# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**BACKGROUND TO THE GUIDE**

**INTRODUCTION TO TOURISM INFORMATION CENTRES**
- The need for Tourist Information Centres  
- The market for Tourist Information Centres  
- The functions of Tourist Information Centres  
- Tourist Information Centres in Vietnam

**PLANNING FOR TOURIST INFORMATION CENTRES**
- Selecting a suitable location  
- Determining the scope  
- Design and layout  
- Facilities and equipment  
- Signage

**TOURIST INFORMATION CENTRE OPERATIONS AND MANAGEMENT**
- Delivering good customer service  
- Presentation and hygiene  
- Human resources  
- Office administration  
- Funding Tourist Information Centre operation  
- Building partnerships

**BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES**

---

**Programme Implementation Unit:** Room 402, 4th Floor, Vinaplast - Tai Tam Building 39A Ngo Quyen Street, Hanoi, Vietnam  
**Tel:** (84 4) 3734 9357 / 3734 9358  |  **Fax:** (84 4) 3734 9359  |  **E-mail:** info@esrt.vn  |  **Website:** www.esrt.vn

© 2013 Environmentally and Socially Responsible Tourism Capacity Development Programme

This publication has been produced with the assistance of the European Union funded Environmentally and Socially Responsible Tourism Capacity Development Programme (ESRT).

The content of this publication is the sole responsibility of the ESRT programme and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union. The European Union and ESRT do not guarantee the accuracy of the data included in this publication and accept no responsibility for any consequence of their use.

ESRT and the EU encourage printing or copying exclusively for personal and non-commercial use with proper acknowledgement of ESRT and the EU. Users are restricted from reselling, redistributing, or creating derivative works for commercial purposes without the express, written consent of ESRT and the EU.
BACKGROUND TO THE GUIDE

The Vietnam Tourist Information Centre Guide has been developed by the European Union-funded Environmentally and Socially Responsible Tourism Programme (ESRT) in response to the opening of the newly refurbished Hoi An Tourist Information Centre (TIC) under the support of UNESCO in mid-2013.

The Vietnam TIC Guide provides a simple and practical overview of the key elements required for successful TIC planning, design, operation and management. Key features of the Vietnam TIC Guide include:

- **Section One**: Introduction to tourist information centres detailing the need, function and market for tourist information centres as well as the situation of tourist information centres in Vietnam.
- **Section Two**: An examination of tourist information centre planning considerations such as appropriate location selection, determining the scope of products and services offered by the tourist information centre, design and layout requirements, facilities and equipment needs, and signage.
- **Section Three**: A guide to operations and management, including suggestions on how to deliver good customer service, good presentation and hygiene for staff, human resourcing, office administration, avenues for funding and building partnerships.

The European Union funded Environmentally and Socially Responsible Tourism Capacity Development Programme aims to build the capacity of stakeholders in the Vietnamese tourism sector in order to fully realize the substantial socio-economic development benefits available from tourism while protecting the natural and cultural resources on which the sector depends.

The Programme builds on the success of the former EU funded the Vietnam Human Resources Development in Tourism Project (2005-2010). The ESRT Programme works in three key areas: policy support and institutional strengthening, product competitiveness and public-private dialogue, and vocational training and education.
INTENDED USE OF THE GUIDE

The Vietnam TIC Guide is designed as a practical resource to assist organizations interested in starting-up a TIC in Vietnam. The Guide may be of interest to Provincial, District and Local Tourism Authorities, Non-Government Organizations working with tourism destinations, private sector organizations of tourist attraction sites, or even local communities who may themselves wish to drive the development of a TIC in their locality.
INTRODUCTION TO TOURISM INFORMATION CENTERS

The need for Tourist Information Centres

Today, travelers research their travel plans via a range of resources including the internet, television, magazines and newspapers and guidebooks. However, often this information can be too general because it is developed to cater to the widest possible audience and in order to stay relevant for the longest period of time. For travelers, local, up to date information about the region’s attractions, events and services is often required to ensure they have the best possible experience during their trip.

On the flip side are local businesses, particularly micro- and small-to-medium enterprises, which are forever looking for ways to promote their products and services directly to the consumer.

Tourist Information Centers (TICs) therefore operate to fill this gap of supporting visitors with their travel in a region, whilst at the same time supporting the local economy by providing local businesses with the opportunity to promote themselves directly to the consumer.

The market for Tourist Information Centres

Anyone who is looking for information on things to see and do and anyone who is a visitor to an area represents a market for TICs. Thus, the markets for TICs includes:

- **Visitors to the area** including Vietnamese living in the surrounding region or other parts of the country as well as international visitors;
- **Local residents** of the local community who would like information on things to see and do in their own area or either for themselves or for friends and relatives;
- **Local businesses** that may need to give their customers or clients information about their local area;
- **Travel agents and tour operators** who are planning trips to the region.

*Figure 1: The Visitor Journey and methods of information provision*
Sometimes also referred to as Visitor Information Centres, Welcome Centres, Interpretive Centres, and Visitor Resource Centres, the common nature of all is typically the establishment of a purpose-built or specifically refurbished multi-functional physical space with personnel who provide information to facilitate travelers’ experiences.1

With such a broad modus operandi it is not surprising that TICs perform a range of functions which may be undertaken to differing degrees according to the localised needs of the destination. Best guided by a tourism information plan that reflects the aims and objectives of the destination’s tourism services strategy, TICs generally fulfill the following core functions:

- **Promotion** – The TIC actively seeks to increase tourist demand by actively promoting the attractions of the region / area as a tourism destination, often also with the aim of increasing visitor expenditure and length of stay. For this, information racks with brochures of goods and services of local businesses are typically provided. A booking service may also be offered.

- **Travel advice and support** – The TIC assists the visitor with telecommunication services (e.g. paid telephone, internet access, SIM cards), itinerary planning, the provision of directions, permit requirements, and general travel advice (including “Do’s and Don’ts”). In this role, the TIC may also aim to control visitor flows (e.g. where they can go, at what time) and provide security and safety advice.

- **Retail activities** – The TIC performs income generating activities that financially support the operation. Activities might include selling tickets, paid advertising space, booking attainment commissions, in-house tours, or the sale of books and souvenirs. Large TICs that receive a high flow of visitors will often also sell snack food and drinks and may even operate a coffee shop.

- **Education and interpretation** – The TIC provides education and interpretation on the value of the area through displays and information. In this role the TIC may sometimes seek to act as a substitute for visiting a tourist attraction if it is too sensitive visit or difficult to access (e.g. a particular natural area or fragile heritage site).

---

In Vietnam, three main types of TIC exist: state-owned TICs, locally-authorized TICs, and privately owned TICs. State-owned and locally authorized TICs are the most limited in both number and range, and are largely restricted to booths or desks in key gateway locations such as international airports like Da Nang, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh, outlets in national-level tourism destinations such as Sapa, Hanoi Old Town, and premises in well frequented protected areas or tourist attraction sites.

Privately-owned TICs are by far, the most widespread provider of tourism information and advice in Vietnam. Although not typically considered a TIC in many countries, these tour operators and travel agent still the tourism information and travel assistance gap left by the limited number of state-owned and locally-authorized TICs in Vietnam by offering travel advice and services in the hope of a commercial transaction.

