Tourist Signing Rationalisation
A practical guide for road signing practitioners
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Section 1
Introduction
One of the most important but least understood aspects of tourism destination management is visitor navigation. Regions devote a large amount of time and resources to attracting people, yet only a fraction to enhance the experience of visitors once they’re in the area.

Road signing to tourist attractions and services is among the most contentious issues that road authorities have to deal with. The expectations of business operators are often unrealistic, but a cause of tension may also be: the road authority’s failure to develop fair and equitable guidelines for the industry; inadequately communicating the primary role of signing; and; failing to educate the business community about how the tourist processes information regarding places to visit and services to use.

The purpose of this ‘tool-kit’ is to provide signing administrators with:

1. principles regarding the travel behaviour of consumers,
2. key tools that can be applied in their local situation to help avoid and ease signing congestion,
3. practical case studies from around Australia, that highlight how some regions and towns have approached the issues.

This kit cannot take a prescriptive approach to the subject because local factors and State/territory legislation will always influence decisions.

It goes without saying that managing tourist signing in most regions involves a cooperative and consultative approach. Those regions that are leading the way in this field tend to have appropriately resourced structures and have usually developed a solid relationship between the road and tourism authorities.

Primarily, road signing is about traffic management and motorist safety. These principles need to always take precedence, but a well thought-out tourist signing system can also effectively communicate with visitors, meet the reasonable needs of tourism operators, and help to protect visual amenity.

The National Tourism Signing Reference Group (NTSRG) is aligned to AusRoads and is a subcommittee of the Australian Standing Committee on Tourism (ASCOT). It was formed in 1998 and represents the Tourism Commissions and Road Authorities of every Australian State and Territory. It aims to increase uniformity in the processes and the execution of tourist signing matters. NTSRG undertakes research and investigation, including input to the Australian Standard AS 1742.6 (Tourist and Service Signs)
Section 2

Behavioural aspects of tourist signing
A primary motivator behind business requests for tourist signs is usually marketing related, though it may be presented under the guise of ‘improving visitor navigation’.

The typical information processing that a tourist undertakes to reach an attraction or a service is often poorly understood by business operators, so it can help to communicate it to them as part of the signing application process.

The fundamental concept that needs to be conveyed, and continually reinforced, is that a directional sign should be the last link in the communication chain between the business and their customer. Most of the process is in the hands of the operator, who needs to effectively communicate with the visitor through information and marketing material. Almost all visitors to a destination arrive armed with some level of awareness and information. So, the primary signing need is directional, not motivational.

Visitors are initially motivated to visit a town, city or region because of preconceived knowledge about the destination. This may be acquired through a variety of means, but rarely because of a road sign that is fleetingly sighted when travelling at 110 km/h.

Tourist navigation research commissioned by VicRoads and Tourism Victoria during the 1990s revealed that major directional signs (ie white on green) are the key navigational tools used by the travelling public to reach a destination. The traveller has usually formed a strong opinion and a desire to visit beforehand. The directional and reassurance signs simply confirm that they’re heading in the right direction.

A large percentage of visitors do some degree of research regarding a destination before they leave home, via brochures, directories, advertisements and, most prominently, via the internet. Increasing numbers – especially among younger age groups – conduct their research ‘on the road’, or at the destination, via smart phones, GPS navigational aids and other hand-held devices.

However, despite this increasing use of hand-held information devices, a significant proportion of visitors still make use of a visitor information centre, or, when not available, tourist information bays, town maps etc. The location and the quality of these centralised information services play a big role in potentially reducing the need for lower level tourist signing to businesses. Good signing to the visitor information centre and/or information bays is an important starting point. The onus is then placed on business operators to become aligned with their local tourism body/ visitor centre, where their information can be made available to visitors and where the staff has been educated by the operator regarding the type of service that the business can offer.

A simple and obvious hierarchy of importance in tourist signing can also help to subliminally inform the travelling motorist. Controlled use of sign colour, format and placement of tourist signs aids comprehension, navigation and enhances safety. Unfortunately, it’s not uncommon to see signs to key natural features, such as national parks, lookouts etc, overwhelmed at intersections by over-sized signs to small accommodation establishments. The disruption to the ‘hierarchy-of-importance’ can confuse visitors, not to mention create clutter and reduce visual amenity.

Signing to service businesses

The communication process used by visitors to find key tourism services, particularly accommodation, is different. Visitors requiring accommodation fall into two main categories:

1. Those who have pre-booked or have pre-enquired about their accommodation,
2. Those who arrive in a town, city or region and simply require somewhere to stay

The first category will be seeking a specific business name. They will have had the ability, through direct contact with the business, to obtain explicit instruction about how to get there. Nowadays, this is even easier using business location devices and in-car navigation, on smartphones or wireless-enabled tablets or laptops.
The only legitimate directional sign need for these businesses may be a final guide sign, if required, at the nearest intersection with a major road, with perhaps another sign if back-street navigation is difficult.

The second type of accommodation seeker does not seek a specific business name, but rather are looking for a particular type of accommodation, eg caravan park, motel, B&B etc. The navigation needs of these visitors can usually be met using internationally/nationally approved symbols or generic words, eg ‘caravan parks’, ‘Motel’ etc. Night-time navigation is aided by using suitably reflective materials and siting the sign in a prominent location.

Communicating the behavioural patterns of the two types of accommodation seekers should help applicants to see that their signing needs are less than they believe them to be. However, the onus falls upon the accommodation operator to provide explicit navigation advice in all their marketing material, to make use of the many free electronic mapping location services, and to ensure that the consumer has access to the instructions at the time of enquiry or booking.

