

A NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON
**VISITOR
INFORMATION
SERVICING**





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IN SUMMARY

Australia has 453 accredited Visitor Information Centres (VICs) across the states and territories. These VICs service 12.9 million visitors annually. With the growing number of information touch points for travellers, the role of VICs in visitor information servicing must continue to evolve and adapt.

This report summarises insights from research, literature and success stories nationally and internationally. It provides a fresh view on the future of VICs and the priorities to remain competitive and relevant.

MISSION OF VICS

The travel decisions visitors make are heavily influenced by the information available to them. Accredited visitor information providers are consistently recognised in studies here and overseas as a key source for trusted, credible information in the destination.

The top five features that visitors look for in a visitor centre are:

1. Welcoming experience
2. Knowledgeable, professional staff, skilled in customer service
3. Unbiased, authoritative and tailored information (on and offline)
4. Validation of research found before and during the trip
5. Local stories and insights.

Delivering on these needs is the core objective of all accredited VICs across Australia.

Through the information shared and the skilful sales and advice provided in person and online, VICs in partnership with their Destination Network (DN), Regional Tourism Organisation (RTO) or Local Tourism Organisation (LTO) are inspiring and influencing visitors to maximise their travel experiences and contribute to a growing visitor economy.

OUR DIRECTION

Six strategic directions set the agenda for the national accredited VIC network. Each has a set of priorities for action.

1. Adopt a customer-focused approach
2. Position yourself to fish where the fish are
3. Integrate technology with face-to-face service
4. Embrace visitor servicing
5. Make visitor servicing everyone's business
6. Engender an effective network



INTRODUCTION

The number of visitors using accredited VICs across Australia remains relatively steady. This is a positive result when travellers are increasingly using digital media in their travel planning. In Australia and overseas, organisations are exploring visitor servicing, recognising everyone within the visitor economy has a role to play in engaging visitors. It is timely to revisit the role of VICs in the visitor economy in the future. In the context of tightening budgets and digital disruption, VICs are redefining how they engage with travellers and meet and exceed their expectations. They are exploring new ways to support their tourism industry and local communities in growing the visitor economy.

This paper distils the findings of national and international research and literature¹ and conversations with VICs and State Tourism Organisations (STOs) on the performance and future of VICs and shares success stories from across Australia.

Over the last decade extensive work creating new business models around visitor information servicing has occurred. The Australian Visitor Information Servicing Guidelines acknowledge that accredited VICs are far more than a 'bricks and mortar' information service housed in a central location. Staff and volunteers are increasingly delivering visitor information services in additional ways to meet the changing needs of visitors. The contemporary visitor servicing model includes pop-ups, mobile vehicles, touchscreens, roving ambassadors and online to extend the reach of bricks and mortar VICs.

The accredited VIC network comprises only those VICs whose primary purpose is visitor information servicing, and who are genuine providers of timely, accurate and impartial visitor information. These services are distinguished by the italicised yellow on blue 'i' symbol.



VALUE OF ACCREDITATION

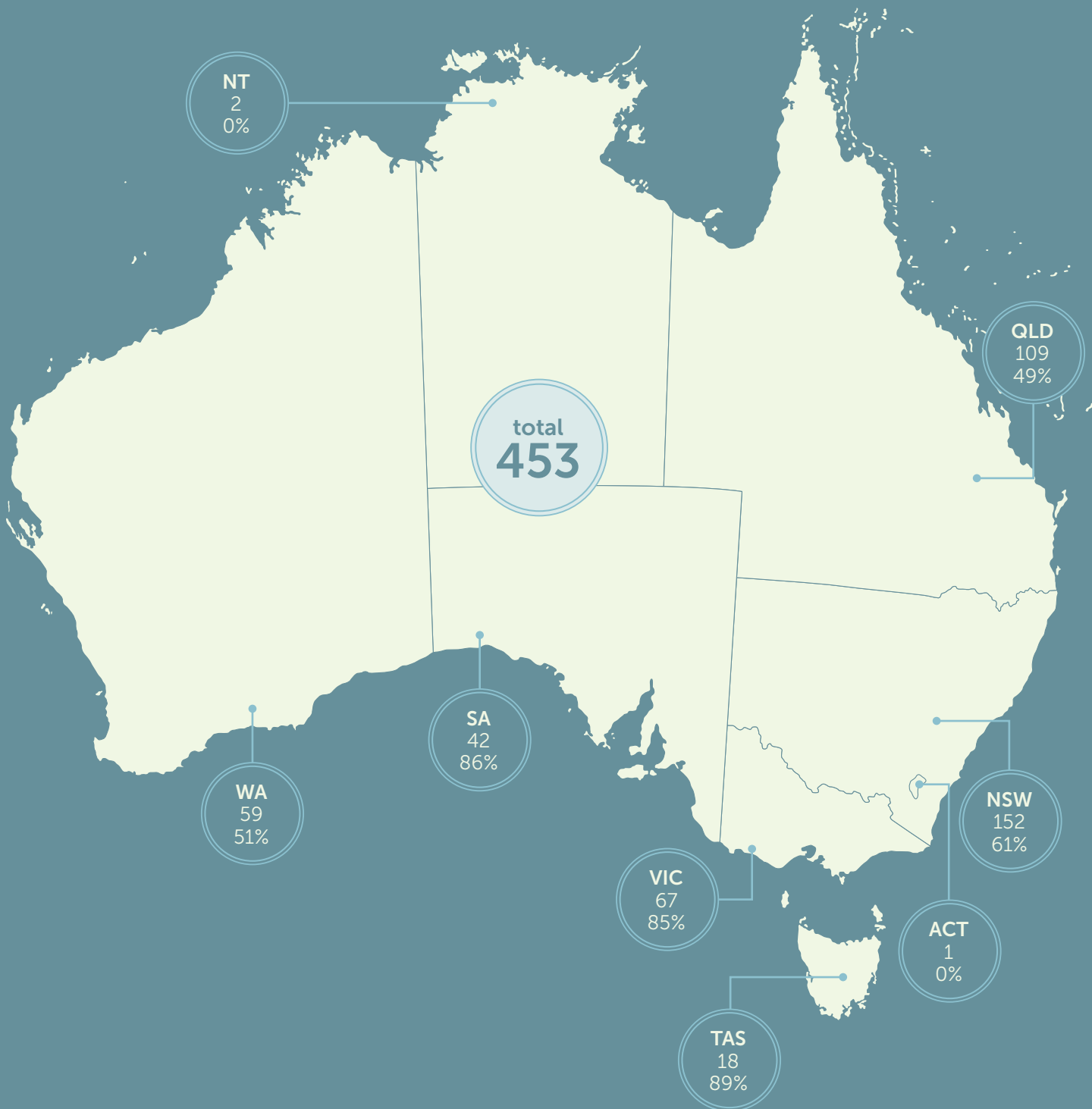
Accreditation provides accredited VIC owners access to the national brand and signage, state and federal funding opportunities, state tourism projects and marketing campaigns; and inclusion in maps, Australia Tourism Data Warehouse (ATDW) and printed collateral. VICs also gain entry to a nationwide network of centres and the collaborative opportunities that presents.

Accreditation fosters high standards in visitor servicing in the regions by ensuring the delivery of quality information and visitor facilities and the professional development of staff and volunteers. The high standards can offer peace of mind to visitors that they are receiving authoritative, local information to assist their travel planning. There is not this assurance for visitors using information services not linked to an accredited VIC.

The value of accreditation for VICs is determined by the benefits they and their stakeholders gain from the program. To maintain value, the accreditation model must evolve with changes in visitor servicing. The onus is on the accreditation program to ensure visitor information services fulfil visitor market needs and support the efforts of the tourism industry, local government and communities in growing the visitor economy.

¹ See References at end of document

CURRENT STATUS OF AUSTRALIA'S VICS

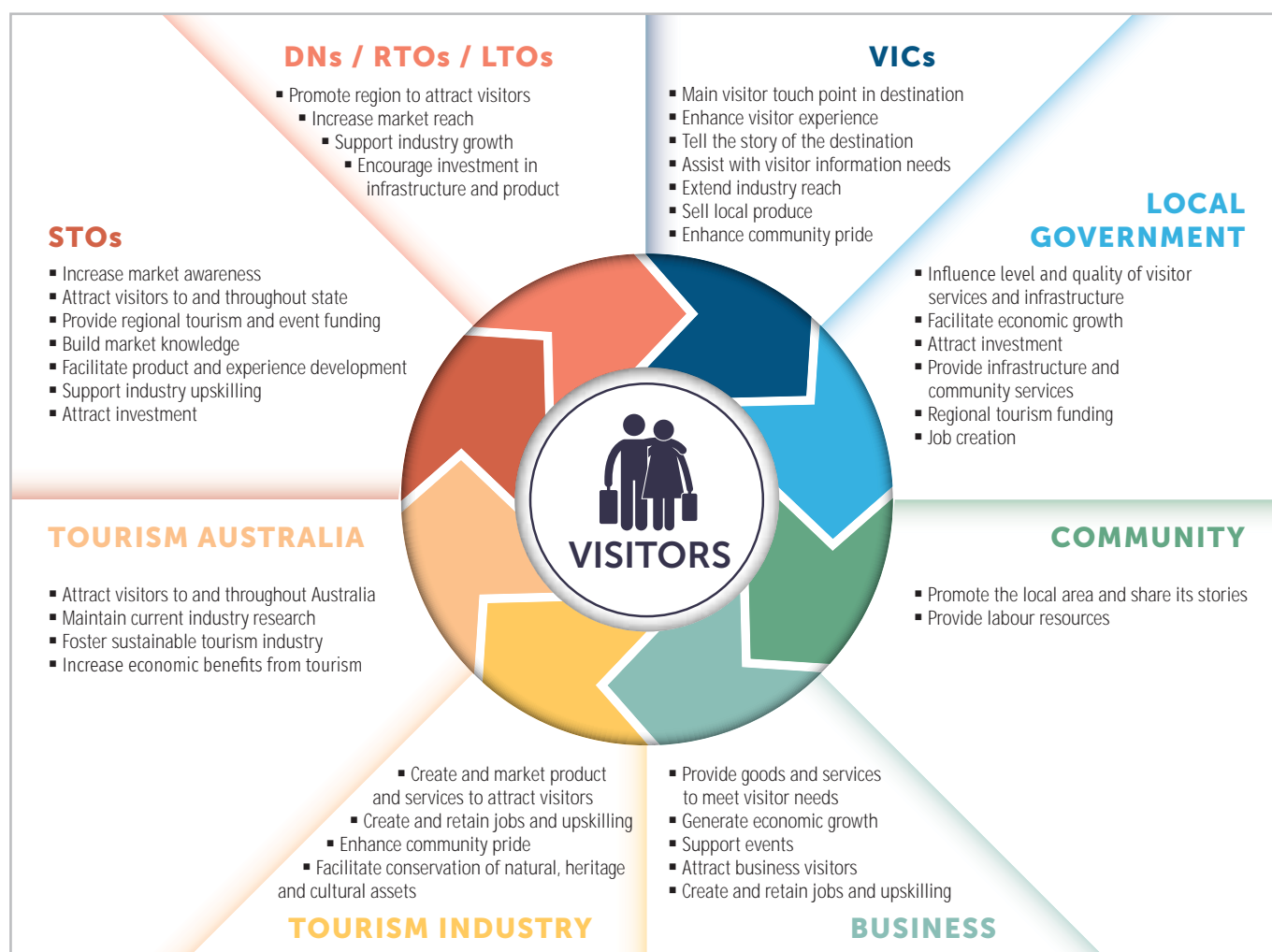


% represents level of LGA ownership and/or operation

VICS IN THE VISITOR ECONOMY

The visitor economy recognises that the benefits of visitor activity reach beyond industries that directly service visitors such as attractions, accommodation, tour companies and transport providers to retail, food production and service providers and other industries involved indirectly. The various stakeholders and their roles in growing the visitor economy are outlined in the following figure.