While public TICs in Vietnam are currently limited in scope, the immense growth of the tourism sector in Vietnam (Vietnam General Statistics Office figures indicate international arrivals more than tripled from 2.1 million in 2000 to 6.8 million in 2012, and domestic tourism also almost tripled from 11.7 million in 2000 to 32.5 million in 2012), there is already a dire need for more state-owned and locally-authorized TICs in Vietnam.
Selecting the location of a TIC is one of the most important decisions that will ever be made in the lifespan of the TIC as visitation levels are directly related to visibility and accessibility criteria.

Ideally, the TIC location will be guided by a broader regional tourism information plan that has strategically mapped out key tourism destinations in the region and identified where TICs are most needed in order to best facilitate the provision of information to visitors. This information may often be found in national or provincial tourism development or tourism marketing plans and strategies.

Typically, seek to place a TIC in a tourist “gateway”, where the majority of visitors enter a destination (e.g. an airport or near a major public transport hub), or otherwise to place the TIC in a central location within the tourism destination itself (e.g. in a town centre that receives tourists).

Some of the key success factors in determining where to locate a TIC within a selected destination are:

- **Near tourist attractions in locality or region** – The TIC should be near existing or planned tourist attractions that already receive a significant number of visitors or there are reasonable expectations for such.

- **Easy to find / highly visible** – The TIC building should not be overly obscured from view by trees, buildings or objects. The location should be highly visible to foot traffic as well as passengers in vehicles and be easy to find on a map.

- **Adequate parking** – Space for adequate off-street parking is available for the anticipated number of visitors to the TIC. The size of the parking area needs to consider the number and type of vehicles that are expected to access the TIC (e.g. large buses, mini-buses, motorbikes, cars).

- **Accessible from main road and on-site access** – The TIC should be easy for visitors travelling in vehicles to access from the main road / tourist route. A consideration of the most common types of vehicles used should therefore be considered (e.g. if most
tourists are expected to arrive in buses, then it would not be wise to put the TIC in a laneway. On site, the TIC should be easily accessible for the elderly and people with wheelchairs.

• **Favorable government conditions** – The local authority has provisions for commercial tourism businesses within the proposed area and has supportive policies. Different locations may attract different levels of financial assistance, and be subject to differing government regulations on the purchase or rent of land or office space, as well as allowable forms of development and operation.

• **Supportive development conditions** – Building materials, labor force, electricity, water, sewage, waste management systems, and communications technology are readily available in the area. For TICs to be constructed, the terrain/landform should also not be prohibitively difficult or expensive to develop.

### Determining the scope

The scope of a TIC refers to its physical size, the extent of services provided (e.g. will the TIC include an internet kiosk, coffee shop, toilets, sell souvenirs), and the level of availability to the public (hours and days of operation).

The range in scope of TICs can be immense, with some being as small as a booth with a staff member simply offering travel advice from an enquiries desk, through to large office complexes that include a dedicated bookings desk, souvenir shop, coffee shop, and well-equipped interpretation centre.

The overall scope of a TIC should ideally relate to a number of criteria including the level of visitor arrivals, the information and travel needs of the visitor, and the overall functional requirements of the TIC. Available budget and human resources will also factor largely in deciding the overall scope of the TIC.

Some of the key success factors in establishing the right scope of a TIC are:

• **Ensure the building size is appropriate for the size of the market** – In general, large TICs will be needed in high visitation areas, and small TICs are needed in less busy destinations. A review of tourism statistics on visitor arrivals (including trends) as well as discussions with tour operators who may frequent the TIC should be conducted in order to help understand the physical size characteristics required of the TIC. A comparative analysis of TICs in other destinations, the average number of customers serviced daily, and the total visitor arrival numbers can also help determine the physical size requirements of the TIC.

• **Provide services that meet a gap in the tourism information and travel assistance services available in the area** – Is there sufficient tourism information already being offered in the destination (e.g. by private sector)? Are there some facilities that are needed in the area but not available (e.g. internet facilities, telecommunications, public toilets, coffee shop, locally made souvenirs)? At what times and days do most visitors visit come to the area? Are there large numbers of visitors and tour groups that require information? Are there already other TICs in the region? A gap analysis of the scope of the products and services available and not available as well as visitor dynamics and needs should be conducted to help inform the types of services that might be required of the TIC.

• **Provide services that suit the functional requirements of the location** – The services provided by TICs in gateway locations can be different than that a TIC within a tourism destination or at an attraction site. For example, gateway TICs may often place more emphasis on the promotion of what to see and do in the area and where to stay through the provision of large information displays and booking services, whilst a TIC located centrally within a destination or at a key attraction typically concentrates on visitor management (e.g. when to visit a place, “Do’s and Don'ts”) and the provision of interpretive material and displays to substitute to visiting places that might be too fragile or difficult to access.
Design and layout

The design and layout of the TIC refers to the architecture of the building, the selected materials of construction, the interior design elements, and the types and locations of functional spaces.

A good TIC design is critical to ensure the TIC is visually engaging and thus more likely to attract visitors, whilst a well-considered layout is necessary to ensure the TIC has the required functionality and spaces to meet the needs of the various types of visitor.

Whilst the design and layout of a TIC will be limited by available budget and the results of the TIC scoping exercise, in general, the TIC design should aim to represent and reflect well the character, landscape, climate or key features / attractions of the local region. This may be done through the colours used, the architecture (e.g. to reflect the local buildings), or the materials (e.g. timber walls or flooring may be more appropriate for a TIC located in a natural environment).

Interior design

Key elements for good design of interior spaces includes:

- **Entry / lobby** – The entry and lobby should be sufficiently large and of sparse furnishings to allow the free flow of visitors into the TIC. If tour groups or high volumes of visitors are expected then double (automatic) doors should be considered.

- **Service desk** – The service desk should be large enough to house a computer for each member of staff, and offer enough space to lay out a large map. The location of the desk will depend on the shape of the room and visitor flow considerations (see below). As a general rule, the desk should face the entrance of the room so service staff can know when a visitor arrives in order to be able to provide them with a warm welcome and immediate service.

- **Information area** – The main part of the TIC room should be dedicated to the display of brochures and flyers. Wall racks or free-standing brochure racks can be used (or a combination of both). To provide the best display of the brochure front cover and enable easy access for the visitor brochure racks should be able to fit standard, 10cm wide x 21cm tall brochures without overlapping, with any wooden panels in front of the brochures no more than 15cm high. The highest rack / shelf should be easily reachable by an average height visitor.

- **Visitor lounge** – If room space is sufficient, a place for visitors to sit down, relax and read should be provided. This may be in the form of arm chairs, a bench seat, sofas, or table and chairs. The visitor lounge should not be too close to high traffic flow areas such as the front entrance or the service desk to enable good traffic flow within the room.

- **Internet station** – The provision of one or more computers with internet access will allow visitors to undertake their own web-based research on their trip. A booking system controlled by the service staff and time limits may be required for particularly busy TICs.

- **Administrative office and storage room** – An administrative office area may be required for large TICs in busy locations that have numerous staff. A storage room for surplus brochures and other items will also be useful.

