



Harrow, Victoria

Across Australia, towns and regions hold special events to attract people to their communities for a day or two. However, there are very few communities who hold the same event every week, for months on end, year after year. It's an even more remarkable feat when you realise that the community that stages the 'Harrow Sound and Light Show' numbers only 90 residents and it takes 60 of them to run each show.

If not for its long-running Sound and Light Show, Harrow would have remained a largely unknown rural village on the edge of the Grampians / Wimmera regions. However, it has a potential catchment of 150,000 people within an hours drive in every direction, especially when you include the tourism centres of Grampians, the Coonawarra Wine Region and the western end of the Great Ocean Road.

It's a pretty town, with the beauty of its river gums complementing the heritage streetscape. It was the home of Australia's first Aboriginal cricketer and the recently built Johnny Mullagh Museum takes pride of place in the main street. But it is the weekly coming together of local characters and local yarns that has brought Harrow nation-wide fame.

The idea grew out of the economic hardship of rural Victoria during the mid 1990s, especially following the loss of some key services. The event was initiated by the local publican and it draws inspiration for its storyline from many of the town's colourful forebears in the local cemetery.

The rollicking theatrical production begins with dinner in the 1846 Hermitage Hotel, then guests are lead through the streets of Harrow, where car batteries and fires bring to life the stories of bushrangers, explorers, doctors and undertakers.



The Harrow Promotion and Development Group received an initial grant of \$20,000 from Business Victoria to produce a business plan for the venture, but everything else runs on the smell of an oily rag. Yet, the weekly shows, held during the warmer months of the year, have raised significant funds for local facilities and have boosted local business and community pride. They also teach locals and visitors about the area's history and, without question, have put the little town on the tourism map.

Since starting the Sound and Light Show, Harrow has also boosted its profile through its annual 'Beaut Blokes' get-togethers, which attempt to partner the eligible bachelors of the district with city-based ladies.

Not only have they attracted a bevy of potential partners from around the country, they have also secured national television and magazine coverage.

Key findings:

One dynamic personality can change the attitude of a town.

The tyranny of distance from tourism markets can be overcome if the 'pull' of the product is strong enough.

Tourism development and promotion can be a catalyst to unite a small community.