

HOW TO...GUIDES

How to...Start up a successful tourism business – a ten step guide

1. Questions to ask before you begin

Researching and planning a business requires a lot of time, dedication and effort. The following questions will give a strong indication of whether you have done enough initial thinking to being planning and researching in earnest:

- Do you have a clear idea of the type of business you want to run?
- What is your objective? Do you want to make a lot of money or have a lifestyle change? Do you want a business that fits around your life or are you prepared to work very hard and very long hours to get a significant business off the ground?
- Do you have the right people skills? Tourism is a very people-centred industry; being successful with customers and staff takes very good social skills. Can you take the long hours and lack of days off in peak periods. Will you keep calm and smiling – even when things are going wrong?
- Do you have the basis of good business skills? Can you plan and organise, are you good with money and time, do you understand customer service, do you know about marketing, do you have the commitment required to learn everything you need to know about legislation, technology, administration and record keeping?
- Do you have the time, energy, financial stability and commitment required to make this business work?
- Have you done some basic research? For example is there a need for what you want to offer? Have you visited similar businesses to get an idea of what running one would be like? Do you know what the competition is? Do you understand what type of people you want to attract and have some idea of how you'd reach them?
- Are you targeting domestic (UK) customers and overseas visitors – which areas/countries?
- Who do you want to promote to: groups, individuals or a combination?
- Is it feasible to create this business? Could you get planning permission or a licence, could you get support and backing from tourism organisations and business support organisations, and could you afford or raise the investment required?

- Does this business have potential to make an adequate return on any investment needed?

2. Ask yourself ‘what can go wrong?’

Understanding why projects go wrong will help you avoid common pitfalls.

Common reasons for failure are:

- Inadequate input, not enough thought, preparation or consultation
- Lack of research
- Failure to understand the market – who they are, what they want, how much they are likely to spend/buy
- Lack of business planning and/or project planning
- Failure to appoint appropriate advisors or project management staff
- Lack of communication
- Conflict between partners or business partners
- Vague requirements
- Poor costings
- Inadequate team skills
- Failure to bring in expert assistance early on in the project, such as a consultant or business engagement officer
- Inadequate support from professionals including marketing agents, consultants, legal advisors and accountants
- Projects can set off on the wrong foot, it is critical to put as much effort into the early stages as possible

3. Who can I ask for help?

Local and regional help

How does your region support tourism? Who can you go to to talk about regional tourism, tourism networks, and business support? It could be via:

- Area Tourism Partnerships
- Local Enterprise Partnerships

- Industry-led independent Tourism Alliances
- Your local authority

National help

- VisitEngland – www.visitengland.org - is the national tourist board for England, responsible for marketing England to domestic and established overseas markets and for improving England's tourism product. It offers an extensive range of business support tools and resources including tourism research facts and figures, advice on accessible tourism, accommodation know-how, marketing opportunities, quality awareness, and sustainable tourism.
- VisitEngland also champion best practice through the annual VisitEngland Awards for Excellence which celebrate the best of English tourism and help to raise the profile of England as a world-class destination.
- VisitBritain – www.visitbritain.org - is Britain's national tourism agency, responsible for marketing Britain worldwide and developing Britain's visitor economy. Funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, it works in partnership with thousands of organisations in the UK and overseas to ensure that Britain is marketed in an inspirational and effective way around the world.
- VisitBritain provides marketing opportunities, insights and statistics, and a useful 'top tips' section on how to make the most of working with the organisation and reaching international visitors.

4. What do I need to do to define my ideas & develop a proposal?

By doing research, looking at competitors, understanding who the tourism customers in your region are and what they are looking for, you will be able to decide: exactly what type of business you'll run, how big it will be, where it will be located, what it will offer - the facilities, service and level of comfort/quality, which customers it will target, whether enough people will book or buy from it in order to make it profitable

Here are some things to do that will help you to clarify your ideas and end up with a really clear proposal:

- **Background information** – familiarise yourself with the key drivers for tourism in your region: the attractions – natural and man-made, the accommodation, the entry points and transport links, who the customers are, what they do and spend where they are from and how they book. Understand the changing perceptions and trends of customers, which areas of tourism are growing and the main sources of competition to the region.