- **Coffee shop** – Providing a coffee shop as a part of the TIC operation is becoming increasingly popular in large TICs that receive a high volume of visitors. If a coffee shop is planned, there must be enough space for a kitchen and dining area without intruding too much on the information space – which remains the primary function of the TIC.

---

Pearce P. 1991, ‘Visitor centres and their functions in the landscape of tourism’ in Moscardo & Hughes (Eds.) Visitor Centres: Exploring new territory, pp.7-14, James Cook University, Townsville, Australia
Visitor flow

When designing the interior space of the TIC it is paramount to first determine how you would like visitors to move around the room; this may be in a controlled and logical flow, or alternatively a free-flowing design. Three common types of visitor flow designs and their advantages and disadvantages are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visitor flow</th>
<th>Summary</th>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Free flowing</td>
<td>Fixtures are placed in free flowing patterns.</td>
<td>Encourages browsing, flexible design, good for small spaces.</td>
<td>Encourages loitering, confusion if logical order is required for exhibits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Circulation loop</td>
<td>Fixtures are arranged around a central “isle” that loops around the room.</td>
<td>Exposes the visitor to the greatest amount of information and merchandise.</td>
<td>Requires large room space, can cause traffic bottle necks in busy TICs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Spine layout</td>
<td>An isle is created from the front to the back with fixtures arranged on either side in free flowing or grid design.</td>
<td>Good for small spaces, combines controlled movement with free flowing elements.</td>
<td>Information or services at the back of the room receive less visitation than the front of the room.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Exterior design

For the purpose of this guide, the exterior of the TIC includes architectural and design elements as well as accessibility features. Key elements for good design of the TIC exterior includes:

- **Architecture** – The exterior design of the TIC should reflect the local environment and culture. For example, in urban areas a more modern multi-level space may be suitable, whereas in a rural area a low-scale building that reflects architectural elements of the local dwellings would be more appropriate. Creating a distinctive design welcomes visitors, assists their “sense of place” and encourages exploration.

- **Construction** – The materials used in the construction of the TIC building should be in keeping with the surrounding environment. Concrete and brick buildings would thus be more suitable in urban areas, whilst natural materials such as timber or stone may be more in-keeping with rural areas.

- **Accessibility** – The TIC building should be easily accessible to foot traffic (people) as well as vehicles (cars, buses, motorbikes). A pathway from the road to the front door should be provided for foot traffic, whilst a driveway and parking area should be provided for the most expected forms of vehicles (space permitting). Accessibility should take into consideration full human diversity, in particular, people who have challenges in mobility, vision and hearing impairments or cognitive disabilities, for example, by providing a ramp for the elderly and people on wheelchairs.
Responsible Tourism considerations in TIC location and design

Consideration should be given to the impact the location of a TIC will have on the natural, cultural and economic features of an area. In natural environments, the construction and operation of a TIC can alter water drainage systems, affect water catchments, increase traffic and pollution, and destroy the habitat of native flora and fauna and thereby add to their demise. In urban areas highly frequented TICs can generate increased localised traffic, and create additional noise and air pollution from visitor vehicles. Well-located TICs can however, also bring benefits to local businesses by promoting their products and services and thereby increasing economic activities, and to conservation by increasing visitation and ticket sales to protected areas that are used for conservation. In choosing a site for a TIC, the following issues should be addressed:

- What inputs (energy, materials, labour, and products) are necessary to support development and operation? Can labour and materials be sourced locally to reduce economic leakages?
- Can waste outputs (solid waste, sewage effluent, exhaust emissions) be dealt with at acceptable environmental costs?
- Is there existing built infrastructure such as roads, buildings, water and electricity?
- In natural environments, will the construction of facilities infringe on natural waterflows or cut animals off from known migration routes or sources of food and water? Are there any endangered species within the area that may be negatively affected by the construction and operation of the TIC?
- In urban areas, will the TIC be located in an area already zoned for commercial use and away from residential areas? Will the TIC location bring an unacceptable level of traffic and congestion to an area?
The facilities and equipment of a TIC refers to the functional spaces that are provided to the visitor as well as the staff, and the machines and technology they require in order for the TIC to operate effectively. The level and range of facilities and equipment provided will be guided by the scoping exercise that has determined the expected tourism information and travel assistance requirements of visitors to the area as well as the physical size of the TIC building. At a very basic level the followings types of facilities and equipment are needed:

### Service desk

The service desk (front desk) is where TIC service staff are stationed throughout the day and where the majority of interaction between the visitor and TIC staff takes place. A functional service desk will provide:

- Desk or bench with chairs for each member of TIC service staff
- Telephone and fax for enquiries, administration
- Computer for service staff with internet access
- Printer and photocopier
- Desk top brochure holder for most used information
- Office business card holder with business cards
- Stationery (pens, note pads, etc.)

### Displays

A display area can be used to provide visitors with interpretive information about the features of an area. The most common types of displays include:

- **Interactive displays** – Sometimes also called “edutainment”, interactive displays encourage visitors to touch objects, get actively involved and engage the senses in order to create a more powerful, memorable learning experience.

- **Models and artefacts** – TICs that play a greater role in interpretation and substitution for visiting actual sites will often provide displays of historical relics, artefacts, cultural items, or even the unique animals of the area. TICs in towns and cities often provide a replica model of the buildings and streets, highlighting key tourist attractions.

- **Posters and standees** – Large, easy to read information about the key attractions, history, culture or features of an area can be easily communicated to the visitor through wall posters and standees. In particular, a large-scale wall map is a good way for visitors to easily orientate themselves to the area. The map should highlights the streets, landmarks, parks, tourism attractions, and other services that are relevant to the visitor.
• **Media display** – A TV / monitor that plays short video clips of the local features is an alternative way to communicate information to the visitor about what to see and do. Video clips should not require sound or alternatively be played at a low volume in order to create an atmosphere that is conducive for the visitor to linger and explore all aspects of the TIC.

**Displays/Information area**

The information area is usually the main part of the TIC room and is used to display tourism print material. Basic requirements for the information area include:

• **Racks and / or shelves for tourism print material** – Stand-alone racks or shelving is required to contain tourism brochures, flyers, and guidebooks. Consideration should be paid to ensuring different sized-material is catered for.

• **Merchandise display** – Attractively designed and laid out shelves or display tables promoting merchandise. Good lighting effects can add to making the displays more attractive and increase the likelihood of generating sales. Potential items for sale can include clothing relating to the local area, maps, post cards, arts and crafts.

• **Lounge area** – An area containing a number of arm chairs, a sofa, or table and chairs gives visitors the chance to relax and read the material that they have collected.

**Additional options**

Other additional facilities and equipment that may be required of the TIC include:

• **Toilets** – Gender separate or combined.

• **Storage room / facility** – A room or cupboards to contain surplus print information and for administrative needs.

• **First Aid kit** – To treat a visitor or staff member in case of an emergency. Items in the kit must always be restocked as soon as they run out.