Key points

1. Explain to businesses how tourists’ process information to find destinations, attractions and services.
2. Signs are directional and informational, not promotional. They are no substitute for marketing.
3. Signing to quality, centralised visitor information services can reduce the need for individual business signing.
4. Develop a hierarchy of importance for tourist signing.
5. Understand and communicate the two main types of accommodation seekers and their information needs to business operators.
Section 3
Setting the framework
Effective and orderly presentation of tourism signing doesn’t happen by accident. It requires a framework that is clearly understood by signing practitioners and tourism operators. Ideally, this will be a signing strategy, policy or a set of procedures. At the very least, it should involve establishing a clear hierarchy of importance to apply to tourist signing requests.

A local area signing policy should be a clear statement about the organisation’s philosophy under which tourism signing is permitted and outlining the parameters within which local tourism operators can apply.

A signing policy should promote fairness and equity. While it should recognise the commercial interests of business, this needs to be within the primary context of road safety and traffic management, and also consider the information needs of visitors, how the travelling public processes information, as well as the rights of the resident community. Wherever possible, consistency with state and national guidelines should be the aim.

It makes sense to use the State/Territory guidelines as a basis for a local policy. Most organisations adopt the broad principles of the guidelines, especially eligibility criteria, sign format etc, then add components to reflect special needs or conditions in their own communities. A local area signing policy should reflect any special planning or urban design policies, especially in environmentally and culturally-sensitive locations.

By not taking a strategic approach, and without such a framework, signing applications will always be handled in an ad-hoc way. Over the course of time, changes in road authority personnel and operator demands may result in cluttered intersections.

How to develop a signing strategy and policy is outlined on the NTSRG website (www.tourismsigns.com.au), so let’s restrict discussion to developing a ‘hierarchy of importance’ for tourist signs. If a road authority bases a tourism signing strategy on the information needs and the information processing behaviour of motoring visitors, then the natural hierarchy of importance should become obvious.

Using the alpha-numeric

Most state/territories have now adopted the alpha-numeric road numbering system, which has been assisting tourist navigation in Europe for 60 years. However, the navigational potential of the system is still poorly understood by most Australian tourism operators.

The primary navigational aids used by visitors are the white-on-green major directional signs. Most of these signs around the country now feature alpha-numeric designators. Most hard copy and online maps and directories also feature them as well.

The alpha-numeric designators on key directional signs should be sufficient to direct visitors to within a short distance of their intended destination. In most cases, this should remove the need to sign a business from distant points. Where alpha-numerics are not in use, it may be possible to piggy-back on existing directional signs, eg:

For obvious reasons, not all towns and cities can be included on major directional signs and most road authorities have a policy of signing to ‘through’ destinations, which may not necessarily be the biggest or most significant tourism town on that route. Councils and tourism bodies should consult with their state/territory road authority if they believe their key directional signage is lacking.

It is always advisable to review the marketing material of tourism operators applying for signs to ensure that their material includes clear navigational instructions, including alpha-numeric designators and freeway exit numbers where applicable.
Street signing is important

Visitors need prominent, simple and clear street signing once they leave the major routes. Prominent street and road signing can further reduce the need for signs to individual attractions and services.

A review of local street signage is an excellent starting point:

- Are all street/road signs in good, reflective condition?;
- Are they prominently visible to motorists?;
- Is the road reserve regularly maintained to avoid the sign face becoming obscured?

Incorporating alpha-numeric numbers + street names into a business’s marketing material should reduce the need for specific business signage, eg

“To reach Kookaburra Motel, take the Boydtown exit (no.3) from the A7. Follow the C272 north from Boydtown. After 5 km turn left into the C589, which takes you into the Kingsville retail centre. 1 km beyond the shops, turn right into Waterfall Street, and look for the Kookaburra Motel finger sign 300 metres on your right.”

The same instruction should be even easier to communicate using a schematic map.

The Waterfall Street sign could also include the approved accommodation service symbol on the pole, to help those who are simply looking for motel-style accommodation.

The onus in the above example is on the road authorities to provide high quality alpha-numeric directional signing to Kingsville, then a prominently displayed Waterfall Street sign. In this case, the business operator is entitled to one street blade to provide final guidance.

Highlight strengths

Visitors are generally made aware of – and are attracted to – an area because of its high profile regional strengths, such as coastal scenery, wineries, gourmet food, high country adventuring etc. Those features and attractions that support the major image of an area could be considered for priority treatment in the hierarchy of tourism signing that you’re developing, eg

- Kingsville Food and Wine
- Epicurean Centre
- King Valley lookout
- Kingsville Cottages

Collaboration and consultation with the local/ regional tourism authority is important to determine the key strengths. However, avoid strengths that are attached to current marketing campaigns, as these may change from time to time.

Tourism is about ‘experiences’

Most visitors are motivated by the activities and experiences offered by an area. These type of attractions and tourism experiences (ie. when they meet state and local criteria for signing) could have reasonable grounds to request signing on a road reserve, especially when they support regional strengths mentioned above. They should form the next level of importance on the signing hierarchy.
Accommodation signing

While accommodation and other service providers are vital to the local tourism industry, they should be placed at the bottom in the ‘hierarchy of importance’, because of the consumer behavioural patterns outlined in section 2 of this document.

With some notable exceptions, tourists are not motivated to visit a town or region by the accommodation. So, why is it that signing for small accommodation businesses is often allowed to dominate other signing at intersections, or to overwhelm the signage for those things that create the region’s tourism ‘experience’. eg: such as shown below.

