Australia's Accredited VICs:
A Strategic Directions Paper

TUE

Frankston Visitor Information Centre

Contents

Introduction

Nationally there is a commitment to providing an accredited visitor information service that is relevant and valued by visitors, the tourism industry and local communities. Since 2010, a number of state and territory tourism organisations (STOs) have commissioned reports on the future of visitor information centres (VICs).[1] This interest highlights both the significance of VICs in regional tourism and awareness that they face major opportunities and challenges as the landscape of tourism changes internationally. Developments in digital technology alone are transforming how visitors' access information.

This strategic directions paper distils the key findings of those reports. The intention of the paper is to direct the national network of accredited VICs towards a future where they have a clear, relevant and valued role in the tourism distribution chain and their local communities.

The value of VIC accreditation is many fold. It provides VIC owners access to the national brand and *i* signage and to a nationwide network of centres. Accreditation also fosters high standards in visitor servicing in the regions by ensuring the delivery of quality information and visitor facilities and the professional development of staff and volunteers.

Accredited VICs are well positioned to play an important role in achieving the tourism industry's goal to increase its competitiveness and double visitor expenditure by 2020. As a key point of distribution once the visitor has arrived, VICs have a capacity unrivalled in their region to disperse visitor expenditure, increase yield and inspire visitors to re-visit and recommend the destination. The future success of accredited VICs will depend on their ability to respond to changing visitor and industry expectations and deliver value to visitors, the industry, local government and residents.

[1] The STOs and their reports are: Tourism Victoria (*Victorian Visitor Information Centres Futures Project, 2013*); Tourism and Events Queensland (*A Way Forward for Queensland VICs, 2014*); South Australian Tourism Commission (*South Australia: The role of Visitor Information Centres (VICs) in distributing tourism product in regional South Australia, 2012*); Tourism New South Wales, through Aurora Research, (*Northern Rivers Regional Visitor Services Strategy, 2012*)

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A quick snapshot of accredited VICs in Australia

- Australia has over 460 accredited VICs that serve many millions of visitors per year.

- Over 80% of the accredited VICs are run by local government, with most of the others having some kind of council support.

- Engagement with VICs can result in 59% or more additional expenditure in the community (or around $180 per adult visitor) on fuel, food and retail, accommodation and attraction services.[2]

- VICs generate social benefits for their communities in addition to economic outcomes (e.g. employment, information for residents, community hubs, support during crises, industry training and support).

- Average operating costs per VIC range from $100,000 to $300,000 plus, annually.

- Economies of scale, in terms of servicing each visitor, drop once a VIC has 35,000 or more walk-in visitors.[3]

- Across Australia, VICs employ more than 500 staff and thousands of volunteers.

- Smartphone penetration amongst Australian adults is now at 88% (up 12% year on year), and projected to reach 93% by the end of 2014.[4]

- Visitors are increasingly using the internet and mobile devices for travel planning and bookings.

[2] *The Impacts of Regional Visitor Information Centres on Visitor Behaviour in South Australia: Summary of Results, 2011,* South Australian Tourism Commission
[3] *Victorian Visitor Information Centres Futures Report, 2013,* Tourism Victoria
[4] Annual Australian Mobile Phone Lifestyle Index from AIMIA, 2013. http://stuartbuchanan.com/2013-australian-mobile-use-statistics-four-takeaways-from-aimias-australian-mobile-lifestyle-index/

A time for change

The role of VICs in the future has come under scrutiny. The STO reports highlight that the traditional VIC operating model needs to change. The VIC model was developed in an era before visitors could research and book accommodation and experiences using mobile technology while on holiday. Now the traveller can independently search detailed and tailored information online before and when they reach their destination using smartphones and other mobile devices.

Some VICs have expanded or changed their operations in response to visitor and industry needs. But a network-wide shift is needed towards a more proactive approach in taking information to the visitor how and when they want it, instead of hoping the visitor comes to the information.

A number of opportunities and challenges for the VIC network can be identified that have the potential to influence its future.

Opportunities for VICs:

- They can evolve how they provide information. They can respond especially to the rapid increase in visitors' use of technology, particularly via mobile devices, to gather information, create their own content and share experiences during their visit.

