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Meeting Visitor Needs

A HANDBOOK FOR MANAGERS AND STAFF OF VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES



MARGARET RIVER VISITOR CENTRE
& WINE TOURISM SHOWROOM

Roy Ballantyne, Karen Hughes, Marg Deery and Nigel Bond

SUSTAINABLE
TOURISM



CRC

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Preface

VICs make important contributions to the economic, social and recreational well-being of communities by encouraging visitors to experience and support local events, attractions and services. The quality of customer service, facilities and information provided by your centre is likely to influence not only what visitors do in your region but also whether they use information centres in adjoining regions. Although VICs are inextricably linked, staff rarely have the time or opportunity to view practices and procedures implemented by other centres. This is particularly evident in remote and rural areas where access to examples of 'best practice' and/or formal training is virtually non-existent.

This manual was devised to help overcome the professional isolation often experienced by staff working in Australian VICs. It is specifically designed to facilitate the sharing of 'best practice' approaches to information dissemination, customer service, staff training, sign and exhibit design and evaluation. Material is based on research in the areas of visitor studies; interviews with thirteen VIC managers; and surveys conducted with approximately 407 visitors at 18 VICs in Queensland, Victoria, Western Australia and the Northern Territory. The manual is written in a non-academic style and is designed to be used by managers, staff and volunteers. It includes photographs, discussion questions and checklists to enable you to evaluate and improve your services and facilities. The manual concludes with four case studies designed to describe examples of 'best practice' in more detail (see Appendix A).

Our overall goal is to provide people working in VICs with a summary of research findings and access to current examples of 'best practice' approaches to information dissemination and customer service. We hope the manual inspires you to network and share ideas with other centres in your region and State. We welcome feedback on the manual and encourage you to contact the centres featured if you require further information about their services, practices and products.

Chapter 1


LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS: THE IMPORTANCE OF CUSTOMER SERVICE

1.0 Introduction

Visitors can obtain travel information from a range of sources – books, brochures, the internet, television – so why bother coming into visitor information centres (VICs)? For many, the main attraction is the opportunity to speak to local people about sites, facilities and events in their town or region. In fact, research consistently identifies face-to-face interactions with friendly, knowledgeable staff as the most important feature of VICs (Ballantyne & Hughes 2004).

The challenge for VICs, therefore, is first, to develop a culture of exemplary customer service skills amongst *all* staff, whether paid or voluntary; second, to design spaces where visitors and staff can comfortably interact; and third, to ensure tourist information and recommendations match the needs and time limits expressed by visitors (Deery, Jago, Mistilis, D'Ambra, Richards & Carson 2007). This chapter discusses the basics of customer service, covering issues such as dealing with a wide variety of visitors, telephone etiquette, face-to-face communication, non-verbal communication, meeting customer needs, and resolving customer complaints. It includes photographs and examples from VICs around Australia, as well as 'tip' boxes that highlight things you might like to introduce in your centre. The chapter concludes with two checklists to help you gauge your customer service skills and identify areas that may need improvement.

1.1 Responding to a Variety of Visitor Needs

Visitors are becoming increasingly well-travelled, and as a result expect high levels of customer service. The fact that information and advice is provided free of charge is irrelevant – if you use the  sign to advertise your expertise and knowledge of tourism products, people will come into your centre expecting access to current and accurate information about local and regional attractions.

Customer service in VICs incorporates all the actions and reactions that occur between visitors and centre staff, facilities and products. Central to customer service in the tourism industry is the concept of 'moments of truth'. This is commonly defined as any interaction between customers and an organisation that leads customers to evaluate the quality of services received (Mahesh 1993). In the context of VICs, moments of truth (MOTs) primarily occur during face-to-face interactions between staff and visitors but can also refer to the presentation and quality of supporting products such as brochures, maps, merchandise, online bookings and other travel information resources. These factors can all impact upon visitors' judgement of the quality of customer service received. So, what is 'good' customer service and how can VICs develop and maintain high service standards?

Generally, 'good' customer service involves being helpful, friendly and beneficial in some way (Powers 1995). It requires listening carefully to what visitors want and then

responding to their needs and interests. Good customer service also involves being able to empathise with visitors – try putting yourself in your customers' shoes. What information would you need if visiting an unfamiliar area and how you would like to be treated? Think about how you approach visitors in your information centre. Do you greet people as they enter; do you introduce yourself; are you polite, friendly and professional at all times; do you treat all visitors with respect and courtesy; do you listen closely to what they are saying? These are all key aspects of 'good' customer service that help to create a positive first impression of you, your centre and your region.

Visitors are a diverse group of individuals with a wide range of interests and preferences. 'Visitors' in this manual are defined as any persons travelling to or through a town or region and/or residents accessing the services of their local VIC. Clearly, anticipating and meeting their needs is not always going to be easy. Reflect on the people that come into your centre – do they tend to be families, singles or couples; older, middle-aged or young; backpackers, campers, or five star hotel clients; from local areas or interstate; Australian or international; interested in nature, nightlife, shopping or cultural experiences? Chances are that you will meet all of these, and possibly even all on the same day. Essentially, the only way to ensure you meet visitor needs is to ask direct questions about their preferences, listen closely to their responses, then provide them with a range of relevant tourism options from which to choose.

Our survey of 407 visitors in 18 VICs revealed that users of VICs are indeed a diverse group. For example, 11% were locals (within 2 hours drive); 18% were from within the State; 47% were from other States; and 24% were from overseas. There was also a gender imbalance, with more females (59%) than males (38%). It should be noted, however, that visitor research often produces results that are skewed towards females – this doesn't necessarily mean more women are travelling. Rather, it is our observation that women are more likely to agree to complete questionnaires, particularly if travelling as part of a couple or family.

Our research also revealed that although people of all ages use VICs, the most common age groups were 60 and older (25%); 50-59 (25%) and 20-29 year olds (20%, see Table 1).

Table 1: Age distribution of survey respondents

AGE	FREQUENCY	%
Under 20	12	3
20-29	81	20
30-39	45	11
40-49	48	12
50-59	102	25
60 and over	103	25
Missing	16	4
TOTAL	407	100

To provide good customer service, you will need to have an idea of your main visitor groups and their interests, motives and preferences. While it is virtually impossible to match visitor demographics with travel preferences, research does show that age is one of the key factors determining visitor satisfaction with customer service – people from the same generation tend to share the same view of, and preferences for, particular types of customer service. There will of course be exceptions; however, general preferences for service provision according to age are presented in Figure 1.1.

Tips for serving different age groups
<p><i>Veterans (born prior to 1943)</i></p> <p>This group prefers consistency, conformity and stability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish rapport by being respectful • Don't be too casual • Don't rush them into decisions
<p><i>Baby boomers (born 1944-1960)</i></p> <p>This group tends to be optimistic and prefers personalised treatment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be friendly and open • Use their name if you know it • Provide personalised service
<p><i>Generation Xs (born 1960-1980)</i></p> <p>This group are technologically competent, independent and flexible</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be efficient and direct • Be prepared to answer a barrage of questions • Don't oversell tourism products as this group tends to be sceptical
<p><i>Generation Ys (born 1980-2000)</i></p> <p>This group are sociable, goal orientated and highly familiar with digital media</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't take too long to explain things – this group like quick solutions • Avoid talking down to them – they may be young but they know what they want!

Figure 1.1: Guidelines for serving visitors of different age groups

(adapted from AMACOM 2007)

While customer service is important in a range of industries, in tourism, customer service is inextricably linked to visitors' experiences. In other words, the service you provide becomes an integral part of visitors' overall travel experiences. Unlike other products, 'bad' customer service cannot be recalled or replaced. For this reason,

there needs to be zero tolerance of service ‘defects’ (Baum 1993). Remember – good news travels fast in the tourism industry but bad news travels even faster. If you are able to consistently meet or exceed your visitors’ expectations, they are highly likely to recommend your services to other travellers. If their expectations are not met, however, they will be sure to let twice as many people know.

Figure 1.2 illustrates a children’s corner at Lake St Clair Visitor Centre, Tasmania. If the majority of your visitors are retirees and/or backpackers an area such as this is unlikely to get much use but if your centre attracts a large number of families, a children’s corner can be invaluable for keeping little fingers busy.



Figure 1.2: Children’s corners don’t need to be big to be effective

(Source: Lake St Clair Visitor Centre, Tas)

If well designed, children will be happily occupied colouring in and reading books while their parents access information on local walks and have a cup of coffee and buy souvenirs. Essentially, once children are occupied, parents are much more likely to spend time and money in your centre. They are also highly likely to revisit and recommend it to other families. The example illustrated is reasonably simple – two large painted sheets of plywood depicting Tasmanian winter scenes, a wooden picnic table, some photocopied colouring-in sheets and some picture books. Could you create a similar locally ‘themed’ children’s area in your centre?

The other reason customer service is so important is that the way you greet and interact with visitors sends powerful messages that can influence whether people stay in your town/region or choose to travel elsewhere. As an example, Deery et al. (2007) asked visitors who had decided to extend their stay in Victoria why they had

changed their plans. The majority (70%) responded that their decision to stay longer was a direct result of conversations with VIC staff. Remember that many visitors may not have been to your region before – in our survey 63% of respondents were first-time visitors to the region. You are an ambassador for your town and region and as such, can have a substantial impact on the long-term viability of local attractions, products and services in the area.



Figure 1.3: Good customer service involves responding to a wide range of needs and interests
(Source: Busselton Visitor Information Centre, WA)

1.2 Techniques for Communicating With Visitors

The importance of developing effective verbal and non-verbal communication skills cannot be overstated - information centres provide a service that relies almost exclusively upon interpersonal communication. Establishing and maintaining consistently high standards of communication is essential if your centre is to provide visitors with the level of service they expect. The key elements of verbal and non-verbal communication are discussed below together with some exercises and examples to help improve performance in these areas.

1.2.1 Choose your words carefully

Using simple words and expressions is often the most effective means of communication. Try to build an expressive vocabulary as this will enable you to communicate effectively with visitors, regardless of their age, educational background or nationality. It is also good practice to pay particular attention to your use of grammar, as your credibility is likely to be compromised if you express yourself poorly (Pond 1993). Below are some expressions overheard in VICs – what impressions do you get about the staff member and the credibility of their advice?

- Can I help youse?
- Me and the kids stayed a week at this place – it was great!
- Are you looking for general information or something pacific?
- The guy brung a whole lot of brochures yesterday – I'll just go and grab you one

Your choice of words is particularly important if the group includes international tourists or people who do not speak English as their first language. In such situations try to limit your use of slang and colloquial expressions as these are likely to confuse visitors and detract from the information you are trying to convey (AMACOM 2007). It may be useful to augment your words with visual cues – maps, signs, logos, cartoon drawings, photographs, models, diagrams – and possibly even throw in some creative charades. In fact, visual aids are a powerful method of attracting and engaging all visitors and help to clarify explanations and directions. For example, your centre could design a display or use a wall that features attractions and maps of your region, as illustrated in Figure 1.4.



Figure 1.4: Photographs and maps give an overview of a region's main tourist attractions
(Source: Ballarat Visitor Information Centre, Vic)

Other examples of visual aids include:

- Models of local tourist attractions.
- 3-dimensional models of surrounding area and attractions.
- Large scale maps of local region and main transport routes.
- Binoculars/telescopes.
- Human artefacts (e.g., photos, diaries, antiques to explain the history of the area).
- Field guides on local flora and fauna.
- Plant and animal photographs and specimens (see Figure 1.5).



Figure 1.5: Plant and animal specimens help visitors learn about the local area
 (Source: Mt Field National Park Visitor Centre, Tasmania)

1.2.2 Articulation

Clear articulation is vital if visitors (particularly those for whom English is not a first language) are to understand what you are saying. Some common mistakes are slurring or dropping the endings off words, mumbling, and talking too fast (Ballantyne, Crabtree, Ham, Hughes & Weiler 2000). Remember, slow and steady wins the race, especially if you are giving directions or providing visitors with a complex array of choices. In these cases, it often pays to repeat or summarise key points, either verbally or in writing to help them remember what you have said. Tracing routes on regional maps or drawing 'mud maps' is also helpful. The main thing to keep in mind is that although you may have given the information or directions a hundred times, your visitors are hearing it for the first time.

1.2.3 Voice inflection

If possible, use a tone of voice that is natural, expressive and easy to understand. This is particularly important if you regularly repeat the same information as, over time, you may find yourself developing a 'sing-song' or monotone, which is often associated with repetitive learning and boredom. Monotones are particularly lethal on telephones as they tend to signal that you have no interest in visitors and their questions. Again, remember your client is hearing this information for the first time. Be patient, explain clearly and precisely, and be willing to repeat the information if visitors don't seem to have taken it all in the first time. This particularly applies to queries – don't be afraid to check with callers that they have absorbed what you have said, particularly if the information given includes complex directions, unfamiliar place names or telephone numbers.

Exercises to improve inflection

- Smile when talking on the telephone – it will help your voice sound friendly, warm and receptive
- Read passages out aloud and practice stressing words
- Breathe deeply and slowly as this relaxes your vocal chords
- Exaggerate your tone slightly

1.2.4 Telephone etiquette

Each centre will have its own approach to dealing with phone enquiries; however, good telephone etiquette should include the following:

- *Answer the phone within three rings.* An unanswered call signals poor customer service, insufficient staff and/or an empty centre – none of which create a desirable, professional image. Answering the phone within three rings may not always be possible in busy periods; however, an effort should be made to ensure that prospective clients do not hang up in frustration. Having said that, constantly interrupting your conversation with on-site visitors to pick up the phone is also unacceptable – staff need to find a balance and be prepared to share responsibility for answering telephone queries. Even if you are personally unable to answer queries, answering the phone and then finding someone who can, will create a positive impact on callers (Leland & Bailey 1999).
- *Greet the caller.* Even if you are in a hurry or serving other clients, take the time to greet the caller with a simple 'hello' or 'good morning/afternoon'. Follow this with your name and the name of your VIC to reassure the caller that they have contacted the correct place. Finally, ask how you may help:

Good morning, this is _____ from the _____ visitor information centre.
How may I help you?

- *Put callers on hold if necessary.* To minimise stress and confusion, you need a clear procedure to follow if the telephone rings while you are dealing with other visitors. It is particularly important that you ask callers if you can put them on hold before doing so. It is also good manners to explain why they are being put on hold as this prevents them jumping to the conclusion that they are unimportant. If possible, give them an estimate of how long you are likely to be and when you do return to the line, make sure you thank them for waiting (AMACOM 2007). Sometimes it is inconvenient for callers to be put on hold – in such cases, offer to return their call.

Good morning, this is _____ from the _____ visitor information centre. I'm with another customer at the moment, do you mind if I put you on hold? I'm likely to be about two minutes.

Thank you for holding - sorry about the delay. How may I help you?

- *Transfer the call if necessary*

There may be cases where you can't answer callers' questions and need to transfer them to someone else. Make sure you explain why they are being transferred, who they are being transferred to, and ask whether they mind being transferred. When you do transfer a call, don't hang up until the recipient answers, otherwise the caller is no better off than when they started. If the recipient doesn't answer, offer to take a message or to transfer them to an alternative staff member.

Managers' Task: If you're wondering about your centre's customer service and telephone etiquette, try calling your centre anonymously and evaluate how staff deal with your questions. If you suspect they might recognise your voice, ask a friend to do it for you. This is something you can and perhaps should do regularly as it allows you to provide staff with instant feedback and rewards.

1.3 Non-Verbal Communication

Body language is a powerful communicator – 55% of what we learn about others is from their body language; 38% from their tone of voice and only 7% from the words used. Your appearance, mannerisms and posture signal your competence and credibility well before you even begin answering visitors' questions. In fact, people are much more ready to believe what they see than what they hear (Ballantyne et al. 2000). Posture, gestures, eye contact and general body movement all send messages about your interest in visitors and their questions.

1.3.1 Eye contact

One of the most powerful ways of connecting with visitors is through eye contact. Eye contact is important because it conveys to visitors that you are interested, receptive and attending to what they're saying. As with all things though, moderation is the key – don't stare at visitors like a rabbit caught in headlights as this is likely to make them very uncomfortable.

As well as signalling your interest, eye contact enables you to determine whether visitors are listening – those who are disinterested or overwhelmed will generally look elsewhere (Ballantyne et al. 2000). What should you do when this happens? First, draw visitors back into the conversation by asking questions that pinpoint their interests and requirements; second, tailor your information to meet their specific needs and areas of interest.

1.3.2 Gestures

Gestures are an important communication tool because they enable you to emphasise and clarify points. They can also signify your interest and willingness to be engaged in conversation. As an example, consider how you feel when talking to someone with folded arms – this gesture creates a non-verbal barrier that implies the person is not interested in prolonging the conversation (AMACOM 2007).

The best gestures are natural and serve some purpose (Pond 1993) but can in some cases become repetitive and develop into annoying habits. For example, nervous speakers often engage in grooming activities (playing with their hair, clothing or fingernails) or other repetitive movements such as wringing their hands. Forced or over-zealous gestures are also distracting. If you find yourself repeatedly using the same gestures try to make a concentrated effort to stop, otherwise visitors are likely to focus on what you are doing rather than what you are saying.

1.3.3 Body posture

To show you're interested in what visitors have to say, face the person, lean forward slightly and nod during the conversation to signal you are listening. Think about how you stand or sit as well – slouched posture suggests boredom while a tense, stiff posture portrays nervousness. Both are unappealing as they convey to visitors that you'd rather be anywhere but with them.



Figure 1.6: Eye contact and body posture signal your interest in helping clients
(Source: Albany Visitor Information Centre, WA)

Most interactions with visitors should take place in the personal zone (2-4 feet/60-120cm) as this distance is sufficient to create privacy yet wide enough to ensure they feel comfortable. If visitors continue to back away from you, take this as a very clear signal that you're too close for comfort.

1.3.4 Neatness

Attention to personal grooming and hygiene is critical if you wish to make a good impression. Similar attention should be paid to clothing and general appearance – if your centre has a uniform, wear it with pride; if not, choose neat and modest attire. This is not the place to show off your latest tan and/or piercings! The same attention to detail should be paid to work areas and counters. Keeping these areas tidy and organised will not only present a professional workplace image to customers, it will also enable you to find things quickly and efficiently.

Tip: Brochure stands, displays, facilities and equipment should be checked prior to opening so you are free to welcome visitors and can efficiently deal with their queries.

1.4 Reach for the Stars: Examples of exemplary customer service

According to Leland and Bailey (1999), the difference between good and exceptional service is the degree of initiative taken by staff. Essentially, exceptional service occurs when staff provide clients with something far beyond their expectations, thereby creating positive, memorable experiences (AMACOM 2007). We know of instances where VIC staff have accompanied visitors to local attractions if they seem confused by directions; driven them to accommodation venues if they lack transport; and provided meals and accommodation if no other options were available locally. These actions are conducted out of sheer goodwill towards customers. While these services may not be possible in your VIC, you might like to consider introducing simple touches such as creating a comfortable seating area with complimentary tea and coffee.