### Key Points

1. Develop a clear framework to achieve sign minimisation and rationalisation: a signing strategy or policy, a set of procedures, or, at the very least, a hierarchy of importance that can be applied to sign requests.

2. Use the State/Territory guidelines as a basis for a local/regional tourism signing policy.

3. Encourage operators to make full use of alphanumeric designators and road/street names to provide navigational instruction to customers.

4. Consider priority for those businesses that reinforce the region’s key strengths and tourist experiences.

5. Services signing, especially for accommodation, comes towards the bottom of the hierarchy of importance.

6. Don’t allow sign envy to drive requests from operators for bigger and more prominent signs. Size and format should be based on safety and traffic management factors.

Remain focussed on the visitor’s key information needs

If the above hierarchy of visitor information needs is followed, there shouldn’t be the need for so many signs cluttering our roadsides. Of course, this requires a major change in thinking among tourism operators, because it is too easy to cloak their promotional desires under the guise of visitor navigational needs.

Remember that one of the major causes of sign clutter is competition among operators. Signs usually beget more signs, and large signs often result in even larger signs, as operators try to outshine the competition down the road. Ironically, accommodation properties in most areas of NSW are not able to get services signs on State-controlled roads. While many businesses grumble about this fact, at least they are all equal when it comes to capturing trade.
Section 4

Research and consultation
Tourism signing is not rocket science, but nor can you rely on an applicant’s common sense.

Typically, applications for tourist signs will land on your desk when a business is first established or when it has been taken over. Applicants often believe that a poor location of a business can be overcome by installing a large number of directional signs. Sign applications also tend to come when a business is performing poorly, as signs are often seen as cheap advertising.

A key to effectively dealing with signing applicants is to try and remove the emotion and heat from discussions by using research and established principles. The way that most people seek out the location of a business, as outlined in section 2 of this document, is a good example of the style of communication needed. Ensuring that their marketing material includes good navigational instructions is also a constructive way to reinforce that signs are just the final link in the communication chain.

An alliance with the local or regional tourism organisation can be useful, though be aware that many of these organisations rely on membership fees and sponsorships, which may cloud their ability to provide a truly objective assessment. Better input and a more objective assessment is often achieved through referring decisions to a tourism signing committee. These committees typically comprise representatives from the state/local road authority, councils, tourism organisations and selected members of the tourism industry.

Regardless of the structures and referral agencies in place, it can still be an uphill battle to maintain an orderly and equitable approach to signing without some form of grounding documentation. This usually takes the form of State/ Territory or local tourism signing guidelines, and/or a local area signing policy.

In fact, the development of a well-researched signing policy should be one of the first outputs of a regional tourism signing committee. The policy should be based on extensive industry consultation, so that it has a credible basis upon which to develop policy and procedures. Signing decisions that are not underpinned by a signing policy will always be prone to isolated, ad-hoc decision making, which can often lead to inconsistency and cluttering. Local signing policies that grow out of State/ territory-wide signing guidelines also stand a better chance of avoiding inconsistent decision-making across regions.

A final and important word about consultation. Councillors and local politicians can play a ‘make or break’ role in implementing a signing strategy. They are the elected representatives of a local community, whose role is often to provide a voice for dissatisfied people. When trying to introduce a new signing system there are bound to be some dissatisfied tourism operators. Therefore, it’s essential to brief councillors and local members about the process and the objectives of the project. Their understanding and support for what you are doing may not reduce the number of complaints from operators, but it may influence their response to the complainants.

Key Points

1. Emphasise that the primary consideration in all road signing is road user safety.
2. Use facts and research to take the heat of sign negotiations.
3. A regional tourism signing committee can provide objectivity when assessing sign applications.
4. A tourism signing strategy and policy, based on meaningful consultation, should underpin signing decisions.
Section 5

Sign reduction
The easiest and most immediate way to reduce sign clutter is to remove redundant signs. Sign clutter usually results from years of ‘layering’. New signs are often added to a pole with little consideration or what can be taken down. Signs are often displayed for businesses that have long since closed, or that started out with a tourism focus, but are now little more than a retail outlet.

Removal of redundant signs is such an easy and logical first step, yet most authorities fail to do it on a regular basis. One or two days with a truck and a two-person crew can often reduce sign numbers by as much as 25%. Divide the area’s road system into achievable chunks and, if you schedule a sign reduction session once a week, for a number of weeks, you will notice a big difference in 1-2 months. In some cases the process may be slowed-down by the need to issue ‘show cause’ notices. These require a sign owner to justify why they should remain signed as a tourism business. Allow adequate time in the process to undertake this.

In more extreme cases, where the eligibility to display may be doubtful and/or the business owner refuses to comply, imposing a ‘sunset clause’ on the sign’s continuation may need to be formally issued under the appropriate Road Act, local planning scheme, or bylaw.

Apart from regular audits and removal of redundant signs, the road authority should review possible redundancies every time an application for a new sign is lodged and assessed. An effective database of sign permits makes it easier for the authority to audit and maintain tourist signs. A well designed database can trigger the need for a renewal application, or at least for the authority to undertake a maintenance check. The display of permit numbers on the back of each sign not only makes auditing much easier, but allows for quick detection of illegal signing.

Illegal/ non-compliant signs

The lack of a tourism signing policy, and/or someone to enforce it, often results in illegally installed signs, or unauthorised modifications to previously approved signs. They may stand-out at an intersection because the sign features inappropriate fonts, is over-sized, or may carry creative additions, including logos. Removal of poorly formatted, non-compliant signs can quickly improve the appearance of an intersection.

