

Rescuing the Surveying Profession from Near-Extinction: The Surveying Task Force Inc.

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SUMMARY

Globally, the profession of Cadastral Surveying faces widespread issues of aging demographic, insufficient intake and relatively inadequate public image, which imperil its future. Efforts to address this tend to be ad hoc, often duplicated, contentious and not uniformly applied.

In Victoria (Australia) statistics showed that at current rates, within ten years the number of Licensed Surveyors will be halved, with dangerous implications for universities, the profession, the integrity of the Cadastre, and the property industry which is a mainstay of the Australian economy.

In 2007, the Cadastral Surveying Career Promotion Task Force (later incorporated as the *Surveying Task Force Inc.*) was established in Victoria with representatives from relevant professional, statutory and academic bodies. Its aim was to pool resources and expertise to build the capacity of Surveying by promoting it to young people as a profession and revitalising its public image.

Using professional marketing assistance, the Task Force has carried out research, established a branding strategy and marketing plan, raised funds and implemented a great number of initiatives in a coordinated and dynamic manner. The success to date has attracted global attention, including direct participation from other States recognising the value of a nationwide concept and 'look' combined with a pro-active, coordinated strategy.

Significant achievements can be attributed to the Task Force acting as a forum for consensus, unifying disparate Surveying participants to focus on a common goal: the continuation of the Surveying profession.

This paper expands on the process and initiatives in Victoria, and explains the significant benefit to the profession of the consensual process.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Cadastral Surveying is a profession with a long and noble history. Required by law, Surveying underpins the work of Architecture, Engineering and Construction, and is integral to sustainable land development. Despite this, in recent times, Surveying has virtually dropped out of sight to the public and to prospective students deciding on their future careers.

In 2007, statistics produced by the Office of the Surveyor-General in the State of Victoria Australia highlighted the fact that more than 70% of the approximately 500 State Licensed Surveyors are over the age of 50. The number projected to enter the profession over the following decade would fall drastically short of replacing those due to retire. The number of graduate Surveyors being registered was a mere dozen per year, tertiary Surveying/Geomatics programs were contracting to reflect a dwindling intake, and secondary school students were turning away from preparatory subjects such as maths and geography. At current rates, the number of Licensed Surveyors in Victoria would be halved within ten years, a situation worsened by an increased need for Surveying due to significant infrastructure projects and rising property values in Australia.

The retirement of large numbers of experienced Surveyors would do more than just increase the workload on those remaining. Without an overlap with a younger generation, much historical Surveying knowledge and expertise would be lost, and a reduction in the number of supervising surveyors would seriously disrupt mentoring, work experience and the registration process. Property- and infrastructure-related companies and organisations that depended on the work of Surveyors would find their own work capacity, project schedules and profitability threatened.

A significant reduction in surveying numbers would also run the risk of reviving Government attempts to deregulate the profession. Such deregulation would lead to increased competition by less qualified and knowledgeable practitioners and a resultant drop in work quality with the potential for increased litigation. The decrease in confidence in land dealings that would engender would threaten the entire property industry.

2. TOWARDS A SOLUTION

2.1 Creation of the Task Force

The issue was brought to the fore by two concurrent events: the introduction of the Victorian *Surveying Act 2004* with its new regime of annual registration, and the appointment to the Surveyors Registration Board of a Member with particular interest and experience in the promotion of professions, who drove discussions on this issue at Board meetings.

Different approaches to resolve the issue had been tried over the years by separate bodies in an ad-hoc manner, without any significant effect. This time, a more all-inclusive approach was envisaged. The Surveyors Registration Board of Victoria invited representatives from all major relevant bodies – Association of Consulting Surveyors Victoria, Institution of Surveyors Victoria, Spatial Sciences Institute Victoria (now Surveying & Spatial Sciences Institute), as well as the two Victorian universities offering tertiary degrees in Surveying, University of Melbourne and RMIT University, to a preliminary stakeholder meeting in April 2007.

There, agreement was unanimous as to the urgent need for a campaign to secure a plentiful supply of high-level trained and registered professional Surveyors into the future, to protect the profession, the Cadastre and the property industry. This led to the formation of the Cadastral Surveying Career Promotion Task Force, composed of representatives of the same bodies plus students from the Universities' Surveying/Geomatics societies. The first official meeting was opened by the Surveyor-General of Victoria on 9 August 2007.

