parkrun. This one is harder to put your finger on, so stay with me and I will try to explain it.

Parkrun is a celebration of the social connection that we all crave. The connectedness that holds societies together and drives people to want to be involved. That gets them out of bed to drive for 2 hours, in the rain, for a 20-30 minute run.

Another component of parkrun that is celebrated is its volunteers. At each parkrun there is a need for at least six volunteers; an event director, a scanner, turn-around person, marshals, pacers, tail-end Charlie and others. A simple but unenforced directive from parkrun is that each runner is expected to volunteer three times a year, which may or may not happen. It is in its volunteers where the real value of community engagement is found. A large percentage of parkrun volunteers do not actually participate in the run/walk, they are there purely to volunteer.

In its 2012 report *State of Volunteering in Australia*, Volunteer Australia found that, "Contributing to the community is important to the majority of volunteers. We also know from research that people volunteer for diverse reasons, including the personal satisfaction it gives them, the sense of belonging to community".

It is this simple observation that reveals the true value of parkrun, "a

sense of belonging to community". The volunteers at parkrun don't just perform their respective roles, they also create the community, the atmosphere, the motivation and the sense of belonging to something that is bigger than the individual, that draws not only the volunteers back but also the participants. Throughout all my parkrun's there has not been one where I was not encouraged and congratulated by another participant or volunteer. You often see people cross the finish line to high fives and shouts of exhilaration.

At the pre-run briefing conducted by the event coordinator, milestones are celebrated, cheered and clapped. When I did my 100th run (in -3 degree weather in Campbelltown), there was more celebration from total strangers than I had ever experience before. Milestone t-shirts are given out for 50 and 100 runs, creating a constant source of celebration. From a socio-cultural perspective, the celebrating can sometimes appear 'religious' or 'devout' in nature.

Photos are another key component in creating a community. Another volunteer position is the photographer, who takes photos of each participant before uploading them to the internet for people to access for free.

ACTIVATING AUSTRALIA'S ICONIC PARKS AND COASTAL RESERVES

In his letter to parkrun on behalf of PLA, Mark Band stated, "The other value that parkrun brings to the Australian community is in the enhanced awareness of Australia's fabulous parks. From the St Peters parkrun at Sydney Park, Albert Park in Melbourne, and the Gold Coast coastline at Kirra, to the rugged coast at Shellharbour, the beautiful heritage listed Queens park in Toowoomba, and Kirwana coastal walk, from Newfarm in Brisbane and the Hunter river foreshore development in Newcastle, to the Sandon Point at spectacular Bulli. One of the values of parkrun is the iconic locations in which they are conducted. Parkrun has done much for bringing ordinary Australian's back into their parks, or introducing Australian's to parks that they had never visited before".

As a recreation planner and an open space planner, this is where I see the real value of parkrun, "where the rubber hits the road". Parkrun is bringing people, who normally wouldn't go to a park, back into our parks, our reserves, our coastal reserves and our council parks. A case in point is Panania

DISCLAIMER!

The author of this article is a self-declared parkrun tragic. He has run 180 parkrun's on 60 different courses in four different states. As a recreation and open space planner with indepth knowledge of parkrun, he considers himself well placed to comment on Parkrun from an industry perspective.

parkrun in Sydney. An often overlooked park along the George's river, Panania has been revitalised by Council, purely because parkrun had started an event there. Parkrun often uncovers 'hidden' gems. Like Newport Lakes Park in Melbourne, an old quarry completely hidden in suburbia and known only to the locals, which wouldn't have been discovered by many unless they went there for parkrun.

As an industry we strive to get government and the community to value their parks, to value their provision and to ensure they are protected. By having an event that brings people into parks we achieve our aim. Another case in point is St Peters parkrun in Sydney. Conducted in Sydney Park — a disused brickwork and dumping site that was completely converted into Sydney's newest showcase park (Centennial would disagree) by Sydney City Council — the St Peters parkrun introduced Sydneysiders to this breathtaking achievement in open space planning.

Research shows that when people become aware of parks and engage with them, they become advocates for those parks. Parkrun participants who engage with their local parks are now becoming 'protectors' of those parks.

CONCLUSION

I have seen parkrun grow exponentially over the last five years. There are now more than 250 individual parkrun's being held around Australia each and every Saturday morning. Volunteers are engaging, runners are running, walkers are walking, land managers are providing support, and parks, reserves, beaches, national parks, regional parks, dams and sporting precincts are being activated.

Parkrun has proven that it is world best practice for physical activity programs, it is creating 'communities' and it is showcasing open spaces. PLA acknowledged that in 2016, when it wrote to parkrun and stated, "Your organisation should be congratulated." ■

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