Visitor servicing that inspires and influences visitors is key to growing the visitor economy. Research continues to validate the role of VICs and the associated financial and social contributions they make to regional and state economies and communities and the creation of local jobs².



VISITATION TO VICS

At the centre of the visitor economy are visitors driving the tourism industry. The travel decisions visitors make are heavily influenced by the information available to them. Accredited visitor information providers are consistently recognised in studies here and overseas as a key source for trusted, credible information in the destination.

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4. Validation of research found before and during the trip
5. Local stories and insights.³

Delivering on these needs must be the core objective of all accredited VICs across Australia.

³ The Tourism Group, 2018, *The role of AVICs*; Haeberlin Consulting, 2014, *The future of visitor centres in WA*.

VISITATION TO VICS ACROSS AUSTRALIA



13.5 MILLION VISITORS
OR OVER 37,000 VISITORS/DAY
WENT TO A VIC IN THE LAST 12 MONTHS



% OF VISITORS WHO USE A VIC:

18.6%
INTERNATIONAL VISITORS

8.7%
DOMESTIC OVERNIGHT
INTERSTATE VISITORS

6.1%
DOMESTIC OVERNIGHT
INTRASTATE VISITORS

2.7%
DOMESTIC DAY TRIP VISITORS



4.4%
OF TOTAL VISITORS
WENT TO A VIC



NT AND TAS HAVE THE
HIGHEST PROPORTION
OF VISITORS USING A VIC



DOMESTIC
VISITORS
HAVE A GREATER
AWARENESS OF VICS THAN
INTERNATIONAL VISITORS

INTERNATIONAL
VISITORS
ARE MORE LIKELY THAN
DOMESTIC VISITORS TO USE A
VIC DURING THEIR STAY



DOMESTIC DAY TRIP
VISITORS ARE THE
LEAST LIKELY
TO VISIT A VIC



OVERALL SATISFACTION
WITH THE VISITOR
CENTRE EXPERIENCE
REMAINS HIGH



FIRST TIME VISITORS ARE
MORE LIKELY
TO USE A VIC

THE QUALITY
OF CUSTOMER
SERVICE
DELIVERED BY THE VIC
NETWORK WAS PERCEIVED
AS A KEY STRENGTH AND
DIFFERENTIATING FACTOR
RELATIVE TO OTHER
INFORMATION CHANNELS



KEY REASONS FOR
USING A VIC WERE:
EASE OF ACCESS
CREDIBILITY, AND
COMPREHENSIVENESS



ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION OF VICS TO AUSTRALIA



DIRECTLY EMPLOYING STAFF
AND VOLUNTEERS ACROSS AUSTRALIA:

APPROX 100 FTE &
600 VOLUNTEERS IN SA
2,647 VOLUNTEERS
& 375 STAFF IN QLD
200 STAFF, 200 CASUALS
& 548 VOLUNTEERS IN NSW



\$373M

SPENT ANNUALLY ON
VISITOR ECONOMY BY
LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

FACILITATE MILLIONS INTO LOCAL ECONOMIES:

\$117M INJECTED INTO WA'S ECONOMY,
CREATING MORE THAN 900 JOBS

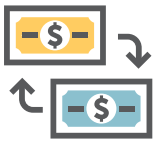
\$112M ON AVERAGE IN UNPLANNED
ECONOMIC SPEND P.A. IN SA

\$11.3M IN NSW AND OVER \$15M IN
QLD GENERATED IN GROSS ANNUAL
REVENUES FROM TOURISM PRODUCT
AND MERCHANDISE SALES ALONE



84%

OF VICTORIA VISITOR
INFORMATION SERVICE
(VIS) SURVEY RESPONDENTS
WOULD SPEND MORE IN THE
REGION AS A RESULT OF A VIS
VISIT



QUEENSLAND RECEIVES AN AVERAGE
REVENUE PER VISITOR
AT \$5.36 AND AVERAGE COST
PER VISITOR AT \$5.98

90%

OF COUNCILS AGREE THAT TOURISM
OFFERS FUTURE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
OPPORTUNITIES FOR THEIR LOCAL AREA



35c

IN EVERY LOCAL
GOVERNMENT \$1 SPENT
GOES TO VICS



24%

OF VISITOR SURVEY RESPONDENTS
STAYED LONGER IN THE REGION AS
A RESULT OF THE VICTORIAN VIS

TOTAL ADDITIONAL MONEY SPENT IN THE
REGION AS A RESULT OF A VIC VISIT RANGES
BETWEEN \$59 (NSW) AND \$104 (WA),
UP TO \$124 PER ADULT (SA), \$151 (VIC)



95% OF WA SURVEY
RESPONDENTS NOTED THAT
THE VIC WAS AN IMPORTANT
PART OF THEIR OVERALL
VISITOR EXPERIENCE AND
ALMOST 95% OF NSW
& VICTORIAN SURVEY
RESPONDENTS WOULD
RECOMMEND THE VIC TO
THEIR FRIENDS AND RELATIVES.

Sources: TRA, Queensland Snapshot of Year Ending June 2018 (IVS & NVS)

TRA, Victoria Snapshot of Year Ending June 2018 (IVS & NVS)

TRA, Visitor Information Servicing in New South Wales, June 2016

TRA, The Influence of Western Australian Visitor Centres on Tourist Behaviour, 2015

Victorian Accredited Visitor Information Servicing Survey, First Quarter Results 2018- 19

Victoria Tourism Industry Council, Why and How Local Government Should Engage with Victoria's Visitor Economy, 2018

Victoria Tourism Industry Council, 2018 Local Government Tourism Health Check Research Report

Visit Queensland, VIC revenue figures

“The VIC makes a huge economic contribution, creating over \$4 million

worth of marketing activity for local businesses in Bowen, purchasing merchandise stock locally and as a local employer for staff and volunteers.”

“While our centre doesn't technically make a profit we are the conduit for the region. Our RV area brings in \$10,000 in permit fees to Council and visitors contribute around \$230,000 to local businesses while they are here.”

ECONOMIC IMPACTS

The economic contribution of VICs is driven by their influence on travel and spending behaviour. VICs play a critical role in promoting local businesses, events and council and community services to visitors. Through the information shared and the skilful sales and advice provided in person and online, VICs can have a positive impact on the overall visitor experience and unlock visitor spending, facilitating a flow on effect through increased visitor expenditure and stay duration.

The facilitation by VICs is both direct and indirect:

- **Directly facilitated** — where visitors purchase services and goods at the VIC
- **Indirectly facilitated** — where visitors are made aware of services and goods while at the VICs, but purchase elsewhere, contributing expenditure into local economies.

The economic and social impacts highlight VICs' capacity to provide a return on investment and enable stakeholders to establish a more robust financial case for continued investment in VICs.

SOCIAL IMPACTS

The social impacts of accredited VICs and the network can be substantial:

- Present the shop front for the region, providing a warm welcome on behalf of businesses and residents
- Provide a central hub for local residents, tourism industry and other businesses to engage
- Provide peace of mind and ease of access for visitors seeking authoritative, unbiased and comprehensive information
- Encourage business start up and growth through economic impact or specific services
- Provide the go-to place for up-to-date information for visitors and residents on road conditions and in the event of natural disasters
- Employ staff, use of volunteers and involvement in supporting events and other community services
- Create community pride through promotion of what makes the area special
- Enhance community amenity as tourism growth can facilitate conservation, preservation and restoration of natural and built resources
- Support local producers and artisans where they are showcased and sold through VICs
- Offer local services that are not met by private sector such as book exchanges, walking tours and vehicle charging points.

NEW ZEALAND I-SITE REVIEW



7.3M WALK IN VISITORS ANNUALLY TO I-SITES
+380,000 INTERNET VISITORS
290,000 PHONE VISITORS



45%+
OF ALL INTERNATIONAL
VISITORS TO NEW ZEALAND
USE AN I-SITE

ALMOST ONE THIRD
OF ALL USERS MADE A BOOKING AT AN I-SITE



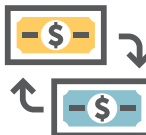
\$146.8 MILLION
CONTRIBUTED TO THE
NEW ZEALAND ECONOMY
(TOTAL NET ECONOMIC
EFFECT ON GDP)

\$1.48 TOTAL ADDITIONAL SPENDING
OCCURS IN THE WIDER ECONOMY
FOR EVERY ONE DOLLAR OF DIRECT SALES
MADE BY THE I-SITE NETWORK



AROUND \$109.3M OF VISITOR SPENDING
CAN BE DIRECTLY ATTRIBUTED TO THE
NETWORK AND WOULD NOT HAVE TAKEN
PLACE IF THE I-SITES DID NOT EXIST

FOR EVERY \$1 PROVIDED IN FUNDING,
THE NETWORK RETURNS ON AVERAGE
\$8.70 IN GDP



The strong performance of New Zealand's i-SITES highlights the unrealised potential of Australia's VIC network. Over 45% of all international visitors to New Zealand use an i-SITE, compared with only 20.4% of all international visitors to Australia using a VIC¹. Around two thirds of these say that i-SITEs influenced their decision on what activity, transport or accommodation provider they used with almost one third of all users making a booking at an i-SITE.

Singular, national leadership that provides guidance and facilitates best practice is instrumental in New Zealand's success and must be an imperative for Australia.

LOOKING AHEAD

CHANGING VISITOR MARKETS AND EXPECTATIONS

Currently domestic visitors to VICs are typically Baby Boomers aged 50 years+, followed by Generation Xs, aged 30-49 years. Boomers in particular prefer human interaction over digital media, although they are growing users of digital technology. International visitors of all ages use VICs, although they are slightly more popular for 15-29 year olds, followed by visitors aged 50+. As the population ages, the travel segments are changing.

Millennials (currently aged 22-37 years) are a new generation of travellers that will soon replace Baby Boomers to become the largest travel market segment as their incomes and financial standing grow. The Baby Boomers will continue to travel and bring with them a new travel segment – inter or multi-generational travellers. Millennials who get on well with their Boomer parents are travelling together as a group.

Millennial travellers have distinct approaches to travel, largely because they want to control their experiences. They are hyper-connected and digitally driven and very interested in travel as their incomes grow. They take on the planning themselves and often seek out low-cost flights and peer-to-peer accommodation sharing options. With their preference for personal experiences and local connections, they are the generation that fuelled the rise of the sharing economy such as Uber and Airbnb. By taking a budgeted approach to their travel and accommodations, they typically free up dollars that they can use on indulgences including personalised, authentic experiences that give them a deep connection and inspiration.

Implications for visitor information servicing

Millennials are a generation defined by instant gratification. If they need information they want it now and will not waste time or go out of their way to obtain it if there are easier options available. Research by Alberta Tourism discovered that Millennials do value roaming visitor services and will pick up print materials, particularly maps. These visitors however, need other reasons to stop and engage with bricks and mortar VICs.

Positioning themselves as local experts, sharing stories and tailoring authentic experiences based on local knowledge, sets VICs apart from other information sources.

China visitors and VICs

Australia's fastest growing international visitor market, China, is under represented at VICs. Chinese travellers favour personal recommendations from family, friends and colleagues (57%) and travel review websites (52%) for their trip planning. Knowing that the information is trustworthy is an important influencer.⁴

Recent research into Chinese visitors' regional access found they have little understanding of the diverse attractions available in regions.⁵ There is an opportunity for VICs to attract Chinese visitors and encourage them to see and do more.

In destinations where Chinese FITs are travelling, welcome information in Mandarin at VIC entrances and bilingual maps may motivate them to use VIC services. While the Chinese millennials understand basic English, a bilingual map makes it easier to orientate themselves and find out what else is possible to see and do. A WeChat service in the VIC can be a drawcard for Chinese visitors. The service enables visitors to scan QR codes and have local product information translated for them.

⁴ China Research 2018, Tourism and Events Queensland

⁵ Han, X; Cheer, J M. Chinese Tourist Mobilities and Destination Resilience: Regional Tourism Perspectives. Asia Journal of Tourism Research, 2018

MULTIPLE INFORMATION CHANNELS

On their travel journey, visitors are consuming information in a number of ways. VICs are only one of the many information touch points available. Fixed and mobile internet services are the primary tool used in pre-visit trip planning to find visitor information.