Also, find out who's who in tourism – in your region as well as nationally and internationally.

Talk to other tourism businesses in the region as well as regional tourism staff and business engagement officers. Find out what tourism specific help is available to you and what trade bodies might be appropriate to your business type.

Attend workshops and events, read guides and blogs and begin to build your skills in marketing, technology, administration, book-keeping, customer service, staff management, meeting statutory obligations, etc.

- **Corporate status and size** – how big will your business be? Are you starting from scratch or buying a going concern. Do you want to trade as a sole trader, a partnership, a limited company or buy a franchise. How many hours are you willing to put in and how fast do you want to grow? Must the business fit around your life and family commitments or are you intending to work really hard to get a bigger business off the ground? How many staff will you need? And, can you outsource some aspects, i.e. cleaning, book-keeping, marketing, e-commerce, etc to reduce costs or workload?
- **Quality** – deciding on the level of quality, comfort and service you will offer is one of the key early decisions you must make. Tourism is a competitive business, and customers expect an increasingly high quality experience. It's important to offer the right level of comfort, facilities and fittings for your target market, plus a warm, friendly and professional service and a willingness to help customers get the most out of their visit.

Look into the conditions associated with different quality assessment ratings (star ratings) for accommodation, the VAQAS criteria for attractions and inclusion criteria for different books, guides and endorsement schemes, to get an idea of the level of fixtures, fittings, products, service and customer service needed for different market segments.

- **Customers** – understanding who your customers will be is critical to offering the right products, service and quality. Will your business appeal to domestic visitors, overseas visitors, business customers, students, locals? Will you target families, couples, individuals, groups? Will they be young, old, professionals, retired, well-off or on a budget? And how will you reach these customers – what marketing materials will you choose, where will you advertise, and how do they source their information and book products like yours.
- **Niches and themes** – How can you specialise, to set your business out from the rest, and which customers can you target? Do you have the interest, skills and contacts to appeal to a particular niche: walking, cycling, mountain biking, genealogy, spiritual tourism, coastal and sailing tourism, luxury breaks, families, children, educational breaks, the 'grey pound' (older customers), the 'pink pound' (gay customers), disabled customers, green tourism, etc. Finding and exploiting a niche can be a valuable source of revenue and can make your business more focussed, more appealing and more differentiated.
- **Competitor and complimentary businesses** – research similar businesses in your chosen area. Are they thriving, is there room for another competitor, or is there over-saturation?

What are their occupancy levels or customer numbers? Do they appear successful or in decline? How would you distinguish your business from others? How would you penetrate the existing market? Visit other businesses, look at their quality, service, offering, marketing and pricing. Talk to them in person – you may be surprised at how willing other owners are to share information experience.

At the same time, look at businesses in the area that may be complimentary to yours. It is very unlikely that customers can make a whole holiday or visit just out of what you offer. A successful destination, one that attracts many visitors from which you can win a good share, has a range of accommodation, attractions, activities, events and food businesses for customers to enjoy.

- **Location, location** – location is vitally important to tourism businesses. Consider the visitor appeal of the area, the availability of facilities and services and transport links. Look into the area's future development plans – both positive and negative. Consider what type of premises you need and whether you want to own it or rent it. Read local papers, talk to estate agents, your local planning office, other businesses and talk to locals in shops, pubs, and out and about.
- **Size of market and share** – Once you know your type and size of business, your quality level, your location and the customers and niches you'll serve, you can estimate the size of the market and your possible share in it. Check out local tourism research stats and any occupancy reports for accommodation so you can work out how full you are likely to be, or attraction visitor levels so you can assess how many customers you may get.
- **Price, capacity and yield** – the price you charge and the number of customers you can accommodate are two key drivers in your potential for profit. Calculating your optimum capacity and pricing will help you maximise your profits.

