

Visitor Information Centre Frequently Asked Questions

Fact Sheet 09
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Visitor Information Centres (VICs) aim to enrich the visitor's experience and to encourage visitors to stay longer in a region. They inform the visitor of what to do and see and where to stay. Research on VICs in Victoria, New South Wales and Canada has shown that they increase the amount of money visitors spend in a region and contribute to regional dispersal of visitors. In Victoria, information provided by VICs influenced 18% of visitors to stay from just a few hours to as long as 14 nights within the region. The research also showed that 35% of visitors were encouraged to travel to other parts of the region they would not have otherwise visited.

Whether or not to have a VIC

A VIC which is constructed with a view to becoming an accredited centre, is usually funded by Local Government. Other tiers of Government can contribute to construction costs via grants. There are a few VICs co-located with other businesses where the proprietors bear construction and/or operating costs.

Funding the construction of a VIC is usually less of a challenge than finding the funds to operate it annually. Many VICs are established without the full and necessary understanding of the operational costs and who will incur them over what period of time. Notwithstanding this, a well designed and placed VIC can be operated on commercial terms however this usually requires co-location with another business and diversification of the services provided.

Not all communities require a VIC. One regional VIC may well service several towns. In fact, given the cost of running them this is a preferred option. A town requires significant depth and diversity of tourism product to support a VIC. Feasibility can be determined through research and consultation with Tourism Alliance Victoria.

Unaccredited centres are perfectly adequate and appropriate for some communities in Australia where there is a lack of tourism product, staffing and resources to support the service and where tourism is not the dominant industry but adds value to the key economic drivers. The delivery of visitor servicing occurs right throughout a community, not just through a Visitor Information Centre. A restaurant waiter is delivering visitor services when asked what there is to do in a region. As the information provided by the waiter can not necessarily be taken as accurate or independent, a VIC is the one way to provide quality assurance in the delivery of visitor information. However, it needs to be acknowledged that a large proportion of visitors will never visit a VIC yet still receive information about an area through other sources.

Establishing an integrated visitor servicing program is in fact preferable in small communities. This means ensuring that visitors can access basic information through key points within a community, including the service station; bakery and newsagent – establishments likely to be open longer hours and more frequently. It also means that the staff understand the ben-

efit in knowing more about their local area and sharing that information with visitors. Organising training and familiarisation tours for small business operators and distribution of visitor information through identified businesses within a town is an equally valid way of offering visitor services, particularly in a small town.

VIC Location

There is a dearth of research regarding the optimum locations for VICs. Considerations include: access to and from the interstate highway, location vis-a-vis retail centres, facilities and attractions.

Anecdotal research suggests that regardless of location, visitors will follow the accredited VIC signs to locate the VIC. Locations with strong visibility and nearby parking will generally attract a higher number of visitors.

Ideally the location would be such that the visitor is exposed to the VIC either through location or signage upon arrival at a destination. Therefore a clear understanding of traffic movement is required.

VIC Design

The exterior building design will vary depending on whether the VIC is located in an existing building or a new building. However, the core function of a centre remains the same regardless of the exterior design. It is the interior building design that is most important.



Figure 1: Accredited VIC
Trademark

Increasingly VICs are required to accommodate commercial activity through the sale of goods and services (ie: ticketing, accommodation, souvenirs, maps, youth hostel memberships) as well as offering a free visitor information service. In this way, like any retail outlet, adequate display and storage space, ease of customer movement, disability and pram access, lighting and security are just some of the considerations.

Handling enquiries and sales over the phone requires designated space (some VICs have what could be described as a mini call centre to handle their phone enquiries). It also requires an adequate phone system with call routing and the ability to track the number of missed calls. Most of all, an adequate number of skilled staff are needed to convert enquiries into a sale or an extended visit.

Computers and high speed cabling or a wireless network are desirable to handle e-mail enquiries.

Aside from design issues, consideration needs to be given to the level of government support offered to any retail outlet that competes with other businesses in town.

If you are looking at establishing a Visitor Information Centre, contact Tourism Alliance Victoria for a VIC checklist: 03 9650 8399.

VIC Accreditation - does my centre need it?

Accreditation is a set of standards established by the tourism industry for the tourism industry. Accreditation is self administered and does not attract external funding. Meeting the accreditation standards requires a methodical and transparent approach to managing safety, service, staff and finances. Accreditation is administered by the Tourism Accreditation Board of Victoria Inc. which is a voluntary non-government committee of statewide industry associations.