Thought for the Day

Unlike many customer service providers, VICs do not rely on repeat custom. However, visitors who receive excellent customer service *will* recommend your centre to other travellers and are likely to stop at other VICs. Essentially, what you do today will affect the health and long-term viability of other centres in your region or State.

Some simple yet effective methods of delivering excellent customer service practised by the VICs surveyed for this study include:

- Installing satellite information centres in local shopping centres (Albury/Wodonga, Victoria).
- Providing detailed information on accommodation, parking and beach access for people with disabilities (Philip Island, Victoria).
- Offering visitors free use of an air-conditioned reference/reading room furnished with comfortable seating (Bowali Visitor Centre, Kakadu National Park, Northern Territory).
- Installing a seasonally themed Feature Display Wall that displays current event information and is updated at least weekly (Toowoomba, Queensland).

- Designing fun and interactive displays that teach visitors about the wetlands (Windows on the Wetlands, Northern Territory – see Chapter 6).
- Providing free, regularly up-dated road and campsite reports (Kakadu National Park, Northern Territory – see Figure 1.7).

SITE	STATUS	EXPECTED OPENING	COMMENTS
Road to Ubirr	2WD with care	-	Site open 8.30am - sunset
Cahills Crossing	Open	-	4WD high clearance
Manngarre walk	Closed	2007	Suffered damage from cyclone – closed for regeneration
Sandstone walk	Open	-	Entire walk is now open
Anbangbang	Open	-	Road and first section of walk open – the rest will open in stages as dries out
Malabanjbanjdu	Partially open		Some campsites closed due to crocodile safety issues
Sandy billabong	Closed	July 2007	Road repairs and crocodile surveys being conducted

Figure 1.7: Printed leaflets provide information about road conditions

(Source: Adapted from Bowali Visitor Centre handouts, Kakadu National Park, NT).

- Presenting dinosaur exhibits to teach visitors about fossils found in the local region (Kronosaurus Korner, Queensland – see Figure 1.8).



Figure 1.8: Interpretive signs and audio recordings teach visitors about fossils found in the local area *(Source: Kronosaurus Korner, Richmond, Qld)*

- Providing free tea and coffee to encourage visitors to sit down with staff to discuss local attractions and drive routes in a relaxed, friendly manner (Toowoomba, Queensland).
- Offering regular audio visual presentations on local history which makes the VIC an attraction in itself and encourages people to spend time exploring the town's historic buildings and attractions (Charters Towers, Queensland).
- Providing reading materials, toys, seating and log fires in winter (Pemberton, Western Australia – see Figure 1.9).



Figure 1.9: Toys, reading materials and a log fire are very attractive in colder climates
 (Source: Pemberton Visitor Information Centre, WA)

- Establishing close networking relationships with other information centres in the region to ensure visitors' accommodation requests can be met during peak periods (Philip Island, Victoria).
- Developing close working relationships with local businesses (Charters Towers, Queensland).

Managers' Task: Hold meetings with your staff and volunteers to brainstorm ways of improving your centre's customer service. Discuss the visitor facilities, services and practices you have experienced at other centres – could these be implemented in your centre?

Delivering excellent customer service is important even in situations where it may not be possible to meet visitors' exact requests. In these situations, try to find suitable alternatives and encourage visitors to reach a compromise. As an example, imagine that a family arrive at your VIC intent on booking tickets to a local show that night. Unfortunately, the venue is fully booked. Rather than saying there's nothing available, suggest they stay an extra day in the region, provide them with a range of visitor activities and attractions to fill the day, and offer to book them in for the following night.

Even if the request seems ridiculous, try to avoid responses such as:

- It's not our policy to...
- It's not my job to....
- I'm not allowed to.....
- I really have no idea about.....

1.5 Dealing With Client Complaints

Despite your best intentions, there will inevitably be situations where interactions with visitors go horribly wrong. If this happens, aim to address and rectify the problem before it becomes an issue and impacts upon visitors' travel experiences. It is important to remain calm at all times. Some simple strategies for dealing with complaints are presented below.

When visitors come into your centre with a problem or issue, they will generally want two things – first, to tell you what has made them upset and second, to hear you promise to resolve the issue. There are four basic steps to dealing with difficult and/or upset visitors:

1. Let them express their feelings first - avoid the temptation to rush in promising to fix things. Although difficult (particularly if the client is mistaken), it is important to listen calmly and not interrupt.
2. Once visitors have vented their frustration, let them know you understand their feelings through phrases such as 'I can see why you're upset' or 'It must be frustrating for you'.
3. Ask questions to ensure you fully understand the issue and what it is they really wanted.
4. Offer solutions and alternatives to rectify the problem but be careful not to promise things you cannot deliver.

Essentially, the best you can hope for is to recover the situation with such exceptional service that visitors not only forgive but also forget the original unsatisfactory encounter (Baum 1993). Although it's difficult, try not to take it personally when a visitor complains about a tourism product or service in your region. Instead, treat it as a valuable opportunity to get feedback, promise to pass on the information to those responsible and make sure you do so. Some basic tips for dealing with customer complaints are presented in Figure 1.10.

Tips for Dealing with Customer Complaints

- Apologise, even if you or your information centre are not the ones who made the mistake.
- Listen carefully to what the customer is saying.
- If visitors are angry and speaking loudly, don't feel you have to answer at the same volume. Instead, speak at a lower volume and they will gradually bring their volume down to yours.
- Ignore rude or profane language – certainly don't match it!
- Defuse volatile situations by questions such as 'Have I personally done something to annoy or offend you? If so, I'd like to apologise'.
- Maintain eye contact.
- Ask questions if you are not completely sure about the essence of the complaint.
- Promise to address the problem and explain how you will do so.
- If you cannot fix the problem, try to reach a mutually agreeable compromise.

Figure 1.10: Simple guidelines for dealing with customer complaints

(adapted from AMACOM 2007, and Leland & Bailey 1999)

Now you've read about the basics of customer service, you might like to rate your skills using the two checklists following. Do you consistently provide exemplary customer service, or is there room for improvement? If you're really serious about improving, we suggest you use these checklists on a regular basis to plot your progress.

CUSTOMER SERVICE SELF-EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE

(adapted from Leyland and Bailey 1999)

- ___ When having a conversation with clients, I give them my complete attention and avoid doing other activities.
- ___ I make eye contact with clients to show I am paying attention.
- ___ On the telephone I try to use inflection in my voice to convey interest.
- ___ I pick up the telephone by the third ring.
- ___ When I put a client on hold, I ask their permission before doing so.
- ___ I use language that visitors (particularly international visitors) will understand.
- ___ When I cannot meet client's exact needs I suggest options and alternatives.
- ___ I apologise sincerely when I (or another staff member) make a mistake.
- ___ When a customer is voicing a complaint I remain calm and understanding.
- ___ I view customer complaints as an opportunity to improve customer service rather than a problem that is taking up valuable time.

Score using the following scale:

- 0 = rarely
- 1 = sometimes
- 2 = often
- 3 = almost always

0-12 points: Bronze level

Scoring at this level generally means one of three things:

- You are new to the service industry and still coming to grips with the fine art of dealing with clients
- You have become rusty and need to refresh on the basics
- You may not be entirely suited to a service-based job

13-22 points: Silver level

You have a solid understanding of the basics but may not be applying them consistently. On good days, you provide exemplary service but on bad days... Practice the actions listed on the questionnaire, especially when you don't really feel like it.

23-30 points: Gold level

Congratulations – you provide professional service on a consistent basis! You may like to ask a colleague to also rate your performance in case there are areas for improvement that you may have missed.

VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRE CUSTOMER SERVICE CHECKLIST

I make visitors feel welcome by

- Greeting them as they enter the premises
- Introducing myself
- Maintaining eye contact

I ensure visitors get a great first impression by

- Dressing neatly and appropriately
- Being friendly, polite and professional at all times
- Treating visitors with respect
- Keeping the front counter area tidy
- Ensuring the brochure stands are fully stocked, neatly arranged and easy to access

I show I care about visitors by

- Introducing myself and asking how I can be of service
- Acknowledging waiting visitors if I cannot attend to them immediately
- Concentrating on the visitors I'm serving
- Attentively listening while making eye contact
- Responding with sincerity

I am an active ambassador for my town and region by

- Displaying a positive attitude
- Welcoming visitors to the region
- Talking enthusiastically about my town/region
- Telling visitors what's great about my town/region
- Thinking of creative ways to encourage visitors to spend time in the region

I can answer visitors' questions because

- I am familiar with local services, attractions and accommodation facilities
- I have first hand experience of local tourism products
- I am familiar with tourism products in adjoining towns
- I keep up-to-date with changes and developments in the industry
- I know where to find information on products I am less familiar with

I make visitors feel valued by

- Recognising that individuals have different needs and preferences
- Taking the time to answer questions thoroughly
- Asking questions to ensure I have a clear understanding of visitors' needs and wishes
- Giving information that closely matches visitors' requests
- Being able to offer visitors alternatives if I cannot meet their exact needs
- 'Going the extra mile' where possible
- Providing maps, brochures and other supporting materials where appropriate
- Taking visitors' complaints seriously and solving problems if possible

I encourage visitors to regularly use VICs by

- Answering questions with accurate, up-to-date and relevant information
- Being friendly, welcoming and polite
- Informing visitors of other information centres in regions through which they are travelling

Chapter 2

BUILDING A STRONG TEAM: MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

2.0 Introduction

Training is an important precursor to providing quality visitor service, and is particularly important in an industry where the majority of staff work on a part-time or voluntary basis (Radford 1991). Given the importance of face-to-face interactions in VICs, *all* staff, whether paid or voluntary, should have the knowledge and relevant experience to provide sound, up-to-date advice about regional tourism products and services (Ballantyne & Hughes 2004). As visitors are often on multi-destination trips, this knowledge and experience should also extend to tourism products and developments in adjacent regions.

2.1 Trip Planning: The role of VICs

The potential for VICs to impact upon visitors' decision making was highlighted in exploratory research undertaken by Deery, Jago, Daugherty, Carson and Adams in 2005. Visitors were interviewed about their travel intentions as they exited VICs in Victoria. Responses indicated that apart from booking accommodation, visitors had done very little planning prior to their trip. For example, 58% had no plans about the attractions they would visit; 91% had not planned any tours; and 87% had not made restaurant bookings. Surveys of visitors at four Queensland VICs conducted by Hobbin (1999) revealed similar patterns of trip planning. Approximately one-third of visitors planned their trip prior to leaving home and adhered to these plans, while a further 20% had planned their trip prior to travel but made changes during the trip. However, a substantial 40% had made few if any plans and selected activities and routes based on information obtained during the trip. Post-trip telephone interviews revealed that the majority of visitors (63%) rated VICs as the most helpful source of information for selecting activities and attractions in the region. These responses suggest there is considerable scope for VICs to entice visitors to visit local attractions and spend longer in their region.

In terms of the type of information required, Deery et al.'s (2005) study in Victoria identified maps of the region and personal recommendations for restaurants, activities and accommodation as the most requested. Hobbin's (1999) Queensland survey also found that the most common request was for maps of the region (mentioned by 43% of respondents). Brochures on individual attractions (38%), tour brochures (29%), general information on attractions (23%), general information on tours and cruises (21%) and a visitor guide (19%) were also considered important.

To further illustrate the range of services and information required by visitors, let's look at why people in our study use VICs. Table 2 shows responses to our question 'What are your main reasons for using this VIC?'

Table 2: Main reasons people use VICs

Main Reasons	This town/city	This region	Other regions	Other States
Find out general information about	235 (59%)	224 (56%)	32 (8%)	8 (2%)
Find out about specific activities/attractions in	207 (52%)	193 (48%)	24 (6%)	4 (1%)
Book activities/tours (if possible) in	88 (22%)	73 (18%)	11 (3%)	0
Find out about accommodation in	87 (22%)	64 (16%)	11 (3%)	4 (1%)
Book accommodation (if possible) in	61 (15%)	34 (9%)	12 (3%)	2 (5%)
Use facilities (e.g., toilets)	121 (30%)			
Have a break from travelling	108 (27%)			
Purchase merchandise/souvenirs	103 (26%)			
Find refreshments	73 (18%)			

Note that respondents were allowed to tick as many options as applied and that the figure in brackets is the percentage of the total sample who ticked this option. It can be seen that on the whole, visitors were seeking local and/or regional information but that few required information about other regions or States. This pattern is evident across all types of information (general information, specific information about activities and/or attractions, and information about accommodation). This does not mean you should automatically throw away brochures on everything outside your region but it does suggest that if space is a premium you could consider reducing your stocks of brochures on attractions in other regions and States.

Table 2 also suggests that the proportion of visitors requiring booking services is fairly low. It must be noted, however, that these figures may have been influenced by the fact that booking services were not available in some of the centres surveyed. The reasonably high proportion of visitors wanting to have a break from travelling, use facilities and purchase merchandise suggests there is some scope for encouraging visitors to spend more time and money at VICs. This issue is discussed further in Chapter 4, 'Common challenges: creative solutions'. Responses have not been divided into international and domestic visitors as there was no significant difference between the two groups on any of the motives listed.

Our study also asked visitors to rate the importance of particular information centre features or services. Visitors indicated on a scale of 1 ('not important') to 4 ('essential') how important it was for VICs to provide the items/services. Responses are presented in descending order of importance in Table 3.

Table 3: Importance of VIC features/services

Feature/service	Mean score (1- 4)
Maps	3.7
Friendly staff	3.6
Brochures on local attractions & activities	3.6
Access to knowledgeable staff	3.6
Advice on things to do in the local area	3.4
Toilets	3.3
Advice on local events/happenings	3.0
Activities/tour booking service	2.8
Information on local accommodation	2.8
Reference books on local region	2.5
Accommodation booking service	2.5
Models/displays of local attractions	2.4
Refreshments	2.2
Internet/email access	2.2
Talks by experts on regional topics	2.2
Multi-media resources (e.g., touch screens)	2.1
Merchandise/souvenirs	2.1
Video theatre	2.0

As reported in previous studies, the provision of maps is considered the most important service or feature offered by VICs. Friendly staff, brochures, access to knowledgeable staff and advice on local activities also scores highly. Booking services and information about accommodation are considered less important, as are the provision of models, displays and refreshments. It is interesting to note that 'high tech' options are generally at the bottom of the table. That is, internet and email access, multimedia resources and video theatres are considered the least important features of VICs. Further analysis revealed that these patterns were consistent regardless of whether visitors were local, interstate or international. This has important implications for those of you contemplating whether to upgrade your facilities to incorporate expensive 'high tech' options. The fact that features the visitors considered most important were those relating to customer service – elements that are essentially free to provide – suggests your money might be better spent elsewhere.

It seems visitors use VICs for a variety of reasons, and that the importance of training staff to deal with a variety of requests and situations cannot be overstated. Accordingly, the remainder of this chapter addresses the issue of staff training, placing particular emphasis on methods of updating product knowledge and getting

the most out of your volunteers. It concludes with a checklist to enable you to assess your performance – you may like to get your staff's view by distributing it to them as well.

2.2 Strategies for Developing Staff Product Knowledge

An exploratory study of information retrieval practices in Queensland VICs by Ballantyne and Hughes (2004) indicates that despite advances in computer technology and widespread internet access, brochures remain the main source of information for both staff and visitors. This supports Deery et al.'s (2007) research which also found brochures were the most common method of disseminating information, with email lists and television also being used by many centres (51.5% and 39% of centres respectively).

Although brochures are attractive marketing tools, they do have a tendency to date quickly. It is therefore imperative that your staff have effective strategies for verifying information and that you conduct training to ensure staff keep abreast of changes and developments in your own and adjoining regions. There are a range of strategies and training approaches that can be used to achieve this.



Figure 2.1: Brochures are the main source of information for visitors and staff

(Source: Toowoomba Visitor Information Centre, Qld)

Our interviews with thirteen VIC managers showed that approaches to training vary considerably from one VIC to the next, with some centres providing specialised training only for paid staff and others giving identical and extensive training to both paid and volunteer staff. Some centres conduct an annual volunteer summit to which both paid and volunteer staff are invited. Others require staff to go through an induction period whereby staff are assigned to an in-house trainer for a set period

(usually one month). Almost all centres provide in-house training rather than outsourcing to professional training companies. The most commonly mentioned topics covered in staff training are listed in Figure 2.2.

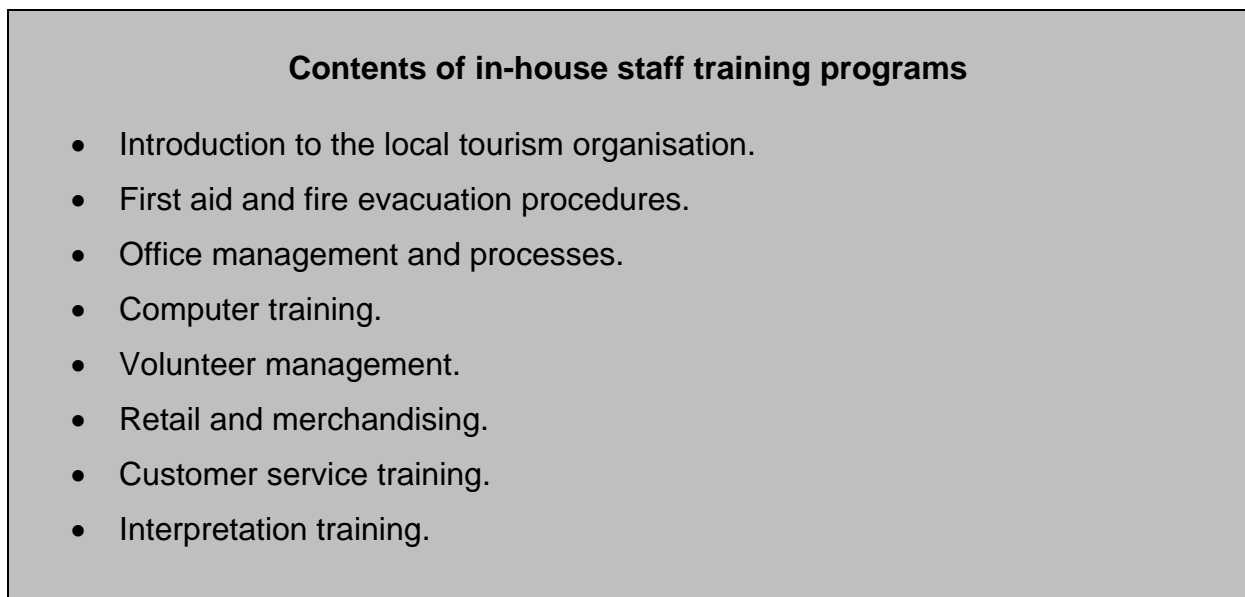


Figure 2.2: Main topics included in training programs offered at centres surveyed

Most centres in our study offer in-house courses on an annual basis; some also run regular monthly meetings and workshops specifically for volunteers. For instance, Gateway Discovery Centre in Cairns offers a full-day volunteer induction course followed by a two month in-house training program. Some centres offer optional annual operational refresher courses, while others conduct regular sessions related to local events or issues. As an example, the information centre in Toowoomba offers briefings on local topical issues such as water restrictions and training specifically related to the city's annual Carnival of Flowers. Likewise, Mon Repos visitor centre in Bundaberg runs a course on turtle biology to enable volunteer staff to accurately answer visitors' questions about turtles. Could your VIC conduct similar sessions, focusing on local places, features or issues of interest?

