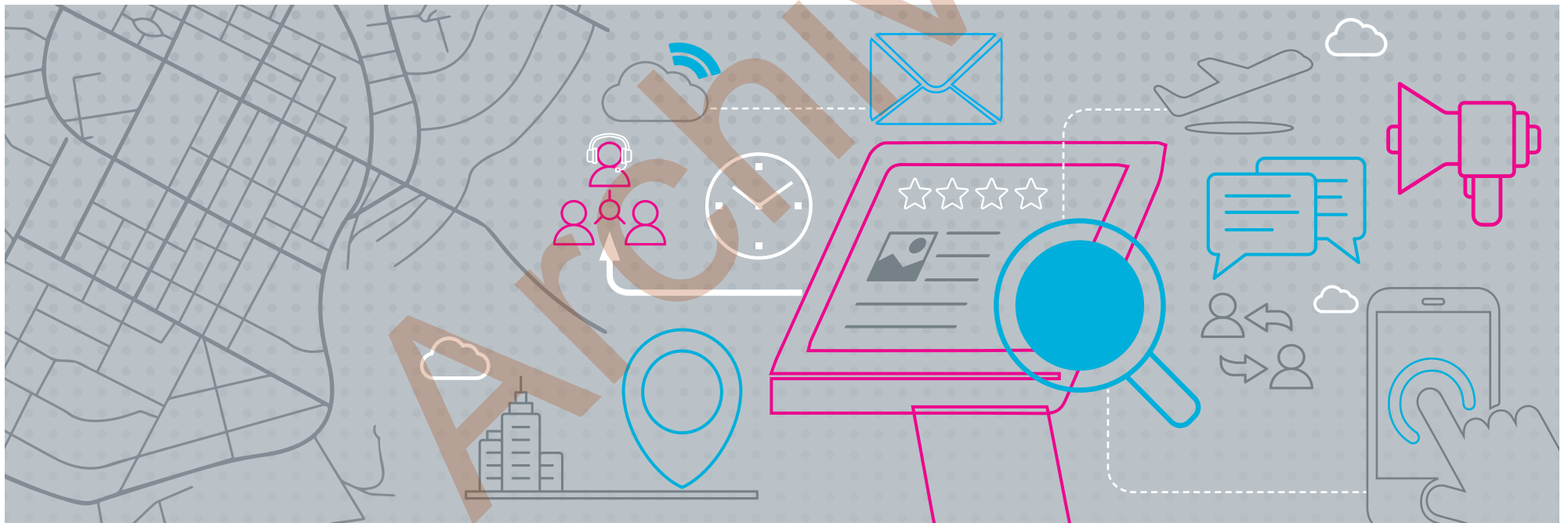


A New Visitor Services Model for Alberta

# Engaging Visitors in an Era of Technology

JANUARY 2017





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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This new visitor services model (VSM) re-positions visitor services within tourism today. It was developed by Alberta Culture and Tourism through research and consultation with providers of visitor services, tourism organizations, industry associations, Travel Alberta and other provincial government ministries. This new model of visitor services is intended to effectively contribute to the Government of Alberta's economic diversification and job creation strategy.

The vision for this model in Alberta is to inform, inspire and influence visitors to maximize their travel experiences and to help grow the tourism economy in all regions of Alberta. The new visitor services model supports the principles of convenient, relevant and innovative multi-channel access for visitors; maximization of economic benefits; use of the right tools and resources; and collaboration amongst stakeholders.

In particular, the model recognizes that technology and changes in consumer behaviour have altered how people access information and make travel decisions. The model builds on the need for visitor services providers to be proactive in reaching out to engage with their visitors. Providers also need to be more assertive in promoting their services and connecting with industry and their communities.

The model proposes priorities and actions consistent with the vision and principles listed above. To effectively engage with travellers and meet and exceed their expectations, visitor services providers will need to incorporate innovative methods of delivery (social media/roaming services); access more information on their visitors (using Big Data/surveying); and proactively deliver both face-to-face and online trip planning services.

The vision for this model in Alberta is to inform, inspire and influence visitors to maximize their travel experiences and to help grow the tourism economy in all regions of Alberta.



## SCOPE OF THE NEW VISITOR SERVICES MODEL

Digital technologies have transformed many industries: music, through downloading; telephone, through the cell and then smartphone; and, quite prominently, tourism itself. Tourism now relies on digital technology in every phase, and yet at the same time it remains an industry of physical services and experiences. Alberta's visitor services are situated somewhere between these two states.

In Alberta, there are more than 120 organizations providing varying levels and types of visitor services for travellers. Most use a passive approach, requiring the visitor to seek out the service. Less than 25 per cent of Alberta's visitor services providers are actively monitoring online tools and websites that engage with the visitor in their trip planning<sup>1</sup>. Alberta accredited visitor services providers reported using social media to engage visitors in 666 online trip planning conversations<sup>2</sup>.

These numbers indicate a need for visitor services to evolve. Visitor services providers need to embrace the latest delivery tools so as not to miss out on opportunities to engage with more of Alberta's visitors<sup>3</sup>. Visitors relying on tourism websites may not be learning about local experiences and smaller attractions—the “hidden gems” (specialized retail stores, a hiking club, or a building with certain architecture) that visitor services providers can provide. Visitor services providers will need to be positioned as a trusted source for trip planning assistance.