2.2 Preliminary Objectives

The decisions taken at that meeting were crucial to the later success of the Task Force. The first formal agreement was that all relevant professional, statutory and academic bodies would be represented, so that any decisions taken would represent the consensus of and aim to benefit the industry as a whole. The need for strong industry participation was considered paramount.

The second point of business was the recognition that time was of the essence: decisions and action must be prompt, with the first initiatives expected within 3 months.

It was then agreed that the Task Force's scope would be limited to the promotion of Cadastral Surveying with a view to increasing the number of Licensed Surveyors, rather than all branches of Surveying, although this particular debate would be re-opened on several occasions as the Task Force evolved. Participants also agreed that the focus would be on bringing more Surveyors through the Victorian educational and registration system, rather than by encouraging overseas Surveyors to seek registration in Victoria.

From that perspective, a short-list of prioritised needs was developed, including:

- increasing the attractiveness of Cadastral Surveying as a profession;
- encouraging more students at both secondary and tertiary levels to undertake tertiary studies in Surveying/Geomatics; and
- encouraging the regional distribution of Surveyors.

A number of possible initiatives were suggested, including work experience, websites, government subsidies, industry scholarships, regional promotion by industry, promotion to parents and career advisors, and increased public awareness campaigns. The substantial financial requirements for such a concerted ongoing effort were obvious, and the Association of Consulting Surveyors Victoria made a sizable contribution on the spot to launch the work and to inspire others to do the same.

2.3 The Next Steps

It was immediately recognised that none of the participants had the professional marketing skills or full-time availability needed to carry out the work. A significant failing of similar campaigns in many professions was seen to be the erroneous belief that "anyone could do marketing", that – often for reasons of false economy – marketing was handled on a part-time basis by people of the profession itself, rather than by engaging qualified, experienced and dedicated consultants. Another common misconception was that people of the aging demographic of a profession would somehow intuitively know the proper marketing approach to 15-year-olds. In response to the gravity of the situation, the Task Force decided to engage a firm of marketing consultants to develop a promotional strategy to meet the objectives.

3. MARKETING RESEARCH

3.1 Research Methodology

Responding to the urgency, the Marketing Consultants established a fast-paced research schedule to produce a viable brand and marketing plan within 5 weeks. The work commenced on 29 October and was completed by the end of November 2007.

The first step was to develop a firm understanding of both the profession of Cadastral Surveying and its issues from an internal perspective, particularly in the sphere of career motivations and brand perceptions. In-depth interviews were held with Surveyors of different levels of experience and dynamic workshops with members of the Task Force and others. Internal documentation was also analysed. Online research was carried out for a better understanding of global and demographic trends and their implications on the profession.

Externally, both high school and tertiary students were identified as potential target markets for entry into a Surveying stream, so to gain insight into their perspectives, focus groups and workshops were held with year 11 and 12 students (with and without their parents, to determine the degree of parental influence on the final choice), and with university students studying spatial sciences. The aim was to explore their lifestyle and goals, career and course expectations, factors influencing their decisions, and their perception of Surveying.

3.2 Research Outcomes

A number of important insights emerged from the research:

- Despite its importance to the built environment, Surveying is virtually unknown to the public. This lack of understanding meant that the profession did not register as a desirable option with school students or their parents.
- A preponderance of Surveyors had been inspired to enter the profession through direct exposure during high school, such as work experience or listening to a Surveyor speaking about his/her work. However, the decreasing number of Licensed Surveyors in existence meant fewer people available to explain or demonstrate the benefits of the profession.
- Surveyors as a whole claimed high satisfaction with both their work and their professional identity, yet when asked to select from a pile of adjectives those which they felt best described their profession, the words selected were not positive in tone. In addition, they were also generally unable to articulate exactly what Surveyors did, undermining their ability to act as ambassadors for the profession. These issues added “raising self-image” to the list of Task Force objectives.
- An analysis of the profession revealed the multitude of positive attributes it offers: a balance of indoor and outdoor work and a variety of tasks; opportunities to work with both the latest technology and the environment; and flexibility of location (city to rural) and type of workplace (private or public sector, small to large firms, and self-employment). It also offers good salary and employment opportunities, even in recent times of economic crisis. Perhaps most importantly, it is indispensable, a career in which one “makes a difference”.
- Those attributes align well with the aspirations and motivations of Generation Y as defined by the research. Generation Y is characterised as intent on retaining freedom and flexibility, eschewing monotonous or overly stressful tasks for more stimulating and varied work. They also seek recognition, combined with good job stability and salary. A difficult ask, but Surveying does tick all these boxes. It became clear that the challenge resided not in the profession itself, but in its presentation and promotion.
- Importantly, the attributes that attracted prospective Generation Y employees were not the same as those that appealed to more mature Surveyors, which would also influence the way the brand should be presented.