Visitors are accessing travel websites, mobile applications, online travel agents and social media for information when they want it. User-generated content on peer review sites such as TripAdvisor has become a trusted source for travel information, providing word of mouth advice on a global scale.

A survey of VIC users in New South Wales (NSW) found nearly two-thirds of the respondents who obtained information pre-visit (63%) used online sources. For time-poor visitors, pre-booking accommodation and some activities saves time at the destination and ensures they make the most of their travels⁹.

With the introduction of online travel agencies, consumers were empowered to take more control over their own travel experiences and book flights and accommodation. Now travel brands such as TripAdvisor, Expedia and new entry to the market, Airbnb Trips, offer one-stop shops aggregating relevant content. These sites harness big data and artificial intelligence to personalise the experience and offer curated destination content. Consumers can book every facet of his or her travel journey including their in-destination experiences.

The digital revolution has brought an expectation of personalised service, tailored to individual needs. People can request what they want and have it customised and delivered to them. Their expectations for information are similar. They are seeking to find what will match their needs and preferences.



In the destination, visitors are seeking out VICs for specific information and/or to learn more about what to see in the destination. With the growth of mobile platforms and apps developed to support travel, they are likely to become an increasingly popular method of trip planning.

Alberta Tourism shared the views of a Futurist Panel on technology's impact on visitor services in five to ten years.

"VICs will become highly interactive, digital centres where trip profiles and requirements can be curated and updated. There will be a move toward satellite visitor services, primarily mobile kiosks. Virtual reality technology will provide visitors with sensory experiences about attractions and activities in the region.

Interactive and intuitive mobile kiosk screen displays, offering apps for download and online concierge advice, will be located in high visitor traffic areas (e.g., rest areas, historic sites and museums, retail centres, convention centres, etc.).

*Travellers will use their devices to call up real-time advice based on pre-set profiles, past travel patterns, peer group preferences and emerging behaviour while in the destination."*⁶



6 The Futurist Panel, University of Alberta; and Destination THINK.

Implications for visitor information servicing

To engage with visitors across multiple channels and devices, information must be consistent, timely and accessible during all stages of the journey. This new online content will provide further choice for consumers but at the same time, potential confusion and frustration in sifting through to find the relevant information that is current and accurate.

Monitoring how visitors want to engage will be critical if VICs are to offer a responsive information service.

VICs shouldn't need to compete with the latest tools but demonstrate they are a trusted trip planning source online as well as in person, delivering personalised service. Integrating technology with a tailored information service will help to position VICs as contemporary and relevant sources of information. Big Data is a necessary tool for VICs to assist in delivering personalised trip planning services.

Visitor research findings by the City of Melbourne revealed a number of insights into visitor information needs:

- Visitors seek different topics and types of information at the different stages of their journey. Information needs to be filtered and not all provided at once.
- Visitors seek current, curated and detailed information. They want information presented from their perspective - we have to stand in our visitor's shoes.
- Traditional information sources (printed maps and face-to-face services) are highly sought after.
- Visitors use information services throughout their journeys.
- Information needs to be available in different formats, tailored to individuals' preferred devices.
- Social media is a key source of information for visitors at all stages of the journey.
- Information needs to be consistent across the whole journey.

SHARING ECONOMY

Social network technologies have been instrumental in the growth of collaborative consumption or the sharing economy around the world. The sharing economy with peer-to-peer renting, swapping, and lending services is changing the tourism marketplace, giving people new options for where to stay, what to do and how to get around. Local residents can serve tourists alongside the traditional players in the accommodation, transportation, and related sectors and meet visitors' need for a personalised approach, authenticity and contact with locals.

Online platforms provide easy access to the wide range of services available, some of them of higher quality and more affordable than their traditional business equivalents. Airbnb's new division Airbnb Trips, intends to be a platform where you can select a place to stay and book in-destination experiences, access curated destination content, and eventually even find flights, restaurants, on-demand transportation services, and more. Airbnb wants to position itself as the only brand a consumer would ever need, for every part of his or her journey, whether on the road or not.⁷

Existing tourism businesses are being pushed to respond to the increased competition the sharing economy has created. For example, in France the national railway operator has developed new products such as low cost train and bus services to compete with ridesharing services. Switzerland has found that the sharing economy is bringing visitors to destinations that were previously unaffordable.⁸

Tasmania is seeing the increased use of online platforms as enabling greater access to a range of local services, attractions and experiences that extend beyond what is conventionally regarded as 'tourism operators'. As a result, the state's visitor economy is delivering benefits to more parts of the community than ever before. Tasmania's Department of State Growth's Digital Ready program for small business encourages small business to participate and benefit from the state's growing visitor economy.

Implications for visitor information servicing

To date, the booming sharing economy means destinations can offer more product and visitors have more choices to consider. As in the case of Switzerland, alternative accommodation options such as Airbnb can mean destinations become more attractive. Increasing numbers of Airbnb providers are asking VICs to list them. VICs providing local knowledge in real time is vital to ensure visitors are gaining access to comprehensive information on things to see and do and where to stay.

⁷ SKIFT Megatrends 2018

⁸ European Parliament Briefing, *Tourism and the sharing economy*, 2017

VISITOR INFORMATION SERVICES IN OUR FUTURE

Australia's Accredited VICs: A Strategic Directions Paper outlined four strategic priorities for the network in 2015:

1. Contemporary VICs
2. Extraordinary visitor experiences
3. A partnership approach to visitor servicing
4. A recognised VIC network

While these priorities remain relevant and many of the associated strategies continue to be implemented, the network needs to refresh its focus to remain competitive and relevant. From the research, literature and conversations on the future of VICs, a new agenda emerges.

STRATEGIC DIRECTION

1. Adopt a customer-focused approach
2. Position yourself to fish where the fish are
3. Integrate technology with face-to-face service
4. Embrace visitor servicing
5. Make visitor servicing everyone's business
6. Engender an effective network

There is an exciting opportunity to guide accredited VICs in inspiring and influencing visitors to maximise their travel experiences and contribute to a growing visitor economy.



1. ADOPT A CUSTOMER-FOCUSED APPROACH

Matching the VIC role to customer needs

VICs play a variety of roles as an information provider. They service the following customers, albeit in varying degrees across the country dependent upon their operating environment. Understanding those customers and being nimble and adaptive to their changing expectations underpins effective visitor information servicing.

VICs serve:

	VISITORS	TOURISM INDUSTRY AND LOCAL BUSINESS OWNERS	COMMUNITY MEMBERS	LOCAL GOVERNMENT
TODAY'S EXPECTATIONS	Provide timely, authoritative, unbiased information, validate ideas, gain insights into what makes the destination special and book product	Facilitate economic growth by encouraging visitors to stay and spend with local operators and businesses	Provide staff and volunteer opportunities, information for the VFR market, meeting spaces and promotion and retail sales for small local producers	Facilitate economic and social growth, generate local pride and provide community service hubs and an information point during natural disasters
IN THE FUTURE	Information needs personalised and delivered online and offline in a timely and contemporary manner	Effective facilitator of business growth	Economic and social resilience and sustainability	Economic and social resilience and sustainability



Brisbane Airport VICs illustrate the need for flexibility in the network to adapt VIC roles to the different operating environments and the guests they serve.

Operating out of both the international and domestic terminals, Brisbane Airport Corporation's (BAC) VICs, managed by Southern Queensland Tourism, are part of the operational team that ensures the on-the-ground airport functions run as smoothly as possible. The service is adapted to be appropriate and relevant to the airport terminals and their customers.

Airport ambassadors (the VIC volunteer team) work across the terminal floors in a team with the many workers who make the airport tick – BAC operations team, Border Force agents, car hire companies, the cleaners, the bus drivers, the coffee baristas, retailers and other service providers.

The VIC team conduct themselves professionally and fit seamlessly within the BAC corporate environment and service culture. The VICs' KPIs include welcoming all people who find themselves in the airport precinct, knowing who the passengers and visitors are and what they want and providing that in an efficient, timely and friendly manner, including way finding and facilitating the collection and possible disbursement of lost property items.

Meeting visitors' information needs

The VICs' role is to inspire and encourage visitors to explore the destination through the information and experiences delivered. Visitors' needs set the direction for VICs' engagement. Understanding a VIC's target markets is crucial to ensure the engagement is relevant and valued.

Amid the plethora of information sources available on and offline, VICs have a keen advantage as the official supplier of trusted and comprehensive local information. People trust recommendations from other humans over brands or organisations. The word of a local is more meaningful than online content. Visitors want local insights into the area, to find out the secret places and things to do to add value to their experience.

"Positive human interactions can be some of the most memorable and impactful parts of a trip. A positive interaction with a friendly local has the ability to provide the deeper experience that people increasingly seek⁹."

In capital cities, VICs' role also becomes that of a gateway to the regions, facilitating the overall visitor experience through the information and inspiration shared.



Australian Capital Territory's (ACT) only VIC, the *Canberra and Region Visitor Centre*, is committed to promoting Canberra and the region as a must-visit destination to increase visitor numbers, length of stay and visitor spending in the area.

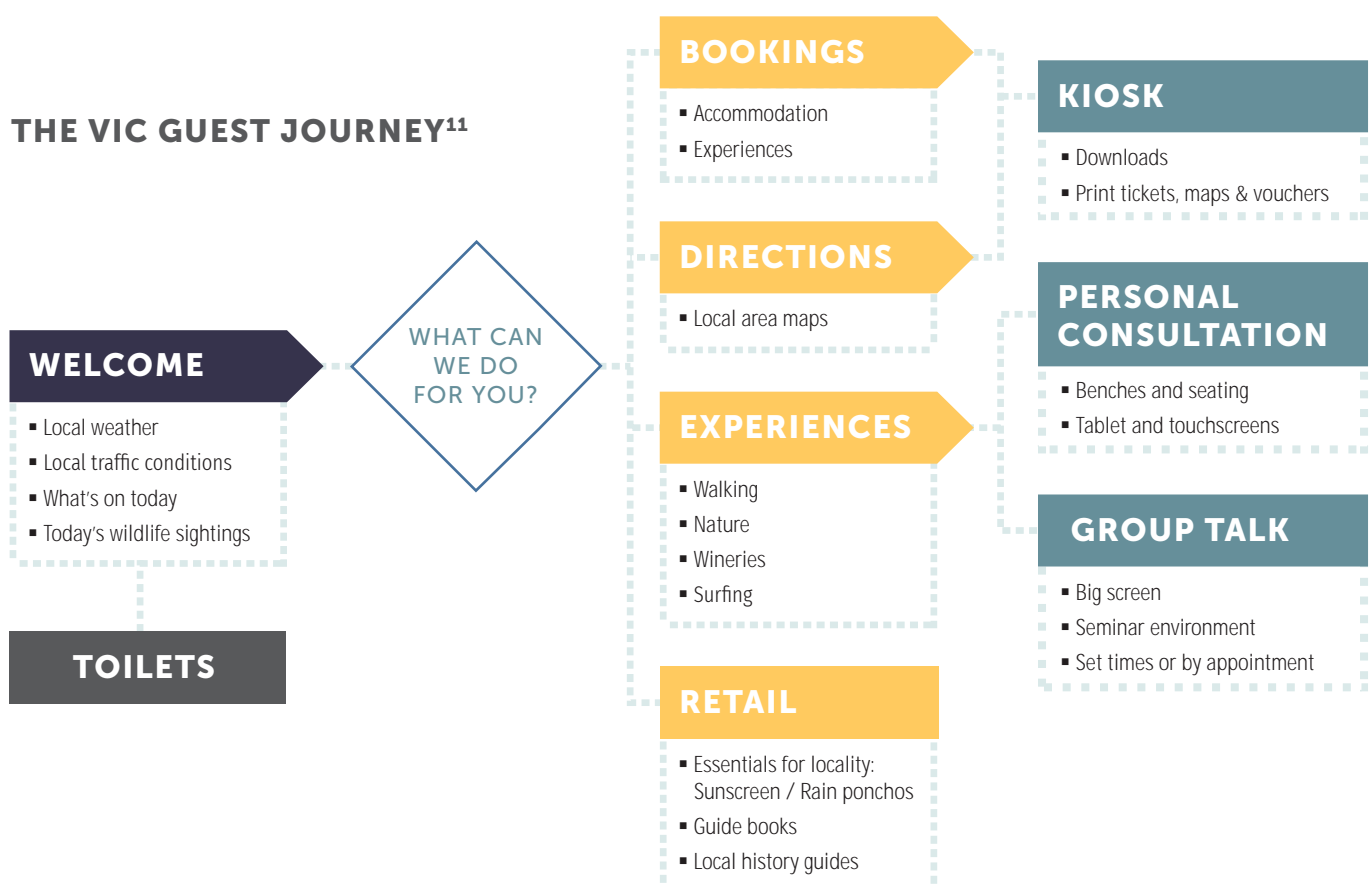
Located in the Parliamentary Triangle in the heart of Canberra's cultural institutions, the VIC has become an important stopping off point to explore the city and broader region.