<sup>1</sup> Based on a survey of visitor services providers conducted in 2015 in which 67 providers responded.

<sup>2</sup> Based on 2015 data reported by Alberta's accredited visitor services providers.

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this model, 'visitors' include Albertans travelling in Alberta as well as travelers from across Canada, the United States and other parts of the world

## VISION

Visitor services **inform, inspire** and **influence** visitors to maximize their travel experiences to help grow the visitor economy in all regions of Alberta.

This model is based on four key principles:

- Visitors need access to convenient, relevant and innovative multi-channel visitor information services.
- Visitor services should maximize the economic benefits for the industry, the regions and the province.
- Visitor services providers need the right tools and resources to provide high quality visitor services.
- A collaborative approach to visitor services needs to be established amongst Alberta Culture and Tourism, Travel Alberta, destination marketing organizations (DMOs), other visitor services providers and tourism operators.

### VISITOR SERVICES GROW TOURISM IN ALBERTA

The Visitors Services Model will ensure visitor services continue to help achieve the following outcomes:

- **Visitor services help drive outstanding experiences** by introducing visitors to their dream experiences, by helping visitors get to their destinations, or by simply providing rest stop amenities.
- **Visitor services help grow the economy in Alberta** by providing the right information, at the right time, in the right way. Visitors do more, stay longer, and return because of their positive experiences. And they share their positive experiences with others.
- **Visitor services generate civic pride and demonstrate to the visitor that they are valued.** Visitor Information Centres (VICs) are a source of pride for many communities, an expression of local culture, history and values. Community VICs indicate to the visitor that there are tourism offerings and experiences worth exploring. Visitor services are also a strong reminder to the community that tourism is important to their local economy.



Photo courtesy of Tourism Calgary

## CHANGES IN VISITOR BEHAVIOUR AND EXPECTATIONS

Visitor behaviour and expectations are changing because of new ways to access and consume information.

### VISITORS SEEK LOCAL, AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCES

Visitors want rich, personalized, authentic experiences and seek a deeper connection with their surroundings and the people around them. Many visitors, especially millennials (aged 18 to 34), are seeking “local and authentic” experiences that offer inspiration and a path toward self-discovery. These visitors trust traveller-to-traveller advice and seek out local advice when in-destination.

At the same time, branded hotels still dominate and iconic attractions continue to be in demand with many market segments. A study on the motivation of urban Albertans to travel into rural Alberta found that Albertans seek out branded hotels because of the quality assurance associated with the brand<sup>4</sup>.

- **Visitor services providers must provide personalized service to visitors.**
- **Visitor services providers will need to be ‘local experts’ on all things (including culture and history) in their community and share the stories that are unique to their area.**

### VISITORS TAKE SHORTER VACATIONS AND ARE LOOKING FOR ONE-STOP SHOPS

Technology is changing the timeframe of traveller decision-making. A recent study of U.S. residents found that many are not using all their annual vacation days and are taking short-stay trips and mini vacations. More travellers are making last-minute bookings, with less planning, but desiring more information on arrival. They will likely seek a one-stop service where they can book accommodation, buy attraction packages, rent a vehicle and make restaurant reservations.

- **Visitor services providers should move to provide ‘one-stop shop’ or concierge type services by making reservations and bookings for the visitor.**

<sup>4</sup> Potential Demand for Rural Vacation Experiences in Alberta by Residents of Alberta, March 2013

Visitor services must move beyond the bricks and mortar VIC approach of delivery and proactively reach out to visitors using the method of delivery by which the visitor prefers to be engaged.

### VISITORS WANT TO BE ENGAGED DIFFERENTLY

Visitors have access to numerous travel resources via websites, mobile applications, online travel agents and social media. They want to access information quickly and conveniently, anytime and anywhere. As a result many do not feel the need to seek out VICs unless they are conveniently located. Visitors are also using multiple channels to obtain information and opinions.

- **Visitor services must move beyond the bricks and mortar VIC approach of delivery and proactively reach out to visitors using the method of delivery by which the visitor prefers to be engaged.**

### VISITORS VIEW USER-GENERATED CONTENT AS A MORE TRUSTED SOURCE

User-generated content has become a trusted source for travel information. There is an inherent trust in traveller-to-traveller advice. Websites such as TripAdvisor provide peer reviews for products and destinations without commercial interest. Similarly, visitor services must provide visitors with suggestions specific to their interests and must be transparent about the quality of the experience that the visitor can expect.

- **Visitor services providers must demonstrate they are a trusted source both online and in person.**





## ALBERTANS TRAVELLING IN ALBERTA

Albertans travelling to visit friends and relatives made up 44 per cent of all overnight person visits to the province<sup>6</sup>. Providers of visitor services should seek opportunities to keep residents informed of activities and events happening in their region. This will help residents maximize the experience for friends and relatives, encouraging longer stays and revisits.

## SHIFTS IN VISITOR SEGMENTS

While the boomers (people born between 1946 and the mid-1960s) have been the dominant market for the past four or so decades, the millennials (currently the generation aged 18 to 34) will soon be the largest population segment in the world and be the largest travel market segment.

