
Small business

Rural and regional outreach program

The barrier of distance and isolation is lessening as the Small Business Unit develops methods to reach rural and regional Australia. Service provision to businesses outside metro areas is a key performance measure for its staff. Each State's small business manager (MSB) has a program to reach this important group of businesses and consumers. A report for federal agencies by Quantum Market Research (September 1999) on communicating with regional and rural Australians highlighted successful strategies already used by the unit and provided new directions to continue to improve this outreach program. The Commission also maintains permanent offices in Townsville and Tamworth.

Key results in the research highlight that:

- information couched in local terminology will have far greater impact;
- visible consultation and communication processes and a visible local presence is important;
- local newspapers are the main source of information;
- local community groups and local MPs and councillors are other key sources of information;
- toll-free numbers are considered the most effective way to provide information;
- Internet links and a book including all government services are needed; and
- the use of local people and resources is vital.

Regional Australians are difficult to gather together so the Commission often reaches them through established networks of government organisations, industry groups and

community-based organisations. But where possible, face-to-face contact has been and will remain the preferred way to bring the Commission's initial educational commitment into rural and regional areas. Direct contact has the additional advantage of providing an internal link to enforcement where advice indicates substantial breaches of the Act.

Queensland is the Commission's most diverse regional market. Staff make field trips to conduct seminars and presentations to industry about the Trade Practices Act in general, the Franchising Code of Conduct and new legislation governing unconscionable conduct. The Queensland MSB, Paul Jones, conducted a special seminar program for travel and tourism industry groups throughout north Queensland in late 1999. He arranged seminars through local industry and government organisations with promotion through regional ABC radio interviews and local TV in Mackay. The seminars were geared for local businesses and used regional examples to reinforce their messages.

In 1999 the Commission used country field days to promote TPA issues to rural communities. The interest shown in the information that is provided by the Commission was stronger than expected and the ability to use this type of attraction will continue to grow. Konrad Chmielewski of the Commission's Small Business Unit managed the organisation of the Gunnedah Ag-Quip Field Day which attracted more than 520 exhibitors and almost 100 000 visitors. A two-page editorial in the program giving small businesses TPA information was distributed to more than 100 000 visitors. This and advertising on 10 regional and rural radio stations, effectively promoted the Commission. Konrad spoke to several hundred visitors and initiated investigation into six matters.

At the Paskeville machinery field days in South Australia, the Commission found similar enthusiasm for the information it provided.

Commission joint ventures with the Australian Tax Office Bizstart Program is helping reach new small businesses in regional centres. The MSBs in all States have contributed to briefings on the Act for businesses attending this program. Bizstart seminars that include information on the TPA have been held from Cairns through to Cannington in Western Australia.

State government business centres have helped distribute Commission publications and supported MSBs in the continuing small business program. These centres cover all of regional Australia.

Chambers of Commerce continue to help gather businesses to attend seminars on the Act. Presentations have been made to audiences in, for example, Kalgoorlie, Whitsunday and Shepparton.

The Victorian MSB, Darren McClelland, has used the Commission's outreach program to collaborate with Rotary in promoting the Commission and its work for small business. Presentations to meetings have been regularly made in regional Victoria and in NSW and will begin soon in the NT. The use of local community business managers to support the program guarantees successful results.

The Queensland Government Agency Program (QGAP) provides isolated communities with a single agency to handle all government services. The network will shortly begin using a computerised system and each QGAP office will have access to the Commission's Internet site. Similar programs operate and are being developed in other States and will provide an important outlet to the remote rural communities.

The Small Business Unit writes a monthly article which is distributed to several hundred rural press organisations. These articles are on current issues such as e-commerce, two-price advertising, GST and the Baldwin's Tractor and Truck Wreckers case. The articles are educative and promote fair trading compliance.

The Commission's small business team are currently setting up an information network through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ASTI) organisations to ensure that ASTI business operators and consumers have a

clearer understanding of their rights and obligations.

The Commission's diversity of partnerships includes the support of the national TAFE program. All TAFE libraries now have a small business package of publications for student use and teachers have a working package for all business courses. In addition some TAFEs have attached hyperlinks to the Commission's Internet site. This education sector is especially important in its ability to promote the Act to individuals before they enter a small business especially one in a regional area.

The MSB in each State is the Commission's representative in combined government/private sector agency business information work groups. Agencies include ASIC, the State Chamber of Commerce, ATO, Department of Fair Trading and State Development. All these agencies have small business programs and work together to educate small business. Services Guides detailing agency and government services and contact points have been published through these work groups and provided to regional and rural communities.

The Commission uses existing systems of information distribution to reach into regional and rural Australia. However, the Unit believes not all opportunities have yet been discovered or fully developed. By continually developing existing sources and recognising resources available to its Small Business Unit, it is the Commission's objective that regional and rural business and communities will view the Commission as visible, approachable and useful in its core activities of providing information and education, and in enforcing the Act.