Apart from in-house training, the most common method of ensuring that both paid and volunteer staff keep abreast of changes and developments in local tourism products is through 'familiarisations'. Most centres conduct regular staff 'famils' to businesses in their immediate surroundings, though trips to more distant attractions in the region are less common. The latter tend to be conducted by larger centres – for example, the Gateway Discovery Centre in Cairns conducts a regional familiarisation every six months. 'Penguins on Parade' Visitor Centre has a somewhat different approach – they help staff learn about regional products by regularly swapping staff with other information centres in the region. This approach is particularly effective for centres linked by themed tourist routes – do you have links with other centres that would allow you to swap staff on a regular basis? Although it takes time and effort to organise, it's a great way of sharing ideas and obtaining first-hand experience of other towns and tourism products.

Another way many VICs actively encourage staff to update their knowledge is by providing access to tourism magazines, brochures and newspapers. You might like to consider putting together a series of product update folders covering local

accommodation, attractions, events and service providers in the area. You could also invite tourism providers to come to your centre to give presentations to staff. Staff communication books covering various issues are also particularly useful for passing on the latest news.

Accessing information on-line is another common strategy for keeping staff up to date. Some of the centres we interviewed have their own website that contains regional product information; others rely on general internet searches. Some centres also have an active staff-only information intranet that helps keep staff informed of local news and product updates (e.g., Uluru/Kata Tjuta National Park, Northern Territory). Most centres interviewed allow both paid and volunteer staff to access the internet and see it as a valuable method of ensuring information given to visitors is current and accurate.

Another important part of staff training was attendance at conferences and professional development workshops. Managers made particular mention of attendance at tourism industry conferences such as the Queensland Information Centre Association (QICA) annual conference and networking workshops with local businesses.

Summary of strategies for keeping staff up-to-date

- Design and maintain product update folders.
- Conduct regular familiarisations for volunteer and paid staff.
- Have an induction process for new staff.
- Conduct short workshops/discussion sessions on local topics of interest.
- Swap staff with other VICs.
- Provide internet access.

2.3 Practice What You Preach: Interacting with your staff

The attitudes, service provision and commitment of staff often reflect those of management. Good customer service involves everyone in the organisation, not just front-line staff (Mahesh 1993). If you are positive, enthusiastic and interested in your job, your staff are highly likely to follow suit. Aim for open and frank communication – total commitment from top down and bottom up is essential if you're serious about delivering excellent customer service. If you're happy with your staff's effort, tell them; if you're not happy, tell them as well. Don't be afraid to bring issues into the open. After all, it's far better that you and your staff identify and resolve any issues and/or gaps in service provision before your customers do.

Figure 2.3 lists ten ways to demonstrate your commitment to your staff – how well do you do?

Management checklist

1. Greet your staff in a friendly, pleasant manner.
2. If you need to discipline staff, do it in private. Remain calm, explain exactly why you are upset and give them an opportunity to respond.
3. Be willing to deal with difficult customers – don't leave it up to your staff.
4. Support your staff's decisions whenever possible.
5. Admit when you don't know the answer.
6. Listen to your staff and don't interrupt while they are speaking.
7. Take time to socialise and celebrate major events such as birthdays.
8. Demonstrate good telephone etiquette.
9. Thank your staff on a regular basis (see next section).
10. Don't be afraid to tell staff when things aren't going quite as well as expected – honesty is always the best policy.

(adapted from Leland and Bailey 1999)

Figure 2.3: Checklist for 'best practice' staff service

2.3.1 Staff rewards

Staff thrive on praise and public recognition of a job well done – as managers and supervisors it is important that you regularly reward staff for their efforts. This does not need to be formal or expensive; in fact, studies show that informal rewards such as praise are equally, if not more effective, than formal rewards (Leland & Bailey 1999). For maximum impact, praise should be given as soon as possible after the event and delivered in a sincere and heartfelt manner.

Examples of how VIC managers reward their staff include:

- Organising familiarisation trips to other regions.
- Implementing staff swap programs with other VICs.
- Sending thank you cards, flowers and/or balloons.
- Organising morning teas to thank staff.
- Paying for attendance at industry conferences and workshops.
- Passing on complimentary tickets received from local businesses.
- Distributing 'staff member of the month' awards (this really only works well in centres with large numbers of staff).

There is considerable scope for rewarding staff but generally, the more enjoyable and interesting the reward, the more it's likely to be appreciated (Leland & Bailey, 1999). If you're stuck for inspiration, ask your staff for ideas!

2.4 Developing a Productive Volunteer Workforce

VICs rely heavily on volunteer staff. In 2004, a survey of 55 member centres by the QICA found that a high proportion of their workforce (92%) was volunteers. This equates to an average of 27 volunteers per centre or 14.34 volunteers to every paid staff member (QICA 2004). Likewise, Deery et al.'s (2007) study of VICs in New

South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory revealed that the vast majority of staff were volunteers.

Although the roles and responsibilities assigned to volunteers vary from centre to centre, most managers would agree that the most important qualities of volunteers are those you can't buy or instil – extensive local knowledge, years of experience, and a passion for promoting their town and region. Volunteers give freely of their time, and if well managed, are invaluable to VICs and their goals. Indeed, many information centres rely heavily on their volunteer staff to take care of phone calls and deal with visitors.

Despite the many advantages of using volunteer staff, there is a pervading attitude amongst some information centres that volunteers are more work than they're worth. In fact, some centres specifically choose not to use volunteers because they feel that paid staff are much more professional. While this may be true in some situations, we argue that with regular training and support, volunteers can be worth their weight in gold.



Figure 2.4: Volunteers are a valuable source of local knowledge

(Source: Ballarat Visitor Information Centre, Vic)

Looking after volunteers does not need to be a daunting task. The remainder of this chapter discusses how to 'get the most' from volunteers, and includes examples and suggestions that provide mutually beneficial outcomes for both VICs and volunteers.

2.4.1 Recruiting volunteers

Before you recruit volunteers, think carefully about what it is you want them to do. They may be unpaid, but they play a vital role in promoting your centre and region. If

possible, write a position description and person specification to help you select suitable staff. Volunteers are ambassadors for your community and should therefore reflect its values – if possible, avoid drawing only from one particular group (Ambrose & Paine 2002). The easiest way to get a broad spectrum of applicants is to formally advertise or write to a range of organisations that might include potential volunteers. Ask prospective staff to formally apply and select candidates as if they were applying for a paid, advertised position. Why? Research shows that if working as a volunteer is perceived to be a privilege, it is more likely to be highly valued by volunteers (Ambrose & Paine 2002).

As with paid staff, negotiate hours of service and obtain a firm commitment from them – it is important that they regard the position as a job rather than a personal favour they are doing for the centre.

Ending Volunteer Services

Occasionally, it may be necessary to inform volunteers that their services are no longer required. This is always an uncomfortable and difficult situation for all involved. A resentful volunteer who feels he/she has been 'sacked' has the potential to cause your centre a great deal of harm. While there is no simple solution, an initial probation period will help to 'weed out' those unsuited to the position. Centre management should also devise a formal procedure for dealing with terminations to help make this parting easier for all parties concerned.

2.4.2 Training volunteers

Training and support is the foundation of an efficient, skilled and satisfied volunteer workforce. No matter how small your information centre, if you use volunteers, you'll need a process in place for training them. Ideally, volunteer training should involve three elements:

On-the-job training

Regardless of whether volunteers are assisting visitors, answering telephones, or fulfilling 'back area' tasks such as cleaning and restocking shelves, supervised on-the-job training is critical to ensure that your high standards are maintained.

Formal induction sessions

The purpose of induction sessions is to introduce volunteers to the functions, roles and operational procedures of your information centre. Sessions should encompass all aspects of work that go on in your centre, even those volunteers are unlikely to become involved in. Induction sessions also include familiarisations. See Figure 2.5 for volunteer training programs commonly offered in VICs.

Although volunteers are likely to be locals, you cannot assume they have first-hand knowledge of each and every tourism product and service in the area. It is therefore important to offer volunteers a program of regular industry familiarisations and/or tours to ensure they have the required knowledge and experience to assist visitors. Try to tailor these sessions specifically to volunteers as this will help to make them

feel a valued part of your staff. Include information on local history, geography, flora, fauna, culture and stories and where appropriate, encourage them to share their own stories and experiences.

Informal discussion sessions and team meetings

All volunteers will benefit from regular opportunities to discuss different aspects of their work with each other, and with other staff members. Where practical, try to invite volunteers to informal gatherings as well as staff meetings.

Training programs offered in VICs

- Orientation & induction.
- Customer service.
- Computer skills (e.g., accessing the internet).
- Retail/merchandising.
- Fire evacuation.
- Occupational Health and Safety.
- Local & regional product familiarisations.
- First Aid.
- Annual operational refresher training.
- On-the-job supervision and coaching.

Figure 2.5: In-house training courses commonly offered in VICs

2.5 Creating a Volunteer Handbook

Many VICs have handbooks that provide their volunteers with information on tourism products and work-related issues. Creating a handbook ensures volunteers are well-informed and helps to build an efficient and supportive team. For managers, putting together a volunteer handbook can be a great opportunity to consolidate information; revise forms and procedures; and renew and refocus centre goals. Depending on your centre's size and needs, your volunteer handbook may or may not contain all the elements we have listed.

Welcome message from the VIC Manager

General information

- Office locations.
- Position descriptions.
- Volunteer roles and responsibilities.
- Current programs and services.
- Contact information.

Introduction to town/region

- Local history.
- Natural and cultural heritage.
- Places and events of significance.
- Tourist attractions and services.

Sample forms and proformers

- Work contracts or assignments.
- Timesheets.
- Travel log or expense vouchers (if applicable).
- Volunteer registration forms (if applicable).

Explanation of organisation

- Organisational structure (chart or diagram).
- Listing of advisory council or board members.
- Account of financial structure or funding sources.
- Staff policies and procedures.
- Volunteer rights and responsibilities.
- Definition of terms or acronyms.

Volunteer issues

- Pre-service orientation.
- Confidentiality.
- On the job orientation.
- In-service training.
- Industry training.
- Rewards and benefits to volunteers.
 - Stipend (if applicable).
 - Meals/Transportation (if applicable).
 - Industry familiarisations (if applicable).
 - Other rewards as seen fit by the VIC.
- Insurance: accident and liability.
- Recognition: events, newsletter, others.
- Resignation.
- Disciplinary action.
- Loss of funding.

- Termination of benefits.
- Information for volunteers with disabilities: inclusion and accessibility.

2.6 Rewarding Volunteers

If VICs wish volunteers to give freely of their time and energy, and to accept the discipline of regular work, they need to provide volunteers with some form of reward for their service. Arguably the most powerful reward managers and paid staff can give is the assurance that volunteers are doing something important or worthwhile – something that is of value to visitors, other staff and the local community. Make a habit of acknowledging volunteers by speaking directly to them, paying tribute to the work they are doing, and including them (where possible) in staff functions.

Keep in mind that volunteers are often highly skilled and may be simultaneously offering their time to other organisations – unless you provide appropriate tasks and rewards you may struggle to retain their services. Volunteers are a diverse group so it is important to identify *why* people have offered their time. This will enable you to provide rewards that match their motives and interests. For example, if a volunteer regards working at your centre as a social outing then social rewards such as functions and ‘famils’ are likely to be powerful rewards. If, on the other hand, volunteers are primarily motivated by the need to ‘feel useful’, spend some time identifying their skills and try to allocate them tasks that utilise these skills. Whatever the reward, incorporate tasks and activities that build cohesive ‘teams’ – the aim is to encourage volunteers to regard themselves as an integral part of your information centre. Again, if you’re not sure what rewards will work best; ask your volunteers!

Suggestions for volunteer rewards

- Free industry familiarisations and/or coach tours.
- Regular ‘volunteers-only’ morning teas or lunches.
- Volunteer uniforms and/or name badges.
- Volunteer conferences.
- Free attendance at industry conferences or training sessions.
- ‘Volunteer of the month’ awards (if you have a large number of volunteers).
- Special recognition presentations for long-term service.
- Birthday and anniversary celebrations.

2.7 Smoothing Tensions Between Paid and Volunteer Staff

Sometimes, despite your best efforts, paid staff and volunteers just don’t seem to get along. According to Ambrose and Paine (2002) there are two reasons why paid staff may object to the presence of volunteer staff. First, paid staff may fear their jobs could be given to volunteers as the services of the latter are essentially free. This is a valid concern and requires tactful and sympathetic handling by management. It is

particularly important to ensure that volunteers are used in a supporting role and never seen as a replacement for paid staff. The second concern is that paid staff often resent the time required to train and/or supervise volunteers. Again, management needs to stress the important role volunteers play in supporting paid staff and highlight the value of having a well-trained and committed team of volunteers.

On the following pages are two checklists. The first outlines the rights of volunteers working in your VIC; the second lists tasks and qualities of effective management. How well are you and your VIC performing? Are there any areas which could be improved?

CHECKLIST OF VOLUNTEERS' RIGHTS*

Unlike paid staff, volunteer staff are not covered by award conditions or workplace agreements. Volunteers do have rights, however, some of which are enshrined in legislation and some of which are the moral obligations of any organisation using volunteers.

As a volunteer you have the right:

- To work in a healthy and safe environment (refer Occupational Health and Safety Act[s]).
- To be interviewed and employed in accordance with equal opportunity and anti-discrimination legislation.
- To be adequately covered by insurance.
- To be given accurate and truthful information about the organisation for which you are working.
- To be reimbursed for out of pocket expenses incurred on behalf of the organisation for which you are working.
- To be given a copy of the organisation's volunteer policy and any other policy that affects your work.
- Not to fill a position previously held by a paid worker.
- Not to do the work of paid staff during industrial disputes.
- To have a job description and agreed working hours.
- To have access to a grievance procedure.
- To be provided with orientation to the organisation.
- To have your confidential and personal information dealt with in accordance with the principles of the Privacy Act 1988.
- To be provided with sufficient training to do your job.

STAFF MANAGEMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

(Adapted from Leland & Bailey 1999)

- We regularly survey visitors to find out how satisfied they are with our service.
- We survey staff to find out how satisfied they are with the working environment and ask them for suggestions for improvements.
- We have a written mission statement and/or specific long-term goals designed to improve our customer service.
- We train staff and volunteers in telephone and face-to-face communication skills.
- Managers are trained in the skills needed to support staff in providing excellent service.
- We put new staff and volunteers through an orientation process that stresses the importance of customer service.
- We have a computer system that enables us to provide fast and efficient customer service (e.g., internet access to assist us in answering customers' queries).
- We have a process in place that enables us to change our policies and procedures in response to customer feedback.

Score using the following scale:

0 = not at all

1 = to a small degree

2 = to a moderate degree

3 = to a large degree

0-6 points

Your VIC does not place a very high priority on customer service. Short-term results are considered more important than long-term ones and results tend to be measured by quantity rather than quality.

Recommendation: Conduct customer service training for both management and staff.

7-14 points

Management is aware of the importance of customer service but has yet to make customer service integral to the daily running of the centre. The ideals of customer service are promoted but managers are still not leading by example. In other words, you 'talk the talk' but have yet to 'walk the walk'.

Recommendation: Take some highly visible action that shows you care about your staff - remedy something they have been complaining about for a while!

15-21 points

You may sometimes feel like you're in the middle of creative chaos but your centre is well on the way to achieving excellent customer service.

Recommendation: Keep the big picture in mind and don't try to fix everything at once – focus on one problem and address that before moving to the next.

22-27 points

Congratulations - your centre has a strong focus on customer service and your staff know they are valued!

Recommendation: Look for new ways to improve and be innovative – don't be afraid to try something that hasn't been done before.

Chapter 3

DESIGN ELEMENTS: SIGNS, LAYOUT AND DISPLAYS

3.0 Introduction

Many VICs have distinctive designs that reflect the character, landscape, climate or key features/attractions of the local regions (Pearce 1991). Not only does the overall appearance of VICs vary from place to place, so too do key elements such as size, style, exhibit space, layout and function. This means that unless they are repeat visitors, most people entering your centre won't be familiar with your centre's layout. This can be quite intimidating and confusing – if your counters and displays are not clearly labelled, they may simply walk straight back out!

This chapter discusses design and placement issues that will help you to create welcoming and functional spaces. It places particular emphasis on directional signs, information centre layout, interpretive signs and exhibits.

3.1 Outdoor Directional Signs

Although blending in with surroundings is important, VICs do need to be visible and clearly signed if they are to attract custom. This is important as research has revealed that the majority of visitors do not specifically plan to visit centres when preparing their itinerary. For example, Fallon and Kriwoken's (2002) study of the Strahan VIC, Tasmania, found that 70% of visitors discovered the centre on their arrival (i.e., they had not located it on a map and planned to visit prior to arriving in the town). If it had not been clearly signed and visible, many may not have noticed it at all.

Consider your own information centre. Is it centrally located and clearly visible or is it hidden by other buildings, signs and/or vegetation? Do signs clearly indicate its location or have these been obscured, as in Figure 3.1?



Figure 3.1: Signs need to be visible if you want to attract visitors

(Source: Port Fairy, Vic)

Alternatively, does your centre fall into the same category as the Royal National Park visitor centre in Sydney which was designed to have minimal impact both visually and physically. Located away from where visitors tend to congregate, the centre was poorly used and eventually had to be replaced by a more centrally placed one (Beckman 1991). Similar problems are evident at the Mt Coot-tha Botanic Gardens in Brisbane, where the visitor information booth is located behind a large bush at the opposite end of the car park to the restaurant and café. Most visitors enter the gardens through the café, failing to notice the small sign to the information booth until they exit the gardens. These examples reinforce the importance of signage, visibility and access – it is unlikely that visitors will use facilities if they are well hidden or difficult to get to.