3.3 Brand Development

The data collected from the research program was collated, reconciled, analysed and used as the basis for the development of a brand position and option. The strengths and weaknesses of the profession were identified and evaluated against the requirements of Generation Y to find the best fit.

Results of the research and the brand position and options were delivered to the Task Force in a dynamic, graphic presentation which included a Brand Book outlining the “new look” for Surveying that would resonate with both practitioners and prospective students alike. Evocative images were paired with resonant phrases to embody Surveying work, such as “indoors and outdoors, city and country, overseas and under seas, with our heads and hands, in suits and boots...”. The new “look” was encapsulated by the slogan: Surveying: “a life without limits™” [see Fig 1 below; Mext, 2007].

The proposed brand met with instantaneous and unanimous approval.



Fig 1: Brand presentation (Mext, 2007)

3.4 Marketing Objectives

A subsequent workshop with Task Force Members confirmed key objectives, strategies and tactics for the development of a viable three-year Marketing Plan (Mext, 2007). Examining the process which funnels young people from school through registration, the Plan showed that a tripartite approach aimed at achievable year-on-year increases in (a) the number of students entering tertiary Surveying/Geomatics streams, (b) those then selecting Cadastral Surveying as their career, and (c) graduates moving through the Registration process, would result in the necessary increase in Licensed Surveyors to restore the profession's numbers to a viable level [see Fig 2].

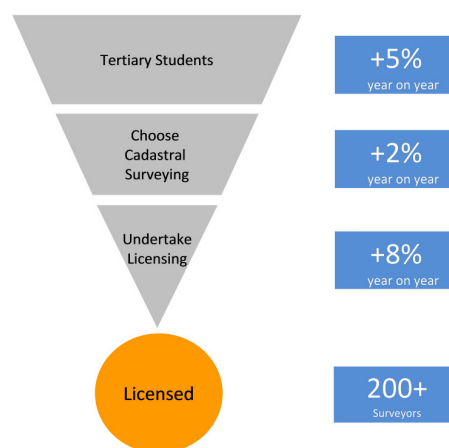


Fig 2: Registration “Funnel” (Mext, 2007)

A cost-benefit analysis directed the Task Force's initial major efforts towards the top of the “funnel”, increasing the number of secondary school students selecting Surveying as their tertiary program. Activities to address tertiary students' choice of Cadastral Surveying were more limited due to resource constraints. Improvements to the efficiency and quality of the licensing process which affect the point of the “funnel” would be handled in the first instance by the Surveyors Registration Board together with industry bodies.

To influence secondary school students, three main target groups were identified: the students themselves, their parents, and school networks such as teachers and career advisors. Whilst students are the key decision-makers, they are also the largest group and the most fickle; parents, whilst influential, are more dispersed and therefore difficult to access; career advisors and teachers were seen as both influential and particularly cohesive conduits to students, and therefore cost-effective to access.

3.5 Marketing Initiatives

As part of the Marketing Plan, the Consultants developed an extensive list of initiatives, which were prioritised to optimise cost-effectiveness and impact.

The first work carried out within an initial three-month period was the development and production of essential communication material, such as logo (see Fig 3), website (www.alifewithoutlimits.com.au), printed collateral (stationery, brochures), display banners, and PowerPoint presentations. A nine-minute colour video was produced in DVD format for wide distribution and embedded into the homepage of the website. Composed of striking images, persuasive narrative and engaging real-life interviews, it aligned the attributes of Surveying to the needs and desires of the market. It was a particularly effective tool, attracting acclaim and interest from the existing Surveying community, the target demographic, and even interstate and international Surveying bodies.



Fig 3: Logo

To ensure that initiatives were focused on achieving Task Force goals, the Marketing Consultants determined the following concise set of aims:

- increasing secondary school student interest in Surveying by exposure to Surveyors;
- educating Career Advisors and Teachers as to what Surveying offers and assisting them in communicating those benefits to students;
- encouraging tertiary students in selecting Surveying as a career; and
- motivating and resourcing industry to promote Surveying through presentations and productive work experience.