• **Coffee shop** – Larger TICs that receive a high volume of visitors can support income generation through the provision of a coffee shop. Adequate space will be required for a kitchen and dining area.
The purpose of signs is to create meaning between an object and a subject. Signs are of particular importance in tourism because tourism is centred on people travelling to often unfamiliar places outside their normal abode and therefore assistance is often required to help find, identify, and interpret things in the local area. The three main types of signs in tourism are directional signs, orientation signs and interpretive signs. Regardless of the type of sign, to achieve optimal effectiveness all signs should be:

1. Highly visible and unobstructed from view to visitor traffic (foot or vehicle), and

2. Easy to read from a distance (words are in a clear font type, font colour stands out and is easy to read).

**Directional signs**

The purpose of directional signs within the context of TICs is to help visitors find the TIC building. With studies revealing that most tourists do not specifically plan to visit a TIC when preparing their itinerary, the importance of clear directional signs in the local area that lead the visitor to the TIC is paramount. Some key criteria for good directional signs include:

- Consider placing signs using a tiered approach with advance warning signs placed 10-30 km from the TIC, followed by signs at key intersections, and finally signage at the TIC entrance.

- Use simple wording of not more than a few words (can include distance calculations, e.g. “Tourist Information Centre turn right after 50m”).

- Make sure the signs are easy to read in different weather conditions (e.g. at night, in the fog, in bright sunshine, in the rain) and of a durable construction (i.e. will not require frequent maintenance). Use internationally recognised tourism symbols and arrows in the correct colour and font (e.g. the universally understood italicised “i” is used to represent TICs).

**Orientation signs**

Orientation signs are used to identify the type or nature of a facility and its location. Orientation signs are most useful to visitors who have limited time and are best placed at or near the object or entrance to a place. Key considerations in the use of orientation signs are:

- Place sign where visitors naturally congregate in front of the object or place.

- Ensure sign is unobstructed from view and can be easily seen (e.g. above doors or hung from the ceiling above facilities or objects).

- If the TIC receives a large number of international visitors consider putting orientation signs in Vietnamese and English.

- Use internationally recognised tourism symbols in the correct colour and font (e.g. to denote wi-fi availability, toilets, telephone, etc.).

---

Footnote: Fallon, L. & Kriwoken, L. 2002, Key elements contributing to effective and sustainable visitor centres: An evaluation of the Strahan Visitor Centre, Tasmania, Australia, Sustainable Tourism CRC, Gold Coast, Australia
Interpretive signs and exhibits

Increasingly TICs are carrying out a substitution function, where they become an attraction in their own right, mixing elements of museum exhibits with an art gallery, and even a performance space. This may be particularly the case in remote locations where stand-alone museums, art galleries and cultural performance centres cannot be sustained.

Within this context interpretive signs and exhibits that provide an explanation about the area’s most important places, objects or events is particularly useful. The creation of effective interpretive signs and exhibits requires considerable thought and planning. Key principles include:

1. Make a personal connection

Interpretive signs should make a personal connection with the target audience and have clear, simple explanations to bridge knowledge gaps. Ways to make personal connections include:

- Use humour, analogies and metaphors
- Answer commonly asked questions – What is this? What is it used for? Who uses it? Why is it here?
- Tell stories, particularly those with characters to whom visitors can relate
- Provide visitors with opportunities to interact, participate and make choices about their interpretive experiences

2. Understand the audience

In the development of interpretative signs the intended target audience needs to be well understood first so the interpretive information can be of immediate interest and relevance to the visitor. By analysing the following aspects of the region’s visitors, ideas for interpretive displays can be developed and customised to the needs and interests of the visitor:

- **Previous experience** – are they mainly returning visitors or mostly first time visitors? Have the generally travelled widely? Are they generally well educated and knowledgeable with regard to the topic area of the attractions you want to feature in your interpretive signs?

- **Motivation** – Why do most of your visitors come to your area? Are they interested in the local culture or nature? Are they after an opportunity to relax and rejuvenate or are they after fun and excitement? Do some visitors want an educational experience?

- **Activity preferences** – What sorts of activities do most visitors like to do once they have arrived? Do they like city activities such as shopping, eating

---

Adapted from Ballantyne R., Hughes K., Deery, M. & Bond, N. 2007, Meeting Visitor Needs: A Handbook for Managers and Staff of Visitor Information Centres, CRC for Sustainable Tourism, Gold Coast, Queensland, Australia
out, and going to bars / clubs? Or do they prefer to relax in a natural setting such as a beach or by a lake? Or are they interested in excitement and sporting activities?

- **Independent or in a group** - How do most of your visitors travel to your area? Are they independent or in a group? Are there many couples or families?

### 3. Maintain a logical structure

When writing the content for interpretive displays the information should be kept in a logical structure so that the visitor is better able to understand and follow the messages that are being delivered. Some key criteria to develop well-structured interpretive displays is to:

- Use headings and subheadings
- Make heading eye-catching, interesting and thought-provoking
- Following sequential order (e.g. examining the past, present and then the future)
- Provide a topic background / context

Maintaining a logical structure can also be applied to the arrangement of exhibits which should be well organised and follow a logical structure and order in the learning experience (e.g. by using a one-way system with signs).

### 4. Use themes

Interpretive signs should be delivered by grouping information into logical themes that detail underlying ideas and thereby help visitors to understand and connect different elements of their visit. Themes should be strong and provocative so they ‘stick in the memory’. For large topics several themes may be necessary.

### 5. Engage the visitor

The more engaged the visitor, the more likely they will take in and remember information that is being imparted through the interpretive display. Effective interpretive display engage the visitor by enabling them to smell, taste, feel, explore, lift or push. This can be achieved through providing field guides, photographs of local events or interesting people, or even by providing visitors with plant and animal specimens that they can pick up and examine.
Visitors from different regions or countries may not be well acquainted with the local laws, rules and regulations and end up causing problems such as harm or damage to the natural environment, litter, social disturbance, and other forms of offensive or even illegal behaviour. If TICs also do not accurately portray the features of the local culture in their interpretive signs and exhibits then they are contributing to the erosion of cultural authenticity and also adding to the visitor having unrealistic expectations in their travel experience. Being in the business of handing out large amounts of print information such as brochures also means TICs are contributing to logging and paper waste. Finally, the central role of TICs in providing information and recommendations means they have the power to promote or alternatively discredit businesses. TICs therefore must be objective in their promotion and dissemination of information and not only favour “big-business”. Responsible tourism considerations for TICs in the provision of information include:

- Provision of information on environmental and cultural “do's and don'ts“ for tourists
- Do not excessively hand out brochures, leaflets
- Provide public computers with internet access and ready information for local tourism products and services
- Fair provision of display space for small businesses as well as large businesses
- Good interpretation and promotion of the local culture (ensuring authenticity)
- Provision of a notice board or calendar that incorporates local festivals and events
Delivering good customer service

In order to be able to deliver good customer service it is first of all important to understand the customer. As explained in the Introduction to Tourist Information Centres Section, TICs provide a service to visitors, local residents, local businesses, and (non-local) travel agents and tour operators planning to sell trips to the region.

