

Destination Marketing

Innovation and Change: Wollongong

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The key to success is to make full use of media contacts in gaining publicity. A media report notes that 'Wollongong has sandy beaches, a clean-and-green hinterland, unhurried beachside villages, a rainforest in a surprising location, the southern hemisphere's biggest Buddhist temple, an array of good restaurants and even a micro-brewery.' In addition, Wollongong is located on the Grand Pacific Drive, a 140-km coastal road claimed to rival Victoria's Great Ocean Road for scenic beauty. The centrepiece, and now a popular tourist attraction, is the new \$50 million Sea Cliff Bridge, 665 m long and 41 m above the sea at its highest point.

However, the image of Wollongong has not always been so favourable. The perception was of a dirty, polluted, heavily industrial city with serious crime and industrial relations problems and high levels of poverty. Factors contributing to this included a downturn in the coal industry, closures at BHP Steel, national disputes and strikes, and high unemployment and crime rates.

The need for change was recognised in the Reinventing Wollongong Campaign, which aimed to bring about improvements in the physical appearance of the city, industrial relations practices, public relations, community pride and the visitor experience. \$500,000 per year for five years was allocated as funding for the project. Success is attributable to the adoption of a clear vision, the identification of appropriate benchmarks, sound research, employment of planning expertise and a strong marketer, a sophisticated communications strategy and, very importantly, exhaustive community consultation.

The effectiveness of the Campaign is measured by internal and external benchmarks. Internal indicators include the unemployment rate, the level of tourism activity, changes in house prices and expressions of community pride. External indicators include the amount of media exposure and evaluations of Wollongong as a place to visit or to reside in (Table 1).

Table 1: External assessment

Wollongong ...	Importance Rating (%)	'Yes' response (%)	
		1999	2004
Is a healthy place to live	90	35	55
Has a low crime rate	76	11	32
Is down to earth	67	75	84
Has a sense of community	63	64	70
Is a place I would like to live in	59	18	24
Has improved over the past few years	31	62	82
Is an up-and-coming area	21	59	80
Is industrially oriented	8	87	80
Offers beautiful, unspoiled natural attractions	84	49	73
Is great for a short break	83	61	70
Offers good value for money	82	64	67
Has lots to see	81	58	69
Is great for a family holiday	76	43	57
Is great for a day trip	68	68	72

The internal performance indicators showed improvement in unemployment (-2.5%), the community pride index (+6%) and residential property prices (+10.8%). As the table shows, in comparison with 1999 views, the external image of Wollongong as a place to live has also shown substantial improvement.

With respect to tourism activity, Wollongong accommodation takings have shown a small but relatively steady increase from 2002 to 2005. Average length of visitor stay has risen from 2.4 (2003) to 3.0 nights (2005). In the same period, day trip visitation grew from 2,730,000 to 2,990,000, with a corresponding growth in expenditure from \$171 million to \$223 million.

A public relations agency was employed, and a program of familiarisation trips for media and travel personnel, Australian and overseas, was initiated. Local media were also involved and efforts were directed towards inclusion of Wollongong in travel publications. Where possible, negative publicity has been countered by positive news stories. Media exposure has risen from 20 items (valued at \$182,156) in 1999 to 427 (\$7,373,778) in 2005. The campaign has been supported by collateral in photographic, DVD, CD and website formats. Media kits have been distributed and PR opportunities pursued.

Given that 86% of visitors come by car, cooperative arrangements have been made to promote the Grand Pacific Drive with Wollongong as a hub, and for inclusion in touring routes such as the Sydney-Melbourne coastal drive and the Triangle Route (Sydney to Wollongong and beyond – Kiama and Canberra). These are consistent with Tourism New South Wales and Tourism Australia strategies. A Master Plan for drive tourism is under way, but already there is recognition and acceptance in China, Hong Kong, Korea, Singapore, Malaysia and Europe.

The impact on the tourism industry has been significant, with 400 new hotel rooms, private operator initiatives on public land, a stronger liaison with Council and greater inclusion in Council planning, and foreshore and CBD development plans. With government and private funding, investment has grown and existing attractions have been upgraded, with a corresponding increase in hospitality jobs. A major development is the \$6.8 million Southern Gateway Centre, with visitor information and dining facilities and an indigenous museum. Attention is now directed to development of a program built around one or two hallmark events, and greater involvement in the MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences and events) industry.

In addition to delivery of the initial promise and meeting the expectations raised, a number of challenges remain. There is a need to overcome the current flatness of domestic tourism and attract a larger share of the international market. Additional funding from state and Federal sources is being pursued and development of local resources encouraged. Perhaps of greatest importance is the need to ensure diversification of the economy through a revival or expansion of non-tourism industries which are not in conflict with the new image.

** Greg was born in Sydney some 47 year ago, with a strong family history in horse-racing through the trotting industry where his grandfather Jack, father John and now his brother Darren have all successfully competed and achieved great results. He studied at Condell Park High School before working as a computer operator and programmer in Sydney, and before a chance meeting changed his focus on life. Greg pursued the trotting industry in his younger years until snow skiing changed his outlook when he went on an extended holiday to Europe and developed a passion for the mountains which drew him back to the Australian Alps for winter, then Europe for the northern winters. He spent ten years travelling back and forth, working as a ski instructor in France, Switzerland and the USA before taking a role as Regional Sales and Marketing Manager for Thredbo Ski Resort, where he remained for 11 years.*

Regional destination marketing became his specialty, with Thredbo as more than just a winter playground but a year-round destination. Many close friends were lost in the Thredbo landslide, but the resort rebounded and it became time for a 'sea change.' He was offered a role in Wollongong as General Manager – Tourism Wollongong. Wollongong is a city going through an image change but with potential to develop, with its proximity to Sydney and the desire for coastal holidays.