- They can leverage visitors' desire to experience what is unique and special about a destination.

- VIC accreditation can continue to drive VICs to optimise the visitor experience and maximise value for the tourism industry and local community.

- VICs can regularly take information out of their building to high visitor traffic areas, e.g. via pop-up stands and roving ambassadors with tablets.

- VICs can work towards delivering all visitors consistent front-of-house experiences regardless of the size and location of the VIC.

- Working together, VICs can establish a modern, integrated network that allows visitors to have their information and travel booking needs met regardless of their location.

- VICs can diversify the services they offer, such as actively servicing local residents with community information and providing support to event management and marketing.

- The well-established STO VIC network can provide greater national and state leadership to VICs.

- VICs can make the experience of working in them more attractive for volunteers that are comfortable with technology.

Challenges facing VICs:

- VICs providing paper-based information and limited opening hours have less relevance for visitors who want to access high-quality, targeted information online 24 hours a day.

- The quality of visitor experiences and yield may decline because of inconsistency across the network in how visitors can access information and make bookings.

- Increasing funding pressure and scrutiny on the return on investment for local government and regional tourism organisations (RTOs) is challenging many VICs to demonstrate their value to their owners.

- Some VIC owners perceive a lack of value in accreditation.

- There is only limited tourism product available for distribution online in some destinations.

- Limited mobile coverage in some areas prevents VICs from offering an effective online service.

- The notion that VICs are a worthwhile part of the tourism distribution system is questioned by some tourism operators.

- There is some duplication of effort and inefficiencies across the network through a lack of leadership and support.

- VICs can struggle to maintain staff levels when they have to pay staff higher rates on weekends and public holidays.

- VICs have limited appeal for volunteers who have different expectations and requirements compared with the older generation of volunteers.

Bulcock Street Visitor Information Centre

Priorities for the VIC Network

Four priority areas for action have been identified from the STO reports.

1.   Contemporary VICs

2.   Extraordinary visitor experiences

3.   A partnership approach to visitor servicing

4.   A recognised VIC network

These priorities are supported by strategies to capitalise on the opportunities and address the challenges for Australia's accredited VIC network. Each strategy has the lead agency (ies) responsible for its implementation noted in brackets. Successful implementation of the strategies will help to achieve the following outcomes:

- the yellow and blue i symbol is recognised nationally as a source of high quality visitor information

- visitors are welcomed as guests, with the distinction that they are invited and valued guests to the VIC and the destination

- accredited VICs are preferred by visitors as a source of information they can trust

- passionate and articulate VIC teams engage with visitors in a way that inspires them to discover and explore the destination and leave with a desire to return

- VICs are an important tourism and community hub, meeting the information needs of visitors, the tourism industry and local residents

- the VIC network's relevance and value grow under strong national leadership.

1. Contemporary VICs

The success of accredited VICs in maintaining and enhancing their relevance and having an edge over technology depends on several factors. These include their ability to ensure a visitor's experience with a VIC is unforgettable and the service unparalleled. With the plethora of information online, visitors have to sift to find information they can trust and the inspiration for what to see and do in a destination or on their journey.   VICs have the opportunity to engage visitors of all ages both on and off-line and maintain a clear point of difference from other information providers. They can do this by:

- delivering accurate, timely and objective information in a way that is convenient and personalised to a visitor's needs, is easily digested, and can be instantly booked or actioned.

While information is increasingly sourced online, information provided by VICs is regarded as authoritative and unbiased. This type of information may be used to supplement information obtained online that may be perceived as biased, inaccurate or out of date.[5]

- enabling visitors to speak directly with passionate, knowledgeable locals. Staff and volunteers can help visitors gather information and inspire them with insights and stories to spend time and money in the region and connect with other VICs on their journey.

Finding a perfect beach, a great place to stay or a restaurant the locals all love can be the difference between an ordinary break and a holiday people remember for the rest of their lives.[6]

VICs' use of technology in providing information is only a part of what they offer. It is essential however, as they can no longer simply offer a 9 to 5 service. By the VICs working with their RTO to supply information online, visitors can access information at any time prior to arriving and when in the region. VICs can also have a role in meeting the needs of visitors who seek only digital content.