Because tourists are the core customer of TICs, this section will focus on the defining the basic skills required to provide good customer service to the average holiday-maker (tourist).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tourists</th>
<th>Local residents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facilitation of trip including information on accommodation, places to eat, recreation and leisure opportunities, transport, safety and security, permits, culture and nature information.</td>
<td>Information to give to visiting friends and relatives on things to see and do.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local businesses</th>
<th>Tour operators and travel agents (non-local)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To promote their goods or services to tourists indirectly (e.g. through a brochure) or directly (e.g. by selling handicrafts in the TIC). Local business may also wish to obtain tourism information to provide to visiting business colleagues.</td>
<td>Information for selling tours including an understanding of accommodation options, places to eat, recreation and leisure opportunities, transport, safety and security, permits, culture and nature information for own customers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3: The needs of the different types of TIC customers
Types of tourists

In general, travellers are classified according to their main purpose of travel (e.g. recreation and leisure, visiting friends and relatives, or business). In TICs recreation and leisure travellers are most often identified as the “typical” tourist. Some of the most common motivations for travel held by tourists includes:

- Sun, sea and sand (beach holidays)
- History / culture
- Nature
- Adventure
- Sport and recreation
- Shopping
- City life (restaurants, fine arts, bars, clubs)

The profile of a tourist usually different depending on their place of origin, with two main categories evident:

1. International tourists

International tourists refers to anyone travelling to a country other than his / her usual environment or country of residence for less than 12 months and whose main purpose of the trip is not employment.

In Vietnam, international tourists are typically from Western countries such as Australia, France, Britain, Germany and the USA (amongst others), or Asian countries such as Japan, Thailand, China and Korea.

2. Domestic tourists

A domestic tourist refers to anyone who travels to another place within the country outside of his / her usual environment for less than 12 months and whose main purpose of the trip is not being employed by or providing a service to a resident entity in the place visited.

In Vietnam domestic tourists can come from any province, city, town or village however major domestic tourist source markets are generally its large cities such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

Needs and wants

In hospitality and tourism, service refers to the assistance or the performance someone provides on behalf of a business (the server) to another person (the customer). At the core of good customer service in tourism is being able to deliver a service that meets (or exceeds) the needs and wants of the tourist. Needs and wants vary in the following way:

**Needs** are mostly universal (does not normally change from person to person). These include such things as to have shelter, food, water, and safety.

**Wants** are how a person interprets a need, and may vary from person to person depending on their culture and upbringing, for example two people may both need shelter, but one person wants a 3 star hotel whilst the other person wants a guesthouse.

It is important to understand the different types of needs and wants of tourists so these can be met. Different cultures or even age groups may need the same things – but want something very different. In order to provide good customer service it is therefore important to understand the target market/s so that the tourists’ wants can be provide for. If the needs and wants are well-met,
tourists will be happy, increasing positive word of mouth promotion, and increasing repeat visitation.

One way to better understand the needs and wants of the tourist is to conduct a visitor survey. In many cases this information is readily available from the provincial tourism authority. Such surveys will normally provide the following information about visitors to the area:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information area</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Place of residence</td>
<td>Country / Province / City of origin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel duration</td>
<td>Days spent on holiday total and / or in the region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel party</td>
<td>Number of people travelling together and their relationship (e.g. married couple, family, friends, single, tour group)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male or female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age bracket (lifecycle)</td>
<td>Adolescents (1-12 years old), teenagers (13-19 years old), young adults and students (20-30 years old), adults (31 years old onwards), retirees (55 years old onwards)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spend</td>
<td>Average daily spend (total or according to area, e.g. accommodation, food and drinks, transport and entertainment)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income level</td>
<td>Lower income, middle income, upper income, unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel motivation</td>
<td>Leisure and recreation, business, visiting friends and relatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities undertaken</td>
<td>Visiting cultural or historical sites, hiking, water sports, visiting religious sites, attending a meeting, conference or exhibition, visiting a health spa, shopping</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1: Typical contents of a visitor survey that help inform TICs about the type of information and travel assistance they may need to provide tourists*
By analysing the results of a visitor survey, trends and commonalities between tourists may be identified, with types of tourists grouped together. By understanding the characteristics of key target markets TIC staff can better ensure the correct type and form of information and assistance is available to best suit the profile of the tourist. For example, a visitor survey may reveal that a significant number of tourists to a region come from France. By analysing the results of the French tourists, atypical profile may take shape such as:

- Mostly couples. TIC staff therefore know to recommend hotels with double beds, possibly even romantic or atmospheric restaurants etc
- Middle income with above average budget for accommodation. TIC staff know to recommend 3 star hotels or higher. Middle level restaurants will be suitable.
- Motivated by leisure and like cultural activities. TIC staff can suggest historic sites and cultural performances.
- Stay 1 to 2 days. TIC staff should recommend nearby attractions and activities above those far away.

**Important services**

Regardless of nationality, there are however, a range of core services offered by TICs that are commonly desired by all types of visitors. For example, a study conducted by the Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Centre that asked TIC visitors to rank TIC services according to importance found the provision of maps to be the most important service followed by friendly staff, brochures, and access to knowledgeable staff, and advice on local activities.

---

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

Table 2: Importance of TIC features/services
Service quality

Quality Service (or ‘Service Excellence’) simply refers to understanding customers’ needs and expectations and going beyond meeting them. In other words, quality service excellence is about going the ‘extra mile’ (i.e. exceeding the customer’s needs and expectations). In doing this, there is an increased chance of positive word of mouth recommendations, and an enhanced possibility of repeat visitation. In tourism, quality service can relate not only to the human elements, but also to other aspects such as the environment, aesthetics, information and equipment.

The provision of quality service can also be analysed according to the elements of the customer interaction cycle from (1) pre-arrival, to (2) arrival, (3) using the TIC service, and (4) departure. Elements of quality service within the guest cycle can include:

1. **Pre-arrival** – TIC has an attractive and informative website or print material (e.g. brochure); TIC is easily accessible by - and quickly responds to - telephone, fax and email enquiries; TIC has attractive and well placed directional and orientational signs; Good parking facilities are available for TIC customers.

2. **Arrival** – TIC is clean and well maintained (information well stocked, public computer terminals operating, cash register readied, chairs and tables neatly arranged, etc.); TIC staff provide a warm welcome to customers on arrival (smile, immediately offer assistance); TIC staff orient customers to the services provided that may meet their needs.

3. **Using TIC service** – TIC staff are knowledgable and respond to customer enquiries quickly, efficiently and effectively; TIC information is comprehensive, and attractively and logically displayed; All additional resources are available and in good working condition (e.g. internet kiosk computers, interpretive displays, TV / DVD / monitors etc). Public toilets are clean and well stocked with soap, tissue, etc.

4. **Departure** – TIC staff confirm the customer has obtained all the information and assistance they require, and if not, follow-up on additional requests; TIC staff provide a warm farewell to customers (smile, wave, wish visitor safe trip / enjoyable day).