The presence of non-compliant signs often encourages other operators to follow, rather than going through the normal process. Sometimes it can be years before a road authority catches up with the anomalies, which can further encourage other operators to do their own thing.

A simple request to the business operator to produce evidence of the original agreement or permit and/or justify its continued display according to the signing guidelines, can short-circuit the process, rather than enter into protracted negotiations. Determining the eligibility of a business to be signed can be fairly subjective for a road authority. Seeking the advice of an appropriate tourism organisation or the regional tourism signing committee is often useful.
Information signs

Sometimes a cause of sign clutter on road reserves is the presence of government information signs. They often promote a community message or cause, acknowledge funding for a road project, or simply denote an area of influence, eg water management catchment. In parts of Australia, these type of signs may not require road authority approval to install.

They often remain in place for years – long after the campaign has ended, and even after the sponsoring body ceases to exist. Consequently, sign maintenance can be neglected. These type of signs may not designed for road use, and they may not permit adequate motorist comprehension at the prevailing speed.

If possible, road authorities should negotiate with the government agency to determine the number of signs needed, to find more appropriate locations (ie away from already heavily signed areas), and even to discuss whether there are more appropriate ways to communicate the message. At the very least, the road authority should try to negotiate an agreement about the length of display and the responsibility for maintenance and removal. When in doubt, remove the sign and store – odds-on, you won’t hear from anyone about it!

Marketing signs

Tourism marketing signs are often located on road reserves and at entrances to urban areas. These signs display a marketing theme or slogan in use at the time of installation. When the sign fades, is damaged or is out dated, the installing body rarely has the funds to replace or remove it. The result can be a shabby sign that promotes a long out-dated campaign, and which can reflect poorly on the image of an area.

Road authorities should resist the installation of marketing related signs, with the exception of the State/ Territory Tourism Authority’s destination gateway signing. Where they are approved for installation, the road authority should insist upon a relatively timeless design, and avoid current logos and slogans. A permit that stipulates the period of display, and the need for the organisation to replace or renew, as appropriate, is recommended.

Similarly, agreements should be developed with sponsoring organisations, such as chambers of commerce or regional development agencies, for the installation of regional and welcome signs, to ensure ongoing responsibility.
Tourist Drive signs

Since the 1960s, tourist drive signs have become common features in towns and regions around Australia. Many of them become damaged, faded or overlaid with a later tourist route. In most cases, marketing support material for the route is long out of print. A quick reconnaissance of the local area, in conjunction with the tourist authority, can quickly identify which redundant tourist drive signs can be removed immediately.

Often the routes were determined by local politics rather than by consumer demand. In many cases, they may no longer be used by today’s more sophisticated consumer. The NTSRG actively discourages the use of signs to denote tourist trails, preferring that trails and drives be featured in marketing support material.

Applications for any new tourist drive signs should be accompanied by a comprehensive management plan by the sponsoring authority, particularly outlining ongoing maintenance responsibility.

Community facility signing

While not within the scope of this document, it is worth noting that sign clutter in urban areas is sometimes caused by the over-zealous signing of community facilities. This can include shield signs for community organisations such as Red Cross, Rotary etc. The location of the town’s swimming pool, pre-school centre, scout hall etc will generally be well known to local people and only needs to be signed if it attracts a degree of external visitation.

Key points

1. Always look at removing redundant/illegal signs when assessing a location as part of a new sign application.

2. Conduct regular audits of your area to reduce illegal, non-compliant, damaged or redundant signs.

3. Remove illegal/ non-compliant signs as soon as possible, before they can encourage other operators to follow. A permit database and a number displayed on the rear of a sign is an excellent auditing tool.

4. Try to liaise with government departments regarding the format and locations of their roadside information signs.

5. Avoid marketing style road signage that will date quickly and may not be supported by a maintenance plan.

6. Review your region’s tourist drive signs for continuing efficacy and discourage use of new tourist drive signing (preference for inclusion in marketing materials).

7. Review the need for community facility signs within urban areas.
Section 6
Rationalising signs
Most sign clutter occurs at intersections. Within urban areas, or even in rural locations, there are usually key points from where a number of tourism operators want to be signed. Because of the difficulty involved in rationalising already heavily signed intersections, the old adage of ‘prevention is better than cure’ is relevant. One of the best preventative measures, and to help guide decision-making, is the establishment of a local/ regional signing committee, with representation from the road authorities, relevant tourism organisations, and from the tourism industry itself.

Restrict numbers

A fundamental way to prevent current and potential clutter is to allow a tourism business to be signed at only one or two points from the main road. If this is enshrined in guidelines, or a local signing policy, it should significantly reduce ambit claims from operators to be signed at multiple points, in order to capture traffic from different directions. Some road authorities stipulate that a business needs to nominate a principal access route for signing purposes, and that the route needs to be emphasised in all marketing materials. Help from the road authority to determine a business’s principal access route should be part of the consultation process.

However, there will be times when signing from more than one point is necessary and, on these occasions, it is important to document the justification, so that the decision does not set a precedent for future applications.

The Queensland State Road Authority has developed a series of ‘K’ factor graphs, to assist regional tourist signing committees and signs officers to more objectively assess applications, based on road speed, visitation and distance.

Cap the numbers

It is wise to have an inclusion in a signing policy that clearly states the maximum number of tourist signs permitted at any one intersection (typically 3 to 5). Some policies state that, after the maximum has been reached, no further applications will be accepted for that location, and all operators may be subjected to rationalisation strategies, such as replacement by generic descriptors and/or symbols. Signing permits and/or letters of agreement with operators should include this clause, to reduce attempts at gaining legal redress when rationalisation must occur. To further avoid conflict and potential litigation, it is recommended that applicants sign the permit documentation to indicate that they understand and agree with the terms under which their sign has been granted.