Thought for the day

‘Signage is one of those things you only notice when it doesn’t work. If you can find your way through an area that is new to you quickly and without stress, you’re unlikely to comment on the effectiveness and style of the signage. But if the reverse is true, it makes for an infuriating and frustrating experience that has people cursing a lack of information’.

(Lorenz 2004, p.18)

If your centre is a challenge to find – don’t despair! A series of well-placed directional signs should help visitors locate your facility and ensure you attract passing traffic. In essence, these directional signs should act as pre-arrival markers that highlight the easiest route to your centre (Findlay & Southwell 2004). Many VICs use a tiered approach whereby advance warning sign/s are placed 10-30 km from the centre, followed by signs at key intersections and signage at the entrance (Tourism Tasmania 2002).

All too often though, signs are poorly placed and fail to give visitors ample warning or clear directions. If you're wondering about the visibility of signs to your VIC, drive or walk along the main access routes imagining you're a first-time visitor. How well do your signs meet the following conditions?

- Clearly visible in a range of weather conditions (brilliant sunshine, rain and fog).
- Clearly visible, even in heavy traffic.
- Stand out from surrounding vegetation, signs and/or cityscape.
- Comprise lettering that is easy to read from a distance.
- Provide ample warning, particularly if your entrance is off a major highway where drivers are likely to be travelling at speed.
- Are located at intersections where drivers make navigational decisions.
- Are regularly cleaned and maintained.

Signs that clearly depict where visitors are in relation to other points of interest in the region are also much appreciated by travellers (Pringle 1999). A good example of this is presented in Figure 3.2.



Figure 3.2: Good orientation maps show where visitors are in relation to other points of interest
(Source: Port Campbell National Park, Vic)

The outdoor map in Figure 3.3 is also very effective and is permanently fixed to the side of the VIC to provide visitors with navigational information outside opening hours.

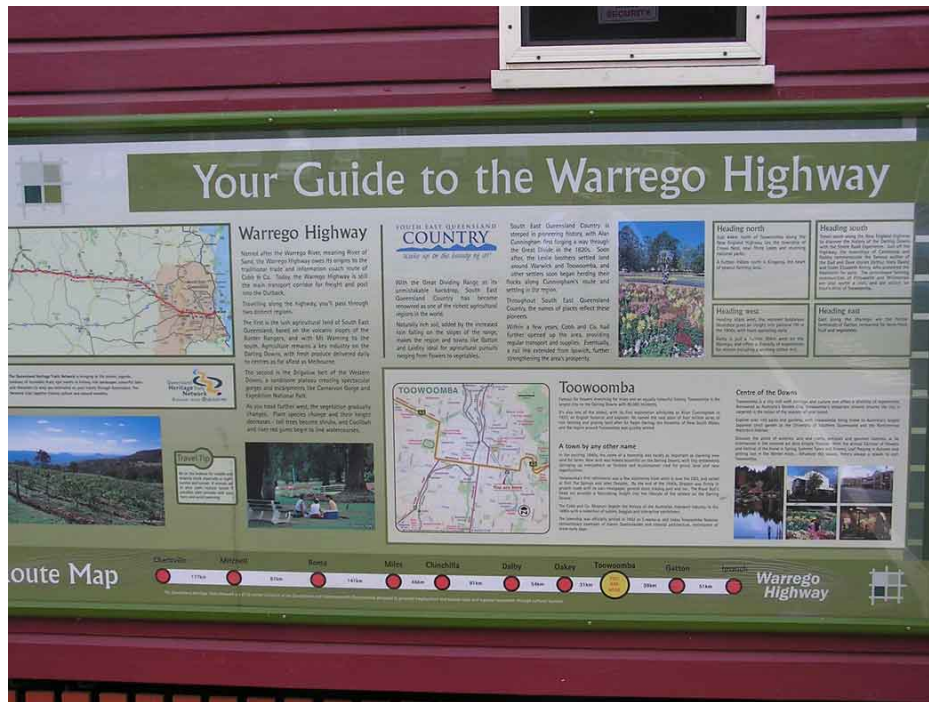


Figure 3.3: Regional maps should feature major routes, distances and points of interest
 (Source: Toowoomba Visitor Information Centre, Qld)

As well as signs, you could consider installing outdoor features to attract attention to your centre. These could include gardens, artefacts (e.g., farming equipment, historic buildings), sculpture and other works of art. Make sure these are relevant to your region; however, otherwise they may be seen as ‘gimmicky’. Figure 3.4 depicts a large dinosaur model outside the ‘Kronosaurus Korner’ VIC in Richmond, Queensland. The centre includes an interpretive display on dinosaurs and is located in a region where many fossilised dinosaurs have been found. Staff comment that the dinosaur attracts considerable attention from passers by and is the main reason visitors stop at the centre.



Figure 3.4: Using an icon of the local area to attract attention
 (Source: ‘Kronosaurus Korner’, Richmond, Qld)

3.2 Orientation Signs

Providing orientation signs at or near the entrance that clearly outline where particular information or services are located is invaluable for putting visitors at ease. If your centre is reasonably large, consider including a floor plan to graphically illustrate where facilities and services such as tour bookings, maps, brochures, touch screens, cafeterias and restrooms are located. Place orientation signs where visitors naturally congregate when they come into your centre, though avoid just inside the doorway, as the last thing you want is a bottle neck or traffic jam in the entrance. This applies for all sign placement – there needs to be sufficient space to comfortably accommodate readers while still allowing others to get past.

Another thing to keep in mind when locating signs is visibility – it sounds obvious, but signs should be placed where visitors are most likely to see them. An easy way to work out where visitors go and what they look at is to identify patterns of wear and tear. Worn carpets in front of displays and signs, finger and nose prints on glass, well worn paths and/or patches in lawns all indicate which of your features are attracting attention. These spots are the ideal location for signs.

Tip: Signs located near the entrance will attract the most attention - if you have important messages, place them here!

In addition to pointing visitors in the right direction, orientation signs assist visitors who are constrained by the time they have available. Visitors don't usually spend a long time in information centres. Fallon and Kriwoken's (2002) survey of visitors in the Strahan Visitor Centre, Tasmania, showed that most visitors (69%) spent less than 15 minutes at the site. Likewise, Hobbin (1999) found that the majority (70%) of the 364 visitors surveyed in four Queensland information centres were there for fifteen minutes or less. These findings highlight the importance of clearly labelling and arranging information so that it is easy to find.

The issue of time also applies to how long visitors have to explore the region, as many studies suggest time constraints have a substantial influence on visitors' choice of activities and attractions. This issue is addressed further in Chapter 4 in the section 'dealing with a variety of visitors'.

3.3 Interpretive Signs and Exhibits

Many VICs have interpretive signs and displays that feature attractions in the local region. Interpretive signs and exhibits use stories and messages to give visitors an understanding and appreciation of important places, objects or events. They can be used to inform visitors about topics such as buildings, historic figures, flora, fauna, ecosystems, artefacts, cultural practices and beliefs, industries, activities, historic periods and local events. Creative interpretation enhances the quality of visitor experiences and can also encourage visitors to spend longer exploring a region.

Before delving into the qualities of effective interpretation, consider Figure 3.5 – would the advantages of installing signs and exhibits at your centre outweigh the 'costs'? If your answer is 'yes' or 'maybe', read on.....

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can provide information when staff are busy serving other customers • Can be used by large groups of visitors • Can be used to provide answers to commonly-asked questions • Can be used in just about any setting • Can be placed outside the VIC to provide after-hours information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cannot be easily changed • Cannot answer questions or adapt information to specific visitors • Must be concise and to the point therefore may not be suitable for complex messages • Need to be maintained on a regular basis

Figure 3.5: The pros and cons of interpretive signs and exhibits

(Source: Moscardo, Ballantyne & Hughes 2007)

Regardless of the topic, there are **six basic principles** for effective interpretation:

1. Interpretation should make a personal connection with, or be relevant to, the intended audience.

Well-designed interpretive signs and exhibits have clear, simple explanations that bridge the gap between new information and visitors' existing knowledge and experiences. Some simple ways of making personal connections include:

- Using humour, analogies and metaphors to build links between information and visitors' everyday experiences.
- Answering questions commonly asked by visitors - what is this, what is it used for, who uses it and why is it here?
- Telling stories, particularly those with characters to whom visitors can relate.
- Providing visitors with opportunities to interact, participate and make choices about their interpretive experiences.

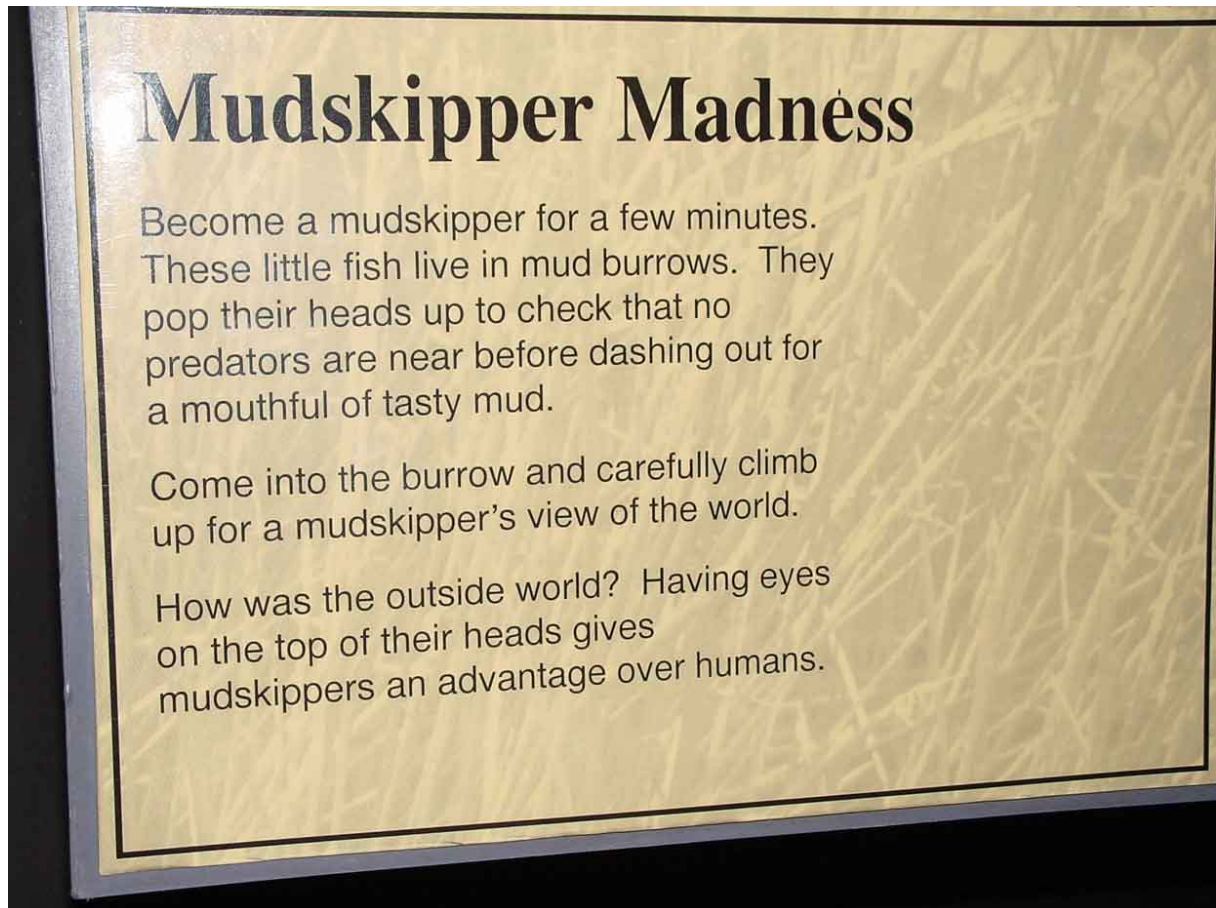
Let's assume your VIC is located near a rainforest and you want to design a display on forest nightlife. Different interpretive techniques can be used to provide visitors with an understanding of various forest inhabitants, as is illustrated in Figure 3.6.

Humour	How does something so small make so much noise?!
Analogy	Possums sleep all day and party all night – just like teenagers!
Metaphor	Possums: Furry raiders of the compost heap
Stories	Peter the Possum wakes up every day just as the sun goes down. He yawns, stretches and puts on his hob nailed boots.....
Interact	Select things from this plate that you think would be part of Peter's natural diet. Look underneath – if there's a picture of a possum underneath, you're correct!
Apply new knowledge	If you don't want to share your garden with possums, think very carefully about the trees you're planting!
Questions	How does a young possum stay on its mother's back without falling off?

Figure 3.6: Using personal connections to interpret possums

2. Interpretation should provide novel and varied experiences.

A common technique for providing varied experiences is to design exhibits and signs that incorporate different media such as audiovisual presentations, models, computers, music and interactive displays. You can also introduce variety by supplementing exhibits with entertaining activities and games such as quizzes, treasure hunts and craft workshops. Try to incorporate an element of fun – visitors will *want* to look at your signs and exhibits if they are quirky, engaging and entertaining – see Figure 3.7.



Figures 3.7: Use interactive signs and displays to get visitors involved

(Source: Windows on the Wetlands, NT)

3. Interpretation should be organised with clear, easy to follow structures.

Good interpretive signs contain a title and are divided into sections by subheadings. Aim for titles that are eye-catching, interesting and thought-provoking, but not trite, clichéd or full of jargon (Dean 1994). The title in Figure 3.8 is virtually impossible to ignore.

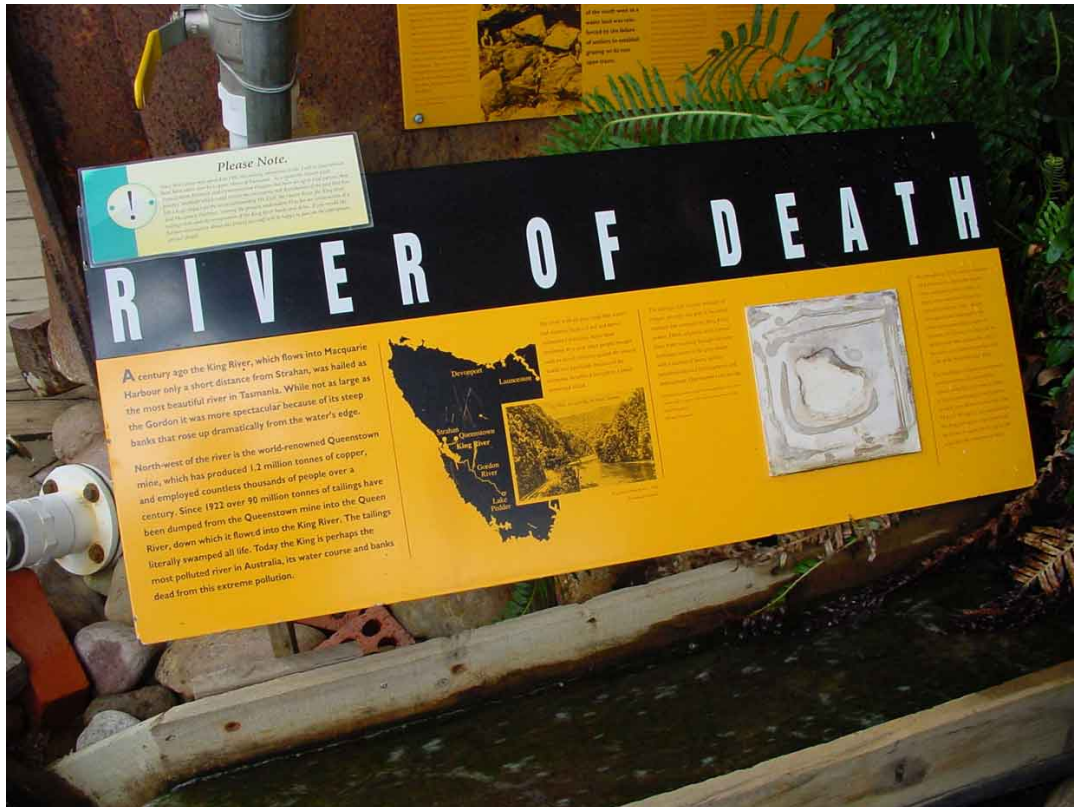


Figure 3.8: Provocative titles attract attention

(Source: Strahan Visitor Information Centre, Tas)

Some examples of how to develop eye-catching titles are presented in Figure 3.9 – note how the improved versions use questions, word plays and alliteration to add interest and attract attention.

Original	Improved version
Life one hundred years ago	Let's go back to 1907 - what would <i>you</i> miss most?
Water's role in the Earth's survival	Water: The key to life on earth
Outback Australia	Sheep, sheds and sheilas: Life in the Australian outback
Fire was an important tool for early man	Home is where the hearth is
Flying foxes spend all night looking for food	Now that's hungry! Flying foxes can fly 100 km a night looking for food

Figure 3.9: Examples of eye-catching titles

Once you have developed a title that clearly states your theme, divide your text into sections using headings and subheadings.

Clear organisation not only applies to individual signs but to the exhibit area as a whole. If your site or exhibit area has a structured one-way system or you have several signs and/or exhibit panels that need to be viewed in a set order, make sure you place an orientation sign at the beginning to tell visitors this.

4. Interpretation should be based on a theme.

Themes provide visitors with the ‘big picture’ by helping them understand and connect different elements of their visit. According to Ham (2003), individual facts are relatively unimportant – it’s the theme or underlying idea that you need to get across to visitors. To do this, your themes need to be strong, provocative and designed to ‘stick in the memory’ rather like catchy tunes. Several themes can be developed from a single topic – your choice depends on what messages or ideas you are trying to convey. We’ve included some examples of themes in Figure 3.10.

Topics/ Subjects	Themes
Books	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Popular fiction: An insight into the customs, language and issues of an era. • Books take you on a journey to another world! • This manuscript represents one monk’s entire life’s work.
Churches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The foundations of this church were laid when William was a baby yet he was a great grandfather before it was completed. • The stones that once formed the nave of this church now hold up the chimney in the Great Hall of Newbury Manor.
Frogs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frogs: They’re not as slimy as you might think! • Frogs tell us how healthy the environment is. • Frogs: nature’s opera singers!

Figure 3.10: Turning topics into interpretive themes

(Source: Moscardo et al. 2007)

5. Interpretation should engage visitors in the learning experience.

Research shows that visitors enjoy activities requiring some form of participation and that they are more likely to remember activities which have interactive elements (Caulton 1998; Hooper-Greenhill 1994). If you can, give visitors the opportunity to do something that makes the experience more meaningful – get them to smell, taste, feel, explore, lift, push and so on. You might also like to make available items such as binoculars and telescopes; field guides on local flora and fauna; photographs of local events, characters, natural attractions; and plant and animal specimens (see Figure 3.11).