The Centre provides content on the city and region to visitors in three ways: face-to-face interaction with staff and volunteers, printed information brochures and maps for visitors to take away and digital delivery through a range of platforms. A touchscreen in the Centre allows visitors to orientate themselves, see what's nearby and create mini-itineraries taking in a range of attractions, events and experiences. The content is drawn from the Australian Tourism Data Warehouse.

To ensure the Centre's service is where visitors are, touchscreens are planned at key hotspots such as Canberra Airport, National Arboretum, Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve and a regional location. The touchscreen content will be fed and managed by the Centre to ensure consistency in coverage.

“As consumers have moved from having limited and often tightly controlled sources of information before they travel, now, to global citizen journalists and bloggers sharing their world of experiences, the shift has moved to visits being about experiences. Preferably socially sharable, visual and bragable ones. Visitors are more often looking for a unique taste and view of a place, and want locals and those who have come before to show them all the hidden gems¹⁰.”

THE VIC GUEST JOURNEY¹¹



¹⁰ Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing, Volume 35, 2018 - Issue 1: Shareable Tourism: Tourism Marketing in the Sharing Economy

¹¹ Komosion, Rethink! Reimagining Visitor Servicing, 2018, Draft Report



The Darwin VIC is seeing increasing visitor numbers and product sales, with July sales hitting a 45 year sales record.

Visitors are coming to the VIC for local knowledge that is tailored to their requirements and expectations in the moment and validates the various pieces of information they have gathered on and offline. With their information needs met, visitors are ready to book then and there and the VIC benefits from the bookings made.

Storytelling

Storytelling is becoming an increasingly effective way for VIC staff and volunteers to share information and connect authentically. Through stories, VICs can bring the places and characters of the destination to life, deepen visitors' engagement and create lasting memories that are shared with friends and family.

Staff and volunteers of Queensland's (QLD) VIC network have received the first two Storytelling Workshops. The initiative was developed around the belief that each of the accredited VICs has a unique story to tell, and in sharing that story can encourage visitors to stay and spend in the destination. The workshops assist staff and volunteers to examine and review their destination along with the key messages currently communicated to stakeholders.

Getting the story right is key. Simply sharing a destination's story that a local VIC or community is excited about may not always work. It must be a story that will resonate with the visitor markets. Done well, VICs can capture the attention of visitor markets and create a clear point of difference.

"What people remember are their experiences, and to create an experience you need to engage them emotionally. It's about striking a balance between facts and activities (the functional) and engaging, amazing and memorable elements (the emotional). You want your story to be the first story every visitor tells when they get home, or even better the story they share on social media¹²."



Malanda VIC in Queensland experienced a decline in visitation to the centre when they changed their story.

Now they are telling the story that resonates, visitation is growing steadily.

When fire destroyed the Malanda VIC, the Tablelands Regional Council considered options for rebuilding. They included constructing a new centre on the existing site or moving 0.5km along the road towards the town centre and using a space available in a dairy building. The relocation option would enable the VIC to offer interactive content and tours about the region's dairy industry as well as the VIC's current content on the local environment and the tree kangaroo. It also had the benefit of a small museum featuring the dairy history and a café. The VIC was relocated there temporarily while options were considered and saw visitation nearly halved.

Car parking at the dairy site was not easily accessed, but this was not the main contributor to the decline. While the history of dairy industry was important to the community, it wasn't driving visitation to the area. Visitors were coming to Malanda to experience the volcanic landscape and to spot the unique Lumholtz's tree kangaroo. Sharing the story of the tree kangaroos and the area's special environment at the dairy didn't work.

The VIC was rebuilt on the existing site alongside the Malanda Falls swimming hole and rainforest walks and now receives 32,000 visitors per year.

Adapting business models to increase performance

In an environment of tightening budgets, VICs are facing the challenge of identifying opportunities to increase the economic and social benefits they deliver to stakeholders. They are under increasing pressure to justify why resources should be allocated to visitor information services. Although VICs are unrivalled in their provision of unbiased, authoritative local information, they need to be found amidst the increasing plethora of information sources available to visitors and perceived as relevant and contemporary. Some VICs have closed their doors or merged with others. Future proofing and reimagining are increasingly part of the vernacular.

The Reimagining Visitor Servicing report highlights that the traditional VIC model of bricks and mortar centres waiting for visitors to come through their doors is flawed and a re-think and new agreement about roles responsibilities, resourcing and engagement are needed¹³. A growing number of VICs are reinventing themselves with new business models of value-producing roles for visitor information that meet the needs and wants of visitors and increase dwell time and spend in the VIC and the region.

VICs are becoming a "must do" attraction in their own right using immersive experiences, interpretation and technology to encourage visitor advocacy and a reason to visit. Other models are seeing the creation of digitally enabled centres with modern retailing best practice and located in a high traffic environment. The different approaches reflect the varying ownership structures and expectations.

¹³ Komosian, *Rethink! Reimagining Visitor Servicing*, 2018, Draft Report



The former Mittagong VIC underwent a four year transformation to a new business model of a *Southern Highlands Welcome Centre*.

Operated by the local government tourism body, Destination Southern Highlands, the revamped centre is a hub servicing visitors and the local community, new residents to area, and business start-ups. The rationale for the change was to provide greater value and services to Council, local community and the tourism industry and to grow the contribution tourism makes to the regional economy. The focus was on innovative ideas to improve performance with limited funds. Improvements to the centre in stage one included:

- Reconfiguring the 'front of house' and layout of the Centre to enable a concierge-style service
- Installation of new Centre branding, signage, large external interactive region map and a digital events board
- Installation of touch screens to allow easy orientation across the region and a large media screen wall showcasing destination content
- \$2 Lavazza coffee dispenser, recharging mobile device point, old fashion jelly bean machine, electric car charging point, water refill station to encourage people to linger longer and electric bike rentals (and bike tours with local operator)
- Dedicated local merchandise and products area to provide a taste of what the region offers and generate retail sales
- Selfie boards to encourage online photo sharing.

Stage Two involved an innovative refurbishment of the toilets. The VIC recognised that the majority of visitors would use the toilets but not all would then come into the centre. Changes included introducing interpretative signs along the walkway to toilets at rear of the Centre with QR coding linked to video and more information, interpretative material on the walls the ceiling and between the toilets to encourage people to come into the centre, audio content playing in the toilets, checklists, flowers and the latest information on campaigns and colourful walls internally and externally to create a Wow factor.

Impacts on VIC service and performance

Increases have occurred in visitation, retail sales and memberships of Destination Southern Highlands (including non core tourist businesses). The new centre also instils pride in the region.

What's next?

The VIC is rolling out touchscreens to non-accredited VIC sites to enable people to have access to regional content. Opportunities are being considered to share space with a café or gallery and introduce a sculpture trail through the Centre's gardens to establish the centre firmly as an attraction in its own right.



Albany VIC in Western Australia (WA) is a local government funded and operated VIC that similarly has undergone a process of redefining the VIC's 'Why' and its business structures and models.

Three core outcomes were sought from the process:

- Understanding the VIC's role in servicing visitors, industry and community
- Creating revenue opportunities
- Establishing the VIC as an attraction in its own right.

Originally the VIC team saw their role as providing information and some retail sales. Now the focus is on increasing commercial viability to sustain a VIC service for the tourism

industry and local community. The VIC team recognise that just being in the centre of town doesn't assure viability – the VIC's service offering is the driver. The VIC reviewed and refined the offering for their customers:

- For visitors — Providing information and a booking service, with staff trained to have a friendly, non-apologetic approach to commission-based sales that are tailored to visitor needs and support the viability of the centre
- For industry — Working with operators in getting product ready and delivering to visitor markets
- For community — Recognising locals are tourists who live here and every person is an opportunity.

The VIC is on track towards achieving the local council's goal of a self-sustaining VIC that is independently operated.

“Given the range of functions VICs undertake and the audiences they serve in their communities, VICs are a public good, however that doesn’t mean they have to operate at a loss,” says Stephen Schwer, CEO of Central Australia Tourism.

A heavy reliance on local government funding and the associated vulnerability that brings has been the impetus for the RTO and its VIC to hone their approach to visitor servicing. ‘Servicing visitors how they want to be serviced’ is a mantra of the VIC.

In a busy marketplace the VIC knows it can’t be complacent about attracting visitors, so is regularly reviewing its service offering to ensure the VICs are meeting visitor needs. The number of visitors (online and offline) and the booking value they generate are key performance measures. The Discover Central Australia website is the most popular touch point for visitors, receiving 160,000 views per year, while walk-ins to the centre are next with 80,000 visitors per year.



ALICE SPRINGS VIC, NORTHERN TERRITORY



The tourism industry in partnership with the Tasmanian Government is planning to lead the development of a flagship *Tasmanian Visitor Experience Centre* (TEC).

The TEC will be an attraction in its own right, offering visitors a great place to visit, to learn, to book, to buy, to download, to recharge and to talk with an informative local ambassador. The TEC will be part of the state’s ‘optimal visitor information provision model’ which takes into account factors such as the key locations that are decision points for visitors, for example, attractions and venue co-location options.

LESSONS FROM BANKING

Service providers that closed their branches all over Australia 10-15 years ago such as banks are now rebuilding the system, with new branches opening. These new branches have different models that enable personal contact for customers alongside the convenience of online services.

“The local branch remains a key touch point for many customers and is the place where people go for advice on

their more complex needs and where they want to have a face-to-face discussion” Harry Wendt, Westpac General Manager Online and Customer Service Centres

The footprint of branches and their resourcing (both numbers and skillsets) has evolved to better match the needs of branch visitors. *Source: Haeberlin Consulting, The future of visitor centres in WA, 2014*

Combining resources

Several studies are underway to assess the merits of combining resources to deliver a consistent, multi-channel visitor information service.

Local Governments in the Great Ocean Road (GOR) region are considering outsourcing responsibility for VICs to a collective group. The four councils, along with the GOR Regional Tourism Board have engaged consultants to explore a suitable model and test with the key stakeholders.

A Bass Coast Shire Visitor Information Centre Service Review has considered how to reduce and share costs (through regional collaboration) and re-invest in technology such as self-service kiosks and touch screens to extend services.

Murray Regional Tourism has developed a discussion paper which recommends a new system of governance across the Murray region and its sub regions that looks beyond the historical framework of local government delivery of visitor information services. (Section 5 further explores the importance of collaboration in visitor information delivery.)

Industry collaboration to deliver value

Attractive tourism product that meets the needs of visitor markets is fundamental to a VIC's ability to maximise economic and social benefits. Limited product translates into few reasons to visit the destination and VIC. With the decline in accommodation bookings through many VICs, ticket sales for attractions, tours and events can contribute vital supplementary income. VICs are playing an active role in some destinations in ensuring there is sufficient and relevant product to compel visitation. This is taking the form of advice on product development and bundling, and assistance and training in areas such as ATDW listings.



MUDJEE VIC, NEW SOUTH WALES

Three VICs active in this area are Albany, Mudjee and Dubbo.