Once the horse has bolted

Most road authorities are faced with the situation of how to rationalise an intersection that is already sprouting a totem pole of tourist signs. The fact that most, if not all, signs were legally granted and installed at the owner’s expense, makes the task even harder.

Unless there is a rationalisation clause in the sign permit/ agreement – as indicated above – negotiation, and the time to do so, will be needed to achieve change. The following options may be open to the road authority:

1. Use of generic descriptors to indicate the category of attraction or services available, eg wineries, galleries, mazes etc,
2. Use of a generic symbol to indicate the presence of a tourist attraction, such as the white on brown ‘t’ symbol used on West Australian roads,
3. Use of approved symbols to designate the product categories available. Available symbols include the ISO/AS service symbols, State/ Territory approved tourism facility symbols, and the National Tourism Attraction symbols (see touristsigns.org.au). Please note that although approved for national use, not all National Tourism Attraction symbols may be approved by a State/Territory road authority for use on their own road network,
4. The placement of a reassurance sign a short distance
down the intersecting road to provide more detail of the
businesses than was available at the intersection, eg
‘wineries’ sign at the intersection, then a listing of the actual
wineries and distances featured on the reassurance sign
along the intersecting road.

Note: the cost for options 1-4 is usually borne by the road
authorities, in lieu of businesses losing their individual
signs. Therefore, a pool of funds is usually needed to enact
rationalisation strategies.

5. Some councils have a policy to prominently sign only street
and road names, sometimes in conjunction with a set of
service symbols. This requires the business owner to clearly
communicate the street location of their business to the
customer through their marketing material.

6. As an extension of 5, above, in parts of South Australia,
the State Road Authority has prominently and attractively
signed wine sub-precincts by using the street/ road name,
eg ‘Jones Road Wineries’. This style of signing may also
incorporate some branded elements, eg a simple logo,

7. Install combined tourist attraction signing prior to the
intersection, which leaves the intersection clear of visual
distraction. This is a more expensive option, as it requires
a reasonable sized road reserve prior to the intersection,
and may require regular re-manufacture of the sign to
incorporate new businesses,

8. Grouping of signs into banks of three business names,
then spacing each sign at 50-100 metre intervals from
the intersection. However, while this may improve visual
comprehension and reduce clutter at the actual intersection,
it may reduce the amenity of the road reserve over several
hundred metres,

9. Plank signing is used effectively by some road authorities
for low speed environments. This ensures consistent
formatting and the plank system allows for ease of removal
and addition, as businesses close and new ones emerge,

10. Some intersections, particularly in urban areas, are
considered to be too important for traffic management,
safety and aesthetic reasons to allow any signing at all.
The ‘no-sign’ locations should be clearly listed in the local
signing policy.

Sunset clauses

The use of sunset clauses for a particular intersection, town
or area is predicated on the fact that the only thing that the
business owns is the sign itself. Their gratis rental of the road
reserve should always be at the discretion of the road authority.
A business has no legal right to occupy a sign location.

When all negotiations fail, or if the road authority wishes to
rationalise without incurring major costs, it may be possible
to issue written notification to each signed business that,
after a given period of notice, (generally 12-24 months),
all signs at the intersection will be removed, without
compensation. Operators would then need to re-apply for
permission, within the parameters and criteria of the new
tourism signing policy.

A significant period of advance warning allows operators to
prepare for the change, allows the road authority to bed-down
the new signing system, and should avoid the authority having
to provide compensation to operators. In these situations
it is often advisable to keep local councillors and politicians
‘in the loop’.
Tourist drives and bays

Tourist drives and information bays may be options for road authorities to introduce when wishing to rationalise signs. Themed or geographically based drives can embrace the key attractions of the area.

However, State/Territory road authorities actively discourage the signing of tourist drives and routes, to avoid further sign clutter. They prefer the inclusion of drives in support marketing material. Featuring drives/routes in marketing material not only avoids the need for signs, but enables the material to be easily altered to incorporate new attractions, new product strengths, and a change of route.

When supplementing tourist drives with information bays, the bays need to be in places where visitors are likely to congregate for other reasons, eg parks, ablutions, shops, etc., rather than where there may be a spare piece of council-owned land.

Signing visitor centres

Primary tourism signing in any area should be to the official (and usually accredited) visitor information centre, from where detailed information about attractions and services can be obtained. If it is an accredited V.I.C., it will be eligible for extensive trail blazing signing, using the trademarked yellow on blue ‘i’. V.I.C.’s should also consider after-hours electronic provision of information, especially accommodation details.

Quality trailblazing signs to visitor information centres is particularly helpful to those visitors who have not pre-booked accommodation.

Key points

1. Restrict signing for a business to only one or two locations.
2. Require a business to nominate its principal access route, for signing purposes.
3. Restrict the number of signs at any intersection to 3-5.
4. Use generic descriptors and/or symbols in lieu of business names at an intersection.
5. Prominently sign road and street names.
6. Use sunset clauses to provide operators with ample notice of sign removal.
7. Tourist drive signing can be used as a way to reduce individual signs.
8. Ensure high quality trailblazing signs are installed for your accredited visitor information centre.
Section 7
Taking a wider approach
Sign rationalisation on a single location basis may address the more immediate issue, but in order to achieve significant reductions across a larger area, or region, a strategically developed sign rationalisation program needs to be developed and implemented. This will be hard to achieve in regions that are not underpinned by a strong tourism signing policy, which ensures consistency and equity across the region and for all operators.