When considering how many bed-spaces, letting units, restaurant covers or visitors you will accommodate, consider: the constraints of the premises, the investment cost of providing different levels of capacity, the running costs and the costs of providing the service or product to different numbers of customers, including additional staff for increased levels of sales. You should also take into account the cost of repaying any loans or investments needed to create this capacity, and the loss of any interest on cash you invest yourself.

How much you charge will be affected by your quality, your fixed and variable costs, the competition and the season.

It can be a complex process especially when you factor in the changing prices over seasons and seasonal staffing. Get help with the calculations from a local business advisor, an accountant, a bank, or a tourism specialist.

- **Planning, regulations and other considerations** - give consideration to the regulations and legislation that may affect how viable your business is, and the rough costs involved. Think

about the following the see if there are any licensing or cost barriers: Health & Safety (check with HSE for any special considerations as well as fire regulations), Planning – most businesses will require planning or change of use permissions so check with your Local Authority, and Licensing – most businesses will need licences of some kind either from your Local Authority (food, drink, entertainment, accommodation) or from a licensing body, i.e. Performing Right Society.

5. Presenting a proposal and receiving feedback

At this point you should have enough information to put together a proposal that you can share with others: a detailed description of the size and type of business you wish to run, based on a thorough understanding – and evidence – of the market, trends and competition. Put this down on paper. Keep it concise and relevant but provide enough detail for a reader to get a very clear grasp of your business idea and the initial evidence to support its viability.

You can use your proposal to get further feedback and advice and to eliminate any unsound concepts. Consider talking to:

- Contact a tourism representative in your region to meet and to discuss your proposal. They can give you initial feedback on viability and suitability, provide advice, guidance, research and resources, put you in touch with specialist consultants.
- Contact a local business advisor. They can discuss your proposal, point you towards more help and advice, suggest local suppliers, i.e. accountants, web designers, training providers, and identify any sources of funding for further investigation and market research, or to actually finance the business.
- Talk to potential investors. Use your proposal to sound out sources of finance – banks, grant providers, private investors, etc.
- Conduct market research. Talk to other businesses, family and friends about your ideas. Consider conducting or commissioning market research with potential customers to establish the response to and need for your proposed business.
- Consider employing a professional to conduct a formal feasibility study. Funding may be available and this will certainly help to establish the viability and potential profitability of your project.

6. Developing the proposal into business and marketing plans

Once you have tested and screened your initial ideas the next stage is to get detailed costings, put together plans that show what will be done, when and how much it costs, decide whether to proceed, and then raise the necessary finance.

These plans will help you work out your sales, costs, profit and cash-flow forecasts to see if the business can make money, when it will reach profitability, and how much cash you will need to stay afloat in the first months or years.

When planning your costs consider:

- **Taking advice** – from some or all of the following: Local Authority on planning permission, business rates, licences, food hygiene, etc; Area Tourism Partnerships and/or tourism partnership initiatives for advice and costings on marketing, quality, accessibility, green tourism, etc; architects and builders for help and advice on any building or planning regs; suppliers to help you cost fixtures, fittings, equipment, etc; an accountant to help you work costs and advise about corporate status, funding, financial control, book-keeping, tax and PAYE; solicitor for the legal aspects of setting up and running a business; an HR specialist for staff and employment requirements; and HMRC for registering as self-employed and advice on tax and allowances.
- **Premises, equipment, fixtures and fittings** – make sure you've got planning permission in writing, and understand the building, health and safety, fire and access regulations, etc before you spend any money or appoint contractors. Keep your target audience firmly in mind and provide for their needs and the level of service and comfort they will expect. Shop around for the cheapest suppliers of gas, electricity, internet, phone and other utilities and make sure they are installed and tested by competent suppliers.
- **Quality Assessment** (or 3rd party endorsement) pre-planning – strongly consider joining a quality assessment scheme such as VisitEngland's Quality Assessment Scheme, VisitEngland's VAQAS scheme for attractions, the Hotel Catey awards for the hospitality industry, and other national and local endorsement schemes for food and drink, arts and crafts, activities, etc, according to your business type.