The specific initiatives initially carried out included:

- *Career expos* – Formal participation with manned stands and video presentations
- *Secondary school events* – Coordinated presentations to students by Surveyors
- *Work experience programs* – For secondary school students; including establishment of network for job/student connection and development of online materials to assist host employers in ensuring relevance and value of experience for both parties; For tertiary students, initial groundwork for program.
- *Tertiary student events* – Lectures to tertiary students on Marketing of Surveying
- *Promotion through Secondary School Career Advisors* – direct marketing campaign to Advisors and intensive education on Surveying attributes; membership of Advisors' Association and representation at Career Advisors' conference
- *Promotion through Maths and Geography Teachers' Associations* – initial coordination with the associations to assist in the development of class based materials and student surveying events
- *Public Relations* – articles published in Industry Body and Career Advisor publications
- *Website advertising* – search engine and job search websites advertising.

Other initiatives were deferred until sufficient funding could be obtained, such as:

- Public awareness program to maximise Surveyor profile
- Tertiary training activities and events, including a work integrated learning approach for students and linking students to work experience opportunities
- Increased tertiary initiatives through student bodies, advisors and department heads
- Government lobbying to create awareness of Surveying and its issues
- Campaigns to address regional and gender imbalance
- Viral and Guerrilla marketing campaigns
- Surveyor Mentoring program
- Promotion through Teachers' Associations to develop surveying-oriented curriculum material and activities
- Increased career opportunity awareness throughout secondary schools
- Active support of relevant Government initiatives in primary and secondary schools.
- Scholarship programs and competitions
- Facilitation of reduction of barriers to tertiary education and the registration process to enter into Cadastral Surveying
- Best practice: raising the Task Force profile to become the model for promotion of professions and engaging youth (BlueFrog Marketing, 2009).

4. RESOURCES

4.1 Resource Needs

It is clear that the Task Force cannot operate without adequate and ongoing support in terms of both monetary contributions and industry participation. In 2008/2009, it has expended financial and in-kind support to the value of approximately A\$375,000 (€230,000/US\$330,000), contributed by participating bodies as well as by a number of Surveying companies and individuals (Surveying Task Force Inc., 2009). Whilst certain bodies such as the Association of Consulting Surveyors Victoria have been particularly generous and pro-active in their contributions, all have followed suit to the best of their abilities, with much contributed “in kind” in the form of employee time, office facilities and materials, etc. Nevertheless, this level of resourcing is still insufficient for implementation of an extensive number of excellent but ‘resource-hungry’ initiatives included in the Marketing Plan (see item 3.5 above).

In addition to monetary support, the participation of Surveyors is needed for both development and implementation of initiatives, such as hands-on workshops and work experience for students and presentations at secondary schools, tertiary events and career expos. Surveyors are also needed in the administration of the Task Force and to ensure its succession planning.

As seen, industry support has been forthcoming, but the Task Force is seeking a more reliable ongoing commitment of both funds and participation.

4.2 Fund Raising

A successful Task Force launch attended by three-quarters of the Victorian Surveying confraternity was held at the start of the campaign to raise funds and to rally support. A second such event is planned for mid February 2010. With similar aims, it will bring Surveyors up to date on Task Force progress and the year’s planned initiatives. An important factor for fundraising is continual communication of the uses and results of those contributions. Demonstrations of success are deemed the strongest motivators for continued sponsorship and involvement.

The Task Force has recently completed its Strategic Plan 2010-2012, a basis for future fundraising. In addition to industry contributions, it identifies several other avenues as potential funding sources. Direct government funding has been categorised into two levels. The more promising one in the short term concerns statutory bodies that are directly affected by and more aware of the future of Surveying. Because of the profession’s low profile and limited resources, approaching other government bodies for direct funding is seen as a longer term initiative, as it would require a dedicated Task Force resource for regular lobbying and relationship building, to compete with other, more influential funding applicants. Another avenue with potential (termed “retail”), targets relevant organisations which, through their greater leverage, have already been successful in attracting direct government funding. The Task Force would seek a portion of that funding through a “subcontractor” arrangement, in areas where its initiatives are aligned to the objectives of the original grants (Surveying Task Force Inc., 2009).