### BOOMERS

Boomers, wealthier and healthier than previous generations, are still travelling. While not as adept as the millennials on mobile devices, this difference is shrinking. They are the largest users of VICs, preferring human interaction, many seeking confirmation of what they read online<sup>5</sup>. The boomers are also supporting a new travel market segment: intergenerational family travel, with educational experiences and child-focused attractions, activities and accommodations.



<sup>5</sup> Feedback from staff at Alberta's Provincial VICs

<sup>6</sup> Provincial Statistics, 2014 Travel Survey of Residents of Canada and 2014 International Travel Survey, Statistics Canada.

## FREE SPIRITS & CULTURAL EXPLORERS

The psychographic market segmentations developed by Destination Canada and used by Travel Alberta are relevant to Visitor Services:

- **Free Spirits** love high-end hedonistic experiences shared with others. Forty per cent of the Free Spirits are millennials between the ages of 18 and 34.
- **Cultural Explorers** tend to be between the ages of 45 and 54, and are more likely to use a VIC. They seek opportunities to interact with locals and tend to stay away from crowded attractions.

### MILLENNIALS

Millennials, labelled the Silent Travellers, often distrust the advertisements and promotions of destination travel websites. Self-reliant, they make travel purchasing decisions based on social media and peer review websites<sup>7</sup>. They take an average of 4.2 vacations per year compared to 3.5 by travellers in general<sup>8</sup>. They place greater value on experiences, but minimize expenditures. The millennials are the largest group using the sharing economy such as Uber and AirBnB. They also prefer the personal, local and authentic experience that the sharing economy offers<sup>9</sup>. Many stated that they plan their daily trips the night before using a Wi-Fi service<sup>10</sup>. Millennials do not want to waste time in lines or to go out of their way to obtain information at a VIC, but they welcome roaming visitor services and will pick up print materials, particularly maps<sup>11</sup>. As more millennials move into their 30s, many will become users of higher end accommodation and restaurants<sup>12</sup>.



<sup>7</sup> SKIFT Manifesto, *The Future of Travel in 2020*

<sup>8</sup> *Inside the Mind of the Millennial Traveler*; Resonance

<sup>9</sup> *Embracing Disruptors: Blueprint for the Future of Tourism*, Greg Klassen, Twenty 31 Presentation at the 2015 Travel Alberta Conference

<sup>10</sup> Focus Groups with Millennials, November 2015, Edmonton, Alberta

<sup>11</sup> Focus Groups with Millennials, November 2015, Edmonton, Alberta

<sup>12</sup> Tourism 2020, Travel Alberta Conference Presentation, Chris Fair, October 2015



## GEN Z

Gen Z, ranging in age from six to 20 years, represents one-sixth of the world's population and in five years will make up 40 per cent of the U.S. population. It is forecast that by 2020, this group will have more than \$44 billion in spending power<sup>13</sup>. They too will be highly mobile and digitally connected. Early analysis of this age group suggests that they will seek travel experiences that provide knowledge sharing opportunities such as attending a symposium or travel to do volunteer work<sup>14</sup>. Trends on this next generation will need to be monitored.

## CHINA AND THE EMERGING MARKETS

Key international markets for Alberta are the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Japan, Germany, the Netherlands, and, more recently, South Korea. Visitor services have adapted to meet their needs.

China, Brazil, Russia, and India have been identified as the fastest growing emerging travel markets<sup>15</sup>. The growth of the middle class in these countries will trigger a wave of new visitors in the coming decades.

China, because of the sheer number of international travellers and its position as the top spender in international tourism, is a key market for Canada and Alberta<sup>16</sup>, particularly with new direct flights. Research conducted by Destination Canada indicates one million Chinese are considering Alberta as a destination over the next two years. By 2020, it is estimated that travellers from China will make 200 million trips abroad—that is an increase from 107 million in 2013<sup>17</sup>. While they often take their first trip as part of a group tour, many Chinese travellers aspire to pursue independent travel<sup>18</sup>.

Chinese travellers, interested in historical sites and local cuisine, also want to explore nature while still having urban amenities<sup>19</sup>. Chinese visitors spend 58 per cent of their travel dollars shopping<sup>20</sup>, looking for recognized brands to be the first sporting the latest trends. There are 1.3 billion mobile phones in China, so visitor services providers will need to develop the capability to engage and converse with the Chinese on social media<sup>21</sup>. Training on their preferences in language, etiquette and culture are important to effectively service these visitors.

<sup>13</sup> *Focus Shifts from Millennials to GEN Z*, David Peltier, SKIFT Magazine; Megatrends Defining Travel in 2016

<sup>14</sup> *Nancy Breiling Nessel, Generational Consultant, GettingGenZ.com*

<sup>15</sup> *The Rise of the Emerging Market Traveler*, Translation.com and Skift, January 20, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> *Tourism Towards 2030, Global Overview*, UNWTO.

<sup>17</sup> *Tourism Towards 2030, Global Overview*, UNWTO.