**Figure 4: Aspects of quality in tourism**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hardware</th>
<th>Environment</th>
<th>Software</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facilities</td>
<td>Landscape</td>
<td>Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functions</td>
<td>Adverse effects /pollution</td>
<td>Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetics</td>
<td>Consumption of resources</td>
<td>Hospitality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Tips for providing a positive service attitude**

- **Smile**
- **Be warm and sincere**
- **Look neat**
- **Smell nice**
- **Use polite language**
- **Listen carefully**
- **Relax, be natural but pay attention**
- **Make good eye contact**
- **Speak slowly and clearly**
- **Know your attractions, services and destinations well**
- **Provide the right information**
- **Do your job quickly and efficiently**
- **Don’t keep customers waiting**
- **Go further than the customer expects**
One of the challenges of working within the service sector is to manage complaints. Complaints may be due to anything from visitors receiving wrong information, receiving poor service, not having expectations met, through to being overcharged for a product or service, receiving incorrect information, misunderstandings or mistakes, or poor internal communications. The important requirement of TIC staff is to be empathetic and solve visitor complaints as adeptly as possible where it falls within the role and responsibility of the TIC, or alternatively to offer suggestions the customer can pursue to solve the problem if it falls outside the role of the TIC. Following the H-E-A-T Approach can be an effective way to handle complaints:

- **Hear** the customer out. Allow them to vent their frustration. Listen carefully to their complaint. Let them finish / do not interrupt or make excuses. Listen with the right body language – eye contact, nod your head, make affirming sounds.

- **Empathise** with their problem. Imagine the problem from their perspective. Sympathise with the customer by showing an understanding of their circumstances and that their problem is understood.

- **Apologise** even if it is not your fault. The customer would like to hear an apology (even if it is general). Do not make excuses and do not blame anyone. Accept responsibility on behalf of the company, even if you are not personally responsible.

- **Troubleshoot**. Take action to fix the problem. Make a plan and tell the customer what you will do. Make it your responsibility. Obtain help to solve the problem if needed. Report serious issues to senior management for future reference and follow-up.

---

**Did you know...?**

Only 4% of dissatisfied customers complain
96% leave without saying a word
Of the 96% who leave, most will never return
A typical dissatisfied customer will tell 8 to 10 people
A satisfied complainer will tell 5 people
If solved, 7 out of 10 complaining customers will do business again with you
It takes 12 positive service incidents to make up for one negative incident

---

Adapted from: HITT 2013, Trainer Guide: Module 1 Service Excellence, High Impact Tourism Training Programme for the Informal Sector (HITT), Cambodia
Answering the telephone correctly is important in order to assure the customer that the TIC provides a professional, high quality service. TIC staff should aim to follow the following procedures when answering the telephone:

1. Pick up the phone within 3 rings so the customer does not get frustrated waiting for service.
2. Provide a greeting (e.g. “Good morning. This is the Hoi An Tourist Information Centre. How may I help you?”).
3. Speak slowly and clearly so the customer understands you and there is no subsequent confusion or misunderstandings.
4. Smile when you speak – it comes across on the phone!
5. Use the customer’s name if possible – if the customer provides you with their name then use it so they know you are listening.
6. Make answers to-the-point – Long answers can create additional confusion.
7. Transfer the call if necessary – If you are unable to help offer to transfer the call to someone who can help rather than providing them with the person’s phone number.
It is not the role of TIC staff to take control of serious health or security situations on behalf of a visitor. If for example, a TIC staff member administers incorrect treatment of a tourists’ injury or wound and is not properly qualified thereby making the situation worse, the tourist may hold the TIC or the TIC staff member liable. However, the provision of general assistance or advice, and the treatment of non-serious injuries is generally not a problem and will be highly appreciated by the visitor. In such situations, one or more of the following actions can be undertaken by TIC staff in the case of a safety or security issue:

1. Help contact medical services
2. Help contact tourism police or relevant authority
3. Help contact embassy
4. Help tourist translate an important message to police, local authority, hospital staff or pharmacy
How staff members look and dress themselves is an important component in the operation of a professional TIC. Within the context of TICs, presentation refers to what is worn (e.g. clothes, shoes, accessories), whilst hygiene refers to our personal health and cleanliness (e.g. hair, face, hands, nails). Being well presented and practicing good hygiene has a number of benefits such as:

- Gives a good first impression to the visitor
- Creates positive self-esteem and confidence in staff
- Helps earn respect from visitors and colleagues
- Helps earns the trust of visitors
- Enhances the reputation and image of the TIC

Typically TIC staff should wear a uniform. This not only helps to provide a professional image but helps visitors to easily identify the TIC service staff. However, whether or not a uniform is provided, a number of general principles should be followed in order to achieve good presentation:

- Dress should be chosen appropriately for work (e.g. business shirt instead of a t-shirt, trousers instead of shorts, knee length skirt instead of a mini-skirt).
- Use of a traditional style in TICs is also a good way to add to a visitor’s cultural experience.
- Clothes should be free from rips, tears, stains or any other defaults.
- Shirts, trousers and skirts should be cleaned regularly and well-ironed.
- Trousers should be worn with a belt.
- Shoes should be closed, well-shined and worn with socks (for men) or stockings (for women).
- Jewellery, necklaces, bracelets or other adornments should be kept to a minimum.
- A name badge can be used to enable the visitor to develop a personal connection with TIC service staff.

Practicing good hygiene is the act of taking care for one’s bodily health and well-being through cleanliness. Good hygiene is particularly important in the services sector not only to better create a professional service, but also because it reduces personal illness and the spreading of disease as well as the psychological benefits it has on staff who have a greater sense of well-being. Whilst the
Staffing of TICs in Vietnam varies according to the type of TIC. For state-owned TICs officials from Local Tourism Boards will typically be assigned as TIC staff. For locally-authorised TICs, local people from all backgrounds may form the staff base. In privately-owned TICs staff typically come from the general public and are often university graduates of tourism or language courses.

It is very common for TICs to also seek assistance from volunteers, most often to help out during the peak season periods.

The number of staff required will be dependent on the scope of the TIC as well as the time of year (i.e. the peak tourist season will normally require additional people due to a higher volume of visitors to the area than during the low season).

Hiring tips

When hiring staff regardless of where they are sourced from, it is important that they have the right qualities to perform the tasks of the job. The development of a job (or “position”) description for all roles within the organisation should therefore be undertaken. The job description will outline requirements of staff to fill the various positions including minimum qualifications, work experience, skills, language proficiency, as well as competencies required to meet the roles and responsibilities of the job. A job description is also an effective tool to reduce confusion from staff members concerning the parameters of their job, and is a useful guide for staff performance appraisals.

