



Community Economic Development Programs

Outback Beds Inc – success story

Challenges and opportunities

The Outback Beds Incorporated story epitomises community spirit, the power of networks, and determination to achieve a better outcome in daunting circumstances.

Outback NSW is isolated, the sparse population is spread across great distances and has limited services. Outback Beds was founded five years ago when rural operators had to deal with a decline in returns from working the land. At the same time, a downturn in traditional commodity markets was exacerbated by the soul destroying hardships of the worst drought in living memory. Income, along with the landscape, was beginning to dry up while rural operating costs continued to increase. There was clearly a need to diversify and find additional sources of income but as always, the question was how?

A program for change

The idea of setting up a network of agri-tourism operators was first broached at a workshop run by the NSW Department of State and Regional Development (DSRD) and the Bourke Rural Counselling Service in December 2001. It was an idea which had merit.

Visiting the Outback is a quintessentially Australian experience: this part of the country and its culture is quite different from what travellers experience in other parts of the world. In the past there were rarely enough comfortable places to stay, which put formidable obstacles in the path of all but the most adventurous. The group that convened in Bourke five years ago saw a way to help both tourism in the Outback and the people who live there.

Outback Beds now covers an area larger than many European countries: from the Murray River in the south, to the New South Wales / South Australia border in the west, through to slightly beyond the Queensland border in the north, and Cryon and Lightning Ridge in the east. Places such as Tilpa, Louth, Bourke, Nyngan, Wanaaring, Brewarrina and Broken Hill in NSW, and Thargomindah and Hungerford just over the border in Queensland, are all now part of the Outback Beds group.

The network offers a wide range of accommodation for travellers, from historic hotels and bush pubs to farm stays, guest rooms on working stations, camping under the stars, new log cabins outfitted as 'stockman's suites', and a below ground bed and breakfast in an old opal mine.

Goals

After two years of operation, Outback Beds applied for funding assistance from the DSRD so that a business plan for the network could be drawn up.

Key marketing aims of the business plan are to re-establish the Outback as a friendly, safe and comfortable place, and to emphasise that the area offers a diverse range of visitor experiences.

Goals under the marketing plan are to:

- § build market awareness of the unique accommodation opportunities which exist in Outback NSW
- § increase business for all Outback Beds members
- § extend the range of marketing materials and develop an efficient and effective distribution system for information about Outback Beds
- § develop intra-network referrals and take part in co-operative marketing programs which target mainstream markets
- § strengthen relationships with key industry partners, including local tourism managers and tour operators, visitor information centres, the Outback Regional Tourism Organisation and Tourism NSW
- § provide the Outback with an up-to-date regional map.

Outback Beds markets to a wide variety of potential customers across many market segments. The domestic market includes corporate and interstate travellers, as well as wanderers (retirees and semi-retirees), while the international market, which is still small but growing, attracts mainly European and North American visitors.



There are also a number of speciality market segments. The 'self-fly' market (visitors who fly their own planes) is particularly important for properties which have their own air-strips or are located close to local airports. The 4WD camping market and event-related travel such as the Louth Races are also growing in importance, and other speciality markets such as fishing or bird-watching are also targeted.

Projects

One of the key strategies in establishing Outback Beds was development of the Outback Beds website – www.outbackbeds.com.au. This website is the primary showcase for all members to attract business. Each participating member has a click-through to their own pages on the site, and many have extensive photographic coverage of their properties, visitor highlights, and accommodation details.

The website design features the Outback Beds logo of a red-tailed black cockatoo and the branding slogan, 'Stay in the Outback with Friends'. The site is maintained by the network's Advertising and Media Officer who co-ordinates feedback from members about the site. There are links with other official tourism sites; for example, the 'Visit NSW' website directs enquiries to the Outback Beds website.

Outback Beds also has an 1800 number for enquiries which is monitored on a rotation basis by Outback Beds' members. All the day-to-day work of running Outback Beds is done on a voluntary basis.

How the community economic development programs have helped

Outback Beds Incorporated was initially assisted as a business network in 2002 under DSRD's Towns and Villages Futures Program. These funds were used for a project coordinator to devise a business/marketing plan for the network. With the growth of the network, subsequent funding was offered under the Main Street Small Towns Program to update the business/marketing plan and to assist with the promotional TV and print campaign in 2006. Assistance has also been provided by Tourism NSW, West 2000 Plus, and the Outback Regional Tourism Organisation.

In 2006 Outback Beds was also offered funds under AusIndustry's Building Entrepreneurship in Small Business Program, which will be used over the next two years to train and support members of the Outback Beds network in key business management practices.

Ongoing activities

In just five years, Outback Beds has become recognised by tourist organisations and by government agencies – local, state and federal – as a credible and viable network.

The number of Outback Beds' members has increased from twelve to twenty-six and requests have been received from both interstate Outback operators and non-accommodation providers to join the network.

Outback Beds has garnered good media coverage, appearing on a number of national television programs such as Getaway, The Great Outdoors, and The Today Show. There has also been a spate of Awards: In 2005, Outback Beds won the Business Enterprise Award category of the NSW Regional Achievement & Community Awards and in 2006, the Destination and Product Marketing Category of the Inland NSW Tourism Awards.

As with all small businesses, Outback Beds' funds are limited. Members are asked to allocate marketing funds as part of their budget each year, and group marketing is undertaken co-operatively.

Outback Beds has undoubtedly been a success, and members say much of this success is due to communication. Although the group has only one face-to-face meeting a year there is frequent contact amongst members, and extensive information sharing.

The tyranny of distance – which would have made a concept such as Outback Beds impossible in the past – has been conquered.

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Business network:	Outback Beds Incorporated
Location:	Extends from the Murray in the south, to slightly beyond the Queensland border in the north, the NSW/SA border in the west, and Cryon and Lightning Ridge in the east.
LGAs:	The network incorporates the following shires: Balranald, Bogan, Bourke, Brewarrina, Broken Hill, Central Darling, Walgett, Wentworth and the Unincorporated Area.
Regions:	Orana, Far West, Murray
Main industries:	Agriculture, tourism, mining, opals