Joining a scheme gives lots of valuable benefits. For VisitEngland's Quality Assessment scheme it is the gateway to publishing on visitengland.com and visitbritain.com, inclusion in brochures, guides and marketing campaigns, and promotion through the TIC network. It also provides a third party endorsement – an independent rating and assessment that customers can trust.

- **Accessibility** - there are approximately 2.7 million potential visitors with disabilities in the UK who regularly travel, and millions more abroad, who have a huge spending potential – estimated to be £80 billion. Taking steps to be more accessible shows that, as a tourism business, you are aware of the importance of being 'open to all'. It is also a legal requirement under the Disability and the Equality Act 2010.

Making your business accessible takes into account how you market your business, how you meet and greet disabled customers, what signs you put up and whether you can make small

adjustments such as reading a menu to a visually impaired customer, or providing vibrating alarm clocks for those with hearing impairments.

VisitEngland provides lots of help and support for making your business accessible including advice on Access Statements, helpful stage-by-stage- guides, and joining the National Accessibility Scheme.

- **Green Tourism** – taking steps to minimise your impact on the environment and save power, water and carbon outputs can help you meet your legal obligations, save money and find new customers. The Green Tourism Business Scheme (GTBS) is specifically geared to help tourism businesses to identify the most suitable green measures.
- **Food and Drink** - Research shows that all visitors – day and overnight, domestic and overseas – rate food and drink as a very important part of their experience. Sourcing, preparing and presenting top quality food and drink is therefore very important, even if this only makes up a small part of your overall offering.

Wherever possible, try to use fresh, local produce. Consider incorporating dishes and drinks that are distinct to your local area to add a regional flavour to your offering – this rates highly in visitor surveys.

If you serve any food and drink at all, you will need to register as a food business with your local authority and become certified in food hygiene.

- **Fire Safety self-assessment** – Anyone who owns or runs a business is responsible for maintaining fire safety on behalf of staff and customers. You are required by law to do your own fire risk assessments, put in measures to control the risks of fire and ensure the safety of staff, customers and visitors. Contact www.communities.gov.uk/fire/firesafety for fire safety law and guidance documents for business.
- **Meeting legislation** – understanding and complying with legislation is time consuming, and can involve investment and ongoing expense. Areas to think about are: health and safety, accessibility, discrimination, data protection, environmental legislation, trading, advertising and selling regulations, HR and employment, Tax, VAT and PAYE, record-keeping, licensing and insurances. Refer to *Tourism Toolkit – How To Guide – Rules & Regulations checklist*
- **Technology** – The right technology is absolutely critical for tourism businesses. Consider your long term IT needs, i.e. wireless networks, PCs, routers, printers and scanners. Think about software for accounting, billing, word processing, customer databases and emails, and don't forget hardware and software for backing up. What kind of phone system will you need? And how will you manage calls when no-one can answer them? Consider tills and other point of sale devices such as hand-held wireless chip and pin devices, and will you need a stock control system? Finally, make sure you take into account the digital TV and music needs of your operation and also the broadband and mobile phone needs of your customers.