VICs should not be expected to be financially self-sufficient as information providers. They are an economic driver, dispersing visitor expenditure and increasing visitor yield. They can also have a critical role as an information hub during emergency response and recovery in times of crisis. There is an onus on them however to maximise the return on investment for local government and RTOs. To do so, VICs need sustainable business models with a focus on flexibility. They will have to adapt their services to the needs of their audience and many already are doing so. Measuring their effectiveness should be based on standardised indicators such as economic impact, visitor experience and satisfaction, industry growth and performance, and local community benefits.[7]

Canberra and Region Visitors Centre

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[5] *The role of Regional Visitor Information Centres in the distribution of tourism product, 2012,* South Australian Tourism Commission
[6] *i-SITE Corporate Profile 2012,* Tourism New Zealand
[7] *A Way Forward for Queensland VICs*, 2014, Tourism and Events Queensland; *Victorian Visitor Information Centres Futures Report*, 2013, Tourism Victoria; *The role of Regional Visitor Information Centres in the distribution of tourism product, 2012,* South Australian Tourism Commission

Darwin Visitor Information Centre

Suggested strategies

- Position VICs in state and regional marketing and communications as the place to go when in region (virtually and on the ground) to find out from passionate and knowledgeable locals what to see and experience and how to get there. (STOs, RTOs)

- Identify any critical gaps in mobile coverage and present a business case for digital infrastructure improvements to ensure coverage in popular tourism locations. (STOs)

- Require all VICs (as an essential accreditation requirement nationally) to have an effective online presence in partnership with their RTO, offer free WiFi and provide a basic level of digital technology to help visitors source and book product. (STOs)

- Provide VICs with guidelines on delivering information online, including responding to comments and complaints on social media, to achieve a standard level of service. (National VIC group/STOs)

- Facilitate all accredited VICs in offering an online booking service by 2018 via the destination website. This service must be compatible with Tourism Exchange Australia so that Australian Tourism Data Warehouse (ATDW) product can be booked regardless of the VIC location. (STOs)

- Investigate options for VICs to offer an online 'virtual Visitor Centre' available 24 hours a day through social media, where visitors can ask real time questions and the VIC can upload promotions and special offers. (National VIC group/STOs)

- Maintain a presence on travel review sites, providing information on the services and benefits offered to visitors, using user generated content where appropriate. (VICs)

- Identify best practice sustainable business models for visitor servicing that reflect different operating environments and give VICs the flexibility to meet visitor, industry and community needs. (National VIC group/STOs)

- Encourage VIC owners to introduce user pay services that add value for visitors and provide an income stream for the VIC. (STOs)

- Provide VICs with guidelines on measuring their economic and social contribution. (National VIC group/STOs)

- Establish a National VIC Working Group to gather and share consumer and industry intelligence and best practice in the provision of visitor information, and monitor the process of change and its impact on service provision. (National VIC group)

Port Augusta Visitor Information Centre

2.   Extraordinary visitor experiences

The level of service VICs provide affects the reputation of the accredited VIC network and Australia as a visitor destination. Visitors need to leave delighted with the 'must do' activities and experiences and want to return. This requires well-trained VIC staff and volunteers, digital technology as a minimum and constant improvement in training and service standards.

VIC accreditation enables a VIC to demonstrate its commitment to continuous improvement and customer satisfaction. It also requires VICs to focus on business planning and operational protocols to ensure consistency in their service delivery. From a consumer perspective, review sites such as TripAdvisor have a more powerful impact on visitor travel decisions than accreditation schemes.

VIC accreditation's greatest value for visitors is in ensuring that every touch point with VICs is the best experience possible so that they are recognised and talked about as essential for travel planning. As visitor needs change, the VIC accreditation program must continue to evolve to remain relevant.

Achieving a greater consistency in 'front of house' across the network is needed to enhance visitors' VIC experience. Visitors should be able to go into any accredited VIC and find the same or similar layout, level of service and facilities available, while experiencing a sense of the unique qualities of the local area. A culture of service excellence across the network is also vital.