Staff skills

TIC service staff are required to perform a range of roles from the provision of information and customer service through to clerical / administrative tasks, merchandising and sales. Key skills required of TIC service staff are identified in the table below:

Elements of personal hygiene can be culturally-specific, some widely accepted principles include:

- Shaved facial hair or otherwise trimmed beard for men
- Wash hands regularly
- Bath regularly
- Wash hair regularly
- Keep hair short or keep tidy / restrained
- Brush teeth before work
- Cut fingernails

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill area</th>
<th>Requirements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tourism industry awareness</strong></td>
<td>Knowledge of the sectors of the tourism industry, the social and economic benefits of tourism, and the benefits of promoting tourism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attitude</strong></td>
<td>Ability to exhibit a positive attitude is essential. This involves having a positive attitude (including enthusiasm), being friendly, being professional, being a team member, willingness to upgrade skills and knowledge, and an adherence to ethics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communication</strong></td>
<td>Ability to communicate effectively and understand the benefits of - and obstacles to - effective communications (verbal and nonverbal); Effective listening, speaking and writing abilities; Ability to process incoming telephone calls; Ability to communicate with special needs visitors; Ability to handle difficult situations and problem-solve.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Operational procedures</strong></td>
<td>Ability to follow operational guidelines for opening the facility, starting a shift, performing daily administration tasks (e.g. collecting visitor statistics, obtaining current status reports for weather, fire hazards, currency exchange rates), keeping the facility operational (e.g. maintaining supplies, maintaining interior and exterior of the centre), following guidelines for ending shifts and closing procedures; Knowledge and ability to apply safety procedures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Information services</strong></td>
<td>Ability to provide information services; Extensive product knowledge; Ability to use resource materials; Ability to provide service to the visitor; Ability to record visitor statistics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Merchandising</strong></td>
<td>For centres that retail merchandise, skill requirements include the ability to provide information about the articles for sale; Ability to apply effective selling techniques to boost sales.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Customer service</strong></td>
<td>Ability to listen carefully; Ability to answer inquiries knowledgeably; Ability to assist visitors with travel arrangements; Ability to suggest things to do and see when the visitor is clearly open to or seeking suggestions; Interpersonal skills to develop the visitor’s confidence and trust so they will rely on the TIC service staff to help them make their visit to the area a pleasurable one.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 3: TIC Service Staff skill requirements*
TRAINING

In order for TIC staff to be able to carry out their responsibilities efficiently and effectively a complicated set of skills and knowledge is required. Providing staff (and volunteers) with workplace training will equip staff with a basic background and orientation to the skill and knowledge requirements of the job that they can then build upon.

As soon as a new staff member is hired initial induction training should be provided in order to give the staff member a general orientation to the organisation, the workplace environment, office policies and procedures, and the roles of other staff and key stakeholders amongst other things.

Further to this, TIC staff should undertake a basic TIC service staff training course in order to impart the core knowledge and skill requirements of the job. A good training program will also help to build staff confidence and professionalism. The training course should be based upon government endorsed occupational standards for TIC service staff. If such standards are not available the previous table of skills, knowledge, and attitudes required of TIC service staff can form the basis of a good TIC skills training programme.

WORKING WITH VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers describe anyone who contributes their time to provide a service that benefits the community without payment. Volunteers often strongly represented in TICs due to the seasonality of the tourism industry whereby volunteers can help service a TIC during the peak tourism periods of the year. However, because volunteers are not employees or being paid by the TIC organisation, they cannot be expected to perform the same level of duties as paid staff and their responsibilities should be more restricted. When working with volunteers the following principles should be followed:

- Make sure the work provided to volunteers is interesting, rewarding and relevant to the operation of the TIC.
- Provide volunteers with training opportunities the same as paid staff.
- Ensure volunteers understand and are able to work in the evenings and weekends.
- Ensure paid staff are accepting of working with volunteers and understand how their roles relate to each other.

- Designate a paid staff member as the volunteer coordinator.
- Develop a set of volunteer policies and procedures for volunteers to follow (role, responsibilities, expected work hours, do’s and don’ts, etc.).
Day-to-day administration of the TIC is typically the responsibility of the office manager with his / her duties typically defined within their position description. The activities of the manager should to work towards achieving a TIC Business Plan, which he / she will usually have developed together with the sponsor of the TIC. The Business Plan should establish the objectives, strategies and actions and targets required for the successful operation and development of the TIC for a fixed period of time (often between one to three years).

**Managerial duties**

The specific duties of the manager aim towards ensuring the delivery of quality visitor information services and may include:

- Generating sales / income
- Developing staff job descriptions
- Supervising and training staff, conducting performance appraisals, scheduling staff hours
- Managing finances including payment of taxes, utilities, payroll, and other expenses, book-keeping
- Marketing and promotions
- Developing partnerships with local area businesses / members, liaising with other TICs and the regional tourism associations
- Developing and updating operational manuals, policies and procedures
- Following the general conditions of employment and workplace environment as set by the government or alternatively according to internationally accepted criteria
- Development and / or updating of TIC database of visitor statistics, attractions, service providers etc
- Inventory control (ensuring adequate supply of quality tourism information and office supplies, equipment)

**Marketing and promotion**

There is no point in operating any kind of business if nobody knows about you. While signage may assist visitors find a TIC once they have already arrived in the area, to ensure a healthy level of visitation and be of good service to target stakeholders, a TICs needs to more broadly promote its services to visitors, local residents and businesses, and external tour operators and travel agents.

Suggested opportunities for marketing the TIC include:

- **Visitor guides** – Most popular visitor guides such as *Lonely Planet* and *Rough Guide*, will have a listing of services in popular tourism destinations that includes TICs. Contact details for updates can usually be found within the guide book.
- **Cross promotion** – Ensure any community services brochures or websites mentions the TIC location and contact details.
- **Public relations** – Submit press releases to local media on TIC activities.
- **E-marketing** – Promote TIC services through a company website and by setting up a social media page providing regular updates on local attractions, activities, and events.
- **Print publications** – Develop and distribute a simple TIC brochure to local businesses that outlines the products and services of the TIC.
INVENTORY CONTROL

With TICs typically offering a large array of information such as brochures, guides and maps, merchandise, and other office supplies and equipment, effective inventory management is required in order to make sure nothing runs out unexpectedly. To prevent this situation from occurring an inventory list should be prepared that identifies all items of stock within the TIC (including equipment). With a little analysis, an estimation can be placed on the average number of items “sold” (or handed out) each day or week. With consideration of the number of days it takes between placing an order for new stock and receiving the stock, the shelf life of the item can be determined.

For example, if 10 handicraft bags are sold per day (on average), and it takes 4 days to order and receive more bags, the minimum number of bags that should be in stock is 40 bags (10 bags / day x 4 days waiting for replacements). If restocking is done every 30 days, then the maximum number of bags that should be in stock is 340 bags (10 bags /day x 30 days + 40 bags to cover delivery time). If the TIC has space for only 240 bags, then restock should be scheduled every 20 days with the order quantity recalculated accordingly. At the end of each day all inventory items should be counted and recorded. The total must match with the beginning the next day.

HOURS OF OPERATION

The operational hours of the TIC should be guided by the hours tourists in the area are undertaking activities such that the TIC can be of the greatest service. In particularly busy locations, the TIC may need to operate extended hours, for example, from 8:00 a.m till 10:30 p.m, the time when most of the activities of tourists stop. Of course, if finances and labour are limited, then the TIC should operate according to normal business hours at a minimum, for example, from 8:30 a.m till 5:30 p.m. As tourism does not stop on the weekends, the TIC should however still be open on Saturday and Sunday (or at least for half of each day). For busy TICs it may be necessary to split staff work hours into two shifts, for example, from 8:00 a.m to 4:00 p.m, and from 4:00 p.m to 10:30 p.m.
AFTER-HOURS SERVICE

It is good practice to still aim to provide a service to tourists after hours (when the TIC is closed), for example, to provide information to tourists who arrive to a destination late at night or early alternatively in the morning. After hours service can be provided through:

- Provision of a bulletin board with hours of operation, basic tourist information, map of the area, and emergency service information.
- Provision of a touch screen computer kiosk accessing the TIC tourist information database.
- Provision of a public telephone (pay phone).
FUNDING TOURIST INFORMATION CENTRE OPERATION

A TIC will not be able to operate unless it has a reliable source of funding to cover operational costs such as staff wages, building maintenance and supplies, site landscaping and maintenance, utilities, capital improvements (e.g. new brochure racks), signage repairs and maintenance, and travel and associated training costs.