- **Your website** – your website is your most important marketing and business tool. Tourism customers research, plan and buy online – more so than any other sector. Think about a site that properly promotes your business and reaches your target audience. Consider overseas customers as well – think about getting the site translated and consider using an e-commerce or booking system that can handle different currencies and languages. Plan and draft your site on paper and work with experienced and qualified website designers and compare quotes for the best prices. You will also need to consider making your site ‘accessible’ to all.
- **E-commerce** - Tourism customers buy online - more so than any other sector - so it’s important that you have an e-commerce system that allows you to update availability or inventory and take bookings online at your own, and also at other websites. If you need a full e-commerce system for selling items such as clothing, food, books, crafts etc, ensure your web designer is offering one you can easily update and that integrates with your stock system. In all cases you must have good methods in place for fulfilment - how you’ll actually manage the booking or sale, answer the customer and supply their requests. Have a system for keeping customer details so you can communicate with them again in the future. Repeat business accounts for a significant percentage of turnover in tourism businesses.
- **Suppliers and stock** - Sourcing good suppliers is time consuming but essential. Good suppliers and their products will help you run an effective, efficient, quality operation, can save you money, help attract customers and help you smooth the business over rougher patches. Consider using local suppliers you can build relationships with, who offer local products that will lend your business a regional flavour, involve less transport and are therefore greener, and that strengthen the local economy. Use trade journals, trade shows, directories, trade publications, the internet and word of mouth recommendations to source products and suppliers that meet your needs.
- **Staffing, recruitment and training** - recruiting, training and paying staff are major cost areas. Your staff are the lifeblood of your business. The quality of your customers’ experience - how much they enjoy themselves, and therefore whether they come back and recommend you to others - depends in very large part on how you and your staff treat them. You should think about the type and number of staff you need, what skills they - and you - must have, where and how you’ll recruit them, how you’ll train them, and what training you yourself need. You’ll also require a strong understanding of HR and employment issues, and you’ll need to think about how you will attract and retain really good people through good pay, employment conditions and training opportunities.
- **Marketing** – Plan, budget for and monitor your marketing so you know what works and what gets the best results. A typical marketing mix includes: a website and associated online marketing campaigns, social media marketing, PR, advertising (online and offline), joint marketing with other businesses, producing your own marketing collateral, i.e. logo,

branding, images, letterheads, invoices, leaflets, and signage (including brown signs). Cost up a working marketing plan, then prioritise activities and budget carefully for the first three years.

7. Drawing up business/marketing plans

Irrespective of whether you need to raise money, you'll need a business plan to bring all these considerations together and to provide a roadmap for how you'll set up, launch and run your business - and how you'll keep it, and you, afloat until it starts to make money.

If you need to raise money then a business plan is mandatory – you won't get a loan, grant or private investment without one.

You'll also need a project plan – one that shows what steps you'll take by when. There are so many elements to bring together - premises, staff, stock, marketing, technology, red-tape, finances, administration - that unless you write it all down and carefully plan the timings, things will certainly go wrong. Again, if you need to raise money or hope to apply for any grants, a detailed project plan is mandatory.

In addition, you must have a marketing plan. Without one, you won't be able to keep track of what adverts to place (or when to place them), which ones to monitor, when to launch internet activities or prepare adverts for brochures and guides, and you can end up making expensive mistakes. Any investor or grant provider will need to see detailed information of what marketing activity you'll be conducting, and why, how much it will cost, how many customers it will generate and how you'll monitor the effectiveness of your activities.

8. Finance and funding

Once you have detailed costings, you can begin to work out your profit/loss and cashflows. Use work done already to make sensible sales forecasts based on realistic occupancy or customer numbers and on realistic prices. Don't forget to allow for low sales at the beginning with a gradual increase as your marketing plan kicks in, and for the affects of seasonality. In addition to your identified costs, you will have to estimate the variable costs of each sale, and how these change as sales grow or fall.

It is strongly recommended that you get help with your financial projections, from a financial consultant, an accountant or your bank. Accurate projections will tell you if the business is viable, how much you need to invest in setting up and how much cash is required to stay afloat in the early months and years. You will then be able to decide if and how you proceed. Take into account your own financial situation. Ensure you have enough cash to keep going personally, and that you've taken provisions to keep safe your pension, insurance, savings and mortgage.