Albany VIC is proactive in working with the local industry to ensure the centre has a good range and quality of product to offer visitors. The VIC staff assist operators in developing products, bundling and packaging product and ensuring it is bookable online. This has led on to some operators creating and promoting packages and earning commission for their efforts.

The *Mudjee VIC* in NSW is operated by Mudjee Region Tourism (an LTO) and works with local industry and business groups and major organisations (tourism/non-tourism) in growing the destination's visitor economy. A recent initiative is to expand the retail sector, with the VIC engaging with 11 retail partners to create a boutique 'Shop Like a Local' trail. The project provides an opportunity to engage with local businesses in creating more reasons to visit the destination and spend locally. The LTO has commercial sponsorships in place as part of its membership structure that enables local industry and businesses to be actively involved in the destination's growth and also extends the reach into the community.

The regional Council operated *Dubbo VIC* in NSW works proactively with the local industry to manage visitor peaks. One initiative the VIC undertakes is to develop packages with the industry to entice visitors to come to the region outside of the busy periods. The industry and local economy are benefitting from extended tourism seasons and visitor spend, while visitors appreciate the greater chance of booking accommodation.

Co-created content

Savvy businesses and organisations have recognised the shift towards online information and entertainment consumption and have gotten creative. They've found that by including the customer in the production, they create an unforgettable experience and turn customers into co-creators and raving fans. Selfie boards and Instagram photo sharing activities are simple ways VICs are encouraging travellers to visit the VIC and to share their experiences with a global audience.

Tourism destinations and service providers are also embracing crowdsourcing, and crowdfunding models to develop new attractions and services, allowing the process of value co-creation among locals, visitors, and other stakeholders¹⁴.

It is important that the planning framework for VICs keeps abreast, with business plans reflecting the evolved vision and goals rather than those that the VIC was originally based on. The accreditation system must also support the visitor experience focus, with criteria supporting VIC efforts to meet visitor needs.

Community drivers

To deliver more value, VICs are expanding their role into a hub for the tourism industry and residents as well as for visitors. In regional and rural Australia in particular, the VIC role can be very community driven. The VIC can be the main touch point in a destination that facilitates economic and social growth back into the community through its efforts. The focus is community sustainability and destination growth opportunities.



Julia Creek VIC is owned and operated by McKinlay Shire Council, a council that is invested and hands on in driving tourism growth in Queensland's Outback.

A five year strategic plan for the VIC provides a clear vision: By 2022, McKinlay Shire's extra overnight visitors will support investment in new commercial tourism products each year. To achieve the vision, the VIC is tasked by the Council and ratepayers to facilitate economic growth for tourism operators and other local businesses and ratepayers.

The VIC seeks to be the gateway for the region. A unique dunnart display and heritage exhibits draw visitors to the centre and souvenir sales contribute some income. Then when visitors are in the centre, staff share local knowledge and insights to create enthusiasm amongst visitors to stay and explore and spend money locally — and contribute to the economic growth of the shire.

The Centre also hosts Bush Dinners every Monday between April and September for visitors and residents. Diners sit around a campfire and hear stories about life in the outback and Julia Creek. A local community group caters the event and charges \$15 per person and Council provides a courtesy bus service. In 2018, 22 dinners were hosted, with the largest attracting 183 people.

Through the economic impacts that flow through the community, the VIC is supporting the Council in improving the resilience of the shire as a place to live, work and play.

¹⁴ *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*,
Volume 35, 2018 - Issue 1: Shareable Tourism:
Tourism Marketing in the Sharing Economy

The *Rural Hinterland VIC* in central Queensland is driven by the community for the community to celebrate the region's heritage and culture and grow the visitor economy.

Local community organisation Callide Dawson Machinery Preservation Club Inc. runs the accredited centre as part of the Queensland Heritage Park attraction. The Park provides a remarkable range of historical machinery and artefacts within the "Silo" building (originally from the Expo '88 site), a restored vintage church, railway station buildings and grounds to give insights into the past and the pioneering spirit of Australians.

In a bid to be financially viable and generate economic returns for the community, the complex has developed into a one stop shop for travellers. A café, function rooms and a 48 hour rest area provide affordable options for caravans, motorhomes and camping and encourage visitors to stop and spend time and money in the region. Every year the community group hosts a vintage machinery rally and on occasion also the state rally, bringing extra visitors to the area.

The majority of income comes from rally, camping and function bookings, entrance fees to the displays and café takings. Only \$9,000 for the VIC and \$5,000 for maintenance and upkeep of the site is sourced annually from the local council. It is a 100% volunteer run operation, demonstrating the passion and commitment of the local community.

Information hub roles

As the information hub, VICs are well placed to support the efforts of the DN/RTO/LTO and local council by taking the lead in the maintenance and dissemination of regional/shire information. This could include maintaining content on the destination website and managing online content and social media and review site commentary on public assets such as parks and sites of interest.

VICs continue to be an important information point during times of emergencies, reinforcing the value of their function for local communities. The VICs can be involved in coordinating information to provide up to date status reports to visitors and locals on critical matters such as road, train and air transport access, action required by locals and visitors, and the support available.

Some VICs like Sunbury in Victoria have become the first port of call for new residents moving into the region. Working with local real estate agencies, they create welcome packs and provide information in the centre dedicated to new residents.





BRISBANE AIRPORT VIC, QUEENSLAND

Supporting local employment

Staff employment and use of volunteers offer VICs opportunities to connect with and support the local community. In regional Australia however, staffing and volunteer turnover can be high and finding quality support a challenge. Some VICs have reduced their reliance on volunteers, instead choosing to employ permanent and casual staff to cover the roles. In some instances volunteers provide a valuable resource during events to support staff. Other VICs, particularly in Queensland, have volunteers as their backbone. There is no one size fits all, with each VIC subject to its own opportunities and limitations in terms of recruiting and maintaining the right resources.

At Bendigo VIC, volunteers have the same training whether they're working in or outside and meetings are held every two months with volunteers and staff. Beyond the face-to-face meetings, the VIC uses a communications tool called Better Impact (volunteer software <https://www.betterimpact.com.au/>) to ensure everyone has access to real-time updates and information. Better Impact is managed and updated by staff and it's their responsibility to ensure everyone has the information and tools needed to service visitors.

VICs can also support local community capacity building through training students entering the tourism industry. Frankston VIC in Victoria has played an active role in the Mornington Peninsula Traineeship Program helping students work towards their Certificate III in Tourism.

Priorities:

- Commit to evolve and innovate VIC business models to enable the service to be agile and responsive to changing visitor and industry needs and a key driver of regional dispersal and spend.
- Foster the sharing of information and tools to assist VIC owners/managers in the regular review and refresh of their delivery model for visitor information servicing.
- Review and confirm the customers to be served and the role the VIC will play in meeting their needs.
- Undertake regular strategic business planning for VICs that assesses and optimises the operating context, footprint, resourcing levels, value creation and the delivery model for visitor information servicing.
- Ensure that the provision of impartial information and a professional service endures as the core of the VIC offering, with other roles adding value.
- Work with the DN/RTO/LTO in identifying the stories that resonate with visitor markets and foster authentic story telling that compels visitors to experience the product.
- Work with the DN/RTO/LTO in developing opportunities for visitors to engage and share their destination experiences.
- Continue to evolve the VIC accreditation standards to reflect the changing business models while maintaining a consistent level and quality of service across the network.

2. POSITION YOURSELF TO FISH WHERE THE FISH ARE

Location, location

With visitors seeking out information from multiple sources on the ground and in the digital world, the accredited visitor information service must be highly visible on and offline and sufficiently agile to meet changing visitor needs.

The location of bricks and mortar VICs is fundamental to success. Visitor information services need to be prominent and accessible to their target visitors regardless of the level or size of centre. The City of Adelaide's VIC experienced a 67% decline in visitation when it changed location in 2014. The site was hard to find and the space confined.

Where towns are reliant on highway traffic stopping, VICs are well positioned at the gateways. In destinations where the majority of visitors are exploring on foot, VICs can maximise their impact in popular visitor places that are easily accessible for pedestrians. Directional VIC signage is required in every case, particularly for driving spontaneous visitation.¹⁵



On Hastings Street in the centre of Noosa and adjacent to the beach, the *Noosa VIC* has a prime location to optimise its service to visitors to the destination.

The spacious and contemporary design where the centre is open to the street draws foot traffic inwards to browse the displays, engage with the team of holiday consultants and volunteers or make bookings via iPads. Visitors come to the centre seeking to chat with a local about what to do in the area, the national park and Fraser Island trips.

The centre's location also supports the efforts of local tourism organisation, Tourism Noosa, in extending the reach of the local tourism industry. Digital advertising of events and members product is projected onto the street to further encourage visitors to enter and member material is displayed through the centre.

Noosa VIC is not complacent about its position, regularly undertaking reviews and evolving the centre so it continues to meet visitor and member needs and maximise spend in the area.

¹⁵ TRA, 2016, *Visitor Information Servicing in New South Wales*

Mobile services

The revised national accreditation visitor information servicing guidelines encourage accredited VICs to look beyond bricks and mortar in providing a service that is relevant to visitors while maintaining brand integrity. Where a destination experiences seasonality or visitor concentrations such as events, cruise ship arrivals or simply popular gathering places, pop-up stands, bike-based services and roving VIC ambassadors walking the streets and public places are bringing the information service from the bricks and mortar VIC to the visitors. Going where the customers are increases the reach and awareness of a destination's bricks and mortar VIC service and enables them to connect with visitors at a time and place that suits them rather than relying on visitors coming through the door.



As a popular cruise ship destination in WA, the Geraldton VIC led Cruise Ship Meet and Greet volunteers are regularly found at the welcome area providing information to passengers seeking to explore the city.

The introduction of a mobile VIC service now allows the VIC to meet the needs of cruise ship visitors and also tourism events far more efficiently.

The mobile VIC, emblazoned with iconic images of Geraldton, is a talking point with passengers at the welcome area. As set up and break down for events is normally done by one or two staff members, having all materials, such as brochures, tables, chairs and other items connected to the event inside the mobile VIC, allows for a much smoother and safer set up and better use of staff time. Previously, materials were transported to and from the harbour front or event locations and marquees and tables set up each time. The colourful mobile VIC is making a positive impression around the city at tourism and other business events.

There is an opportunity for VICs to get creative and look beyond their boundaries in finding the best solution to their visitor servicing needs. In Victoria, a non-accredited VIC is exploring a collaboration with an accredited VIC in the adjacent local government area to improve their service. The arrangement would enable a mobile information service to be offered in a popular visitor location where there is no accredited centre. The service would operate as a satellite of the accredited centre, with the centre's staff and the yellow and blue *i* branding.

Kiosks are low-footprint outlets that offer another means of distributing information. Often sited within existing businesses or service providers, kiosks can provide basic visitor information in a cost-effective way. Maintenance of both the technology and current content is critical if they are to offer value for visitor markets.



Bendigo VIC is expanding its reach to visitors with an Ambassador program.

Bendigo wanted to find ways to better service visitors and created an Ambassador program that gets volunteers out of the VIC and into the places where visitors are. The program was started 10 years ago to better service events and has now evolved to putting volunteers on trains and on the main street to intercept and service visitors while they are enjoying the area. The aim of the program is to serve more visitors and ensure they get the right information at the right time to influence their visit and spend in region. The success of the Ambassador program is measured by the number of visitors reached, which is tracked by each Ambassador.

"We have ambassadors dedicated to the railway stations where people catch the train to and from Bendigo. In the CBD, Ambassadors follow set walking routes and deliver brochures to retailers and cafes that are our members. They are easily identifiable and they stop and talk to people along the way. At events, Ambassadors are stationed at pop-up stands. Event managers help us understand the best times and locations to service visitors," said Nicole Pretty, former Visitor Services Manager, City of Greater Bendigo.

Partnering up

Co-location with complementary services can afford VICs an opportunity to increase patronage and revenue and reduce overhead costs. Since the previous Strategic Directions paper, first hand experience has revealed some success factors for co-location:

- Partner with a complementary attraction or service that will boost visitation and enable the VIC to be a destination in its own right
- Ensure the space and location meets visitor needs, is accessible and evokes a sense of place that is deeply felt by visitors and inhabitants.