<sup>18</sup> *Travel Alberta Webinar: Knowing the China Market.*

<sup>19</sup> *Travel Alberta Webinar: Knowing the China Market.*

<sup>20</sup> *Travel Alberta Webinar: Knowing the China Market.*

<sup>21</sup> *The Economist* of Aug. 6, 2016 (pp.50-52), reports WeChat as the dominant social media platform for the Chinese, for their every point of contact— social, entertainment and even financial (it links to one's bank card). Chinese use of social media is far advanced, and Google, Uber and Amazon have not been successful in China.



## MASSIVE CHANGES IN TECHNOLOGY

Technology, if embraced, will create new opportunities for visitor services providers to engage with more visitors.

### VISITORS EXPECT (FAST) WI-FI

Currently many rural areas in the province have limited Wi-Fi service, but GPS will continue to improve and Wi-Fi service will continue to expand. As well, telecommunication providers are starting to offer cheap international roaming. Wi-Fi will be the main source of connectivity, and it will be ubiquitous. In the future it won't be whether Wi-Fi is available but rather how fast it is<sup>22</sup>. Visitors will have less need for VICs as an information source.

- **VICs must offer other reasons for visitors to stop to engage with them.**

### PROLIFERATION OF 'SMART DEVICES'

The proliferation of smart devices—car computers, wearable technology, virtual reality headsets and even smarter phones—is an indication that the primary method of trip planning for visitors when in destination will be mobile platforms and apps. Indeed, now that these technologies have been developed precisely to support travel, how could visitors not rely on them?

- **Providers of visitor services need to monitor how their visitors are choosing to be engaged and shift their emphasis accordingly.**

### BIG DATA POWERFUL TOOL FOR THIRD-PARTY INFORMATION PROVIDERS

Big Data<sup>23</sup> is a powerful tool for third-party information providers such as Trivago and Utrip; these sites aggregate content about destinations and enable the traveller to personalize their travel based on a compilation of numerous websites and social media sites.

- **Visitor services providers will need to use Big Data as a tool to create digital profiles of their visitors to effectively deliver personalized trip planning services.**

<sup>22</sup> Future Traveller Tribes 2030, Understanding Tomorrows Traveller, Amadeus Future Foundation

<sup>23</sup> Big Data – are large data sets that are combined to provide observations and track what is happening, often in real time. Data sets are drawn from text, images, audio and video and are often a cost-free byproduct of digital interactions.

## GROWTH OF THE SHARING ECONOMY THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

The sharing economy has gone mainstream and made peer-to-peer transactions available at every step of the travel experience. Fueled by digital technology that allows for new product to be created quickly and inexpensively, the kinds of experiences offered and where they are available is expanding daily. Tools such as AirBnB, Uber, Couchsurfing, Vayable, RV Share or Spinlister allow travellers to experience a destination as a local, with information and opportunity for immersion at their fingertips.

- **Visitor services providers need to recognize sharing economy products as alternative experiences for interested visitors.**

## A POSSIBLE FUTURE

A Futurist Panel<sup>24</sup> speculated on technology's impact on visitor services in five to ten years.

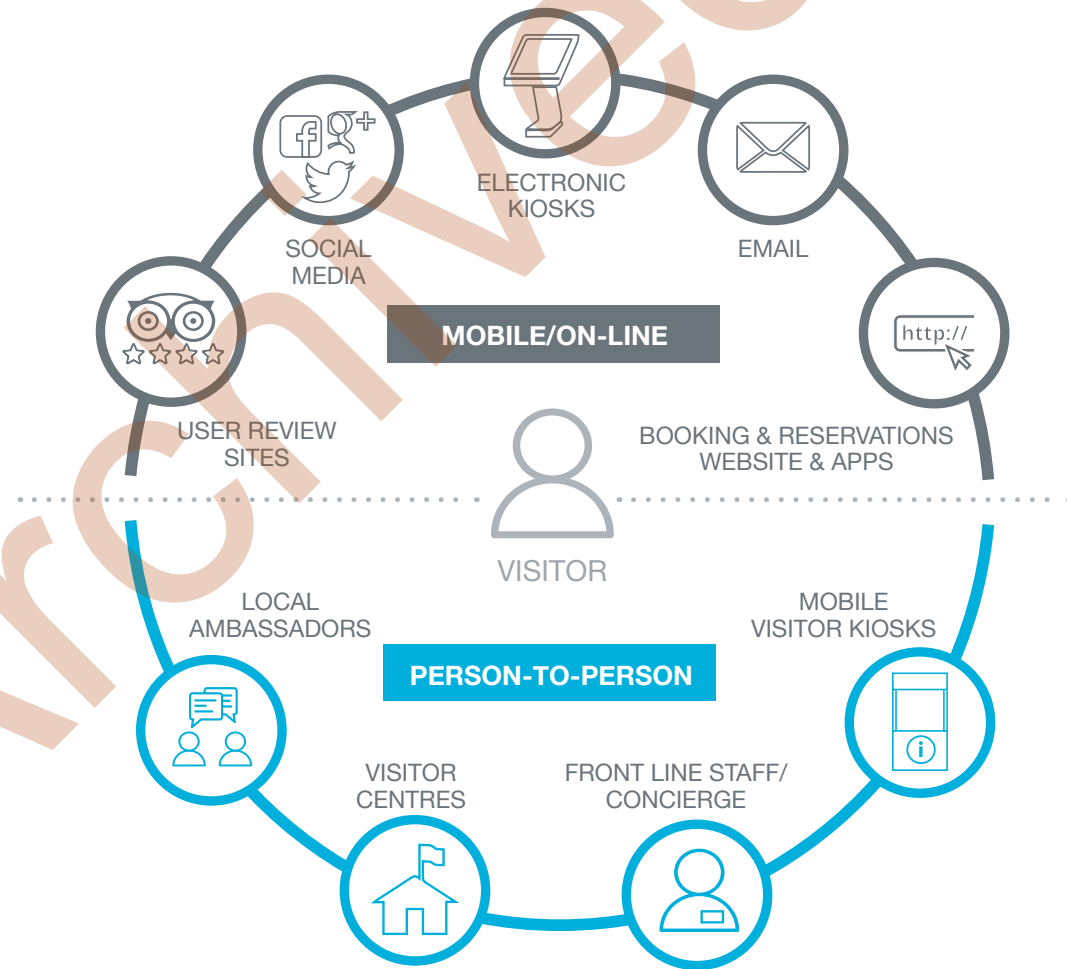
- VICs will become highly interactive, digital centres where trip profiles and requirements can be curated and updated. There will be a move toward satellite visitor services, primarily mobile kiosks. Virtual reality technology will provide visitors with sensory experiences about attractions and activities in the region.
- Interactive and intuitive mobile kiosk screen displays, offering apps for download and online concierge advice, will be located in high visitor traffic areas (e.g., rest areas, historic sites and museums, retail centres, convention centres, etc.).
- Travellers will use their devices to call up real-time advice based on pre-set profiles, past travel patterns, peer group preferences and emerging behaviour while in the destination.