If you need to raise money, start setting this up: talk to banks, accountants, and other business advisors and start looking for loans, grants and investors. To have any chance of getting these you must have detailed, thorough and well- researched plans, and be able to demonstrate a clear vision and a grounded roadmap for achieving it.

9. Setting up your business

This stage assumes that you have: defined and tested your ideas, planned your business, drawn up business, marketing and project plans, and successfully raised finance. Below is a checklist to help you cover the major steps in setting up a new tourism business:

- **Continue to attend workshops, events and training** - the more you can learn, through training and through other people's experience, the more successful your business is likely to be. Sign up for hygiene, hospitality or customer service courses, or train to become a licence holder. Enrol on one of the nationally acclaimed tourism-specific Welcome to Excellence training days which include Welcome Host, Welcome International, Welcome All (disability awareness), Welcome Line (for telephone answering and sales), Welcome E-Business, Welcome Management, and Lead, Motivate and Succeed (for supervisors).
- **Implement your project plan** - you must watch your project plan like a hawk and get straight on top of any slippages. If you fall behind in one area, consider the impact on other areas. Do you need to rebook tradesmen, delay utilities, put off recruiting staff, cancel a training course, put an advert on hold? Failing to take action when things go wrong can be very expensive. If you don't have good project management skills then employ someone who does to help you stay on top of things.
- **Setup record-keeping and office systems** - from day one you'll need to be organised and methodical about day to day record keeping. Set up your filing (electronic and manual) and keep all paperwork, receipts, applications, plans etc. Make sure you are familiar with the record keeping requirements of HMRC, the HSE and other official bodies.
- **Appoint professional advisors** - appoint any consultants, accountants, project managers, architects, surveyors, solicitors etc that you intend to act for you and get plans etc drawn up if not already done so.
- **Submit funding applications** - get all your funding applications in as soon as possible. You don't have to accept or draw down all offered funding, but you do need to know, before commencing any work, that you have the resources to set up and manage the early months and years.
- **Set up bank accounts and secure funding** - accept and draw down initial funding into appropriate accounts.
- **Register with authorities** - now your business is going ahead, you'll need to register with HMRC, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), your local authority (for food handling etc) and others according to your business type. You'll also need to register your company name etc, if using a limited company.
- **Put in applications for permissions** - there can be long lead times on some permissions so, as well as applying for planning permission and building regulations, put in or get organised

your applications for licences and permissions for food and drink, alcohol, entertainment, music, gambling, adventure activities, caravans, pleasure boats etc – according to your business type.

- **Secure premises** - negotiate the purchase, lease or rent of your chosen premises and tie up contracts and agreements.
- **Organise utilities** - there can be long lead times with utilities and this can cause expensive complications and delays, so organise these as soon as possible once you've identified your likely premises.
- **Set up mandatory and optional insurances** - you'll need at least buildings and contents insurance, public liability, and employers' compulsory liability insurance. But you may also want to take out optional insurances to guard against loss of stock (such as food stocks through a freezer failure), credit problems, income problems, unlet weeks and so on.
- **Appoint tradesmen and suppliers and purchase essential equipment** – appoint your chosen tradesmen and suppliers and begin ordering and timetabling supplies and deliveries.
- **Begin premises set up and build** - this is likely to be the most difficult and complex area to manage. Coordinating tradesmen, fitters and deliveries, and checking all supplies can be very time-consuming and difficult, but essential if you are not to have expensive delays or mistakes.
- **Purchase and install IT and Communications systems** - this includes wired and cabled networks, phone and internet, plus all hardware (computers, printers, scanners etc) and software for admin, record keeping, customer databases etc.
- **Apply for Quality Assessments** - these can have long lead times so get your applications in early.
- **Commission logo, branding and marketing literature** - appoint a designer and commission your logo and business literature, including invoices etc.
- **Commission photographs and video** - you'll need professional quality photographs and, as soon as the premises is sufficiently ready, video to market your business effectively. Choose your photographer early on, as there can be long lead times - especially if you're waiting for good weather! Contact your ATP for special deals on getting photos, video and 360 degree photographs commissioned and produced.
- **Plan your website and recruit designers** - finalise your website plans and recruit a competent web designer so that you have plenty of time to get it up, running and tested in time for your advance marketing.