The Tasmanian Government is investing in the development of a new visitor centre located at the Royal Tasmanian Botanical Gardens to provide a better experience for visitors and allow the Gardens to generate additional revenue. Busselton and Canberra VICs are just two centres enjoying significant increases in visitation as a result of co-location. Northam VIC has further enhanced its value with the establishment of a new attraction alongside the VIC.



Margaret River Busselton Tourism Association as owner of the *Busselton VIC* in WA researched the best position for the city's information service as part of a review to improve performance.

The research assessed where people are out looking for things to do and found everyone coming into town went to the jetty first and made plans from there. The decision was made to move the centre from its gateway location on the edge of town where it was dependent on road traffic to the high foot traffic area of the jetty. After trialling a number of locations, a new centre was built alongside a local council owned interpretive centre in an existing heritage railway station and adjacent to privately owned jetty offices.

The move has resulted in the VIC doubling the number of visitors through its doors and an improved Trip Advisor rating. The VIC has taken advantage of a popular location for visitors and offers a seamless experience between the VIC and interpretative centre. By bundling the two together, visitors now have more reason to come in to the VIC. Having the three partners in the precinct is also an advantage for the VIC, enabling direct engagement with the major stakeholders in tourism in the area.

When the purpose built, previously successful VIC saw a steady decline in numbers, the *Canberra and Region VIC* started to consider options.

With the increasing use of smart phones for sourcing information coupled with the VIC's location on the road 2.5km out of the city, fewer visitors were choosing to stop. After researching possible sites, the decision was made to site the new centre alongside the National Capital Exhibition (NCE) at Regatta Point, within the Parliamentary triangle and sight of the majority of attractions visitors want to see and experience.

Relocating has resulted in a 63% increase in visitation. The move has made the VIC more accessible to both the cultural institutions and visitors. Sharing the same entrance to the NCE, the VIC attracts the educational tourism market, VFR and holiday visitors. An extensive new merchandise offering of quality local products has created a reputation for the VIC as a place to go to for locals, businesses, embassies and visitors seeking mementos or quality gifts. New markets are discovering the VIC and wanting to return to find out more.





The *Bilya Koort Boodja: Centre for Nyoongar Culture and Environmental Knowledge*, has recently been built by the Shire of Northam to provide visitors and residents an authentic exposure to the Aboriginal culture and environmental values in the area and the links between them.

The centre offers a technology-rich interactive experience. Visitors are encouraged to dwell in dedicated areas such as the 'sorry space' that tells the story of the stolen generation. Local stories and information on artefacts are shared aurally through iPods. A yarning circle video experience transports visitors to a fireside conversation with Aboriginal elders. The centre incorporates a kids trail and a variety of educational experiences for both individuals and school groups.

The interpretive centre was designed in a way to encourage local Aboriginal community ownership and use by visitors and locals. The centre operates next door to the VIC, with a seamless flow between the two. Visitor numbers to the VIC and Northam are expected to increase as visitors have more reasons to stop and stay longer in the area. Bilya Koort Boodja is just one recent example of the Shire of Northam's commitment to developing the tourism offering in both the region and state.

The centre will also provide assistance and upskilling in business development for small business owners, notably Indigenous start ups. This in turn will increase awareness of the VIC and the services offered. Looking ahead, the Shire of Northam intends to incorporate a number of new technologies into their visitor offerings including virtual reality and QR code trails.

The project was made possible by funding received from the National Stronger Regions Fund supported by the Australian Government, Lotterywest, and the Government of Western Australia and the Wheatbelt Development Commission supported by Royalties for Regions.

If the success factors are not in place, co-location can result in poor performance. A six month trial of moving visitor centre services to the Civic Centre and Art Gallery building in Wagga Wagga failed to deliver the expected range of efficiencies and was unpopular with locals and visitors due to space constraints and a less accessible location. The former Clare Valley VIC in SA was closed after its relocation with the local library performed poorly. The rationale for the move was to streamline local council services with a shared space and staff resources. Limited accessibility due to lack of parking and VIC services reduced to a computer and brochure racks meant the VIC failed to thrive in that location. The VIC has since returned to the former site and is flourishing.

Maximising accessibility


Accessibility is more than just the on the ground location of the information service. Where destinations are targeting visitors from non-English speaking countries, multi-lingual maps and mobile apps are key considerations. As noted earlier visitors' expectation of online and mobile engagement will continue to grow. Online information services enable VICs to proactively reach out to visitors in the way they wish to engage.

Seven years ago Lismore VIC had two people on the front counter. Now only one is needed while the other engages with visitors via the website and social media channels. At the same time as the VIC is maintaining stable visitor numbers through their doors, online engagement has risen exponentially.

Decision making on the type and delivery of online visitor information services in an increasingly crowded marketplace needs to be part of destination management and marketing planning. Clear roles and responsibilities of the VIC and DN/RTO/LTO (if operated separately) are critical. Regular training must also be factored in to ensure staff/volunteers are equipped to deliver on multi channel visitor servicing needs. The following theme (3) discusses online service in more detail in the context of VICs' technology offering.

Priorities:

- Position the VICs as a destination's critical touchpoint for visitors.
- Regularly assess visitor movement trends and where visitors are gathering (offline and online) to ensure VICs are prominent and easily accessible to the target visitor markets on the ground and in online channels.
- Consider opportunities to co-locate with complementary services or businesses that maintain or enhance the accessibility of the VIC and its capacity to increase visitor dwell time and spend in the centre and destination.
- Work with the DN/RTO/LTO (where operated separately) in developing an online service driven by the destination management and marketing strategy.
- Determine the consistent information to be provided across the multiple online and offline information sources and ensure its currency and accessibility is maintained.
- Continue to review visitor market information engagement needs and be proactive in reaching out through the delivery methods relevant to the market.



"The greatest issue facing all VICs is ensuring they meet the changing expectations of visitor markets," says Mitch Lowe,
Tourism and Events Manager,
Lismore VIC

3. INTEGRATE TECHNOLOGY WITH FACE-TO-FACE SERVICE

New ways of interacting with visitor markets

Technology is not making VICs redundant as was predicted by some. Rather, technology is providing VICs opportunities for new information channels, dynamic ways of interacting with visitor markets and reasons to attract visitors into centres¹⁶. VICs now need engagement solutions that are more inclusive of digital technology and online platforms to ensure they provide information visitors want and in the way they want it.

HERVEY BAY, QUEENSLAND



A relatively low-tech innovation is being installed that will enable the *Hervey Bay VIC* in Queensland to promote the region's whale watching story dynamically and more readily demonstrate their point of difference.

The Hervey Bay VIC is the flagship centre for the Fraser Coast region and the strongest performer commercially of the three VICs in the destination. Located on the main route into Hervey Bay, the VIC seeks to capture people coming into town and encourage them to extend their stay in the region. Along with Fraser Island, whale watching is one of the hero experiences for the region, with Hervey Bay considered the best whale watching region on the east coast of Australia by researchers and whale watchers alike. While there is competitor product available in other locations along the QLD and NSW coasts, the VIC focuses on the calm waters of the bay which are used as a stopover by the Humpbacks during their annual migration.

A video wall of four screens that operate from one iPod will live stream footage from the whale watch tour boats. Providing raw footage was trialled with visitors and met with positive feedback. The VIC expects bookings to increase by at least 10%.

"Visitors want to see what is going on out there so they know what to expect rather than some airbrushed photos. Live streaming allows us to go one better as centre visitors can see exactly what it is like out there in the moment and why the Hervey Bay whale watch experience is so special," says, centre manager, Andrew Ellis.

16 KPMG, 2017, *Reimagining the Visitor Information Services Experience*

A high-tech experience offered by some VICs is virtual reality (VR). The technology is being used to create awareness of a destination's attractions and assets, encourage visitors to explore, and to provide visitors with a deeper engagement with a destination's history and its people.



A free VR experience showcasing the region has turned the *Albany VIC* in WA into a visitor attraction in its own right.

Using technology that provides a unique 360° experience, visitors can see the region from a perspective that they would not get when visiting the locations for real. The tour has visitors experiencing the Mt Clarence Desert Corps Memorial at sunrise, swooping through The Gap, plunging off the coast to swim with killer whales, spending time on one of the region's top five beaches, soaring between wind turbines and across West Cape Howe and finishing with a time lapse of the stunning Milky Way. The footage is accompanied by an audio narrative that brings each place to life through local stories.

The rationale for introducing the VR tour was to attract more people into the VIC. Once in the centre, visitors can browse the unique retail offering and learn more about the region's attractions and tours from staff and the touchscreens. Growth in visitor numbers has outstripped expectations, with the normal Easter weekend visitation increasing from 400 people per day to 1,000.

"VICs need to embrace technology that is the right fit with what makes the destination unique," says Hamish Fell, Project Leader – Visitor Services, City of Albany

The National Gallery is boosting awareness and ticket sales for their exhibitions by providing teasers using VR at the *Canberra and Region VIC*.

Visitors to the VIC can pick up cardboard headsets provided by the Gallery and enjoy a VR preview of the latest exhibition.

The VIC also offers another VR experience where visitors enjoy a hot air balloon view of events and attractions in Canberra and the region. The Centre decided to introduce the technology after visitor research revealed strong support.



Effective technology and avoiding the shiny new object

Striking the right balance between the VICs' online engagement and offline visitor servicing is crucial. The technology offered should fit the experience the destination delivers and the needs and expectations of the target markets.

As visitors increasingly seek out information and make bookings online, VICs need to be readily accessible on the destination's website and in social media engagement. There is an opportunity for the DN/RTO/LTO and VIC to connect with visitors in their pre-visit planning stage, maintain that connection with them during their travels and then encourage experiences to be shared online. Social media is a critical visitor engagement tool for VICs.

VIC resources need to be equipped financially and with digital expertise to step into this role when required. Continuing to update the knowledge and skills in online information delivery can be challenging for VICs. Dedicated staff members or teams that handle online enquiries and social media engagement can be an efficient way of centres keeping content knowledge high and consistent.

The provision of free WiFi is an expected service for visitors in public spaces. Now it is not about whether WiFi is available but how fast it is. Beyond WiFi, there is no 'one size fits all' model of digital technology for VICs. Touchscreen tables and kiosks were the 'must have' for VICs in 2015 but have delivered mixed results. Breakdowns and costly maintenance or lack of visitor use has resulted in some VICs removing or rationalising the technology.

Southern Highlands VIC found visitors didn't seek out the touchscreens when in the centre. Their greatest value has been as a supporting tool for staff to use in orientating visitors and providing additional information about tourism product and events. A video wall showing destination imagery, destination apps, online content and social media are proving the right mix for the Southern Highlands VIC in their visitor engagement.

In other parts of the Southern Highlands, touchscreens are being rolled out at entry points where there is no VIC to enable visitors to have access to a basic level of destination content. Across the country, touchscreens are providing another touchpoint for visitors where a VIC is not feasible. With content linked to the destination website and real time bookability, touchscreens enable destinations to increase their service to visitors and deliver benefits to the visitor economy.

In considering the technology to provide, VICs must remember that digital resources can not make the right connections between all of the data to replace a well trained local expert who can hone in on a visitor's needs and state of mind. In rural and remote Australia where visitors can drive long distances without connection, the VIC provides peace of mind and fills an important need in ensuring visitors have access to the information they need.

"Tourism is experiences — you can't get that online. People at visitor centres are a big part of delivering that experience, confirming decisions or validating information in an impartial, ethical and professional way"¹⁷.