<sup>24</sup> The Futurist Panel comprised Greg Caskey, Microsoft; Mike Hughes, Digital Strategist; Paul Clark, InterVISTAS; Dr. Sean Gouglas, University of Alberta; and William Bakker, Destination THINK.

# MULTI-CHANNEL VISITOR SERVICES

Visitors seek out information from multiple sources. Visitor services need to expand to engage with visitors at all touch points. The visitor services multi-channel ‘eco-system’ is now very large and complex (as depicted in Figure 1). Providers of visitor services need to be open to play a role in all channels where there are opportunities for interaction with visitors. This includes all the online tools, person-to-person visitor services in a VIC, or a roaming mobile kiosk and ensuring the other person-to-person touch points (e.g., front line staff and locals) are well informed and welcoming.

**FIGURE 1**  
**VISITOR SERVICES**  
**MULTI-CHANNEL ECOSYSTEM**



# STATUS OF VISITOR SERVICES

## NUMBER AND TYPES OF VISITOR SERVICES

Of the 120 organizations providing visitor services in Alberta, VICs are the most common. They are operated by municipalities (27), chambers of commerce/boards of trade (30), community museums/historic sites (25) and destination marketing organizations (13). There are also (five) national park visitor centres and (14) provincial park centres. Culture and Tourism oversees the operation of 10 provincially owned VICs located at key highway gateways into the province, and Alberta Transportation provides highway rest areas along the major travel corridors.

Other visitor services include amenities such as clean restrooms, picnic areas, playgrounds, dog runs and sanitary-dump stations. As travel in Alberta is primarily by road, these amenities provided at VICs or highway rest areas are expected of a destination that is committed to tourism. While their value is difficult to measure, they provide opportunities to inform, inspire and influence visitors through information displays and kiosks. While travelling visitors also use local and regional websites, guides, brochures and information kiosks.

As noted, currently most of the visitor services providers use a passive approach, requiring the visitor to seek out the service. Few visitor services providers are proactively reaching out to the visitor. Less than 25 per cent of Alberta's visitor services providers are actively monitoring online tools and websites to engage with the visitor in their trip planning. Some visitor services providers have been experimenting with mobile and roaming visitor information kiosks. They have reported that they achieve more visitor engagements at high visitor traffic areas than they do in their VICs.

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**LESS THAN**  
**25%** of Alberta's visitor services providers are actively monitoring online tools and websites to engage with the visitor in their trip planning.



## USERS OF VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES

Users of VICs tend to be older. In 2002, 35 per cent of visitors to provincial VICs were under 45 years of age. In 2015, that decreased to 25 per cent. Visitors under 35 years of age are less likely to use a VIC than a visitor over 55 years of age. In the summer of 2015, the largest market groups using provincial VICs were other Canadians (40 per cent) and Americans (31 per cent). Visitors from outside of North America represented 12 per cent and Albertans made up 17 per cent of provincial VIC users.

The VICs receiving the highest use are in the resort destinations of Banff, Jasper, Canmore, and Drumheller. While overall visitation to provincially owned VICs has increased since the early 2000s, the growth in visitation to these entry point VICs has not kept pace with growth of visitation to the province<sup>25</sup>.

## QUALITY OF VISITOR SERVICES

Users of VICs continue to see value in them as an information resource. A 2015 study of visitors to six communities in the Calgary region found that almost 30 per cent of the visitors had used a VIC in the past year<sup>26</sup>. Research conducted on urban Albertans and their travel into provincial rural areas found that VICs were a key source of information when travelling. Fifty-seven per cent reported that they would use a VIC as a source of information while travelling in rural Alberta<sup>27</sup>, and the annual exit survey conducted at the 10 provincial VICs consistently rates visitor satisfaction as good to very good by 99 per cent of the visitors.