- **Begin networking with local businesses** - if you plan to work with other businesses to deliver packages or to jointly recommend each other, begin setting up meetings and introducing yourself now. Visit the businesses in your area and get to know them. Join trade and tourism associations and visit your local Tourist Information Centres to make them aware of your business.
- **Initiate on and offline payment systems** - setting up your credit card and online payment processing systems can have lead times of up to twelve weeks so get this going early.
- **Select e-commerce systems** - set up and begin to populate your chosen e-commerce system(s), as this can be time consuming to prepare, and do the same for any 3rd party distributor systems.
- **Set up Health and Safety Procedures** - set up your health and safety, food safety, fire safety and environmental procedures and admin systems, conduct first-risk assessments, procure signs etc.
- **Set up your HR systems and begin recruitment** - set up your HR and PAYE systems or use an HR advisor. Draw up job specifications and talk to Jobcentre Plus, recruitment agencies, advertisers and HR specialists to begin designing and placing ads. Prepare induction packs, your induction procedures and contracts.
- **Order stock and set up stock control systems and tills** - order in stock, set up and populate your stock system and check it works with all tills and point of sale devices. Check integrations with your website if appropriate.
- **Implement marketing and PR plans** - design and organise adverts, campaigns, offers and packages, book adverts and draft PR. Set up blogs and social networking entries. Set up and test your customer database, email signatures and answerphone messages.
- **Set up day to day procedures** - set up all day to day procedures, everything from how the telephone should be answered and how soon emails should be responded to, to cleaning, sales, book-keeping etc. If you provide accommodation set up guest registration, terms and conditions and billing etc. Each job role and 'department' of your business should have a set of daily/weekly/monthly procedures. You and key staff should experiment with these to find the best and most effective ways of working and to maximise staff time and sales. Don't forget to include regular health and safety, food safety, fire and environmental assessments.
- **Begin staff training** - begin staff training, both in-house by familiarising them with your procedures and service levels, and out of house if you are using external training on sales, hospitality, health and safety, first aid etc. Don't forget to concentrate on customer service and maximising your visitors' experience at your business. Make sure you and your staff are thoroughly familiar with what's available in the local area for tourism customers, so you can

make recommendations, and in the wider region to encourage them to explore, enjoy and return again.

- **Write an access plan** - write an access plan so customers with impairments can assess the suitability of your business for their needs. Publish this to your website and have copies (including large font copies) available to email.
- **Undertake pre-launch advertising and PR** - launch your website and take online and offline ads off hold. Let the tourist information centres know you are ready to trade. Commence pre-launch PR and activities.
- **Test products with family and friends before initial launch** - test everything: furniture, fittings, service, website, phone systems, tills, catering, billing, accounts systems etc thoroughly and keep detailed records of snags and how they have been corrected. After internal testing have a soft launch: invite family and friends to come and behave as real customers to iron out any service or procedural snags. Ask for honest feedback and act on it.