Priorities:

- Ensure the offline service remains robust, with maps and staff/volunteers on hand to answer questions.
- Offer intuitive, easy to find website content that allows visitors to source information for their planning, make bookings and engage with VICs for tailored advice.
- Deliver tailored itineraries and advice based on user preferences both offline and online.
- Continue to harness social media marketing and rating tools such as TripAdvisor to build VIC engagement with visitors and share information in a cost effective way.
- Work with local government in developing social media policies that are effective for dealing with visitor markets.
- Regularly review the online services with the DN/RTO/LTO (if operated separately) to ensure they match visitor needs while appropriate to the VIC context.
- Ensure technology-based services are kept in working order and are accessible for all visitors (wheelchair users, visually and hearing impaired).
- Maintain staff and volunteer knowledge and expertise in use of digital technology.
- Continue to evolve accreditation criteria to reflect the need for VICs to be proactive in both online and offline information delivery.

17 Haeberlin Consulting, 2014, *The future of visitor centres in WA*

4. EMBRACE VISITOR SERVICING

Broadening the service experience

VICs must inspire visitors to discover a region's unique stories and flavour through its people, place and produce. A growing number of VICs are looking at how they provide information and also extending their services to provide more reasons to visit the centre, encourage people to linger and ultimately to boost the economic and social benefits generated.

Cafés, produce sales, merchandise, walking tours and leasing space for business and community use are some of the services VICs are including. Key for each VIC is ensuring the services offered are appropriate to the visitor markets, the destination and the size and scale of the centre and enable the VIC to stay true to its core objective of providing outstanding visitor information.

"Visitors are increasingly sophisticated. Simply providing information and toilets is no longer enough. When visitors are on the road they are seeking good food – if made with local produce – even better, quality experiences and mementos to buy as well as information and toilet stops. There is an opportunity for VICs to meet all of those needs in one location," says Mitch Lowe, Tourism and Events Manager, Lismore, NSW



Food Fossickers Tour is a food walking tour that incorporates four local businesses in Bendigo, Victoria.

The tour starts at Bendigo's VIC and is led by a volunteer guide. They take small groups with a maximum of eight people creating an intimate experience. It's a behind the scenes experience that includes tastings at each business and a goody bag with products. Visitors taste fresh food, meet the person behind the business and hear the story of not just the food but the person behind the craft. The tour was developed for the international market (Singapore/Malaysia) to extend on the food experience in Melbourne.

Promoting and selling local products enables VICs to support the efforts of small local producers and artisans as well as give visitors a taste of what the destination offers. Retail sales and tasting sessions also encourage residents to make use of the centres. Southern Highlands VIC features wineries and local food producers and offers tastings and sales. In the heart of the Clare Valley wine region, the Clare Valley Wine Food and Tourism Centre draws visitors, the local industry and residents to weekly wine tasting sessions. Lismore VIC provides an online and instore retail outlet with a large range of local products from the Northern Rivers, and offers gift packs for online and store customers.

The retail section of the Canberra and Region Visitor Centre has become the go-to place for quality merchandise from local artisans and producers. As well as the chocolates, spirits, wines, beers, nuts, oils, local designer merchandise, jewellery and books, the VIC provides cheaper souvenir options to cater for the needs of their different visitor markets.



The rebuild of the *Malanda VIC* provided an opportunity to bring a fresh approach to the visitor experience offered.

While always a visitor information and environmental interpretive centre, the displays were tired and in need of an upgrade. The new centre celebrates the area's natural history, Indigenous connections and significant wildlife. Visitors can browse the brochures and quality retail items on natural history, Indigenous arts and local story books in the visitor information service area and step into a rich visual and aural experience of the local environment in the interpretation section.

An exploding volcano, a tree kangaroo (taxidermy and a VR experience), stories and displays of Indigenous artefacts and flora and fauna, and a children's area give visitors a greater understanding of the area's values and ways to support their conservation. Visitors can also book a walking tour with a local Indigenous guide to learn about Malanda's Indigenous story and natural history.

"Our reputation for providing good knowledge on natural history and the local flora and fauna continues to grow. For the first time we are now attracting domestic and international tour groups, particularly education groups," says Gwyneth Nevard, Coordinator Tourism Culture and Events, Tablelands Regional Council

Over a seven year period the *Lismore VIC* has been transformed from an information point to an attraction in its own right.

Over 16 interpretative panels tell the stories of Lismore's history, Aboriginal culture and unique natural environment. Lightboxes in each panel link the content to local attractions, events and tours to encourage visitors to explore and immerse themselves in the region. An indoor replica rainforest includes rainforest murals, sounds, taxidermy animals, interpretative panels and a waterfall.

The VIC also has an Aboriginal Gallery space featuring artworks of high profile and emerging Aboriginal artists; rotating exhibitions feature contemporary Aboriginal art from the Bundjalung nation. A retail outlet is a showcase for the area's producers, with a huge range visitors can take home.

School groups to the VIC have increased by 500% as a result of the VIC's refocus. These visits are encouraging the students to return with family members. Visitor numbers overall continue to grow and engagement with the community is strong.



LISMORE VIC, NEW SOUTH WALES

Meeting a market gap

Some VICs are extending the services they offer to those where a private operator is not filling a need until such time as there is a demonstrated business opportunity. Services include walking tours (e.g. Gawler VIC), Cycle hire (Southern Highlands and Barossa VICs) vehicle charging points (Southern Highlands), waste dump points and book exchanges.



The Alice Springs VIC goes one step further and demonstrates market opportunities for businesses.

Free walking tours were offered until two private operators decided there was a business opportunity. It was a similar story with a visitor guide. Now private operators run the tours and visitor guide and the VIC is exploring other initiatives such as the free hop on bus service it recently commenced to attractions around town. Once the business case is demonstrated, it is anticipated that private enterprise will take over, after which more opportunities will be sought by the VIC.

“The role of VICs is to fill market failure in meeting visitor and tourism industry needs”, says Stephen Schwer, CEO of Central Australia Tourism. “By devoting attention on where market failure exists, the VIC can be very focused in its resource allocation.”

Identifying the services to provide

Determining where to focus a VIC's time and resources can be challenging. VICs need to be able to identify the opportunity provided by available local product and current and potential visitation and then match it with the VIC role and functions and the appropriate level of investment required. Mapping the level of opportunity against the level of funding enables the VIC to assess the optimal level of investment as well as co-location or consolidation decisions. The funding:opportunity model highlights that as the level of opportunity grows, so does the potential broader value that the visitor centre can be delivering to the local community¹⁸.

Often for VICs under the most pressure to maintain sustainability, doing less but with greater focus can optimise the investment and achieve better long term results. In considering services to provide, it is also critical for VICs to not lose sight of the basics.

"The visitor experience must be a positive one across all touchpoints with the VIC. The atmosphere in the centre needs to be upbeat and bubbly – we are serving people on holiday. VIC staff and volunteers have to be committed to helping answer the questions visitors may have. If the toilets are not clean or the parking is hard to access, visitors can be very unhappy with their experience of the VIC and the area. And it is important to make visitors feel comfortable with just using the toilets because we have no idea of their story. They may have spent a lot of money in the previous town and are just stopping to stretch their legs," says Julie Webster, Team Leader, Dubbo Visitor Information Centre.

18 Haeberlin Consulting, *The future of visitor centres in WA, 2014*

Priorities:

- Determine the best vehicle to provide inspiration and added value to visitors for the location – bricks and mortar VICs are not the only solution.
- Harness commercialisation opportunities that offer value-add services to visitors, industry and local community.
- Assess the level of opportunity for the destination based on visitor numbers and local tourism product against the level of funding in the strategic planning for the VIC.
- Consider the services and experiences that the VIC could offer to reinforce the area's story, create a point of difference, add value to the visitor experience and increase dwell time in the centre and destination.
- Review VIC layout and adapt where needed to support a welcome, concierge approach to assisting visitors and to also encourage people to linger, browse information and retail products, and make bookings.
- Work with the DN/RTO/LTO/local council (if separate) in maintaining regional content online.
- Promote VICs' role and functions during times of emergency to local community.



LISMORE VIC, NEW SOUTH WALES

LESSONS FROM RETAIL

A retailer today requires agility and a multiplicity of delivery platforms to meet customer needs and expectations. Many people are going into stores knowing what they want because they have done their homework online and are looking to try the product or validate their research and make the purchase decision with face-to-face support.

Rebel Sport has undergone a process of re-imagining stores in a bid to inspire customers. Product is now arranged based on customer needs. The running section for example, brings together shoes, clothing and equipment. Rebel Sport believes this change in layout is establishing the organisation's credibility as a sports specialist. It also moves Rebel beyond being just about product and price to where they can have a bigger conversation with customers about their needs and how they can be met.

Essential ingredients for success

Be clear on:

- The purpose of the business and what the brand stands for
- Who are the customers
- The issues/problems you are trying to solve for them

Key actions for future proofing

1. Bricks and mortar businesses need to gather insights on the customer
2. Regularly review and confirm the role of the store/business
3. Increase technology skills to meet customer needs

Mistake to avoid

Assuming knowing the customers without getting enough insight for informed decisions.

Source: *The Next 5 Years*, Bernard Salt

5. MAKE VISITOR SERVICING EVERYONE'S BUSINESS

Collaborative partnerships

Visitor servicing has been defined as "the sum of visitor interactions with our region and our product across the trip cycle"¹⁹. Visitor servicing involves the entire community including local government, DNs/RTOs/LTOs, businesses, residents and other VICs. Research reports continue to reinforce increasing collaboration between these partners to help promote and sustain the local tourism industry. The effectiveness or otherwise of these partnerships in attracting visitor markets and meeting their needs and expectations also flow to neighbouring areas.

Central partners are local government as the driver of economic development growth and the DNs/RTOs/LTOs as the tourism destination manager and marketer. With more than half of VICs run by local government and most having some kind of council support, local government is a significant influencer on the information service offered. Increasingly local governments are supporting the transition to new ways of working for VICs. They are recognising that a VIC delivering an exceptional visitor experience translates into economic growth. Their continued funding of VICs is crucial due to the service's economic and social contribution to local communities. Victoria's Local Government Health Check 2018 highlights that it will be imperative to build a shared understanding of visitor needs and the roles and responsibilities of VICs, RTOs/LTOs and local government in meeting those needs and measuring that investment.



When the *Clare Valley VIC* in South Australia (SA) closed in March 2014, the local tourism industry, producers and the community came together to find a way forward from what was considered an unacceptable situation.

The local wine makers, grape growers, arts and cuisine groups together with community representatives formed an organisation to run a new VIC, the Clare Valley Wine Food and Tourism Centre.

The centre showcases the local producers and artisans of the Clare Valley. Visitors can taste and purchase regional produce and local art work. Wine tasting sessions every Friday afternoon feature local wineries and other producers and are a drawcard for visitors, local businesses and the community to come together. The centre now attracts 25,000 visitors per annum.

The VIC leases the Council's original visitor information centre building and receives some funding support from Council in addition to a promotional levy from local businesses featured in the centre. According to the Centre Manager, Paula Jones, "While the VIC may never be fully self-funded, the new VIC model represents a more cost effective option to offer a community."

19 Komosion, *Rethink! Reimagining Visitor Servicing*, 2018, Draft Report

Yarra Ranges Tourism is embracing the power of collaboration in information distribution.

The organisation has a diversified approach to visitor servicing and relies heavily on local businesses to not just deliver excellent customer service but also distribute information.

With the aim of engaging more visitors, Yarra Ranges Tourism identified the most visited destinations within its region and then worked with local businesses to strategically place information stands where visitors gathered. In the first year, the number of visitors receiving brochures more than doubled. It is also trialling digital screens across the region.

Partnering with the Box Hill Institute, Yarra Ranges Tourism created a training course called 'Visitor serving is everyone's business'. The 90-minute course is free for partnering businesses and can be tailored for their business needs.



VICs reinforce DN/RTO/LTO's marketing messages and support their efforts in encouraging increased visitation and spend in the region through the inspiration and influence they generate. The DN/RTO/LTO in turn are important in ensuring visitors are directed to the VIC for information and bookings.

Clarity of the VIC roles and responsibilities in supporting the DN/RTO/LTOs is vital to ensure an effective relationship between the two. Where a VIC is run separately from the DN/RTO/LTO, a Memorandum of Understanding can assist in formalising arrangements and creating a closer partnership.

Alice Springs visitor servicing is tightly integrated with both the marketing and membership functions of the RTO.