<sup>25</sup> Comparison of VIC Visitors and Total Visitors to Alberta between 2001 and 2010. This comparison has not been done beyond 2010 due to methodological changes to the 2011 Travel Survey of Residents of Canada.

<sup>26</sup> A Survey of Visitors to Six Communities in the Calgary Region, 2015, Calgary Regional Partnership.

<sup>27</sup> Potential Demand for Rural Vacation Experiences in Alberta by Residents of Alberta, March 2013.





## BALANCING VISITOR NEEDS WITH EQUAL INDUSTRY REPRESENTATION

Many organizations providing visitor services have an obligation to represent tourism businesses and services equally within their region. To ensure both the visitor receives personalized recommendations and that all industry is represented, visitor services staff need to be well trained on questioning skills to determine the interests and needs of their visitors. Through questioning skills, staff can identify appropriate alternative products highlighting the features of each, giving the visitor the final choice. This approach can be used in face-to-face interactions as well as online.

## STANDARDS AND SUPPORT FOR VISITOR SERVICES

Alberta Culture and Tourism provides leadership and strategic direction for visitor services by providing training and resources to providers through the Alberta Visitor Information Program (AVIP). AVIP includes an accreditation program for community and regional VICs that recognizes a high standard of service. Accredited VICs also receive highway and community signage. Fifty-three community and regional VICs have been accredited in the province.

## VICS WILL NEED TO CHANGE

To ensure VICs meet the changing needs of Alberta's visitors, VICs must transition from being information centres to experience centres where the visitor can book a hotel, make a dinner reservation or book a tour. They will need to cast off their institutional feel to reflect the local culture and become places for visitors and locals to gather, relax and socialize.





## WHAT WE HEARD AND LEARNED

Some common themes related to challenges and opportunities emerged from stakeholder consultations. The research on trends and best practices in other jurisdictions also identified significant shifts in approach.

### VISITOR SERVICES PROVIDERS ARE UNDER PRESSURE TO SHOW RETURN ON INVESTMENT

The role of visitor services is to increase the economic contribution of tourism by extending the range of tourism in the province and increasing the total expenditures of visitors. Providers of visitor services are typically nonprofit organizations with limited funding. They are under increasing pressure to justify why resources should be allocated to visitor services and to demonstrate the value of visitor services to their funding organizations, to their communities and to the tourism industry.

Provincial visitor services must also demonstrate their value. Reliable metrics need to be collected and shared with industry.

Retail sales, facility rentals and equipment rentals can be a revenue generator to help offset operating costs. High visitor traffic VICs can generate up to 30 per cent of their budget. The ability to generate revenue to offset operational costs depends on factors such as location, the number of tourism attractions in the area, and the management model.

### SOCIAL MEDIA POLICIES

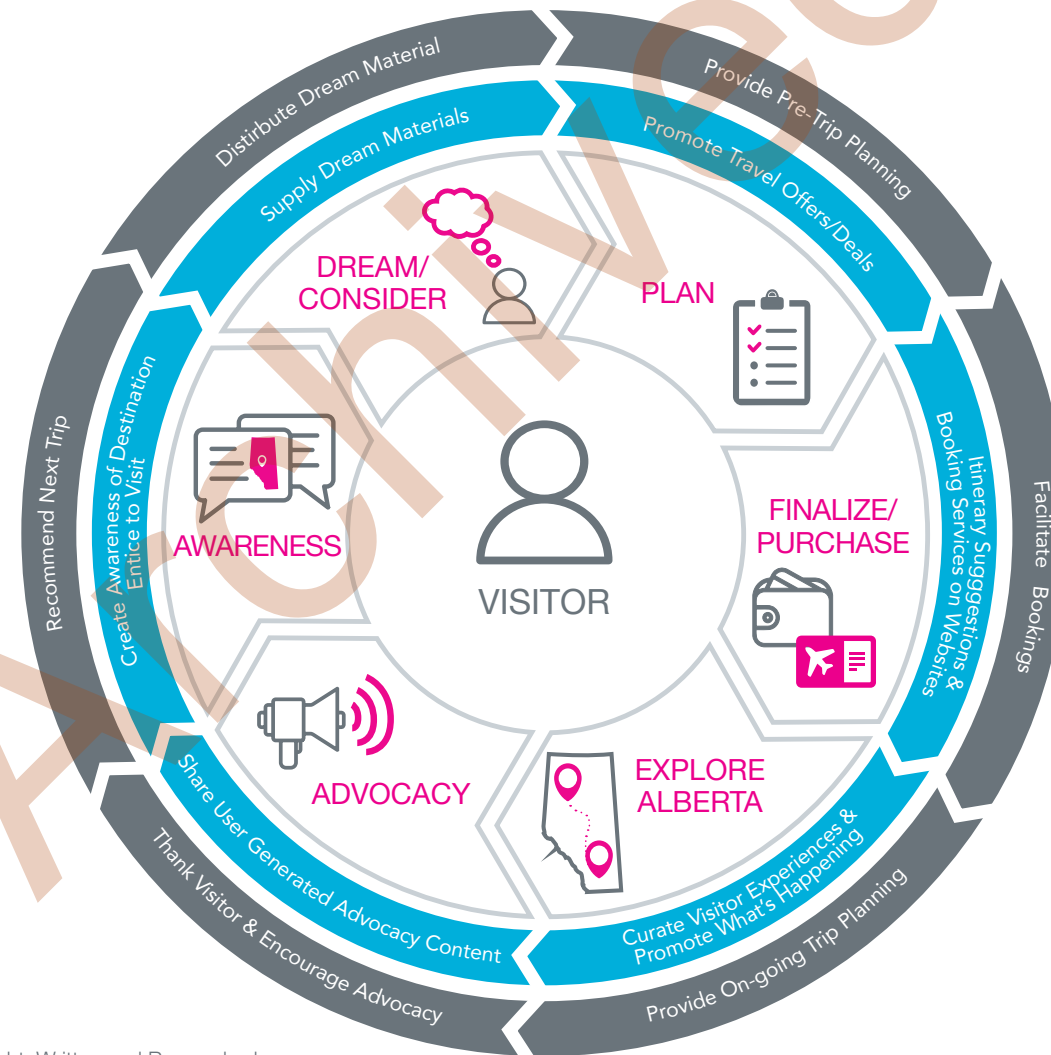
Visitors evaluate their digital experience on convenience, immediacy, simplicity and context (i.e., responding to the visitor's specific needs and interests), but many visitor services providers are limited in their use of social media because of their managing organizations' policies. Social media activity is often handled by communications or marketing departments. This often results in the needs of the visitor not being fully met. Policy changes to allow visitor services providers to be active on social media, while respecting organizational needs, should be pursued so that personalized and trusted information can be provided to the visitor looking for trip planning assistance—to help them go beyond the usual tourist stops and districts.