Figure 3.11: Encourage visitors to use a variety of senses

(Source: Mt Coot-tha Botanical Gardens, Brisbane Qld)

6. Interpretation should demonstrate an understanding of, and respect for, the audience.

Visitors differ both from each other and from interpreters in many ways. While it is common practice to distinguish between visitors in terms of demographics such as age, sex and nationality, research indicates many other distinctions influence responses to interpretation. These include previous experience, motivation, activity preferences, membership of social groups and whether they visit in groups or alone. Your visitors are highly likely to be first time visitors to the region and centre, but what else are they interested in? What questions do they ask? If you document common questions in a book, you'll be able to identify common interests and use this to design signs and exhibits that appeal to a wide range of visitors. Another approach is to ask them directly, as is illustrated in Figure 3.12.



Figure 3.12: Ask visitors what additional information they require

(Source: Andy Warhol Exhibition, Vancouver, Canada)

3.4 Key Steps In Designing Interpretive Signs

Designing effective interpretive signs requires detailed planning and careful consideration of what you want visitors to understand. Some of the questions to ask in the initial design phase are:

What is special about this place, event or object?

The answer to this question could include animals, plants and other features of the natural environment such as spectacular mountains, waterfalls, escarpments and views; cultural traditions and celebrations; historic events; human stories; buildings; artefacts; and opportunities to participate in unusual or special activities such as diving with sharks or watching turtles hatch (Ham, Housego & Weiler 2005).

What are the visitor management issues?

This question is particularly pertinent for VICs that border national parks or other fragile resources – consider what it is you want visitors to do, where you want them to go, and how you can encourage and support this behaviour.

What are the constraints of the setting for interpretation?

This question relates to features such as extreme weather conditions, access, space and the presence of other users and services. In some cases these can be to your benefit. For example, if it's often cold, why not have a log fire and comfortable chairs to encourage people to spend more time in your centre – remember Figure 1.9?

Who is the audience?

To answer this you need to consider who makes up the bulk of your client base and what they are most interested in. If a substantial proportion of your visitors are families, you might like to design some children's activities to keep younger visitors occupied while adults access tourist information.

Suggestions for children's activities

- Labels, peep holes and tactile displays.
- Quizzes and puzzles.
- Passports with stamps for each attraction and VIC visited in a region.
- Children's discovery trails through the centre.
- Discovery trolleys.
- Children's corner with colouring sheets, jigsaws, picture books (refer back to Figure 1.2).

Below are some other design tricks for making your signs more attractive and legible:

- **Use large bold type for titles.**
- **Use colour or another means of contrast.**

Add three dimensional features

- Use questions, analogies or unexpected provocative statements.
- Write in type that is big enough to see.
- Use 40-65 characters per line.
- Write in short paragraphs and in clear expressive language.
- Use active verbs and use pronouns such as 'you', 'me', 'I' and 'we'
- Use illustrations, provided they are clear, relevant to the text and well-spaced.
- Use humour if appropriate:

WARNING!

Attention All Possums

Refuse all handouts from humans. They mean well but their food will make you slow and fat ... easy bait for feral animals. Revert to natural foods for your own survival. Do not accept human handouts.

(Adapted from Knudson, Cable & Beck 2003)

We have included a checklist at the end of this chapter to help you evaluate your current signs and exhibits, and to guide you in improving and/or developing new signs and displays. You could also look at our 'Interpretive signs' website which has a range of examples, exercises and photographs of interpretive signs and exhibits from around Australia. The site can be accessed free of charge at the following address – <http://www.talm.uq.edu.au/signage/>.

INTERPRETIVE SIGNS CHECKLIST

(Ballantyne & Hughes 2003)

1. Interpretive signs and exhibits are relevant to the intended audience:

- Have the main visitor group/s been identified?
- Have visitors' likely interests and needs been documented?
- Have visitors' previous experiences and knowledge been considered?
- Is the information relevant for the target audience? In particular, does it 'connect to' their previous knowledge and experiences?
- Does interpretation build on experiences visitors may have had at other sites/attractions in the area?
- Is the interpretation sensitive to the different social and cultural backgrounds of visitors?
- Does interpretation take into account the needs and limitations of 'special' groups (e.g., families and visitors with disabilities)?
- Could some visitors (e.g., children and those in wheelchairs) have difficulty accessing signage and/or interactive displays?
- Have metaphors, analogies and personal stories been used to present information?
- Has humour been used where appropriate?
- Are sentences short and easy to understand?
- Does the level of language match the reading ability of the target audience?

2. Interpretive signs and exhibits have themes:

- Has the major topic/s been identified?
- Have core themes/messages based on the topic/s been developed?
- Do core themes/ messages focus on the special/ rare/ different characteristics of the site or attraction?
- Are the themes/messages clearly stated?
- Are the themes/messages supported by stories and information?
- Are the core themes reiterated throughout the exhibit/site?
- Have local activities or events (e.g., festivals, workshops, bushwalks) that link to the themes/site been mentioned?

3. Interpretative signs and exhibits provide novel experiences and avoid repetition:

- Is the content interesting, surprising and/or thought provoking?
- Is the information presented accurate and up-to-date?
- Does the interpretation include a range of presentation techniques (e.g., flaps, models, quizzes, audio visual components)?
- Have movement, contrast, colour and/or extreme elements been incorporated into signage?
- Does the interpretation require visitors to use different senses (e.g., touch, smell, hearing)?

4. Interpretive signs and exhibits have clear, organised structures:

- Have catchy titles been used to attract visitors' attention?
- Is the content clearly organised into an introduction, body and conclusion?
- Does the introduction include clear explanations of central terms and concepts?
- Does the conclusion clearly reinforce the messages and concepts discussed?
- Does the conclusion suggest ways in which new information can be integrated into visitors' daily lives?

5. Interpretive signs and exhibits facilitate visitor involvement and choice:

- Does the interpretation encourage visitors to solve problems and/or make decisions?
- Do signs and displays ask visitors stimulating and appropriate questions?
- Does the content engage visitors' emotions?

6. Interpretive signs and exhibits respect the audience:

- Are signs written in 'layers'?
- Are there any sentences that could have double meanings or be interpreted in a manner not intended?

7. Additional design issues:

- Is the font and size of text easy to read?
- Is the text well spaced?
- Do the colours chosen for text, illustrations and background match the sign's content and tone?
- Do illustrations match and enhance the sign content?

- Are illustrations clear and easy to see?
- Does the placement of text and illustrations look balanced?
- Do the construction materials reflect the 'feel' of the sign/display content?
- Are the materials durable enough for the intended purpose?
- Have issues of maintenance, vandalism and longevity been considered?
- Are signs placed where visitors will see them (e.g., in direct line of vision, at natural stopping points)?
- If signs aren't directly in front of the attraction, are they within easy viewing distance and clearly matched to the feature/s being described?
- Is there enough space for people to view signage in comfort?
- Have seats been provided where appropriate?
- Has reflection from natural and artificial light been minimised?
- Are the colours used appropriate for the available lighting conditions?

Chapter 4

COMMON CHALLENGES: CREATIVE SOLUTIONS

4.0 Introduction

Our interviews with managers of 14 VICs across Queensland, Victoria and Northern Territory highlighted a number of challenges often faced by centres. Essentially, these can be grouped under the following headings:

- Lack of space.
- Events/tourism products that change from week to week.
- Difficulty in attracting first-time users.
- Wide variety of visitor interests and abilities.
- Answering requests relating to accommodation vacancies.
- Encouraging visitors to purchase merchandise.

This chapter presents suggestions and examples of how these issues can be addressed. Photographs are labelled to enable you to contact the VIC depicted if you wish to ask further questions or implement something similar in your centre.

4.1 Making Use of Small Spaces

Lack of space is a common problem experienced by VICs, particularly those housed in heritage buildings or rooms not originally designed as information centres. Many centres struggle to find sufficient space to aesthetically display the wide range of regional and local brochures, posters, maps and photographs available. If wall space is an issue in your centre, consider copying the approach used by Toowoomba VIC where a series of maps (State, regional and street maps) are placed on boards stored in a wooden 'pocket' built against the wall (see Figure 4.1) and rotated depending on travellers' needs.



Figure 4.1: Maps are stored in wall pockets

Source: Toowoomba Visitor Information Centre, Queensland.

Each map board has hooks on the back so it can be lifted out of the ‘pocket’ and hung on the wall. This enables staff to swap maps as needed and to trace routes through the city and region. Not only does this approach prevent maps becoming damaged from constant folding and unfolding, the actual wall space used is a fraction of what would be required to display all these maps separately.

This approach does not have to be limited to maps – you could use it to display posters on other topics such as local attractions, accommodation and events. These could be rotated in response to visitor enquiries (as with the map example above) or could be changed according to the weather, seasons and/or availability.

Another creative use of limited wall space is to place information in hanging display ‘pages’ (see Figure 4.2). These should be hung at comfortable adult reading height (which incidentally, also prevents small children banging them together as make-shift instruments).



Figure 4.2: Suspended poster pockets help to save wall space

(Source: Walpole Visitor Information Centre, WA)

Reading folders are another method of presenting a large volume of information in a small space. Brochures and fliers are displayed in plastic pockets and can quickly and easily be updated. Figure 4.3 shows a reading table specifically crafted to display reading folders and free newspapers.



Figure 4.3: Brochures and articles can be presented in reading folders to save space

(Source: Margaret River Visitor Information Centre, WA)

For many VICs, lack of space tends to result in cluttered display areas that can be difficult to keep tidy. How could the display in Figure 4.4 be improved?



Figure 4.4: Lack of space can result in cluttered brochure racks

One solution you may have come up with is to divide brochures into categories or themes as illustrated in Figure 4.5. Note that the brochure racks pictured are on wheels to allow reconfiguration of the space if required. Be careful with placement, however - too often racks are positioned just inside the entrance which forms a visual barrier and can create traffic jams.



Figure 4.5: Wheeled brochure racks – easy to adjust centre layout if more space required for displays, activities or access

(Source: Albany Visitor Information Centre, WA)

Essentially, the challenge is to ‘think outside the square’. Figure 4.6 shows how floor space has been used to display items of interest. Could your floors, decks or even ceilings be used to similar effect?



Figure 4.6: Glass covered recesses in the floor display models and specimens

(Source: Bowali Visitor Centre, Kakadu National Park, NT)

4.2 Advertising events/tourism products that change from week to week

Keeping visitors and staff informed of local events requires commitment to regularly updating signs and handouts. It’s usually best to have these in a format that can be changed with little effort, as demonstrated in the following examples. Figure 4.7 depicts white boards that are displayed above brochure racks to save space and attract attention. Each panel lifts out and can be updated at a moment’s notice. The added advantage of displaying these above head height is that ‘creative’ visitors will find it difficult to rub out letters to change the meaning of your signs.



Figure 4.7: Suspended white boards save space and allow regular updating of information
(Source: Busselton Visitor Information Centre, WA)

Blackboards are also commonly used to display event information. If you decide to use outdoor blackboards, place them in an area that is well protected from the elements to prevent rain ruining your artistic efforts. You may also need to check them regularly to ensure they are still legible and that they haven't been vandalised. The outdoor example in Figure 4.8 includes a phone number for the VIC and refers visitors to the centre's website for further information.



Figure 4.8: Blackboards are easy to update

(Source: Margaret River Visitor Information Centre, WA)

4.3 Attracting First-time Customers

Our survey results suggest there is a core group of visitors who regularly use VICs whenever they travel (60% of our sample). In fact, of the 407 visitors surveyed, only one was a first-time user. The overwhelming majority (387 respondents or 95% of our sample) were able to access the information, services or products they were seeking, suggesting a high level of satisfaction amongst current customers. The challenge for VICs, therefore, is how to attract those who have yet to make use of their services.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, careful placement of attractive signs and regional icons will also help to attract first-time users. When asked their opinion about attracting first time customers, many respondents (76 in total) felt more advertising through the internet and television, as well as prominent displays in airports, transit centres and accommodation venues would be beneficial. Other common suggestions were improving road signage (mentioned by 30 respondents); advertising the services of friendly, helpful staff (25 respondents); good access and location (mentioned by 14) and incentives such as discount vouchers (mentioned by 8).

Given the importance of the internet in pre-trip planning (used by 64% of respondents – see Table 4), the internet is likely to be an increasingly valuable resource for advertising the services and location of VICs. While there are currently a range of websites listing VICs, very few actually illustrate on maps where these are located. Does your centre have an internet ‘presence’ that clearly describes its location? If not, you may need to allocate some resources to rectifying this.

Travel guidebooks and magazines are also important planning resources and could be considered as possible outlets for advertising your centre.

Table 4: Sources of information used to plan trips

Source	Frequency	Percentage
Internet	257	64
Word of mouth	245	61
Books	185	46
Magazines	129	32
Television	90	23
Travel Agent	81	20

4.4 Appealing to a Variety of Visitor Needs, Interests and Abilities

Visitors come in a wide range of shapes and sizes – designing itineraries to accommodate a variety of interests, needs and physical abilities can be a real challenge. The task is even harder when visitors haven’t allowed enough time to fully experience the options available. How can you match visitors’ interests, abilities and time restriction in a way that maximises their enjoyment of your region?

One effective solution is to design an activity timeline to help visitors select appropriate activities for the time they have available. Figures 4.9 and 4.10 show one that focuses on short walks around Cradle Mountain in Tasmania. Duration of the activity, distances and safety precautions are provided for each walk.

This approach could be used for a range of activities, not just walks. Regardless of the topic, the procedure is the same:

- List popular visitor attractions in your region.
- For each, roughly estimate how long it takes people to visit the site (you may need to contact the site for this information). Don’t forget to include travel times if the attraction is remote.
- Design an activity timeline display that covers a range of timelines (hourly, half days, full days) and sites. If there are numerous sites and attractions, you might like to organise them into themes such as ‘getting in touch with nature’; ‘adrenaline rush’ or ‘family fun’.
- Include any relevant safety information (e.g., recommended footwear, suitability for young children).

Very short walks

Very short walks (20 minutes - 1 hour return)	Starts from	Distance	Track description	What you'll see	Suitable for...	Weather conditions			
						Fine	Change	Rain	Snow
Pencil Pine Falls and Rainforest Walk	Visitor Centre	500 m return	• Woodchip surface • (wheelchair can be borrowed from visitor centre)	Rainforest, waterfall	• Families • Moderately fit • Experienced	✓	✓	✓ with raincoat and sturdy footwear	✓ with raincoat and sturdy footwear
Waldheim Chalet and Waldenfers Forest	Waldheim	500 m return	• Minimal steps • Gravel underfoot	Old 18th pine, historic chalet, visitor displays	• Families • Moderately fit • Experienced	✓	✓	✓ with raincoat and sturdy footwear	✓ with raincoat and sturdy footwear
Dove Lake to GLACIER ROCK	Dove Lake carpark	200 m each way	• Gravel surface • Slight uphill • Well graded	View of Cradle Mountain	• Families • Moderately fit • Experienced	✓	✓	✓	✓
Dove Lake to heathland	Dove Lake carpark	200 m each way	• Gravel surface	View of Cradle Mountain, historic huts	• Families • Moderately fit • Experienced	✓	✓	✓	✓
Enchanted Walk	Next to bridge at national park entrance	1 km each way	• Dry underfoot • Minimal steps • Pathway off Cradle Mountain Lodge	Rainforest along creek	• Families • Moderately fit • Experienced	✓	✓	✓ with raincoat and sturdy footwear	✓ with raincoat and sturdy footwear
Kayvet Falls	Opposite Cradle Mountain Lodge	1 km each way	• Wooden walkways • Some steps • Handrails	Waterfall, rainforest	• Families • Moderately fit • Experienced	✓	✓	✓ with raincoat and sturdy footwear	✓
Lake Lilla	Dove Lake carpark	500 m each way	• Gravel surface • Some steps	Old id lake, view to plateau above	• Families • Moderately fit • Experienced	✓	✓	✓	✓

Cradle Mountain and Dove Lake from Suicide Rock

The Enchanted Walk, suitable for toddlers and to age 90+

The Rainforest Walk is just outside the back door of the visitor centre, suitable for everyone and wheelchair accessible

Suitable for...	Weather conditions			
	Fine	Change	Rain	Snow
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families Moderately fit Experienced 	✓	✓	✓ with raincoat and sturdy footwear	✓ with raincoat and sturdy footwear
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families Moderately fit Experienced 	✓	✓	✓ with raincoat and sturdy footwear	✓ with raincoat and sturdy footwear
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families Moderately fit Experienced 	✓	✓	✗	✗
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families Moderately fit Experienced 	✓	✓	✗	✗
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families Moderately fit Experienced 	✓	✓	✓ with raincoat and sturdy footwear	✓ with raincoat and sturdy footwear
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families 	✓	✓	✓	✗

Figures 4.9 and 4.10: Timeline of suggested activities

(Source: Cradle Mountain Visitor Centre, Tas)

If you lack the space or funding to display this information as a poster or sign, consider incorporating it into a simple handout.

Another creative way of appealing to diverse audiences is to design posters displaying activities available in your region. In Figure 4.11 the professional quality of the images attracts visitors' attention while captions provide information about the activities.






	<p>Deep sea fishing out of the Great Lakes area. Boat ramps at Forster & Tuncurry, also Tea Gardens and Hawks Nest. Beach launching is available at No.2 beach at Seal Rocks and Elizabeth Beach at Pacific Palms. Plenty of good Snapper grounds and plenty of rocky reef areas for those wishing to troll or live bait for Pelagic. Seal Rocks is the second most eastern point of NSW and one of the shorter areas to have access to the continental shelf.</p>
	<p>Swimming with the Dolphins. An experience of a lifetime. Forster has it's own unique pod of dolphins that have developed a relationship with Dolphin Watch Cruises. (the only licensed operators allowed to "swim with the dolphins") As they know and feel comfortable with the vessel, they choose to play with humans in their own environment. Learn & marvel about these fabulous marine mammals. Suitable for people of all ages with a thirst for adventure.</p>
	<p>Trail bike riding in state forests. For those wanting a bit of exhilaration in the wild. State Forests' roads and trails offer an outlet for you. Regular bike groups from far and wide use the forests for recreation. Maps of the area, showing trails and roads, are available from Visitor information centres at Forster, Bulahdelah, Pacific Palms and Tea Gardens.</p>
	<p>Kite surfing in the Great Lakes area is slowly becoming a popular sport for both the beginner or intermediate.</p> <p>Kite surfing schools, with individual instruction, are available in the Great Lakes area and are permitted on white soft sand and the shallows of Wallis Lake. An exciting experience for those wishing to indulge in this great exhilarating experience. (photos courtesy www.xshore.com.au photographer David Hardin)</p>
	<p>Body boarding is a great summer sport for both young and old. There are a great selection of beaches available for body boarders in the Great Lakes area. A great way for kiddies to start their surfing career.</p> <p>Body boards have another great use. Why not slide down the many sand hills in the Great lakes area, like the one at the end of 1 mile beach</p>

Figure 4.11: Poster displaying photographs and descriptions of activities in the local area

(Source: Bulahdelah Visitor Information Centre, NSW)

You might also like to design signs and displays that highlight the special or unique features of your town or region – people love trivia and little known facts. Perhaps you could have an outdoor blackboard with regularly changing facts or sayings – ask locals for their input if you're not sure where to start.