Remember, signing proliferation happens over a number of years, so don’t expect to get them down quickly, or without a fuss. Tourism operators who have legitimately obtained their signs from the road authority, paid for them, and have continued to comply as tourism businesses, will not give them up easily, and usually not without compensation.

Rationalising tourist signs on a large scale will generally require some public funding in order to re-manufacture and re-install new signs at an intersection. When an operator’s sign cannot be replaced, the road authority may be required to reimburse the operator for the amortised cost of the sign (sign life using class 2 material is generally 7 years, while the longevity of signs using class 1 material is up to 10-12 years).

Field-work, the dismantling/ re-installation of signs, and the human resources to administer the rationalisation and compliance under the new system, will need to be funded from the public purse. Major signing projects may also require the services of a consultant to plan and coordinate the process.

While funding is one hurdle for a road authority to overcome, another equally difficult hurdle is to generate internal momentum and commitment to pursue the program. Rationalising is inevitably contentious and some operators will try to have proposals overturned, or to get themselves exempted from new provisions. Because of this, it is not uncommon for a council to commence a sign rationalisation program, only to lose determination and commitment when the draft report reveals the amount of local political conflict that it may generate.

Thorough consultation with the industry is a crucial part of the process to minimise objection in later stages. Councillors and MPs will be the obvious targets for disgruntled tourism operators, so keep local representatives informed about the project and its objectives.

Sign rationalisation projects are best kept well away from local government elections, as they provide easy fodder for candidates. The process should be scheduled over 2-3 years to reduce the momentum of objection, and to reduce the impact on a single year’s budget.

**Key points**

1. Sign rationalisation on a regional basis is difficult to achieve unless underpinned by a tourism signing policy.
2. An amount of public funding is usually needed to achieve large-scale sign rationalisation.
3. Maintain internal commitment and momentum to achieve success.
4. Keep councillors and politicians informed about your sign rationalisation project.
Section 8

Frequently Asked Questions
The type of questions/comments you are likely to get from business operators, with suggestions how to answer them!

Q. Why can’t I get more than 1 or 2 road signs for my business?

A. A sign is the final reassurance step in helping to navigate people to your business. You need to include good directions in all your marketing materials, including Google map locators, and make sure that your staff know how to clearly guide people to your place, especially using the route numbering system.

Q. Why do I have to state a primary access route for signing, when my customers come from all directions?

A. If we didn’t require a primary access route, every business would want to be signed from all directions and on every route. This would make the region a visual mess, and that number of signs would actually decrease motorists’ comprehension and create confusion. I’m happy to sit down with you and work out your best access route for signing purposes.

Q. Why can’t I be added to that signpost, when there are already others on it?

A. Road research shows that the maximum number of sign messages that can be comfortably and safely understood by a travelling motorist is between 3 and 5, depending on speed, location and safety factors. Above that number it can become a hazard. That intersection already carries the maximum number of signs.

Q. Why can’t I have my full business name on the sign?

A. The longer the message (ie the number of words and letters) means the poorer the motorist comprehension. We aim for evenly sized and formatted signs to not only improve the look of the intersection, but also to improve motorist comprehension. Let’s look at how we can use abbreviations and/or symbols to shorten the message.

Q. My sign was approved and paid for by me years ago. You can’t tell me to take it down.

A. All you paid for at the time was the cost of manufacturing and installation of the sign. Having the sign on the road reserve is at the road authority’s discretion and at any time it can be legally removed for safety and traffic management reasons.

Q. What’s this ‘sunset clause’ thing you have sent me?

A. We have reviewed eligibility for tourist signing and at the moment you don’t qualify to remain signed, but rather than pulling it down right away, we have provide ‘X’ months notice, so that you have time to re-apply and re-qualify, or.

A. That intersection needs to be re-designed for traffic management/safety reasons, but rather than removing your sign right away, we’re giving you ‘X’ months to prepare.

Q. There are businesses already signed at that intersection, why can’t mine be added?

A. Three to five businesses (ie depending on State / Territory guidelines) is the maximum number allowed to be signed at an intersection, for safety reasons. Because of your application, we may now need to look at ways of rationalising the signing at that intersection, which could involve generic references, symbols and perhaps a reassurance sign down the intersecting road.

Q. My cousin runs a motel in the north of the State and he can get lots more signs than me.

A. While the statewide guidelines apply across the state, they are sometimes interpreted differently in each region. Also, most areas have adopted their own tourist signing policies, which are designed to reflect the local conditions and planning rules.

Q. My business is big and important enough in the region to be signed from the motorway/freeway.

A. Navigating by the motorway and major roads is covered by the state route numbering system, so it should be easy to provide clear directions to your customers through your marketing material. You then need to use street and road names. We can provide a sign or two as the final reassurance.
Q. Why have you used just a bed symbol at the intersection instead of my business name?
A. If your customers have pre-booked their accommodation, you have had the opportunity to provide them with clear directions. If people don’t know your business and are just looking for a place to stay, then the international bed symbol tells them that there is accommodation down that road.

Q. Why can’t I have advance signs and position signs like my competitor?
A. Those type of signs are provided when there is a safety and traffic management reason, not to advertise a property. You are on a main road, with clear sightlines, so your property signing should be sufficient to alert customers. Let’s sit down and work out new property signing for you that will meet your needs.

Q. You’re anti-business; it’s impossible to get a road sign around here.
A. All road signs are erected for safety and traffic management reasons, not for promotional purposes. No business has a right to be signed in the road reserve, unless there is a safety issue.