The primary benefit of Accreditation for a Visitor Information Centre is access to the brand (italic yellow on blue "i" sign) which is a trademark reserved for use only by Accredited VICs. The brand is displayed on and associated with over 387 VICs nationwide which means it appears on signage and prominently located buildings as well as in marketing material such as (in Victoria) all Jigsaw brochures and RACV guides and on www.visitvictoria.com. The brand has been in the marketplace now for some years and with over 3 million visitors going through Victoria's VICs annually. The brand has been in the marketplace now for some years and with over 3 million visitors going through Victoria's VICs annually, it has become a powerful and sought after trademark.

Other benefits include:

- Only Accredited VICs are included in state and regional tourism marketing collateral
- Accreditation assists VICs in running a more professional business by establishing and documenting systems and procedures, ensuring risk management practices and associated insurances are in place, having a documented business and operation plan – all of which is useful in managing staff change overs and ensuring consistency in the delivery of customer service
- Accreditation also guarantees the customers - accuracy in advice and advertising, personally delivered service, comprehensive and timely information, compliance with health and safety standards and sound environmental practices

Is accreditation transferable?

Yes. Accreditation is transferable from one VIC to the next if the management remains the same, however the Accreditation Verification Officer (info@tourismaccr.com.au) will need to conduct an onsite visit to ensure the new VIC adheres to all the requirements of Accreditation. So a clear understanding of the requirements of accreditation are needed prior to establishing a new VIC as this may influence building design

and layout.

How does the customer know my VIC is Accredited?

Aside from the display of the italic yellow "i" sign on the blue background, which is the Accredited VICs trademark, VICs are encouraged to display and explain their accreditation status to their customers. There is an explanation of accreditation that accompanies VIC details on www.visitvictoria.com and on the inside back cover of each region's jigsaw brochure. It reads: "...[accredited VICs are] your guarantee of up-to-date quality information and expert advice about every piece of Victoria. And they're open from 9am to 5pm seven days a week."

How can my centre offer 24 hour visitor information?

Twenty four hour visitor information is offered via websites, so promotion of your region's official tourism website will assist global, around the clock access to visitor information.

Accreditation requires that VICs have an after hours display listing available accommodation.

Is a Visitor Information Centre a tourism attraction?

This depends on the type of Centre it is. It is not an attraction if it primarily provides a visitor information service to visitors. It may be a cultural or heritage tourism attraction if it incorporates an interpretive display or is colocated with a cultural or heritage attraction. Cultural and heritage assets are recognised as important tourism attractions. Some attractions are powerful in that they are known to shape the image of a destination and draw visitors to the region (e.g Sovereign Hill in Ballarat). Mostly VICs are secondary or tertiary attractions which complete the visitor experience by providing a range of activities for visitors while at the destination but are not known to create an image of an area or to pull visitors to it.

Reservation Systems – What makes a successful booking system?

Success is based on:

- A well-trained, telephone sales focused team, able to convert booking enquiries into revenue generation sales
- An efficient procedure for processing bookings, tracking advertising campaigns, collating monthly revenue figures and dispatching commission invoices
- Considerable time and on-going analysis of the way calls are handled, the words used, the sales techniques used when asking for and closing a sale and the streamlined process taken with each potential sales call
- Having phones analysed to know how many calls are being missed and focus on ensuring that the VIC has the best possible phone system to effectively provide every opportunity to capture potential revenue generating calls and in turn convert into bookings
- Regularly up-dating regional websites and using them both as a sales (booking facility) and a marketing tool

Accredited Visitor Information Centre Brand (Figure 1)

Accredited Visitor Information Centres in Australia are recognised by the italic yellow “i” sign on the sky blue background. This symbol is a trademark registered and owned by Tourism Victoria and administered in Victoria by Tourism Alliance Victoria. Tourism Victoria obtains exclusive rights to use the trademark, to authorise other persons to use the trademark and to obtain relief if the trademark has been infringed.

The trademark serves as part of the brand for Accredited Visitor Information Centres. The key attributes of the brand are:

- Provision of quality information about a destination
- Information and advice provided is accurate, comprehensive, professionally delivered and independent

Target Markets

The brand is targeted at intrastate, interstate and international visitors seeking information and/or advice on a tourism region, tourism destination or touring route.

Marketing

The brand symbol is marketed in print media, across a national network of road signs, on official tourism websites, and via 387+ Accredited Visitor Information Centres. The location of VICs in CBD's of key tourism towns or on national highways and arterial roads, provides prime exposure for the brand.