In Vietnam, whilst privately-operated TICs are wholly funded by business activities (e.g. the sale of in-house tours, the provision of other services such as hire cars, or through the obtainment of commission from other businesses that they support), state-owned TICs and locally-authorised TICs typically receive funding to support operational expenses from the local tourism board or a relevant government authority. Trends from around the world show however, that even state-authorised TICs are being required to be self-financed or self-sufficient.

There are a range of measures TICs can take to be more financially sustainable ranging from the obtainment of on-going government support and income from booking commissions through to the sale of merchandise and the provision of paid advertising space.

Government assistance

For state-owned TICs and locally-authorised TICs the government is the main source for financing the on-going operational costs. This form of funding is supported because TICs function to encourage visitors to stay and spend money in a region thereby increasing revenue for local businesses, generating local employment, and ultimately creating a greater tax base for the government. The form of funding support from the government can often extend from the provision of a building for the TIC and the provision of staff, through to payment of a range of costs such as utility bills, insurance, capital works, improvements, and general maintenance.

Commission

Commission can be made from the selling of tours, accommodation, or other services such as hire cars, bicycles on behalf of suppliers. Typically the TIC will obtain 10-20% of the sale price of the product or service however this is can be negotiable with the supplier.
Merchandise

TICs are quickly latching onto the income-generating opportunity presented by the sale of merchandise. Assuming the function of a gift shop, TICs can generate income not only from the sale of maps and other information-related material, but also from the sale of souvenirs such as postcards, handicrafts, posters, paintings, t-shirts, hats, snack food, and drinks - to name but a few.

Paid advertising

Providing a highly-visible “priority” space for paid advertising can help generate income. The space can be anything from a standee or wall display through to an clip displayed on a TV screen or monitor.

Other income areas

The provision of paid business services such as a fax machine, photocopier, internet kiosk, ATM, secretarial service and even the management of local meetings, incentives, conferences and events (MICE) can all bring income to the TIC.

The provision of traditional dance and music performances, discussions about the local culture, environment or history by a local expert, handicraft demonstrations, local art or photographic exhibitions, and even in-house tours (e.g. town orientation tour) are other ideas for generating income.

Overseas, TIC memberships have also proven to be successful. For payment of an annual membership fee, businesses can obtain benefits such as rights to display brochures in a ‘members’ feature display rack’, listing on a local TIC-produced map, or listing in a local directory of member services amongst other things.
The support of relevant government authorities, the tourism industry and local community is essential for the success of the TIC because they are the suppliers of the information that the TIC will distribute to visitors, they will participate in training programs and, in many cases will also help support the TIC Visitor Information Centre financially (directly, through commission or in-kind).

Three key stakeholder groups can be identified for TICs, namely public sector tourism authorities, the tourism private sector and the local community. An analysis of the three stakeholder groups follows.

**Key stakeholders**

**Government tourism authorities**

In Vietnam most state-operated and locally-authorised TICs will have a working relationship the provincial level Department Culture, Sport and Tourism. Typically this may be conducted through a local Tourism Board which represents public and private sector interests. The Tourism Board may also be responsible for determining TIC structure, function and management, as well as be the chief financier.

**Tourism industry associations, organisations and groups**

In Vietnam a range of tourism industry associations, organisations and groups exist that either represent the entire tourism sector nationally, regionally or locally (e.g. the Central Coast Destination Marketing Organisation of Vietnam), tourism sub-sectors (e.g. Vietnam Society of Travel Agents, Vietnam Tourism Association), or even niche tourism markets (e.g. Responsible Travel Club of Vietnam). Such associations aim to develop and market related tourism products and services, build capacity, improve standards, and collectively represent the interests of their members to government. Tourism industry associations can be a good source of information and advice in the planning, development and operation of a TIC.
Community groups

In local areas where tourism play a role community destination management organisations (DMOs) may be established. These groups may be informally arranged or formally arranged and range from complete community control through to being multi-stakeholder board with government, community, private sector and even NGO representation. Other community groups that can be found throughout Vietnam that may be relevant to TICs include women’s associations and youth groups. All of these community groups can be a source of support to the TIC for example by providing volunteers through to providing information on community based tourism experiences, or even the supply of handicrafts or souvenirs.

Maintaining communications

For all stakeholder groups the critical factor is for the TIC to maintain constant communication about its activities, events and services. Activities that should be implemented to maintain communications include:

- Invite business people to visit the TIC from time to time.
- Develop a regular TIC newsletter (electronic or print) that details TIC activities and events and send to stakeholders.
- Participate as members in industry associations and visit community groups to update them on relevant TIC matters.
- Regularly maintain and update the TIC website with up-to-date information and events happening in the area or new facilities or services being provided by the TIC.
- Provide considerable notice to local businesses if their brochures are running out.
- Deal promptly with any complaints or concerns from the industry as they are brought up.

Responsible Tourism considerations in TIC office management

How a TIC runs internally on a day to day basis can have a significant impact on the community and environment. Poor procedures in the office can lead to unnecessary pollution and excessive waste and contribute to climate change through unnecessarily high energy consumption. Poorly considered and applied employment conditions such as salaries that are below the industry average, discriminatory employment policies, or the creation of a work environment that does not foster fairness, inclusion and harmony will result in lower productivity and may further entrench social problems. Responsible tourism considerations for TICs in office management include:

- Employ green office principles (reduce energy consumption, reduce paper and printing and increase recycling, minimise waste, save water).
- Follow government requirements on proper employment conditions (provide a good working environment, ensure staff have adequate breaks and work reasonable hours, foster positive relations between staff and refuse acts of discrimination, provide opportunities for training, ensure staff are paid award or above award rates).
- Meet or exceed minimum standards for TIC operation and service provision in Vietnam or basic internationally recognised standards.
- Collaborate with environmental groups doing work in the area (e.g. clean-up campaigns).
- Form partnerships with public transport operators and promote use to visitors (timetable information, routes, pricing, ticket sales, etc.).
BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES


Fallon, L. & Kriwoken, L. 2002, *Key elements contributing to effective and sustainable visitor centres: An evaluation of the Strahan Visitor Centre*, Tasmania, Australia, Sustainable Tourism CRC, Gold Coast, Australia

HITT 2013, *Trainer Guide: Module 1 Service Excellence*, High Impact Tourism Training Programme for the Informal Sector (HITT), Cambodia

Pearce P. 1991, ‘Visitor centres and their functions in the landscape of tourism’ in Moscardo & Hughes (Eds.) *Visitor Centres: Exploring new territory*, pp.7-14, James Cook University, Townsville, Australia