Q. I’m getting on to my councillor/ politician to get my sign application through.
A. That’s your right, but the local tourist signing policy was developed by council, the road authority, the tourism association and with input from some tourist operators. Councillors and politicians were part of that process.

Q. My business attracts the largest patronage in this region, so I deserve to have bigger signs.
A. The size of the sign does not reflect the size or importance of a business. The size and lettering is determined by the type of road it is on and the prevailing traffic speed. In fact, road research tells us that motorist comprehension is improved when signs are evenly formatted so that the eye scans them better and more quickly.

Q. I only got my signs approved 2 years ago and now you are saying that the intersection signing needs to be revamped.
A. When you got your sign permit it stated that the road authority may need to remove or alter signs for traffic management and/or safety reasons at any time. That intersection has become cluttered because of a growing demand for signs, so we need to find a new way to better collectively sign the group of attractions.

Q. That sign at the intersection just says ‘galleries’. What good is that when it doesn’t have my gallery name on it?
A. Most visitors are just looking for an indication of the type of attractions along a road, or in an area. Therefore the generic word meets their needs better than a list of individual business names. If they’re looking for a specific business, they have generally looked it up beforehand and have navigational instructions to get there. Google business locators are able to be used on most modern phones these days.

Q. Nobody understands those funny letters and numbers on major road signs.
A. Once they start using them they find it a very simple of way of getting around. They’ve been used in Europe for over 60 years. The big problem is to get operators to start including the numbers in their marketing materials.

Q. Most of our customers say they can’t find us and that the signing in this region is atrocious.
A. We’re always interested to hear ways to improve navigation for visitors, so please make notes and run a customer survey of exactly where they are having problems, so that we might be able to address it at a wider level.
Section 9

Case Studies
Case Study 1
Halls Gap, The Grampians, Victoria

Halls Gap is a small urban centre at the northern end of the Grampians National Park. It is essentially a one road town, alongside which most of the towns retail, tourism and hospitality venues have been located over the past 100 years.

The building set-backs and the heavy roadside vegetation means that it’s difficult to provide adequate signing for commercial establishments. A lack of enforcement over the years had resulted in a number of illegal and non-conforming signs, and little rationalising having been done.

The result was a mismatch of 69 signs on a short stretch of road, in varying styles, colours, fonts and sizes, in addition to a raft of legal and ill-legal A-frame sign boards outside most properties. The situation was aggravated by a number of overly-large government information signs. The streetscape not only confused motorists, but severely detracted from the natural amenity.

In 2008, Tourism Victoria, VicRoads and Northern Grampians Shire Council combined on a project to not only improve the visual amenity of Halls Gap, but also to possibly create an example of what could be achieved through sign rationalisation and good signing policy.

An experienced consultant was engaged to work with the authorities and to liaise with the town’s tourism community. From the first public meeting it became obvious that, while the business owners recognised that their town was blighted by inappropriate signing, few of them were willing to adopt a new approach for fear of losing competitive advantage.

A signing strategy was developed for the town by the consultant and during the next 2-3 years VicRoads worked with the business community and council representatives to bring the key elements of the strategy to fruition. The 69 signs were reduced to 14 signing ‘banks’, which feature evenly formatted plank signs. This format means that they can be easily removed and updated to accommodate changes in the businesses. The prevailing speed along the road is between 50-80 km/hr, which is appropriate for use of plank signing.

Major trail blazing signing was installed for the accredited Visitor Information Centre, and businesses were strongly encouraged to form a relationship with the V.I.C. staff. They were also educated on how to include navigational instructions in their marketing material, including use of the state route numbers.

From this...

To this...
According to VicRoads Western Region Signing Officer, Bob Wallace, the project involved some compromises to the State guidelines in order to get businesses onboard and to accommodate some local factors. However, the result was a dramatically improved streetscape and an understanding among current business operators that the new policy and process improves the look of their town and, in fact, improves motorist comprehension.

The sign banks have been limited to no more than 4 signs each, and they are well spaced to alleviate clutter. The direction arrow on some signs was modified to indicate to motorists that the business was located off the main road. Educating new business operators in the town about the policy remains an ongoing task for VicRoads and Council, and the Council is yet to tackle commercial signing in the retail strip.

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Case Study 2
Swan Valley, Western Australia

Perth’s Swan Valley is a gourmet region bordering the city’s north-eastern suburbs. The fertile river valley has long provided farming conditions to produce excellent food and wine, and its attractive scenery and 150 tourism businesses has made it a popular visitor destination.

In recent years, the growth of roadside stalls and of food producers wanting to tap into the tourism market created a plethora of illegal, non-conforming and often homemade signs. It was intruding on the visual amenity, creating motorist confusion and traffic management issues. This was especially the case on the Great Northern Highway, an 80 km/hr arterial that runs through the heart of the valley.

The challenge for the City of Swan, in conjunction with Tourism WA and Main Roads WA, was to design an easy to follow, instantly recognisable and comprehensive signage system that provided visitors with the best possible chance of finding and discovering the many attractions. In the process, it was envisaged that the scheme would replace the myriad of private business signs that were cluttering the roadside. Letters, emails, phone calls and meetings were used to communicate the proposal to businesses, as full agreement and collaboration was needed to be able to do away with the individual signs.
The eventual system includes welcome signs at each of the 6 major entry points to the area, advanced warning signs to alert people on the major roads of upcoming businesses, major and minor intersection signs, and then the food & wine signs at each individual business.

All of the signs are branded in the Swan Valley burgundy colour and they incorporate the logo and tag lines, making them easily identifiable with other marketing materials, particularly the Food & Wine Trail guide and map.

