

Quality: more than a stroll in the park

Ron Russell¹

Qualmark® is Tourism New Zealand's official mark of tourism quality and is obtained following an onsite assessment of a business and its facilities. The mark is a government owned trademark and the assessment gives the business the right to use the trademark signified by the silver fern followed by an indication of the type of business. In the case of accommodation providers a star rating is awarded, e.g., 1 to 5 Star hotel, self-contained and serviced etc. In the case of other activities such as airlines, charter boat companies, and passive and high action activities, a pass mark is achieved and this is then indicated by the use of the fern over a business description such as endorsed visitor transport, or endorsed visitor activity.

The system was developed following research by Tourism New Zealand (TNZ) indicating that visitors to New Zealand found it difficult to uncover if a business was trustworthy, or that they were going to get what they paid for and at the same time would receive value for money. This concern was also voiced by offshore sales offices such as international travel agents.

The licence is based upon an annual assessment, and gives the holder priority listing on the TNZ website (www.newzealand.com) as well as a number of offshore advantages when marketing alongside TNZ offices and agents internationally. The international visitor and offshore agent is encouraged to look for the Qualmark when making bookings and arranging transport.

Qualmark licence holders currently number just on 1500, made up of approximately 1100 accommodation providers and 400 endorsed visitor activities.



The Qualmark® trademark.

New Zealand inbound visitor numbers currently stand at 2.4 million, and there has been a 46% increase in these numbers since 1999. However, the source of these visitors is changing, while at the same time New Zealand is receiving competition from other countries including Africa, Australia, and South America.

Marketing advantages created from the years of the *Lord of the Rings* and *Last Samurai* movies, and the Americas Cup yacht race are subsiding and there appears to be no further free replacement. TNZ's offshore marketing budget base which currently stands at approximately NZ\$50 million is strategically placed to reach New Zealand's ideal visitor, and promote the country as a quality destination.

The demographics of the 'ideal visitor', or 'Interactive Traveller®', have changed during the past few years, and recognising these changes required a refocus on what we have to offer and how we market that product to the world. This traveller has been identified as looking for an authentic New Zealand experience, is generally well heeled, has travelled a lot and is inclined to seek out places that match their interests, such as wine

and food, fishing, gardens and culture, and so forth.

TNZ identified the Chelsea Flower Show as a gateway to reaching the Interactive Traveller and as a result became the major sponsor of the gold-winning New Zealand entry at Chelsea in 2004. TNZ is to again sponsor a court at the 2006 show; the effect of this sponsorship will again highlight New Zealand as a worthwhile garden destination. The sponsorship worked well with the development of the New Zealand Gardens Trust (NZGT) and the classification of New Zealand gardens that are suitable to promote to the international visitor market. The NZGT now has more than 150 gardens in its listing, many of which the Trust has assessed and listed as Gardens of Regional or National Significance.

Qualmark and the NZGT entered into a memorandum of understanding in 2003. This memorandum agrees that Qualmark licence holding is available to Trust assessed Gardens, thereby encouraging and allowing gardens of significant standing to be listed and promoted by TNZ offshore. Following the NZGT assessment and categorizing process, an application may be made to Qualmark for the garden business to be assessed and licenced. A Qualmark assessor who will take into account business practices as well as the facilities will carry out the onsite generic assessment. Presuming the business obtains the pass mark of 60%, then that business may take advantage of the various marketing opportunities that come with the Qualmark.

I'm often asked, "How can my small garden business reach the 'ideal visitor', when my garden is just a hobby?"

The opportunity now exists for the formation of a nationwide garden

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cluster, possibly centred upon NZGT listings. The cluster could be marketed to both the domestic and international markets, and as a result of having a collective value (say NZ\$200) to visit any 10 gardens from a list of 150, the value would attract international agent interest. Another field could be the formation of a group of Qualmark star rated accommodation providers that

have accommodation within gardens of Regional or National Significance.

I also believe that some current New Zealand shows and festivals are of international standing and are ready to be further marketed offshore. Well known examples include the Ellerslie Flower Show in Auckland and the Taranaki Rhododendron and Garden Festival, and there are many other

less known events deserving of international recognition.

The future looks bright for the garden tourism industry, and there are great benefits to be had by pulling together at all levels, from the grass-roots private garden, to the botanic gardens and parks, through to event organisers, inbound tour operators, and tourism and horticultural organisations.

Ron is a National Sales and Account Manager for Qualmark® and is focused on hotels, visitor transport, and the passive visitor activity segments.

Ron joined Qualmark in 2002 at a time when the organization was in the process of introducing the endorsement system for non-accommodation operators and upgrading the accommodation criteria.

Qualmark now has around 1500 licence holders and the endorsement program spans sectors as diverse as skydiving to gardens. Tourism New Zealand and the Automobile Association of New Zealand jointly own Qualmark.

Ron's broad business experiences include agriculture, horticulture, retail, property management, human resource management and tourism.

Turning your garden treasure into gold

Jack Hobbs¹ and Aleysha Pangari

Introduction

For many years our main focus at the Auckland Botanic Gardens has been on making physical improvements to the gardens. The main driver for these improvements has been feedback from fellow plant and garden 'enthusiasts', who are seldom short of opinions which remain highly valued and useful. The importance of improving the quality of the services we offer our visitors has also been paramount.

In more recent times we have realised that we have needed to take a much broader and more disciplined approach to growing our business. It is vital to have a great garden and services, but it all amounts to nothing if it does not provide what our customers want, or if insufficient people know about it and realise what it potentially offers to them.

Progressively we have realised that our potential visitor base is in fact much broader than the garden

enthusiasts we have previously targeted and been influenced by. We also realised how little we knew about our customers, and what potential our business had in terms of increasing both the numbers and diversity of our visitors.

The solution was to commission professional market research so that we could better understand our existing and potential visitors, including what would motivate them to visit, their wants/needs and other information that could be used for informed decision making on future growth. The results of this research have completely shifted our perception of who our current and potential visitors might be and it has clarified what we might do to optimise the chances that they will choose us as their preferred destination.

As alluded to earlier, we found that keen gardeners in fact make up a small proportion of our visitors, with only one third of our visitors

indicating that it is our plants and gardens that they most like about the Botanic Gardens. Only around 13% of our local population use the Botanic Gardens for ideas and information on gardening. Areas of greatest enjoyment include walking, relaxing, feeding the ducks and activities for the kids. Market research is full of surprises, and one soon learns to never assume what motivates visitors.

An example of effective product development based on market research has been the success of our new Children's Garden. This development was largely a response to feedback indicating Botanic Gardens (and gardens generally) are not viewed as appealing destinations for families. Since opening this new attraction in March 2005 the numbers of families visiting the gardens has risen significantly, contributing to a doubling of total visitation during the autumn months compared to

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