Examples of Brand Marketing

Victoria

To industry and government

- Tourism Victoria media releases
- VIC media releases
- Tourism Victoria Newsletter
- Tourism Alliance Victoria Newsletters
- Regional Tourism Organisation Newsletters
- VIC Newsletters
- www.tourismalliance.com.au

To visitors

- 72 Accredited Visitor Information Centres
- Network of road signs
- Signs on Accredited VICs
- Regional Jigsaw publications
- Victorian State Jigsaw publications
- Local and regional visitors' guides
- www.visitvictoria.com
- Official regional tourism websites
- AAA Tourism “Experience Victoria” Publication
- Universal Press Mapping Products
- RACV maps
- Vic Roads maps
- Australian Travel Directory
- Melways
- Bed and Breakfast Guide
- Yellowpages
- Festivals and events publications

Queensland

To industry and government

- Tourism Queensland (TQ) media releases
- TQ News (article in nearly every issue since June 2000)
- Tourism on Q (weekly e-mail newsletter)
- ‘i’ on Queensland network newsletter with distribution to regional tourism organisations and local government
- Regional Tourism Organisation newsletters

To visitors

- 99 Accredited Visitor Information Centres
- TQ media releases
- Sunlover publications
- Regional Tourism Organisation Visitor Guides/Holiday Planners/ websites
- Local Tourism Organisation Visitor Guides
- Queensland Motoring Guide
- TQ Queensland Holidays website
- Promotional flier distributed through VICs
- AAA Tourism “Experience Queensland” Publication
- Universal Press Mapping Products
- RACQ Maps
- DMR “Guide to Queensland Roads” Map
- Jason's Travel publications
- Sunmap mapping products
- Hema Maps mapping products
- Beautiful Accommodation in Queensland
- Pink Pocket Guide to Queensland
- Road signs on the Queensland state and local network

Snapshot

Ballarat Tourism

"Like all businesses we must continue to be open to new computerised systems. However, it is essential they not only make the processes more efficient, but also promote greater financial return. I would suggest that in the case of bookings which, really is a simple process, state of the art technology might not achieve both those desired outcomes.

My feeling is, get started. Look carefully at the people employed to do the job. Are they "sales professionals"? If not, train them and give them the skills required. Then look at your phone system and assess whether or not it is adequate to handle the diversity of your business and then put procedures in place that will allow you to monitor your call conversion ratios. It is imperative to constantly review and monitor income flows.

When initially making our system decision we did so with the intention of reviewing within two years. We have done that already and while we remain happy with our existing accommodation reservation system, we also recognise developments in technology now offer "live time" booking systems and are currently investigating this. We were, however, still dissatisfied with our telephony system and undertook a thorough review. This led to our current upgrade, resolving many of our issues in the process and performance in this area has shown strong improvement.

So, my advice to those going down a similar path is just get started, do your homework retain an enquiring and thoughtful open-mind."

VIC Manager, Ballarat Tourism

Did you Know?

- 64% of visitors to the VICs region are repeat visitors
- VICs influenced 18% of visitors to stay longer within the region. This varied from a few hours to 14 nights
- The highest rated service attributes were the friendliness of staff and staff knowledge
- Of the repeat visitors 58% have visited the region between 1 – 4 times
- 26% of these repeat visitors have visited the VICs before

Sources

- Deery, M., Jago, L., Daugherty, S., (2004) Increasing Tourism Yield: A Study of Visitor Information Centres, Victoria University
- Horsley, J.,(2003) VIC Manager, Ballarat Tourism
- McKercher, B.,(2001) Attitudes to a Non-Viable Community-owned Heritage Tourist Attraction. Journal of Sustainable Tourism 9, 29-43
- Raguse, S., (2005) VIC Manager, Ballarat Tourism
- Symonds Travers Morgan (1997): Economic Contribution of Visitor Information Centres in New South Wales, Report for Tourism New South Wales, the Council of Tourist Associations and the Australian Institute of Tourism Officers
- Tonge R., Myott D., (1989) How to Plan Develop and Market Local and Regional Tourism. Gull Publishing Services

Other Tourism Alliance Victoria Reference Material Includes:

- www.tourismalliance.com.au
- Functions of a Local Tourism Association
- Functions of a Regional Tourism Organisation
- Best Practice Touring Routes
- Planning for Tourism
- Local Government Tourism Health Check
- Planning a Tourism Direction Case Study: Hepburn Shire Council
- Economic Impact of Tourism-Measurement Tools
- Significance of Tourism
- AAA Tourism Star Rating versus Tourism Accreditation
- Establishing a Municipal Tourism Policy

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