5. PROGRESS

5.1 Years 2008/2009

In 2008, to meet governance requirements and facilitate the handling of large financial contributions and expenditures, the Cadastral Surveying Career Promotion Task Force became an incorporated not-for-profit entity officially entitled the *Surveying Task Force Inc.* Later that same year, another body, the Spatial Industries Business Association, was also admitted.

Achievement of Task Force goals through assessable KPIs is being carefully monitored. It would be premature to attribute positive effects to the Task Force's work at the date of this paper, as insufficient time has elapsed for statistically meaningful results, particularly given the lead time for changes to tertiary intake. Nevertheless, encouraging signs are being evidenced.

Task Force delegates have already reached several hundred secondary students through attendance at over 30 events, with over one hundred students registered on the Task Force database at one event alone. Almost 200 Career Advisors are currently signed up to actively promote Surveying to their students. Over 4,000 brochures and 360 DVDs have been distributed, and website statistics show a steady influx of hits with small variations.

Universities report increased levels of interest in Surveying on Open Days, and informal on-the-spot polling shows a clear connection to Task Force promotional initiatives. Other promising results include discernible increases in the number of first preferences for tertiary Surveying streams, and an unusually high percentage of students opting to stay in Surveying when entering after a year's deferral. There has also been a noticeable increase in the number of Surveyors obtaining registration. The sustainability of these results remains to be seen.

The strategy, momentum and appealing brand developed in Victoria have not gone unnoticed outside the State. In 2009, two other Australian States, South Australia and New South Wales, signed Interstate Participation Agreements by which they can benefit from the work already carried out. The advantages to promoting a powerful and unified image and strategy, rather than "re-inventing the wheel", are many, as are the opportunities to pool ideas, resources and analysis of results to greater effect.

Popular initiatives in other States have also been adapted to the Victorian market, such as full-day workshops where groups of students get hands-on exposure to Surveying tools and practices in the field. As mentioned earlier, research has shown such experiences to be instrumental in the choice of Surveying as a career.

As the issues of dwindling numbers and declining image are not faced solely in Australia, it is not surprising that Surveying bodies from other countries have expressed interest in Task Force activities and marketing material. The *Surveying Task Force Inc.* would welcome communication with similar groups in other countries to brainstorm, share insight and compare results on an international scale.

5.2 2010 and Beyond

The Task Force is expected to continue in its present format for three more years, at which time a full review will be held to evaluate its future direction. Succession planning is underway to ensure an ongoing pool of motivated, skilled participants to assume executive responsibilities.

6. TASK FORCE EFFECT ON THE INDUSTRY

The Task Force was conceived as a group of representatives of the major stakeholders in the Surveying profession in Victoria, with its all-inclusive composition both reflecting the gravity of the matter and contributing to positive outcomes. It was recognised that combining resources, expertise and energy behind a cohesive and professional plan was the way forward.

The Task Force has proven to be an exceptional forum for achieving consensus among the disparate interests of the stakeholders, which is a major reason for its success. By reinforcing the community of interest through work towards a common and worthwhile goal, it serves as a unifying influence on the industry. It increases understanding, encourages mutual respect, and forges professional friendships among Members, which extends to their dealings on other issues and in other arenas in the industry.

Taking a leaf from the book on good partnerships, Members operate on the principle that any strategy which disadvantages one body would be disadvantageous to the industry as a whole. This has proven to be an enormously productive approach, as it sidesteps distracting and time-wasting factionalism and hidden agendas in favour of achievable and timely results that benefit all. In cyclical fashion, participants' cooperation and input have resulted in the Task Force's good outcomes to date, and being associated with that success, in turn, is the best motivation for continued and cooperative participation.

The Task Force and its campaign have also turned out to be a rallying point for the heretofore largely untapped energies of the Surveying confraternity seeking a way to give back to the profession. The activity of speaking about Surveying at secondary schools and career events, for example, has had impressive take-up by Surveyors volunteering their time. The Consultants' work facilitates their efforts by identifying and coordinating speaking opportunities and supplying resources such as PowerPoint presentations, notes and handouts.