Topics with broad appeal

'Little known facts about this region'
'Famous people/events/inventions from this region'
Common local sayings and what they mean
'Best kept secrets' of this town

Another option is to ask visitors questions about your town and challenge them to find the answers. This can be informal, or incorporated into a treasure hunt with written clues. Take care to ensure that the 'answers' are structures such as buildings and signs not something that is likely to move or change. 'Skulduggery – the Game' invites travellers to tour the towns of Longford, Ross and Oatlands along the Tasmanian Heritage Highway to unravel three crimes committed in the 1830s. The pack (costing \$19.95) consists of three games and allows you to play detective to test your super sleuth skills, be a history buff or just enjoy hours of family fun and entertainment. Further information can be obtained by visiting the website [www.tasmaniacentral.tas.gov.au/webdata/miniSites/skulduggery/index.htm]. 'Treasure Hunt on Foot' packs are widely available throughout Britain and have proved very popular with both visitors and locals. These packs consist of written clues, maps and answers and provide a great source of revenue for individual centres (packs are sold for approximately \$7). For further information see www.hunfun.co.uk – note that access and safety issues are clearly marked on the pack (e.g., suitable for wheelchairs, prams etc.).

4.5 Answering Accommodation Queries

Although 'famils' enable staff to provide information about the type and quality of local accommodation, it is equally important to be able to advise visitors of accommodation vacancies. Some VICs have computerised accommodation booking systems, however, these are often costly to install and can require extensive training. An alternative is to introduce a non-automated system such as the one illustrated in Figure 4.12.

Toowoomba Accommodation Vacancies				
Properties with a tick have advised that they have vacancies				
HMAA QUEENSLAND	JUL	F	Sa	Su
		21	22	23
Allan Cunningham Motel		F	F	F
Ambassador on Ruthven Motor Inn		✓	✓	✓
Applegum Inn Motel				
Asters on James Motor Inn		✓	F	✓
Blue Violet Motor Inn				
Bridge Street Motor Inn		✓	F	✓
Bronco Motor Inn				
Burke & Wills		✓	✓	✓
City Motor Inn		✓	✓	✓
Clewley's Motel				
Clifford Gardens Motor Inn				
Clifford Park Holiday Motor Inn				
Coachman Motel				
Cotswold Motor Inn				
Country Gardens Motor Inn				
Downs Motel			F	F
Eastgate on the Range			✓	F
Federal Hotel/Motel				✓
Flying Spur Motel				

Figure 4.12: Accommodation whiteboard with vacancies marked
 (Source: Toowoomba Visitor Information Centre, Qld)

Accommodation venues are written on magnetic strips placed on the right hand side of the white board. As venues fill, staff write in 'F' under the appropriate date. The strengths of this system are that it is cheap, easy to update, and allows both staff and visitors to identify accommodation vacancies at a glance. The accommodation board is particularly useful during peak periods when demand for accommodation is high. The only real drawback is that information centres must rely on accommodation venues to contact them once they are fully booked.

4.6 Encouraging Visitors to Purchase Merchandise

Many VICs rely on sales of merchandise, souvenirs and refreshments to boost their income. While not the main reason that visitors use centres, purchasing merchandise and souvenirs is nevertheless an important part of visitors' travel experience (see Tables 2 and 3 in Chapter 2). The fact that many visitors also regard information centres as an opportunity to have a break from driving suggests there is potential to encourage them to spend time and money in your centre.

Generally, souvenirs and merchandise are bought as reminders of particular experiences or places. This suggests that visitors are likely to be interested in items that depict regional attractions or reflect the character or 'feel' of a place. While it is important to offer products in a range of prices, the quality should always remain high. Take a close look at your centre's merchandising and ask yourself the following questions:

- Are items locally sourced or at least made in Australia?
- Do items reflect the character of your town/region?
- Are there items depicting local attractions/icons?
- Will your product range appeal to visitors of different ages and backgrounds?
- Are items attractively displayed?
- Is there a common theme linking display areas (colours, 'beach feel', outback etc.)?
- Are items reasonably priced?
- Would *you* buy the products you're trying to sell?

If the answer to any of these is 'no', you may need to revise your merchandising strategies. The remainder of this section illustrates some 'best practice' retail areas from VICs across Australia – perhaps you could incorporate some of these ideas into your centre.



Figure 4.13: Displays of local produce with themed umbrella to attract attention

(Source: Pemberton Visitor Information Centre, WA)

Positioning a brightly coloured 'bee' umbrella above the display in Figure 4.13 attracts attention and signals that merchandise underneath is made from honey. The use of corrugated iron and wooden shelving help to reinforce the 'country' theme.

Figure 4.14 illustrates a VIC situated in the middle of the Margaret River wine region in Western Australia. The diffused lighting, décor, seating and displays create a welcoming atmosphere and give the impression of quality. Wines of the region are tastefully displayed and can be sampled and purchased. As well as local wines, the centre sells a range of locally made merchandise such as clothing, wooden chopping boards, books and souvenirs.



Figure 4.14: Using lighting, colour and décor to create a feeling of quality

(Source: Margaret River Visitor Information Centre, WA)

The displays illustrated in Figures 4.15 and 4.16 have a ‘summer/beach’ feel that reflect the character of the beachside towns in which they are located. The use of bright colours, brand names (such as ‘Out of the Blue’ and Very GC) and clean simple lines help reinforce the ‘beach’ theme. Note that products are practical and relate directly to beach activities (e.g., sunscreen, hats, towels, beach bags). Staff of the Coolangatta VIC report they have difficulty keeping up with demand for the VeryGC beach bags, which are popular with locals and visitors alike.



Figures 4.15 & 4.16: Merchandise should reflect the 'character' of your region
(Source: Cooloongatta Visitor Information Centre, Qld)

Chapter 5

CONDUCTING VISITOR RESEARCH

5.0 What Is Visitor Research?

It is well documented that VICs have the potential to play an important role in increasing the number of visitors to and within destinations. One of the key benefits of conducting evaluation is that it can help information centres determine their contribution to visitor yield within their area of operation (Deery et al. 2005). Despite the benefits of conducting comprehensive visitor research, it is often either disregarded completely (because it is seen as too time consuming or there are insufficient resources) or it is conducted on an 'ad-hoc' or irregular basis. As Ham and Weiler note (2005, p.iv), 'Although many organisations want to conduct good in-house evaluation, a number of factors have prevented them from doing so'.

Our interviews with VIC managers highlight the different approaches to visitor research and evaluation currently utilised. These approaches fall into three categories:

1. Informal evaluation.
2. Formal evaluation.
3. Visitor initiated evaluation.

VICs that rely on informal evaluation often document complaints and compliments by collating responses in visitor day books. Several centres require counter staff to record all transactions so they have a record of visitors' requests and comments. In most cases, comments and complaints are aired at staff gatherings and used to prompt discussion about ways in which centres could improve their approach to customer service.

Although several VICs distribute questionnaires to gauge visitor satisfaction, this is often on an ad-hoc basis. Questionnaires are displayed in visible locations around the centre (such as the front counter) and visitors choose whether or not to complete one. These questionnaires are generally reviewed prior to staff meetings, however, often no formal research process is followed, and little consideration is given to either sample size or visitor-demographic representation. Some VICs prefer an interview style approach to written comments, and assign a staff member to informally interview a random sample of visitors. The number of visitors approached and the type of questions asked are usually predetermined.

VICs that use formal evaluation generally employ the services of commercial companies or research specialists (such as university staff). These evaluations are usually undertaken at regular, defined intervals (such as every six months). Unlike informal methods, formal surveys require staff or external researchers to sample a pre-determined number of visitors. Formal evaluation utilises more robust research methods and therefore yields data that is more valid and reliable than the informal approach.

VICs that rely on visitor-initiated evaluation usually do not have a visitor research program in place. They do, however, record any verbal comments or complaints that are made to centre staff. These may or may not be discussed at staff meetings. This method of gauging visitor satisfaction is very informal and does not provide a reliable indication

of how the centre is performing. Managers relying on this form of approach generally prefer not to undertake visitor research or evaluation as they believe visitors do not have sufficient time to complete questionnaires or interviews.

5.1 Why Is Visitor Research and Evaluation Important?

Given the time and resources required to conduct research, you might be wondering whether the process is worth it. Some key reasons why you *should* consider visitor research and evaluation are that they can:

- Tell you what things work well, what doesn't and why.
- Indicate how well individual programs or initiatives are contributing to your overall goals.
- Help identify what your centre has done (or is doing).
- Ascertain whether your objectives are being met.
- Highlight areas where visitor service can be improved.
- Inform other initiatives currently being planned or developed.

Furthermore, as Ham and Weiler (2005) discuss, evaluation helps VICs assess the ability of staff to 'up-sell' tourism services and products such as accommodation, tourist attractions and tours.

The importance of conducting evaluation at all stages of design and implementation of any new service or product cannot be overstated. Evaluation is an essential aspect of any tourism activity or service provision and should be factored into business plans for both small and large VICs. Unless you conduct regular systematic evaluation, you run the risk of running your centre in a vacuum, without any clear idea of how visitor characteristics and your centre services interact to create positive visitor experiences.

It is true that visitor research can be costly and somewhat time-consuming, particularly if it involves interviews and observation (Hein 1998). However, as accountability and customer expectations are changing, so too are attitudes towards conducting research. These days an ever increasing number of visitor attractions are using a visitor-centred approach when designing exhibits, signs and interpretive activities (Screven 1999) and encouraging staff to focus on the needs, expectations and interests of their visitors (Caulton 1998). The decision to undertake visitor research reflects an attitude of commitment to both the product (what the VIC does) and the visitors (for whom the VIC exists). It indicates a commitment to reflective practice and willingness to review, revise and improve.

Research should run in parallel to the planning and implementation of new and existing initiatives/services. It should become part of a continual development process by providing feedback about progress, encouraging reflection about outcomes and providing a basis for considering future strategies.

5.2 Evaluation Versus Visitor Studies: Is there a difference?

While evaluation and visitor research often use similar methodologies, the two processes have different intentions and answer different questions. Evaluation asks visitors to judge the value or effectiveness of something. In the VIC context, evaluation is used to determine the effectiveness of services, facilities and information provision against some form of predetermined criteria. Visitor research, on the other hand, focuses on the identification of visitor trends, patterns and relationships. It is often used to identify particular groups of visitors and audiences as well as clarify patterns of participation or use (Scott 1995). Reliable identification of a major trend in visitors requires a statistically valid sample size, therefore visitor research generally requires a larger sample size than evaluation.

Visitor research can provide a general overview of existing clients, who they are, where they come from, how often they use information centres, why they visit and their general level of satisfaction. Visitor research does, however, have limitations. Because it is usually conducted as an exit survey, the number of questions that can be asked and the survey format tend to be limited as visitors are usually in a hurry. Exit surveys also tend to employ 'closed-response' type questions (simple Yes, No or tick box responses) with few in-depth (qualitative) questions. These items allow gross trends and patterns to be identified but some of the finer patterns between visitors cannot be explored (Scott 1995). Finally, costs usually prohibit their delivery in more than one language, which excludes the participation of many visitors with limited or no English. As a consequence, visitor profiles can be biased.

There are many research specialists (e.g., marketing consultants, university staff) who can help you design and implement a research program. As our interviews with VIC managers indicate, several centres choose to employ consultants to undertake the research on their behalf. The advantages of employing professional, experienced research consultants are: first, it frees up centre staff for other duties; second, it ensures information collected is valid and reliable; and third, results are statistically analysed and interpreted.

If, however, you decide to keep research in-house, this guide will provide the basic information you need to get started. It can be used to design and conduct your own surveys or as a basis for putting together a brief for others to do the survey for you.

Those wanting more in-depth information about undertaking visitor research can consult a number of texts and websites that focus on research methods and questionnaire design. These include:

American Association of Museums (1999) *Introduction to Museum Evaluation: Resource Report.* / Committee on Audience Research & Evaluation (CARE)

Diamond, J. (1999) *Practical Evaluation Guide: Tools for Museums and Other Informal Educational Settings.* AltaMira Press / American Association for State and Local History

Ruane, J. (2005) *Essentials of research methods: a guide to social research.* Blackwell, Malden, Mass <http://www.randikorn.com/> (this website contains numerous resources for those undertaking audience research)

http://www.cc.gatech.edu/classes/cs6751_97_winter/Topics/quest-design/

<http://www.surveysystem.com/sdesign.htm>

The main steps in conducting visitor research or evaluation are discussed under the following headings:

- Developing a research plan.
- Designing your research instruments.
- Conducting your survey.
- Analysing the results.

5.3 Developing a Research Plan

Because surveys can be expensive and time-consuming, you need to be sure that a survey is necessary before you begin. You also need to be sure that you have adequate resources to complete the survey process.

Some questions you need to consider are: *

- What do you hope to learn from this survey? Is there some other way of answering these questions?
- Is there existing data on visitors and their needs elsewhere that could be relevant for your VIC's needs? Is there a regional or State level study that can provide the information you need?
- Over what period of time will the survey run? (A year, several months, several weeks, a few days?)
- Who will be responsible for undertaking the survey process? How will they be trained? Who will help them conduct surveys or distribute questionnaires?

If you decide to proceed with a survey, you will need to set out your aims or objectives. Examples of research objectives could include:

- To know more about visitor characteristics for marketing purposes.
- To evaluate how visitors view your service and what improvements they feel could be made.
- To identify the different types of visitors to your region (for example, business versus leisure visitors, overnight versus day trip visitors, international versus domestic visitors).
- To explore how visitors spend their time and money while in your region.
- To identify other regions and attractions commonly visited either before or after yours. This will help you to decide with whom you should collaborate for marketing, packaging and other purposes (e.g., working with other VICs in different regions/States, local retailers, artists or designers).

- Self administered survey conducted while at the VIC (most common method employed by VICs)
- Postal surveys, with or without short contact with visitors at your VIC
- Short face to face interviews with visitors at your VIC
- Short interviews over the telephone

Figure 5.1: Methods of collecting visitor data

* Adapted from Leones (1998)

5.4 Designing Your Research Instruments

The success of your research will often depend on how well your research tools are designed. For this reason, aim to collect as much information about your visitors as possible, not only their demographic details but also their motivations, needs and expectations. Developing questions that produce useful answers is not an easy task – take time at the beginning to carefully word, test and revise questions before implementing your research.

The guidelines below highlight some common problems and strategies to help overcome these.

5.4.1 Tips for writing successful questions

- Describe what units of measure are involved (hours, days, number of people, dollars, cents, percentages).
- Indicate the time period referred to, if appropriate (in the last week, month, year, five years).
- Describe the geographic area to be covered (for example, in this town, in this region, in this State).
- If appropriate, use standard census content and format for demographic questions (i.e. questions about age, income, education, race and ethnicity). This will allow you to compare responses from the survey to census data (for example, to examine the income level of visitors as compared to that of local residents).
- Include 'undecided', 'don't know', 'other' or 'none' as an option in questions as appropriate. This is important so that you can distinguish these responses from cases where visitors simply didn't bother to answer the question.
- If a question provides categories for responses, try to think of all possible responses and then group them. Make sure you include all categories needed to meet the objectives of your study.
- Always include 'other (please specify)' as an option when providing categories.
- Include some open-ended questions if possible. This allows visitors to respond in their own words rather than choosing a response from an existing list.
- Leave space at the end of the questionnaire for comments as these often provide valuable insights.
- Borrow well constructed questions from other surveys when appropriate. Some sample survey questions are included in Appendix B.
- To allow you to monitor for non-response bias, collect some demographic details such as place of origin, whether they are in the area on business or for leisure, how many days (and nights) they plan to stay in the area.

Once you have developed your draft questions, check that they:

- Are neutrally worded to avoid bias.
- Are short and concise.
- Ask only one thing at a time.
- Are easy to understand.
- Require simple responses.

- Relate to the survey objectives.
- Use specific, precise wording to avoid double meanings or misinterpretation.

5.4.2 Organising the questionnaire

Once your questions have been finalised, roughly group them together according to the following:

- Questions that use the same response category (e.g., excellent, good, fair, poor).
- Questions that are related in subject matter (e.g., group all demographic questions together, all questions relating to characteristics of this trip together, all visitor satisfaction questions together).

Although there are no hard and fast rules about sequencing questions, there are some approaches that work better than others, as listed below:

- Start with fairly simple and interesting questions – for example, visitors often enjoy talking about where they have been and where else they are going.
- Place the most important questions near the beginning to increase the chances of them being answered.
- End with easy questions such as demographic questions about age, education and income.
- Keep the survey as short as possible – people's willingness to respond will often depend on the number of pages they can see. Interviews, whether by phone or in person are best kept to less than 10 minutes to avoid respondent fatigue.
- Don't be tempted to compress your questionnaire to make it appear smaller (e.g., by using a smaller font size or photocopying your surveys double-sided). It will look more difficult and respondents may not see the reverse page.
- Eliminate questions that do not meet your objectives.
- Make sure that there are no redundant questions (i.e., questions that basically ask the same thing).
- Include a place on the questionnaire or interview sheet for a respondent identification number. You may also want to indicate date, time and place of distribution.

5.4.3 Writing instructions

There are five important pieces of information that need to be included in the instructions:

1. The purpose of the survey.
2. Who is conducting and administering the survey.
3. How respondent confidentiality is being protected (setting up a system to safeguard confidentiality is an important way to increase the likelihood of honest responses).
4. Whether or not there will be a follow-up questionnaire or any further contact.
5. Who the respondent can call or write to if they have questions, concerns or would like a copy of the survey results.

If your survey is being distributed by post, it is important to also personalise the cover letter or instruction sheet and clearly indicate when the survey should be returned (i.e., in two weeks or by a certain date).

Once you have written your instructions, ask the following:

- Is it clear which set of instructions accompany which questions? Have I used appropriate numbering, indentation etc.?
- Is it clear how the question should be answered (e.g., have I told respondents to write in an answer, check a response, circle a number)?
- Have I indicated whether I want the individual to respond for him or herself or for the entire visitor party?