Marketing campaigns' call-to-actions drive bookings through the VIC. The RTO works with the industry to build understanding of the benefits members gain from the RTO operating a VIC service.

The 'visitor economy' acknowledges that many communities and industries contribute to and benefit from tourism growth. Small businesses in markets not traditionally regarded as part of the tourism industry, and/or those located in suburban, regional or remote areas can have a role to play in creating unique visitor experiences that see customers become advocates for the destination and its brand.

Well informed, these local businesses and community members play an important part in visitor information servicing. It is critical that all stakeholders are engaged and aligned. The Alberta Government developed a visitor services multi-channel ecosystem model that seeks to ensure all providers of visitor services are proactive across all channels and identify opportunities for interaction with visitors. Residents and the front line staff of local businesses are identified as key players in offering a warm welcome to visitors.²⁰





One reason for the impressive tourism award tally of the Alice Springs VIC is its commitment to industry and community collaboration.

The accredited VIC as part of the RTO, Tourism Central Australia, is actively involved with organisations in the community to ensure tourism positively impacts the visitor economy. The VIC also has a buy-local policy for products sold in the centre, signed the Indigenous Art Code to ensure ethical trading in Indigenous art that supports local Aboriginal communities and has become certified as a Climate Action Business with Ecotourism Australia.

Priorities:

- Continue to build partnerships with local government, industry and community in growing the visitor economy and directing the future of visitor servicing .
- Gain agreement of local government, DNS/RTOs/LTOs of their respective roles and responsibilities with VICs in meeting visitor needs and how performance will be measured.
- Continue to educate tourism operators on the value of VICs for selling their industry and how to develop bookable product.
- Ensure VIC staff and volunteers understand and maintain contemporary knowledge of the value of VICs and the industry and the role they play.
- Collaborate with the regional network of VICs to enhance knowledge, increase reach and encourage visitor dispersal and spend and improve viability.

Collaborative partnerships with attractions can increase dwell time and spend in region and through ticketing and/or itineraries, provide visitors with a seamless experience. As noted earlier, VICs can significantly influence the effectiveness of the tourism industry in reaching visitors and encouraging them to spend time and money locally. VICs are establishing partnerships with accommodation providers, vehicle rentals and taxi companies to service visitors better.

The ability to connect and share ideas and resources between VICs is a means to increase the consistency of visitor experience across a network of centres with different owners and operating models. A new online forum, The Tourism Hub, has been developed by Australia Regional Tourism Ltd (ART) to foster greater collaboration amongst visitor information centres (accredited/non-accredited) across Australia. While ART are funding the technology and will moderate the site, the intention is that the platform will be "owned and driven" by industry operators.

The Hub will also include a webinar feature to deliver a professional development program for volunteers and staff in accredited VICs that is linked to Nationally Accredited Units and can be put towards a Cert III or Diploma in Tourism if desired. As a collaboration tool and vehicle for upskilling, the Hub will address a gap highlighted in the previous *Australia's Accredited VICs: A Strategic Directions Paper*.

6. ENGENDER AN EFFECTIVE NETWORK

With so many different operating models in Australia, an effective network in each state/territory of VICs working together with overarching leadership nationally is vital. Without leadership there is a collection of independently operating VICs. Those VICs can be strong performers where they are backed by local government or a private organisation. Across the network however, VICs are missing opportunities for growth. Visitor services providers need the right knowledge and resources to provide high quality visitor services.

A managed network with an effective centralised management layer in place can improve performance for VICs through greater accountability and capacity building. Currently training is provided at state/territory level and there is no commonality in what is provided, limiting the network's ability to consistently provide a high-quality user experience.

Stronger brand awareness and integrity would also result. The "i" brand, and the benefits it promises is being inconsistently applied throughout visitor centres. The strength of a nationwide network of VICs — a promise of a warm welcome and reassurance of the service visitors can expect — is not being fully realised.

Centralised management also means the opportunity for common measures of success that can be shared with stakeholders. Currently the extent to which any measures exist and are managed is very much dependent on the relationship between each centre and its respective management body. Consequently there is no standard measure of the performance of visitor centres leaving many gaps in understanding the impacts of VICs and trends over time. These information gaps

also limit VICs' ability to demonstrate their value. Analysis of visitor centre door count data and regional visitation statistics highlights that each visitor centre is performing at a very different level in terms of share of total visitors to its region. Visitor information services providers need the tools to demonstrate their value.

At a state/territory level, there are several research initiatives underway to assist VIC activity. Victoria's VICs are surveying visitors into the centres to gain a better understanding of what they are looking for from VICs. Data collection is ongoing, which will allow the VICs to identify any patterns and benchmark over time.

NSW and QLD have initiated the collection of data on visitor WiFi usage at VICs across their respective states. The data allows VICs to gain insights into the visitor markets into their centres and to promote events and festivals, merchandise, specials and offers to visitors via their landing pages. If individual VICs across the network were to regularly and consistently analyse their data, there is an opportunity for the network to create postcode heat maps that illustrate visitor origin and the VICs they have travelled to across the state/territory.

Raising the profile of the national accredited VIC brand, the yellow and blue *i*, continues to be an important priority. Visitors need to be made aware of the brand, what it means and the role of the VICs as an information channel before they arrive in Australia so they know to search it out offline or online. Australia's loose network of VICs are not reaching and attracting international visitors to the same level as neighbouring New Zealand, or the associated economic benefits.

Elements of an effective network

- Overarching national leadership that provides strategic direction and oversees accreditation standards.
- All VICs are working well and consistently delivering a high level of service.
- Level of service continuously lifted across all VICs, supported by training and resources.
- Work across boundaries, encouraging visitor dispersion around regions and across states/territories.
- State/territory network driven by the STO providing financial and staff resources and oversight.
- Brand value and integrity protected.
- Increasing brand awareness in visitor markets.
- Priorities and available resources aligned to maximise the impact of resources within the state/territory and national VIC networks.

Priorities:

- Re-commit to a national network and develop a strategic planning framework which sets measureable KPIs to support the growth of the network
- Secure resources for the management of the national network and the national brand.
- Introduce consistent accredited VIC network leadership and support across the states and territories
- Investigate an effective method to enable the STOs to monitor and measure VICs direct and indirect contributions to the visitor economy and benchmark over time
- Require strategic planning on VICs' priorities and actions, ensuring the role and functions of the VICs fit the opportunity visitor numbers and available product present
- Continue to inform VICs on the value of data and achieve a common priority on data collection
- Introduce consistency in VIC professionalism nationally through staff training

PRIORITIES AT A GLANCE

Adopt a customer-focused approach

- i. Commit to evolve and innovate VIC business models to enable the service to be agile and responsive to changing visitor and industry needs and a key driver of regional dispersal and spend.

- ii. Foster the sharing of information and tools to assist VIC owners/managers in the regular review and refresh of their delivery model for visitor information servicing.

- iii. Review and confirm the customers to be served and the role the VIC will play in meeting their needs.

- iv. Undertake regular strategic business planning for VICs that assesses and optimises the operating context, footprint, resourcing levels, value creation and the delivery model for customer needs.

- v. Ensure that the provision of impartial information and a professional service endures as the core of the VIC offering, with other roles adding value.

- vi. Work with the DN/RTO/LTO in identifying the stories that resonate with visitor markets and foster authentic story telling that compels visitors to experience the product.

- vii. Work with the DN/RTO/LTO in developing opportunities for visitors to engage and share their destination experiences.

- viii. Continue to evolve the VIC accreditation standards to reflect the changing business models while maintaining a consistent level and quality of service across the network.

Position yourself to fish where the fish are

- i. Position the VICs as a destination's critical touchpoint for visitors.

- ii. Regularly assess visitor movement trends and where visitors are gathering (offline and online) to ensure VICs are prominent and easily accessible to the target visitor markets on the ground and in online channels.

- iii. Consider opportunities to co-locate with complementary services or businesses that maintain or enhance the accessibility of the VIC and its capacity to increase visitor dwell time and spend in the centre and destination.

- iv. Work with the DN/RTO/LTO (where operated separately) in developing an online service driven by the destination management and marketing strategy.

- v. Determine the consistent information to be provided across the multiple online and offline information sources and ensure its currency and accessibility is maintained.

- vi. Continue to review visitor market information engagement needs and be proactive in reaching out through the delivery methods relevant to the market.

Integrate technology with face-to-face service

- i. Ensure the offline service remains robust, with maps and staff/volunteers on hand to answer questions.

- ii. Offer intuitive, easy to find website content that allows visitors to source information for their planning, make bookings and engage with VICs for tailored advice.

- iii. Deliver tailored itineraries and advice based on user preferences both offline and online.

- iv. Continue to harness social media marketing and rating tools such as TripAdvisor to build VIC engagement with visitors and share information in a cost effective way.

- v. Work with local government in developing social media policies that are effective for dealing with visitor markets.

- vi. Regularly review the online services with the DN/RTO/LTO (if operated separately) to ensure they match visitor needs while appropriate to the VIC context.

- vii. Ensure technology-based services are kept in working order and are accessible for all visitors (wheelchair users, visually and hearing impaired).

- viii. Maintain staff and volunteer knowledge and expertise in use of digital technology.

- ix. Continue to evolve accreditation criteria to reflect the need for VICs to be proactive in both online and offline information delivery.

Embrace visitor servicing

- i. Determine the best vehicle to provide inspiration and added value to visitors for the location – bricks and mortar VICs are not the only solution.

- ii. Harness commercialisation opportunities that offer value-add services to visitors, industry and the local community.

- iii. Assess the level of opportunity for the destination based on visitor numbers and local tourism product against the level of funding in the strategic planning for the VIC.

- iv. Consider the services and experiences that the VIC could offer to reinforce the area's story, create a point of difference, add value to the visitor experience and increase dwell time in the centre and destination.

- v. Review VIC layout and adapt where needed to support a welcome, concierge approach to assisting visitors and to also encourage people to linger, browse information and retail products and make bookings.

- vi. Work with the DN/RTO/LTO/local council (if separate) in maintaining regional content online.

- vii. Promote VICs' role and functions during times of emergency to local community.

Make visitor servicing everyone's business

- i. Continue to build partnerships with local government, industry and community in growing the visitor economy and directing the future of visitor servicing.

- ii. Gain agreement of local government and DNs/RTOs/LTOs of their respective roles and responsibilities with VICs in meeting visitor needs and how performance will be measured.

- iii. Continue to educate tourism operators on the value of VICs for selling their industry and how to develop bookable product.

- iv. Ensure VIC staff and volunteers understand and maintain contemporary knowledge of the value of VICs and the industry and the role they play.

- v. Collaborate with the regional network of VICs to enhance knowledge, increase reach and encourage visitor dispersal and spend and improve viability.

Engender an effective network

- i. Re-commit to a national network and develop a strategic planning framework which sets measureable KPIs to support the growth of the network.

- ii. Secure resources for the management of the national network and the national brand.

- iii. Introduce consistent accredited VIC network leadership and support across the states and territories.

- iv. Investigate an effective method to enable the STOs to monitor and measure VICs' direct and indirect contributions to the visitor economy and benchmark over time.

- v. Require strategic planning on VICs' priorities and actions, ensuring the role and functions of the VICs fit the opportunity visitor numbers and available product present.

- vi. Continue to inform VICs on the value of data and achieve a common priority on data collection.

- vii. Introduce consistency in VIC professionalism nationally through staff training.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

This paper demonstrates a national commitment to ensuring accredited VICs maximise their contribution to the visitor economy and continue to be valued by visitors, the tourism industry, local government and communities. It will be used to inform the decisions of VICs, STOs, local government, DNs and RTOs/LTOs.



Disclaimer: This paper has been produced based on existing STO reports and other research on the future of accredited VICs. Irrespective of any measures taken by the Victoria State Government (Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources) and all State Tourism Organisations as members of the national VIC group, to check that the information is accurate or complete, in no event will the Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources or any State Tourism Organisation be liable to any person in contract, tort (including, but without limitation, negligence) or otherwise if any information in the paper is incomplete or inaccurate.

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