10. Launching your business

To get your business off to a great start, and ensure it stays healthy, consider the following:

- **Have a launch event** - open your business with a splash. Hold a party or other event. Invite local businesses, tourism staff, tourist information centre staff, and press. Consider getting a local celebrity to open it and look for press and PR angles that can be used in local radio, TV and news. Invite local people, run a local promotion or competition. Run customer incentives, competitions and special campaigns and discounts.
- **Implement customer feedback** - from minute one of day one encourage customer feedback verbally and in writing, privately and publicly. Ask customers directly about their experiences, get staff to engage them in conversation, ask them to fill out forms at suitable points in the business (eg at reception, on departure, in your shop or cafe etc). Send customers follow up emails after their visit asking for feedback. Have a feedback facility at your website, use a guest or visitor book, encourage customers to provide reviews at sites like TripAdvisor. As well as feedback about the facilities and service you offer, look for feedback about where your customers come from, how long they stay, what they are looking for and any other information that will help you to target your marketing more accurately and improve or expand your offering.
- **Monitor systems and procedures** - no matter how much you have tested your business, more snags will show up once you start trading for real. Encourage all staff to watch for issues and provide feedback on how things can be improved. Procedures you set up in advance may prove inadequate under real demand and you may need to alter the way things are done, schedules, stocks, staffing levels or back-office routines. Stay on top of administration and red tape, even if this means burning midnight oil. In the heat of the launch and the early days it will be tempting to focus purely

on the customers, but letting admin and red-tape pile up can lead to (expensive) disasters and make these jobs even more difficult and time consuming.

- **Monitor your marketing plan** - it is essential that you monitor your marketing closely. Which adverts, PR or activities provide the best responses? Which deliver the highest spending customers? Which generate lots of responses but few sales? Which activities do you want to continue and which should you drop? Monitoring and adjusting your marketing, and ensuring you come up with fresh campaigns, approaches and ideas, is an ongoing part of the everyday running of any business.
- **Monitor 3rd party relationships** - whether you like it or not, your business is dependent on third parties. Monitoring your supplies and suppliers will help nip any supply problems in the bud, and keep your supplier relationships strong and positive. If you are using an agency, consolidator or other booking or sales channel, monitor results from this closely. Are they effective, do they provide a good enough yield, can you renegotiate commissions, should you drop a channel or allocate more availability to it? If you are partnering with other tourism businesses to provide a package or to expand your offering, make time for these relationships and ensure that that are positive and working productively for everyone.
- **Monitor and provide feedback to staff** - the morale of your staff directly affects the morale of your customers. The more motivated and positive they are, the better they will perform. Monitor staff performance, morale and procedures and provide feedback to staff about how well they, and the business, are doing. Motivate them with positive customer feedback and any great reviews or awards you win. Incentivise them with praise, encouragement and small internal prizes. When things go wrong try to work out why, and, where necessary, give more training and re-examine procedures. Ensure the pay, atmosphere, conditions and perks you offer are good enough to attract, and retain, the right staff for your business.
- **Monitor sales and finances** - from day one, you must see whether sales, income and expenditure are matching your business plan and targets. Be prepared to take action if sales are considerably lower than expected, by injecting more marketing activities, adjusting pricing or attending to how more enquiries can be converted into sales. Keep a close eye on expenditure and cash-flow and be prepared to use your contingency funding if things go wrong. Consider whether you need to plan for greater investment in the second six months or Year 2.
- **Future improvements** - on a day to day basis, look for how you might do things better. These improvements could be service, cost, procedure or product based. Could you source better supplies, manage staff levels better, offer a new package, spend more time on social networking, upgrade a reception room, employ a better chef, hold more events? In most cases, you'll need to provide (to yourself) a cost justification – a clear link as to how this improvement would benefit the business financially or operationally.
- **Develop your plans** - if you thought your planning days were over - think again! Successful businesses never stop planning. You'll need to keep updating your business plan, staff training and development plan, marketing plan, and product development plan

- **Keep up to date through events, networking and publications** - nothing ever stands still in business so, if you don't want to fall behind, you'll need to make time to keep up to date with what is happening in the industry. Use the Toolkit, subscribe to trade journals, attend industry events and network with other businesses and tourism professionals to make sure you keep pace with changes in the visitor economy. And attend workshops, training events and courses to ensure your own skills grow and expand with your business.