5.5 Conducting Your Survey

Prior to using your survey instrument on the general public, we strongly recommend that you pilot test it with a small sample of people who are representative of the type of people you will be surveying. This can be friends, family, other staff or people coming in to your centre. Try to include a range of people as you're essentially testing it to see whether and how different groups respond. As an example, you might want to include people of different ages, different marital status, with or without children, different income and education levels, or from different locations, depending on the factors you think will affect an individual's ability and willingness to respond to the survey. If possible, time how long it takes for respondents to answer the questionnaire. One indication that a survey is too long is if many of the respondents don't complete the entire survey.

In the pilot-testing stage encourage respondents to make comments on things such as content, order and formatting of questions, and overall layout and presentation. As part of this process, take note of any questions that are frequently unanswered or are misunderstood and therefore answered incorrectly. These questions may be poorly worded, too difficult to answer, too sensitive or simply in the wrong place. Reword or rearrange these items and if you have time, try the survey again with a different sample of people.

5.5.1 Selecting your sample

There is no simple answer to the question of sample size. Ideally, you need the greatest number of survey responses that your time and budget will allow (Ham & Weiler 2005). As mentioned, try to recruit a wide range of visitors as this will increase the validity of your results (see Figure 5.1). Sample selection becomes even more important if you wish to compare what individuals from different groups of your visitors think (for example, overseas visitors compared to local day-trippers). Similarly, if you wish to compare visitors from off-season times with visitors from peak season, then you need to make sure that you collect enough surveys for your results to be valid.



Figure 5.2: Aim to recruit visitors from a range of demographic groups

(Source: Ballarat Visitor Information Centre, Vic)

Every survey (unless it is actually a census – a survey of the total population) is likely to have some form of bias or sampling error. Such errors can generally be reduced by increasing sample size. Larger numbers mean you can be more confident that the responses you receive are representative of what the majority of your visitors actually think. If conducting a simple visitor satisfaction survey (and if your survey is straightforward and relatively brief), a sample of 150 respondents is deemed acceptable (Deery et al. 2005). You might like to consider offering a small incentive or conducting a ‘lucky prize draw’ to encourage response – we’ve found complimentary lollipops and chocolates work particularly well!

For most statistical analysis, it is necessary to select a random sample. A sample is just a collection of people from the general population that you wish to learn something about. A sample for a visitor survey generally needs to be a randomly selected group from all of the visitors to your VIC. By random, we mean that selection is designed so that every member of the population has an equal chance of being selected.

Note: To avoid increasing the probability that people who remain longer in the centre are more likely to receive a survey, be consistent about when you approach visitors. This requires distributing surveys at a given time or place (e.g., as people enter, at the exit).

5.5.2 Training staff about how to approach visitors

If you have decided to use VIC staff to survey visitors, there will undoubtedly be some who are better suited to this task than others. Try to select individuals who:

- Have good communication skills (e.g., enunciate well, use language appropriate for interviewing visitors).
- Have good interpersonal relations skills.
- Are socially mature.
- Are friendly and outgoing.
- Are good at keeping conversations on track (particularly important if you are considering interviewing visitors).
- Are good independent workers with a strong work ethic.

Once you have recruited willing staff you will need to explain the aims and objectives of the research. This will include going through the survey instrument thoroughly to ensure staff understand the purpose of each question and the type of responses required. You should also show staff what records to keep and why these are important. Finally, procedures for selecting and approaching visitors should be clearly explained and the 'spiel' used to recruit potential respondents developed and practiced. As part of this process it is important to give staff the opportunity to practice recruiting 'dummy visitors' (e.g., friends, other staff members) before asking them to approach the general public.

Note: Most regions experience pronounced seasonal differences in visitation. To ensure you get a fully rounded picture of trends try to conduct your survey at different times over the course of a year.

5.6 Analysing the Results

A variety of software programs are available for data input and analysis. These include spreadsheet programs such as Microsoft Excel, or more sophisticated data analysis software such as the Statistical Program for the Social Sciences (SPSS) or SAS. The latter programs are commercially available but are expensive to purchase and require some degree of training and statistical knowledge.

Before entering all your survey responses, test the selected system with your pilot-test data to ensure the system will allow you to perform the analysis you require. Assuming the system selected is appropriate, enter survey data as soon as possible after it is collected. This will make any serious problems with the questionnaire apparent early and allow you to make adjustments accordingly. It is good practice to carefully check the data entered – for instance, randomly select a sample of surveys and have another person check that these have been correctly entered. This would not of course be possible for data that is entered directly into a computer from a face to face or telephone interview.

5.7 Communicating the Results and Recommendations

In the previous sections we covered the basic steps in designing a research project and collecting data. This final section covers how to do the last but extremely important step in the research process – reporting your research to others. A well organised report clearly describes what you have investigated, how your research was conducted, how the data was collected and analysed, and what was discovered as a result. The aim is to stimulate the interest of readers and thereby ensure your research results and recommendations are widely disseminated.

There are three main considerations you should keep in mind when writing up your research report:

1. The audience for whom the report is intended.
2. The story you want to tell within the report.
3. How the report should be formatted.

5.7.1 The audience^{*}

As you report your results, focus on who is likely to read the report. Ask yourself questions such as:

- Is my audience likely to want and/or understand technical detail?
- Will my audience require a detailed explanation of all research results?
- Would my audience prefer a simple summary of the research results?

The answers to these questions should guide the format, depth and style of your report.

5.7.2 The story

Every research project has at least one major story or theme. Finding the main focus of your research is one of the most difficult aspects of writing a report. The best way to find the theme of your research is to view your research from your audience's perspective. Try to identify what is important to your target audience and how they are likely to implement your findings. This will enable you to focus your report on what is important to your intended audience rather than what you yourself regard as the most important findings.

5.7.3 Formatting considerations

There are a number of ways you can report research results including formal reports, executive summaries, press releases, talks and presentations, workshops, seminars and on-line documents. How you format and present your research findings will largely depend on your intended audience. For example, a detailed industry report for your accreditation body will require a greater level of detail than a six-month snapshot of visitors to your VIC for your staff meetings.

If you decide to produce a written report, you would usually include the following:

- An executive summary with the highlights of the research.
- An introduction.
- The results presented in text, tables, and graphs.

^{*} Adapted from <http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/writeup.php>

- Conclusions and recommendations.
- Appendices with sampling methodology and analytical methods.
- An appendix with a copy of the survey instrument.

Once your report is written, make enough copies to share with local businesses currently interested in tourism, as well as those who may be enquiring about opportunities for tourism-related businesses in your region. It is also good practice to have extra copies available for key contacts outside your region (e.g., your accrediting body, State universities and tourism associations). You might also like to consider preparing a powerpoint presentation of main research findings.

Tips for Presenting Information

- Use graphics if they make the data easier to interpret
- Use tables to organise data
- Compare survey data to other data (e.g., you might compare visitor income to local income levels, or the age distribution of visitors compared to the national/regional age distribution)
- Compare the information between different types of visitors in your research (e.g., between day trip and overnight visitors or between business and leisure visitors)
- Highlight what you think are the main implications of your research for your centre and for the industry. For instance, if visitors consistently rate customer service in your information centre as low, suggest that there may be a need for customer service training amongst staff.

APPENDIX A: VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRE CASE STUDIES

The four case studies presented in this section illustrate some innovative and creative practices used by VICs across Australia. Each case study provides a brief description of the centre together with examples and photographs of what is currently being done to enhance visitors' travel experiences. The case studies are designed to showcase a variety of products and services, and to give you some examples of how to provide high-quality visitor experiences and support regional tourism and recreation businesses.

CASE STUDY ONE

Sydney Visitor Centres

Locations: The Rocks & Darling Harbour, Sydney, New South Wales

Number of paid staff: 16 full-time, 15 casuals

Number of volunteers: 0

Visitors per year: 1 million (600,000 at The Rocks; 400,000 at Darling Harbour)

Areas of excellence: Online, real-time booking service; visual displays; retail initiatives

The Sydney Visitor Centres are located in two of Sydney's most popular tourist areas – The Rocks and Darling Harbour. Both centres offer comprehensive visitor information services, which include providing visitors with details on tours, accommodation and entertainment in and around Sydney. Each centre offers an extensive selection of brochures, tourist guides and maps, souvenirs, giftware, phone cards and a range of special tour tickets and passes. Exclusive local merchandise is also available. In addition to providing information about Sydney, the VICs also provide travellers who want to see more of Australia with a range of maps and guide books to other Australian States.

Staff at the Sydney Visitor Centres have recently installed a state-of-the-art on-line accommodation and tour booking service available through the centre's websites. The booking system, 'Bookrite', offers customers, partners and travel businesses a valuable reservation tool and provides the information centres with significant revenue. The system also enables tour operators to receive real-time online bookings.



Sydney Visitor Centre online (real-time) booking system

In addition to developing a booking system, in 2005/06 both VICs underwent a ‘physical makeover’. Major changes were, in part, implemented as a direct result of in-depth visitor research. The following table presents a breakdown of some of the changes that were incorporated into the new centre design.

Changes implemented by Sydney Visitor Centres

Past	Present
Brochure racks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic categories appealing only to tourist markets • Tall racks not easily accessible 	Brochure racks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Categories with wider appeal – experiences, shopping, entertainment, responsible travel • Racks accessible to all
Mass produced souvenirs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Giftware ranges • Items to meet travellers’ needs • Items targeting lifestyle and leisure
Tour and accommodation booking service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trip planning • Itinerary building • Real-time reservations
Website information	Online bookings
Interpretive displays	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defining the destination by experiences in precincts • Web-based interactive information

One of the significant innovations developed by the VIC during this redevelopment was an information display known as the ‘Information Ribbon’. This is a 50 metre display that defines Sydney and surrounds using 14 precincts and regions (see the following images). It was designed as a promotional tool to create awareness of the diversity of experiences and attractions within the region. The Ribbon incorporates a range of images, information panels and brochure displays, including:

- Large photographic hero images and three activity images for each precinct and region.
- Text that showcases the Must See, Place to Stay and Events in each precinct and region.
- Brochure displays set out in colour-coded categories.

Other recently introduced initiatives include:

- Provision of high-speed internet terminals.
- More comfortable, Ottoman style seating.
- LCD screens for digital video advertising situated in entrances and at information and reservations counters.
- Separate information and reservation areas.
- New staff divisions to improve overall customer service, including a specialised reservation team who build and book personalised client itineraries.



Sydney Visitor Centre Information ribbon



Clear subject headings make finding information easier

The Sydney VICs have also developed a number of retail solutions, which allow visitors to sample a wide selection of locally produced arts and crafts. On-line shops linked to The Rocks and Darling Harbour websites offer branded merchandise for each precinct. The online shop also offers pre-arrival products such as maps and guidebooks to help customers plan their visit to Sydney and Australia.

CASE STUDY TWO

Toowoomba Visitor Information Centre

Location: James Street, Toowoomba

Number of paid staff: 1 full-time, 2 part-time

Number of volunteers: 65

Visitors per year: 85,000

Areas of excellence: Welcoming atmosphere, enthusiastic volunteers

Toowoomba VIC is located in a purpose-built Queenslander style building 2 km from the CBD. It has a carpark and is surrounded by well-manicured gardens and lawns. As visitors approach the entrance they encounter a large map illustrating major highways in the region (refer back to Figure 3.3). Adjacent to the front door there are noticeboards displaying information on local events, markets, attractions and interesting facts. There are also free Toowoomba maps for visitors to take after hours.



Outside displays provide tourist information after hours

The inside of the information centre is decorated with 'country' style furnishings in keeping with the rural region the centre services. Traditional materials such as wood and corrugated iron have been used to create a stylish and comfortable area. The centre is spacious yet has a cosy, welcoming atmosphere. Brochure racks are placed along the walls immediately inside the doors and are clearly labelled. The service counter is visible as visitors walk through the front door and is staffed at all times.

The walls of the information centre are adorned with changing displays relating to the local region. There is a wide range of local produce for sale (food, handicrafts, art), as well as maps and travel guide books on topics such as National Parks, heritage tours and camping/4WD holidays. Tables and chairs are available for visitors to use whilst perusing these resources or enjoying a complimentary tea or coffee. Some innovative features of the centre include:

- White boards that list local accommodation and vacancies. Accommodation venues listed email or fax the centre to advise of their accommodation status, and phone when they are fully booked (refer back to Figure 4.12).
- Aerial photographs of Toowoomba that illustrate growth and development over the last 20 years.
- Maps on wooden boards that can be hung on the hooks in the walls to answer visitors' questions (refer back to Figure 4.1).



Wooden floors and country furnishings create a welcoming atmosphere

The VIC has a waiting list of volunteers wishing to offer their services. This may be largely due to the camaraderie amongst volunteers. From our observations joking, teasing and laughing seem to be common forms of interaction amongst team members – this is definitely a fun place to work and a great social outing.

Practices employed by the centre to support the volunteer workforce and foster strong team spirit include:

- Regular forums to inform volunteers of topical issues (e.g., water restrictions, recycling and the Carnival of Flowers).
- An effective volunteer program that covers recruitment, training, support and recognition.
- Orientation & induction training programs.
- Annual operational refresher training.
- On-the-job supervision and coaching.
- Monthly newsletters.
- Briefings from new operators/event organisers.
- Monthly familiarisation visits.
- Operational Refresher sheets – following is an example.

TVIC Refresher Handout

Over the past weeks a few areas of our day-to-day operations are needing REFRESHER training – just to remind us of things we may not have done for a while, or changes we may not have caught up with. Please read the notes below, and have a chat to Lynne or I if you need clarification or wish to give us any feedback. Thanks!

Accommodation Brochures

Due to space limitations and operator confusion about whether their brochure should qualify to be displayed in the 'Toowoomba' or 'Nearby Area' sections, I have made the following decision:

Brochures for properties located:

- **Within** the Toowoomba City boundaries are displayed in the **Toowoomba Accommodation** section.
- **Outside** the Toowoomba City boundaries are display in the **Nearby Areas** section.

All properties are listed together under their property type on the Accommodation handout list. When assisting visitors in sourcing accommodation, please remember the brochures in the Nearby Areas section, especially for people seeking 'out of town' experiences with easy access to Toowoomba.

Tour Guides

Details of local Tour Guides – Sally Young & Barbara Osbourne are located under 'Tours' in the Transport folder.

Credit Card Vouchers

After imprinting the card, please tear off the top carbon sheet, then:

- 'Fill in' the **white voucher** (this will copy onto the yellow & green vouchers).
- Tear out the yellow voucher & give to customer.
- Keep the white & green vouchers – place in the cash register.

For amounts over **\$100**, please phone for an authorisation number:

- Authorisation Telephone number is located on sticker under the hand piece on each phone (1300 301 831).
- Follow the prompts (you will need to have the customer's card).
- Record the authorisation number on the white sales voucher.
- Remember to tick the card type (i.e. Visa, Bankcard or Mastercard).
- Always have another volunteer or staff member check the voucher, before finalising the sale.

CASE STUDY THREE

Window on the Wetlands Visitor Centre, Darwin

Location: 60 km from Darwin on the way to Kakadu National Park

Number of paid staff: 1 full-time, 1 part-time, 2 casual

Number of volunteers: 0

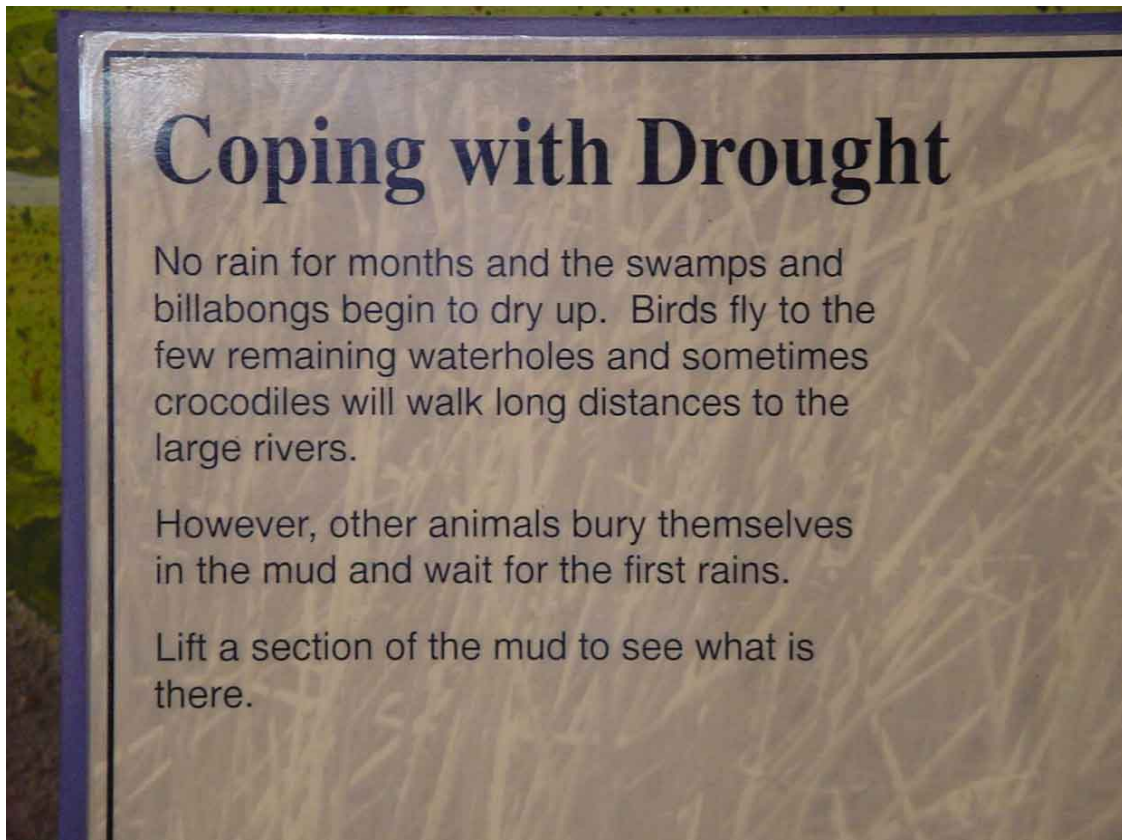
Visitors per year: 80,000

Areas of excellence: Interpretive signs and displays

The Window on the Wetlands visitor centre is perched on Beatrice Hill in the middle of the Adelaide River floodplain. This river is one of eight in the Top End with large floodplains in their catchments. Together their floodplains create an expanse of coastal wetlands that is one of the rarest and most threatened land systems in the world. The visitor centre is designed to provide visitors with an overview of this wetland area. Entry is free and the centre is open daily from 7.30am to 7.30pm.