## ALIGNMENT

The visitor experience, from trip planning to trip follow-up, should be effectively managed. This involves engaging the visitor consistently and in a timely manner through multiple channels and devices. It is a key differentiator in the travel purchase decision and ultimately the competitiveness of a destination<sup>28</sup>. As visitor services providers move into other channels, they should strive to provide a consistent visitor experience across all of them. Visitor services providers should also be ready to demonstrate leadership in working with local industry and tourism marketing organizations to ensure consistency, timely engagements and coordinated efforts.

Visitors want transparency, which requires accurate and consistent information across all channels. Travel Alberta recently enhanced the Alberta Tourism Information Service (ATIS) to enable it to become the single electronic location for the collection, storage and distribution of tourism information for the province. Once fully maximized, the new ATIS will become a key source for up to date information. This includes websites, contact centres, VICs, social media and print material.

**FIGURE 2**  
**THE ROLE OF VISITOR SERVICES IN THE TRAVEL LIFE CYCLE**



## LEGEND

- Visitor Services:** Visitor Services Providers
- Marketing & Promotion:** Travel Alberta, DMO's, Tourism Organizations

Figure 2 shows the role of visitor services in relation to marketing organization in managing the visitor experience. Going forward visitor services will have an expanded role – assisting visitors throughout the travel life cycle. Visitor services should also include monitoring social media for negative comments and misinformation about the destination.

<sup>28</sup> *Travel Innovation and Technology Trends 2015*; Pocuswright; Written and Researched by Bob Offutt and Colie Hoffman, May 2015.

## DEVELOPING A VISITOR CENTRIC CULTURE BY TRAINING ALL VISITOR TOUCH POINTS

Education for stakeholders and the general population on the value of tourism to their community is needed throughout the province. Training in customer service and product knowledge is needed for all front line staff. Many stakeholders advocated for a Locals Know or ambassador program targeted at both the service industry and local residents. In addition to covering how to be welcoming hosts, this training should teach how to create a sense of place for visitors, such as relaying information on the natural history of the area or the local Indigenous culture. The ambassador program should incorporate opportunities for local subject matter experts to deliver components of the training such as the Indigenous culture.

## REGIONAL APPROACH TO VISITOR SERVICES DELIVERY

Many jurisdictions that have an existing regional tourism structure (e.g., Australia, British Columbia) are moving toward a regional network approach of gateway or regional and satellite visitor services delivery. While Alberta does not have a strong regional tourism structure that covers all areas of the province, visitor services could benefit from a regional approach. Regional collaboration could include cross training, group buying of retail merchandise and equipment (e.g., tablets, digital signs), and the sharing of social media monitoring and roaming visitor services.





## PROMOTE VISITOR SERVICES AND PROMOTE PERSONALIZED SERVICE

Visitor services need to be established as a trustworthy source of reliable information tailored to the visitor's specific needs and interests. Visitor services should be promoted as expert services that help the visitor connect to the destination—both physically and emotionally.

Visitor services should be given a higher profile on travel websites. The links to visitor services are often hard to find on websites or located on side bars that are often overlooked. As social media is a critical visitor engagement tool, organizations should consider including a visitor services page as well as marketing pages. The study Social Media Benchmark found that 67 per cent of consumers have used a company's social media page for service, compared to only 33 per cent for social marketing<sup>29</sup>. In a visitor services context, visitors would more frequently use a visitor services page on Facebook or Twitter than a social media marketing page to obtain information on a destination.