Canberra and Region Visitors Centre

Suggested strategies

- Change the perception of visitors to VIC guests. The rationale is that it is possible to build a strong emotional connection when a visitor feels like a valued guest. (National VIC group, STOs, RTOs, VICs)

- Encourage VIC staff and volunteers to become storytellers to help engage visitors, spark their imagination and inspire them to explore the destination. (STOs, VIC owners)

- Develop a national VIC training program that is accredited, designed for flexible delivery (on and offline) and promotes a culture of excellence among staff and volunteers. (National VIC group)

- Require VIC induction training to include the national, state and destination's brand promise and values and how staff and volunteers are to live and breathe these in their interaction with visitors, tourism operators and the community. (STO, VIC owners)

- Update VIC accreditation criteria to:

  - standardise minimum requirements nationally, including opening 42 hours per week

  - include any additional services and facilities to be provided by all VICs

  - give VICs flexibility to provide services in addition to minimum requirements

  - reduce unnecessary compliance costs for VICs

  - allow VICs to change their opening hours (within minimum standards) to reflect visitor demand

  - enable VICs to operate under business models that maximise outcomes and minimise outgoings, such as partnerships for delivery with compatible businesses, mobile/'pop-up' VICs, and sharing staff costs across businesses (National VIC group/STOs)

- Rationalise the VIC accreditation audit processes across the network to bring them into alignment. (National VIC group/STOs)

- Provide VICs with guidelines on:

  - quality online content and interactive displays in their centres that encourage visitors to experience the destination and give them the information they need

  - best-practice staff and volunteer recruitment and management practices to ensure that VICs have the best team to meet visitor expectations and needs

  - meeting 'front of house' facility and service requirements to achieve consistency across the network (including technology needs)

  - display and sale of locally-produced merchandise to provide added value to visitors and generate income for the centres as well as the local providers. (National VIC group/STOs)

Port Augusta Visitor Information Centre

3. A partnership approach to visitor servicing

A collaborative approach in visitor servicing is crucial because of the many touch points for visitors.

VICs need to be actively involved with the RTO and local tourism organisations in destination management planning and well engaged with tourism operators, local government and the community.

VICs cannot operate in a silo if they are to provide accurate information and messages to visitors consistent with the RTO's regional marketing, as well as valuable intelligence and insights back to industry. They are also an important platform for local operators to promote and sell their products and services.

With VICs dispersed across the country, a strong, collaborative VIC network is required to ensure visitors have a seamless 'VIC experience'. VICs need to promote not only their own destination, but also others on a visitor's journey and coordinate bookings for other destinations as required.

Key to a national VIC network is the establishment of an overarching national body with senior representation from each state and territory. This body is crucial to provide guidance, facilitate best practice and achieve consistency in accreditation and service delivery nationally. With the demise of the T-QUAL accreditation program, a strong national body is even more important to maintain and enhance the value of the accreditation program to the industry, RTOs, local government and community.   VICs working together at a national through to local level can make a measurable contribution to the quality of the visitor experience and the industry's growth target.

Source: *Project VIC Connect report, 2014, Tourism and Events Queensland.*

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Suggested strategies

- Encourage RTOs to take a partnership approach to visitor servicing, with clear roles and responsibilities for the VIC in destination management. (STOs, RTOs)

- Hold an annual meeting of VIC stakeholders and engage regularly throughout the year to discuss and progress VIC initiatives. (National VIC group/STOs)

- Develop and deliver a local government and industry advocacy program to increase understanding of the role of the VIC, the services and benefits they offer and the value they generate. (National VIC group/STOs)

- Develop guidelines for RTOs on what VIC content is to be included as standard on RTO websites to ensure continuity of the VIC brand and message in-destination. (National VIC group/STOs)

- Identify and collect visitor data and insights required to support VICs and RTOs in meeting visitor needs and growing visitor yield. (VIC owners, RTOs)