In focusing awareness on the profession through its promotion of the brand of Surveying, the Task Force is also having a positive effect on Surveyors themselves. Although to date the marketing is targeted at a young demographic, the repackaging of Surveying's positive attributes is "selling" more experienced Surveyors as well. Even before any launch of initiatives specifically aimed at raising self-image, the resonance of the brand and the Task Force's work are causing Surveyors to stand that little bit straighter, with a new appreciation and pride in their own profession. Such simple devices as bright red badges sporting the new Surveying logo are appearing spontaneously on the lapels of many Surveyors at public events. In the longer term, it is also expected that efforts to lift the profession's public profile will have positive flow-on effects in terms of higher fees, salaries and influence for Surveyors.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The Surveying profession in Victoria is faced with a crisis of attrition endangering its very future. The implications of its dwindling numbers have been acknowledged and met head on through the establishment and work of the *Surveying Task Force Inc.* After two years, its campaign to rescue the profession from the threat of extinction is going strong with promising results. For the purpose of replication by other jurisdictions, there is value in examining which elements are seen to have the greatest effect, and what lessons can be learned.

Certainly the acknowledgement of the extent and urgency of the situation by all stakeholders is crucial, as is the substantial and ongoing commitment of those bodies in terms of time, energy and funding. Dedicated people are needed to drive the project and maintain its momentum. Anecdotal evidence from other countries indicates that a lack of unity and dwindling of funds and momentum over time are the biggest threats to a successful campaign for Surveying.

The creation of a Task Force as a forum where all stakeholders are represented and have equal say, is vital. This ensures that strategies and initiatives are considered from all perspectives; issues are placed on the table, robustly discussed and concerns addressed; participating organisations are kept “in the loop”; and the all-important “buy-in” of all stakeholders is achieved. The essential operating principle must be that solutions which disadvantage any stakeholders are not good solutions. The focus on one issue also guarantees that participants’ attention is not distracted by other unrelated matters, as so often happens in meetings when a range of pressing industry issues is under consideration.

The importance of professional assistance is paramount. In this age of ultra-sophisticated marketing, it is unthinkable for the future of the profession to depend on a marketing plan formulated by inexperienced amateurs on a voluntary basis in their spare time, no matter how well-intentioned. The nuances and complexities of running an effective campaign – not to mention the time involved – should not be underestimated. Fundraising activities and regular communication to keep the industry involved are ongoing tasks, as is the monitoring of results and the maintenance of up-to-date databases of various target groups and other participants.

The quality of the marketing consultant is also key, as the creative force behind the brand and its communication. The distillation of the essence of a profession and its presentation in such a way as to resonate with everyone from 15-year-olds to retiring members of the profession are impressive achievements necessitating both skill and experience. For the *Surveying Task Force Inc.*, the rapid success of the brand meant enthusiastic take-up by the industry in terms of contributions and participation, as well creating and fostering a sense of community, professional identity and pride.

Fuelled by its combination of commitment, contributions, expertise and creativity, the *Surveying Task Force Inc.* will continue to drive its campaign to secure the future of Surveying in Victoria against extinction, and to elevate Surveying to its rightful place as the most desirable of professions.

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Roberta Esbitt is an internationally registered Architect with over 30 years' worldwide experience in the property industry. Originally practicing in the United States, then Architect for the European Commission in Brussels, she has run her own property development company in Melbourne Australia since 1995. She also lectures on post-graduate Property at RMIT University and serves on a number of Statutory Boards in various industries.

Ms Esbitt holds a Bachelor of Architecture (Cornell University, USA) and a Master of Business in Property (RMIT University, Australia). She is a Distinguished Life Member of the Association of Professional Engineers Scientists and Managers Australia (APESMA).

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Thomas Werner is currently the Business Development Manager of Terrestrial Laser Scanning at Survey21 Pty Ltd in Victoria. He graduated from The University of Melbourne in 2007 with a Bachelor of Geomatic Engineering (honours) and a Bachelor of Science (Phys), and in 2008 was named Victorian Young Spatial Professional of the Year. In 2009 he won both the Victorian and Asia-Pacific Spatial Excellence Awards for 3D Laser Scanning for Masonry Arch Bridges. He has been Chairman of the Victorian Surveying and Spatial Sciences Institute Young Professionals Group since 2007.

Mr Werner's publications include: "Towards forging stronger links – overcoming the communication barriers between industry, students and academia" (Werner et al. 2007), 2007 AaeE Conference, Melbourne, and "Spatial Students Working/Action Group – Increasing student participation in the Spatial Industry" (Werner et al. 2008), Queensland Spatial Conference 2008 – 17-19 July 2008, Gold Coast.

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