Wording to promote visitor services should emphasize personalization provided by local experts, for example:

*Experience Alberta like a local—wherever your travels take you. We know all the best things to do, places to stay and ways to get there. Our local travel experts will personalize your Alberta vacation to make it unforgettable!*

<sup>29</sup> 2013 Social Media Benchmark Study, J.D. Power and Associates.



## EXPANDING ROLE OF VISITOR SERVICES PROVIDERS

To deliver more value, many visitor services providers are expanding their role and services. They are looking to transform their centres into a hub not only for visitors, but for the tourism industry and residents. Types of services that could be considered include: assisting with community event development and organization; assisting new tourism operators with their listings on websites and ATIS; hosting events for the tourism industry; organizing meetings with their council and the industry; connecting locals with visitors with common interests; supporting economic development by providing information and tours to potential investors; providing information for new residents and encouraging local residents to also use their visitor services.

## STANDARDIZATION OF DATA COLLECTION AND REPORTING

Many visitor services providers lack the information and statistics to inform their community about the value of tourism and the contribution visitor services make. A standardized approach for collecting and reporting information would help them to demonstrate that investment in visitor services is benefiting not only the visitor, but the tourism industry and the local economy.

## ON-GOING MONITORING OF TRENDS

For visitor services to be innovative and responsive, ongoing research and monitoring of trends in tourism, technology and socio-demographics will be imperative. This model is a first step in understanding the changes and opportunities for visitor services.

The long-term sustainability of visitor services will be dependent on the value of the services provided to the visitor, to the industry and to the funding agencies. Visitor services providers will need the tools to demonstrate their value and will need the resources to expand visitor services beyond operating VICs.



Work with provincial, regional and community-based visitor services providers to incorporate a multi-channel approach to the delivery of visitor services.

## KEY PRIORITIES AND ACTIONS

The delivery of high quality, multi-channel visitor services will contribute to Alberta's efforts to grow tourism and remain competitive in the global tourism marketplace.

Alberta Culture and Tourism will assess the provincial visitor services programs and work with community and regional visitor services providers to help them adapt to the evolving needs and behaviour of our visitors.

### PRIORITY 1.0

**Work with provincial, regional and community-based visitor services providers to incorporate a multi-channel approach to the delivery of visitor services.**

#### ACTIONS:

- 1.1 Establish a Visitor Services Innovation Fund to support and encourage visitor services providers to develop innovative, forward-thinking approaches to the delivery of services. For more information, visit the Alberta Culture and Tourism website.
- 1.2 Maximize the use of online tools, social media and crowd-sourcing sites to proactively engage with visitors across all channels and to respond to individual needs.
- 1.3 Update and adapt the Alberta Visitor Information Providers' training programs and resources to assist visitor services providers to transition into a multi-channel approach to delivery (e.g., roaming counselling services, online engagement strategies and guidelines).
- 1.4 Assess and update the provincially owned VICs to ensure service delivery models meet future visitor needs and demand.
- 1.5 Undertake a site redevelopment master plan for the Canmore Visitor Information Centre to fully realize its potential as the province's premier visitor centre.

Work with community-based and regional visitor services providers to help increase their value proposition and maximize their contribution to Alberta's visitor economy.

## PRIORITY 2.0

**Work with community-based and regional visitor services providers to help increase their value proposition and maximize their contribution to Alberta's visitor economy.**

### ACTIONS:

- 2.1 Revise the Alberta Visitor Information Providers Program accreditation criteria to include high standards for all channels of service delivery.
- 2.2 Develop and share training tools, resources and services to help communities expand or refresh their delivery model for visitor services. This could include initiatives to connect visitors with locals, generate revenue, and deliver concierge services.
- 2.3 Enable better understanding of the value of tourism and the visitor economy in Alberta communities by sharing tools to help develop business cases, collect business intelligence, and set performance measures and indicators.
- 2.4 Assist community and regional visitor services providers to enhance their profile and increase visitor awareness of new and evolving services. This could include assistance on using Trip Advisor, Google Maps, and curating visitor comments on their services.





Build a co-ordinated and collaborative approach to visitor services delivery that aligns tourism organizations.

### PRIORITY 3.0

**Build a co-ordinated and collaborative approach to visitor services delivery that aligns tourism organizations.**

**ACTIONS:**

- 3.1 Promote the value of a regional network approach, including a gateway and satellite approach to visitor services providers.
- 3.2 Research and pilot a provincial ambassador program to be used by communities to encourage residents to welcome visitors to the province and their community.
- 3.3 Share best practices and successful approaches used in other jurisdictions with community and regional visitor services providers to guide them in taking leadership to develop relationships between industry, local governments and the community.
- 3.4 Monitor and coordinate provincial, regional and community visitor services initiatives to ensure they align with the new visitor services model and maximize resources.





## IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION

Alberta Culture and Tourism is committed to implementing this new visitor services model over the coming years. Industry input and feedback will be gathered to ensure our actions are meeting the needs of communities and that they are effective in all regions of the province.

The priorities and actions will be evaluated each year and action will be taken based on the availability of resources. They will be updated and modified to respond to changing visitor needs. Outcomes will be reported in the Alberta Culture and Tourism annual report.

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