The building itself is striking, with an upswept roofline that reflects the contours of surrounding hills. Information inside the visitor centre covers topics such as local wildlife, seasonal changes and problems associated with feral animals and weeds. Innovative interactive displays help to explain ecological processes that occur in the wetlands. Visitors are invited to examine evidence, touch or manipulate objects, listen to recordings of thunderstorms, slide and lift hinged panels to obtain answers, feel, smell, push - the range of interactive experiences is considerable given the small space available. Designers certainly took to heart the maxim that visitors retain 10% of what they hear; 30% of what they read; 50% of what they see; and 90% of what they do! See the following images for an example of the centre's interpretive displays.

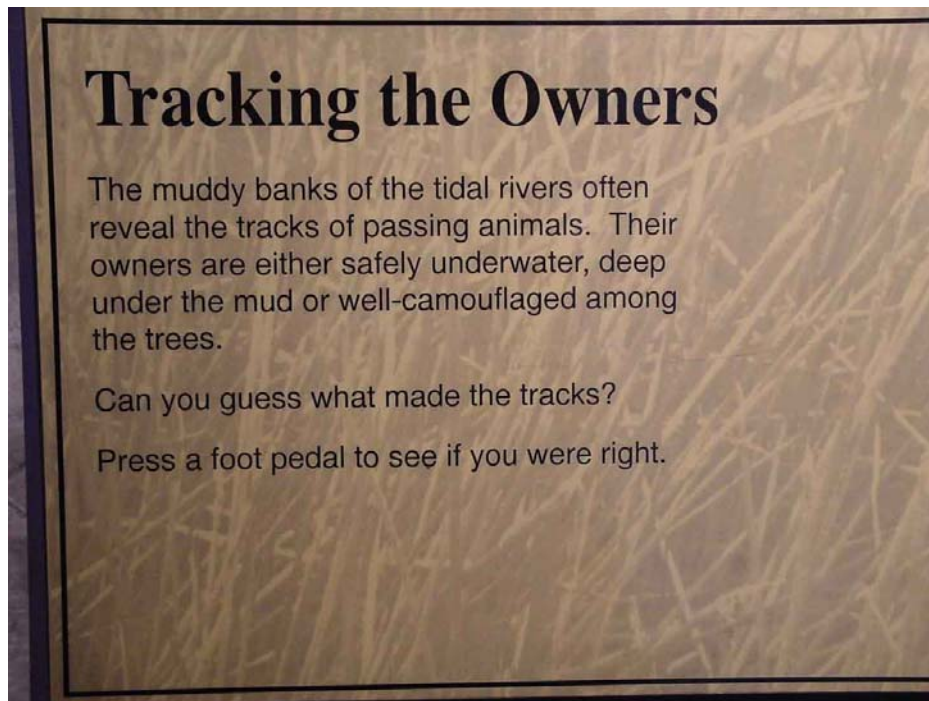
Interactive displays give visitors a 'feel' for the region





Windows on the Wetlands is a child-friendly centre, with many displays specifically designed to appeal to younger visitors. Exhibits and tactile items are displayed at 'child-friendly' heights accompanied by simple questions and instructions. There are also touch screen computers that allow visitors to find detailed information on various animal groups and on local Aboriginal and European history. Note how the example below encourages visitors to think before providing them with answers.

Signs and activities appeal to young and old alike



The visitor centre is popular with locals and visitors alike and is particularly suited to families and those with limited English language skills. Could you design similar interpretive experiences for visitors using your information centre? Perhaps you could challenge them to search for answers; to hear, smell and touch; to solve riddles and puzzles; to make comparisons and discoveries about your town and region.

CASE STUDY FOUR

Bendigo Visitor Information Centre

Location: Bendigo, Victoria

Visitors per year: More than 100,000

Area of excellence: Visitor surveys

The Bendigo Visitor Information & Interpretive Centre is located in one of Bendigo's most beautiful buildings, the former historic Post Office. There are three distinct areas to the Bendigo Visitor Centre:

1. Bendigo Visitor Information.
2. Bendigo Interpretive Centre.
3. Making A Nation Exhibition – the story of Federation.

The centre attracts a large number of visitors and it soon became obvious that a reliable method of accurately measuring the number of people seeking information on Bendigo and surrounding regions was needed. This need was also partly driven by the requirement of Tourism Alliance (formerly Country Victorian Tourism Council) to provide accurate statistics as part of the VIC and Better Business Accreditation Programs.

A review of existing door counting software applications revealed that although there were elements in each that were useful, none contained all the required elements. Consequently, a local software designer was asked to construct a custom-made automatic door counter that would be reliable and accurate. There was an added element of complexity to this brief – the VIC is located in a heritage building, which means all fittings need to be completely removable.

The software chosen was Door Navigator, which is an automated wireless system that feeds information from entry and exit sensors of the automatic door into a central database. The automated counter is simple yet effective and includes the following functions:

- Counts all visitors entering between 9am – 5pm (can be set to visitor centre opening hours).
- Counts ½ a person each time an entry or exit is made through the door.
- Records visitors through the door on an hourly basis.
- Automatically commences counting on a new day.
- Produces a daily report with hourly figures.
- Produces a monthly report with graph.

A sample printout from the system is presented below.

Door Navigator

© 2003-2007 Enterprise Robotics.

Door Count for:

Monday, 23 April 2007: 373

Last Entry/Exit through door:

Information Centre: **5:07:12 PM 302**

Interpretive Centre: **5:01:52 PM 71**

Hour	Info	(Joining)	Interp	TOTAL	Hour	Info	(Joining)	Interp	TOTAL
0 - 1					12 - 13	29		11.5	40.5
1 - 2					13 - 14	45		8.5	53.5
2 - 3					14 - 15	24.5		1	25.5
3 - 4					15 - 16	14		12	26
4 - 5					16 - 17	41		24	65
5 - 6					17 - 18	17		5	22
6 - 7					18 - 19				
7 - 8					19 - 20				
8 - 9	5.5			5.5	20 - 21				
9 - 10	24			24	21 - 22				
10 - 11	62			62	22 - 23				
11 - 12	40		9	49	23 - 24				

The information gathered from this system enables the visitor centre to determine visitation trends and also determine peak times where additional staff and volunteers are required. Currently the Bendigo VIC receives in excess of 100,000 visitors passing through its doors each year therefore ensuring adequate resourcing is vital.

In addition to Door Navigator, the visitor centre also commissioned the development of a software package to record visitor data and visitor inquiry information – Statistical Information Navigator. Whilst information collected is basic, it enables reports to be generated and is frequently used in the Bendigo Visitor Centre. It allows information to be collated on the following:

- Origin of visitors.
- Number of days visitors spend in Bendigo.
- Type of information visitors seek.
- How visitors find out about the VIC.

The system is very flexible and can be altered to collect the information the Bendigo VIC requires. This information is entered by volunteers after they have finished serving each visitor. The main advantage of using a local software developer is that they can tailor packages to meet the visitor centre's needs and continually improve and update technology. The next challenging step for the Bendigo VIC is to integrate the two systems chosen.

Statistical Information Input - Keyboard - [Statistical Information Input - Keyboard]

Date

Group Size

Days Stay

Enquiry Type

- Accommodation
- Attractions
- Tours
- Directions
- Maps
- Transport
- Special Events
- Souvenirs
- Brochures / Information
- Bookings
- Family History / Genology

Notes (Optional)

Home Region

- Local
- Melbourne
- Victoria Country
- NSW
- SA
- QLD
- WA
- NT
- TAS
- ACT
- OS
 - Japan
 - China
 - Asia - Other
 - USA
 - Great Britain
 - Germany
 - Scandinavia
 - Switzerland
 - Europe - Other
 - New Zealand

Information Source

- Friends etc
- TV Adverts
- Magazine
- Newspaper
- Brochure
- General Knowledge
- Driving Past
- Business
- None
- Other

Post Code (Optional)

Version 2.3.7 Copyright © 1996 - 2004 City of Greater Bendigo.

Data collected by the Statistical Information Navigator

APPENDIX B: SAMPLE SURVEY QUESTIONS

Dichotomous Questions

Dichotomous questions generally require 'yes/no' answers. An example is:

Have you used a visitor information centre before?

Yes

No

If you want information only about VIC users, you may want to ask this type of question to 'screen out' those who have never visited a VIC. Researchers use 'screening' questions to make sure that only those people they are interested in participate in the survey.

You may also want to use yes/no questions to separate people or branch into groups of regular and first-time users. Once separated, different questions can be asked of each of these groups. For instance, you may want to ask regular users how satisfied they are with your products and service in comparison to other centres, but ask first-time users why they don't usually use information centres. In essence, your questionnaire branches to become two different sets of questions.

Multiple Choice Questions

Multiple-choice questions consist of three or more exhaustive, mutually exclusive categories. Multiple choice questions can ask for single or multiple answers. For example, to find out how a person first heard about your VIC you could ask:

How did you first hear about this visitor information centre?

- a) Television**
- b) Radio**
- c) Newspaper**
- d) Magazine**
- e) Word-of-mouth**
- f) Internet**
- g) Other: Please Specify _____**

For this type of question it is important to include an 'other' category because there may be additional sources which you have overlooked.

Rating Scales

Rating scale questions require respondents to rate an item along a well-defined, evenly spaced continuum. Rating scales are often used to measure the direction and intensity of attitudes. The following is an example of a comparative rating scale question:

Which of the following best describes your experience in our visitor information centre?

Would you say that your experience was:

- Very pleasant**
- Somewhat pleasant**
- Neither pleasant nor unpleasant**
- Somewhat unpleasant**
- Very unpleasant**

Sometimes rating scale questions ask respondents to rate an item based upon a numbered scale (usually either a five or seven-point rating scale) that has two bi-polar adjectives at each end:

Would you say our staff were:

- (7) Very Helpful
- (6)
- (5)
- (4)
- (3)
- (2)
- (1) Very unhelpful

Notice that unlike the rating scale, the differential scale does not need to have a neutral or middle selection. A person must choose, to a certain extent, one or the other adjective.

Rank Order Scaling

Rank order scaling questions require respondents to rank services or products using a specific attribute or characteristic. This type of question could be used if you wanted to explore the priority visitors place on particular services. For example:

Please rank the following services/products according to how important they are in motivating you to use visitor information centres. Place a '1' next to the most important, a '2' next to one that is next most important, and so on. Remember, no services/products can have the same ranking:

- Maps
- Wide range of brochures
- Face-to-face interactions with locals
- Accommodation bookings
- Toilet facilities
- Refreshments

Open-Ended Questions

Open-ended questions seek to explore the qualitative, in-depth aspects of a particular topic or issue by giving respondents the chance to respond in detail. Although open-ended questions are important, they are time-consuming to complete and should not be over-used. An example of an open-ended question might be:

What products or services were you looking for that were not found in our visitor information centre?

Demographic Questions

Demographic questions are used to identify characteristics such as age, gender, income, race, geographic place of residence, number of children and are an integral part of any survey. Demographic questions can be used to help you to identify the difference between VIC users and non-users. For instance, demographic data might tell you that most of your clients come from interstate, are between the ages of 50 and 65, and have incomes between \$50,000 and \$75,000.

Demographic data helps you paint a more accurate picture of the group of persons you are trying to understand. By better understanding the type of people who use or are likely to use your services, you can allocate promotional resources to target this audience.

Survey questions used in VICs

Below are some examples of survey questions that have been used to gather data about people using VICs.

In general, when you go into an Information Centre what is the first thing you look for?
(Multiple choice question)

- A customer service person
- Maps
- Brochures
- Pictures of area and attractions
- Touch Screens
- Moving images
- Other (please name) _____

In which region do you live? *(Multiple choice question with instruction)*

- Local → go to question 5
- Intrastate
- Interstate
- International

How important are the physical surroundings within the visitor information centre to you?
(Single rating scale question)

Not Imp **Very Imp**

1 2 3 4 5

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following list of statements using the scale 1 to 7, where 1 represents *strongly disagree* and 7 represents *strongly agree*. *(Multiple rating scale question)*

	Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree		
I frequently visit friends and relatives	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I like to participate in exciting activities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I frequently go shopping.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

APPENDIX C: NEWSLETTER, TOOWOOMBA VIC

Volunteer News



Toowoomba Visitor Information Centre (Ph 4639 6055)

December 2006

Dear Volunteers

Thank you for sharing another wonderful year with us, and celebrating together at our Christmas Breakfast!

Reports seem to indicate that the pancakes with maple syrup & cream were the favourite indulgence!

Our Baby Photo Competition was extremely well supported – you were a bunch of cuties in those earlier days – and still are of course!!!

We had a number of correct entries, from which to draw our winners. Congratulations to:

- Sally Young – Wendland Olives voucher (Mon)
- Di Speers – Brindabella Nursery voucher (Tue)
- Vi Hives – Wendland Olives voucher (Wed)
- Edna McKeen – La Fresco voucher (Thu)
- Del Wagland – Pink Peppercorn voucher (Fri)
- Shirley Thallan – RM William Polo Bar dinner voucher (Sun)
- Vi Hives – Toowoomba Gourmet Markets hamper (Sun)

I wish to warmly thank Margot for her contribution to the photo competition, and Lynne for coordinating the finances & bookmark gifts - & reading the apt "The Week After Christmas" poem brought in by Doug Ryan.

We all WISH YOU A MERRY CHRISTMAS with your loved one, and look forward to you all returning safely for 2007!



Merry Christmas from Rudolph

Uniform Shirts

We are planning to place a VIC shirt order soon. If your shirt has become worn and you would like to replace it, please let Lynne know. We have a new design for ladies shirts – more fitted. There is a sample in Lynne's office.

Quiet Time Jobs

We ask all our volunteers to keep an eye on our brochure racks, and restock them as required (in between visitors). Thank you! As our quieter time of the year approaches (Dec/Jan), you may also be able to help with some other duties:

- Dust souvenirs & display shelves, & tidy souvenirs
- Clean kitchen (fridge, drawers, cupboards) etc.
- Restock 'Hand-outs' drawer, by photocopying more sheets
- Tidying counter area

Anything you can do to help keep our centre well stocked with information, and well presented is very much appreciated!!!!

January Roster

The roster for January is overleaf.

January Famil

Date: Thursday 18 January 2007
 Times: 9.00am – 1.00pm
 Transport: Coach
 Venue: Settlers Inn Coffee House & Crafts
 RM's Polo Bar & Bistro
 Abelle Apartment
 Boyce Gardens & Rainforest
 RSVP: By 10/01/07 (Famil sheet on counter)

Have a Happy Month!

Joanne, Lynne & Margot

JANUARY'S BIRTHDAY BOOK



Best Wishes to ~

Karen Grieve

Gail Linkerhof

Peter Sheridan

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GLOSSARY

Applied Research

Research undertaken with the intention of applying the results to some specific problem (such as studying the effects of different seasons on visitor numbers). One of the biggest differences between applied and basic research is that in applied work the research questions are most often determined, not by researchers, but by stakeholders, governing bodies or others who request assistance.

Bias

Any influence that distorts the results of a research study.

Categorical variable

A variable with discrete values (e.g. a person's gender or a person's marital status).

Central tendency

A measure of the typicality or centrality of a set of scores; the three main measures of central tendency are mean, median and mode.

Coding

A procedure for transforming raw data into a standardised format for data analysis purposes. Coding qualitative data involves identifying recurrent words, concepts or themes. In positivist research, coding involves attaching numerical values to categories.

Content analysis

A procedure for organising narrative, qualitative data into emerging themes and concepts.

Continuous variable

A variable that can take on an infinite range of values along a specific continuum (e.g. weight, height).

Descriptive statistics

Statistical methods used to describe or summarise data collected from a specific sample (e.g. mean, median, mode, range, standard deviation).

Frequency distribution

A visual display of numerical values ranging from the lowest to the highest, showing the number of times (frequency) each value occurs.

Inferential statistics

Statistics that allow a researcher to make inferences about whether relationships observed in a sample are likely to occur in the wider population from which that sample was drawn.

Informed consent

The process of obtaining voluntary participation of individuals in research based on a full understanding of the possible benefits and risks.

Interview

A method of data collection involving an interviewer asking questions of another person (a respondent) either face-to-face or over the telephone.

Interview (Structured)

The interviewer asks the respondents the same questions using an interview schedule – a formal instrument that specifies the precise wording and ordering of all the questions to be asked of each respondent.

Interview (Unstructured)

The researcher asks open-ended questions which give the respondent considerable freedom to talk freely on the topic and to influence the direction of the interview, since there is no predetermined plan about the specific information to be gathered from those being interviewed.

Likert scale

A method used to measure attitudes, which involves respondents indicating their degree of agreement or disagreement with a series of statements. Scores are summed to give a composite measure of attitudes.

Mean

A descriptive statistic used as a measure of central tendency. All scores in a set of scores are added together and divided by the number of subjects.

Median

A descriptive statistic used to measure central tendency. The median is the score/value that is exactly in the middle of a distribution (i.e. the value above which and below which 50% of the scores lie).

Mode

A descriptive statistic that is a measure of central tendency; it is the score/value that occurs most frequently in a distribution of scores.

Observation

A method of data collection in which data are gathered through visual observations.

Population

A well-defined group or set that has certain specified properties (e.g. all registered medical practitioners working full-time in Australia).

Qualitative data

Information gathered in narrative (non-numeric) form (e.g. a transcript of an unstructured interview).

Quantitative data

Information gathered in numeric form.

Random sampling

A process of selecting a sample whereby each member of the population has an equal chance of being included.

Range

A measure of variability indicating the difference between the highest and lowest values in a distribution of scores.

Reliability

Reliability is concerned with the consistency and dependability of a measuring instrument, i.e. it is an indication of the degree to which it gives the same answers over time, across similar groups and irrespective of who administers it. A reliable measuring instrument will always give the same result on different occasions assuming that what is being measured has not changed during the intervening period.

Research methodology

The science and art of planning procedures for conducting studies so as to get the most valid findings. Called 'design' for short. When designing a research study, one draws up a set of instructions for gathering evidence and for interpreting it.

Response rate

The proportion (percentage) of those invited to participate in a research study who actually do so.

Sampling

The process of selecting a subgroup of a population to represent the entire population. There are several different types of sampling (refer to research texts for further information).

Sampling bias

Distortion that occurs when a sample is not representative of the population from which it was drawn.

Statistical analysis

Most statistical analysis is based on the principle of gathering data from a sample of individuals and using those data to make inferences about the wider population from which the sample was drawn.

Survey research

A research approach designed to collect systematically descriptions of existing phenomena in order to describe or explain what is going on. Data is obtained through direct questioning of a sample of respondents.

Validity

In research terms, validity refers to the accuracy and truth of the data and findings that are produced. It refers to the concepts that are being investigated; the people or objects that are being studied; the methods by which data are collected; and the findings that are produced.

Variable

An attribute or characteristics of a person or an object that takes on different values (i.e. that varies) within the population under investigation (e.g. age, weight, pulse rate).

Visitors

Any persons travelling to or through a town or region and/or residents accessing the services of their local VIC.

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