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City of Ballarat Visitor Services

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The City of Ballarat's decision in 2006 to decentralise visitor information service has not only made it easier for its 2 million visitors per year to get hold of information, but it has also created a tighter network among tourism operators.

Visitor Services Coordinator, Jim McConkey, said the notion of expecting visitors to head to one centralised point to obtain information doesn't work very well in a city as large and with as many diverse attractions as Ballarat.

"The 'we are here, so come and see us' attitude is outdated and even perhaps a bit arrogant" he says.

The fact that they had outgrown their previous CBD location prompted the Council's Tourism Unit to examine better ways of placing information in the hands of visitors and in places where they were most likely to need it.

The major information centre was re-located to the Eureka Centre, where it co-habits with one of Ballarat's premier attractions and offers the 165,000+ yearly visitors additional facilities such as a café, historic gardens, children's playground and ample parking. A second accredited V.I.C. was also established within the CBD at the renowned Art Gallery of Ballarat. It uses the Gallery's front line staff, supplemented by volunteers. The gallery was persuaded to open from 9am to gain V.I.C. accreditation and to better serve the visitor.

The high levels of visitation to Sovereign Hill also required a satellite centre to be co-located within Sovereign Hill's gift shop. It is not staffed, but its brochure racks are re-stocked every morning and auto-dial telephones put enquirers in direct contact with staff at the main centre.

Information boards and brochures have been located in the Ballarat Town Hall - itself a visitor attraction because of its 19th century architecture.



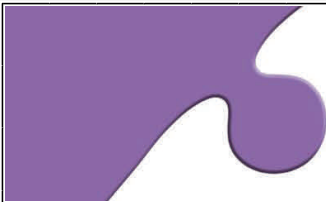
The Council's customer service staff received additional training to enable them to deal with the myriad of questions asked by visitors, while auto-dial phones again provide a well-used back-up service.

Boards have also been installed at the city's popular attractions, including the Ballarat Wildlife Park, the Conservatory in the Botanical Gardens, and at Goldrush Mini Golf. Training was provided to the staff of the three attractions. Information is also available at the city's main railway station, with signage directing rail travellers to the nearby Art Gallery of Ballarat.

However, the Council also recognises that many of its visitors never go to the city's attractions or visitor centres, but most of them shop at some stage during their visit. Therefore they have provided counter-top brochure racks for use by non-core tourism businesses, especially in shops.

Jim McConkey says the new network of information outlets needs to balance the benefit of having additional points of contact, but to not diminish the quality of the service provided. Ongoing training of the 75 volunteers as well as the front line staff at the Gallery and Town Hall he believes is the key to success.

The training program has also been extended to Ballarat's public bus drivers. The buses now also carry a good supply of maps and visitor guides. The Council has even had success in getting the companies to alter timetables and routes to meet visitor needs.



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The next challenge is to build the knowledge base of the city's taxi drivers, so they, too, can act as mobile information officers.

The decentralised approach to visitor information has also made it easier for tourism operators to remain in touch, says McConkey. They are now more inclined to drop off and collect brochures from the greater number of information outlets.

Weekly 'what's on' listings are compiled and circulated by email and fax to attractions, accommodation and even to local parking officers.

So, while you can still get booked in Ballarat, at least you can find out what's showing at the local theatre while the officer is writing your parking ticket!

Visitor services staff work hard to regularly attend meetings of the Ballarat Tourist Association and of new specialist groups, such as the B&B Association.

The previous commercial booking service operated by the visitor centre did not meet its costs and it has now been replaced by a quality referral service.

A weekly update of accommodation vacancies is also circulated to operators, which helps them to provide referral bookings when they are full. It is particularly useful during major events.

The previous gap that existed between Ballarat's tourism operators and the Council has been significantly reduced, as both parties work hard to help each other, through providing better information services to visitors.