- Establish an online network forum for VICs that encourages engagement and the sharing of resources and information with each other on visitor behaviour and trends and best practice systems and processes. Information shared may include VIC design, technology transitioning, booking systems, marketing of the 𝑖, and consumer needs and research. (National VIC group/STOs)

- Identify and implement collaborative exercises across the network, such as generic smart phone applications, group purchasing, marketing, and research. (National VIC group/STOs)

- Work with ATDW to increase the amount of online bookable product to enable all accredited VICs to equally distribute current and correct information.(STOs)

- Collaborate with partners to support digital and other information services and improve cost effectiveness. (VIC owners)

Cairns & Tropical North Queensland Visitor Information Centre

4.   A recognised VIC network

For an accredited VIC to maximise the benefits it generates for the destination, visitors and tourism operators need to be aware of its services and perceive them to have value. Anecdotally, the symbol has low recognition amongst visitors. An ongoing national marketing strategy is needed to raise awareness of the VIC network to domestic and international visitors and the tourism industry. This should aim to distinguish accredited VICs from competitors in a way that is meaningful to visitors.

The success of a national strategy will depend upon support at a state and local level. STO marketing campaigns, and RTO and local government initiatives are essential to raise the profile of the accredited centres. These campaigns and initiatives need to capture people's imagination and produce an emotional connection to the VICs. Their effectiveness will ultimately rest on VIC staff and volunteers consistently meeting the needs of their target audiences and creating lasting memories. Only then will the VICs go beyond awareness to create preference in visitors' minds.

A key advantage for accredited VICs should be the VIC network. Working together, the VICs can increase awareness of the accredited centres as a trusted source of information on and offline.

At a local level, a VIC needs to be easy to find, virtually and in person, with the ℹ clearly visible and information accessible for target audiences. Physically, it is important for VICs to be located in high visitor traffic areas with visible building and directional signage.   Prominently featuring the ℹ in and outside of the building and on staff and volunteer uniforms, merchandise and marketing collateral will help to build brand awareness.

George Foy Park and Visitor Information Centre

Suggested strategies

- Develop and deliver a national marketing strategy which seeks to raise awareness and create a competitive position for accredited VICs. (National VIC group/STOs)

- Work with Tourism Research Australia to ensure that international and domestic visitor surveys allow the VIC network to track users of information centres and the information services they need and expect. (National VIC group/STOs)

- Encourage the VIC network to share insights and undertake joint research projects to increase understanding of visitor needs and expectations and brand awareness. (National VIC group/STOs)

- Develop standard marketing messages and collateral such as a profile on state and regional websites, national and state maps, flags, bags, door mats and badges. (National VIC group/STOs)

- Establish a national brand guide which includes templates and the requirements for the promotion and display of the 𝒊 on and offline by VICs, RTOs and local government and private owners, including its use in digital media, marketing collateral and communications. (National VIC group/STOs)

- Develop a VIC hub on Tourism Australia's consumer website that raises the profile of accredited VICs with a map, addresses and contact information. (National VIC group/STOs, TA)

- Identify opportunities for partnership marketing with local businesses and groups to promote the local VIC(s). (VIC owners)

- Review VIC locations to ensure they are sited in high visitor traffic areas, with highly visible building and directional signage. (STOs and VIC owners)

- Ensure VICs are identified on local maps, in guidebooks and other marketing collateral as relevant. (VICs, STOs, RTOs)

Kuranda Visitor Information Centre

Where to from here?

This strategic directions paper will be distributed to VICs, STOs, local government and RTOs as a summary of the current status of accredited VICs in Australia and the strategies required to maintain a thriving VIC network in the future. The paper demonstrates a national commitment to ensuring accredited VICs continue to be valued by visitors, the tourism industry, RTOs, local government and communities.

Disclaimer

This paper has been produced based on existing STO reports on the future of accredited VICs. Irrespective of any measures taken by Tourism Victoria and Tourism and Events Queensland, on behalf of the members of the national VIC group, to check that the information is accurate or complete, in no event will Tourism Victoria or Tourism and Events Queensland be liable to any person in contract, tort (including, but without limitation, negligence) or otherwise if any information in the paper is incomplete or inaccurate.

Bowen Visitor Information Centre