The Food & Wine Precinct sub-system signage consists of individual business signs placed at the entrance to the business, which gives visitors a clear indication of the type of experience.

The initial roll out of the signage program was funded in full by the City of Swan. Since its completion in 2010, any new tourism business is required to cover the cost of the fingerboard sign. The City continues to cover the cost of any other components of the signage system, header boards etc.

Sascha Stone from the City of Swan says the sign system has been a great success and has had a positive effect on the number of day trippers to the region and their inclination to tour the district, as well as increasing the visitor experience and promoting the region’s tourism attractions. Ron Koorengevel of Main Roads WA agrees that the scheme has been a success, though he notes that it was primarily designed to reduce signage and negate the need for other advertising within the Food and Wine Precinct. He said it is disappointing to see a major increase in the number of wineries still doing their individual signing and an ‘over-run’ in homemade produce signs on the roadside.

The City of Swan advises that, to address this problem, the council conducts an annual audit and penalties are issued by compliance officers to offending businesses.

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Case Study 3
Mc Laren Vale & Clare Valley
Wine Regions South Australia

South Australia’s famous McLaren Vale and Clare Valley wine districts claim one of the country’s highest concentrations of wine tourism venues. The growing demand for directional signing to winery businesses threatened to clutter the scenic countryside, and visitors were finding it more difficult to navigate the complex road network of the regions.

As early as 2000, Transport South Australia and the South Australian Tourism Commission recognised the need to develop a signing system that met the needs of business operators, would enhance navigation, and would preserve the amenity of the roadsides. Formal research conducted into the behavioural patterns of wine tourism customers showed that there was a need for:

- Improved signing of cellar door outlets.
- Larger signing
- Improvements to existing signing, ie clarity and more prominent
- Signing that promotes the wine theme of the region and is consistent with the region

The outcome of the research and planning was the development of a trial wine tourism signing system for the McLaren Vale Wine Region. The trial scheme aimed to remove the multiple listings of winery signs from the main arterial roads, reduce the number of signs to alleviate current congestion, and deliver a consistent approach to wine tourism signing.

An audit of the region’s tourism product was undertaken and consultation began with a working group comprising representatives from the tourism, wine and food industry sectors, Transport South Australia and the local council. Part of the working group’s task was to consult with their industry sectors and to formulate responses to the draft recommendations.

What was developed was an innovative, but simple, three tier signing system to meet navigation and business needs:

1. **Regional signing** – Standard ‘welcome’ signs are used for wine region boundaries

2. **Advanced Street Name** signs (ASN) To avoid signing proliferation at intersections that feature a high number of wineries/services ASN’s are used on the main arterial road network to give advance notice of an intersection. These signs include a road name and up to four tourist/service symbols. Where the grape symbol is shown, up to 3 other related symbols for the winery may be included on the brown panel. All other service symbols are shown on a blue panel. Also allowed is to up to 3 supplementary plates with attraction names that can installed under the ASN. Once a fourth panel is required, all supplementary plates are removed and a reassurance sign is installed on the local road.

Remove fingerboards
3. **Reassurance signs** (REAS) are only installed on the local road network and display attractions/services for that direction of travel. These signs can be designed with some artistic flare to promote the regional theme of the area. This sign type was designed to have individual plates for each name but still look like one sign. When a reassurance sign becomes too large, a second reassurance sign can be installed, or an option is to install an information bay.

The ASN and ID type signs can be used on the local road network at councils’ discretion or the standard style fingerboard signs can be used for direction.

State Government funded the pilot project, which has significantly reduced navigation complaints from visitors and businesses. Given the initial success of the McLaren Vale pilot project, in 2005 it was rolled-out to the Clare Valley wine region, albeit slightly modified, as follows, because of some local political pressure:

1. **Regional signing** – standard ‘welcome’ signs are used for wine region boundaries

2. **Advanced Street Name** signs (ASN) To avoid signing proliferation at intersections that feature a high number of wineries/services ASN's are used on the main arterial road network to give advance notice of an intersection. Also allowed is up to 3 supplementary plates with attraction names that can installed under the ASN. Once a fourth panel is required, all supplementary plates are removed and fingerboard signs are installed at the intersection.

3. **Fingerboard Direction sign** (FBD) can be used on the main arterial road network to give notice of the intersection that feature wineries and related services.

   and/or if council wants to have a 2nd option

4. **Reassurance signs** (REAS) shall be only installed on the local road network and shall show those Attractions/Services for that direction of travel.

The ASN and fingerboards type signs can be used on the local road network at council’s discretion.

The Clare Valley Wine Makers Association was responsible for consultation with their association members to gain acceptance of the scheme. They were also responsible for a survey for the pre and post installation of signs, to determine how effective the new signing is to the cellar door visitor.

The Clare Valley Wine Makers are funding the tourist fingerboard type signs, with the local council installing them. State Government has funded and installed the generic directional type signs. Future costing will see user-pays for the tourist type signs, but government will still fund the generic directional type signs.

Any future requests for cellar door and accommodation signing on State Government controlled roads will be handled by council, while generic type signing and other issues will be referred to the Department of Planning, Transport and Industry (DPTI).

The local council is undertaking the installation of cellar door fingerboard signing and is also auditing the accommodation signing, with a view to include them into this demonstration project.

News of the success of the winery region signing schemes is growing, and the Barossa Valley Wine Region is the latest area to be watching the Clare Valley project closely, to see which method of signing could work best for them.

**More information:**

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Tourist Signing Rationalisation: A practical guide for road signing practitioners

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