

## 2004/05 Christchurch Community Plan Submission

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### **Submission: Visitor Promotions (Draft Plan, Vol 2 p70)**

We would like the City Council to consider how best it could achieve its economic development aim of promoting the city as a visitor and convention destination, and of supporting visitors (including overseas students) during their stay. Our submission looks at visitor promotions, what this city lacks in this area, what action we believe should be taken and why.

#### **What this city's visitor promotion lacks**

Christchurch City Council considers tourism and international education as the city's major industry and we are getting a great benefit from it. Although we consider they are our major "products", we are not putting enough effort into quality control and encouraging a high level of customer service.

The city is losing its reputation as a safe, friendly place. Instead, a negative perception is building, that Christchurch is unsafe, a racist place whose businesses and people are ripping off vulnerable visitors, holidaymakers and international students. In almost every case, that is probably a big overstatement, but perception, word-of-mouth and media coverage are very powerful and often concentrate on the small number of bad experiences some people may have, or have heard about while they were in our city. Visitors take those stories away with them.

We think the city is failing to provide appropriate services -- you could call it after-sale care -- which the consumers of our main industry deserve after paying so much money. Are we satisfied they are going away with the feeling they got what they paid for? The city and people should consider these visitors and international students as valued customers and make sure we are being fair to them.

When we buy a product or service, we expect a decent quality for the money we paid. When the product is not good, we expect to be able to take it back or get a refund or, if it's a really terrible product, be able to tell the Consumers Institute and warn other people about it. Christchurch as a city should apply the same after-care

idea to tourism and international education.

We believe this is especially true for our many visitors and students from Asian countries. In many cultures it is important to feel that your grievance has been considered and taken seriously. Sometimes it may not be possible to achieve a perfect solution, but we believe such a service would help to reduce the numbers of our international customers who leave feeling they were not well treated.

If our city fails to provide after-care service, it means some customers leaving with bitter, resentful feelings. Our city's businesses could be spending millions of dollars on smart advertising around the world, but it will only work for so long if word-of-mouth reports from people who have been here is spreading a bad reputation about our city and country.

### **What action should be taken?**

The City Council or its contractor should set up and promote to incoming visitors some kind of customer claim centre to take care of these unhappy, angry visitors. At the moment, the only organisations doing this on behalf of the city are its newspapers. They may be doing a reasonable job of looking at how the city is doing as a customer-focused place, but it is unfortunate that they tend to concentrate on the bad examples and their reports can be easily picked up by other news organisations overseas.

A customer claim centre could function as an ombudsman's office and also as a drop-in centre for people who have had or are having trouble or unhappy experiences. The centre also should be able to receive and handle claims written in the client's own language, as well as telephone calls. The centre would not be set up to duplicate other organisations' work. It would refer clients to appropriate agencies if that is the best way to get a good result. Customer claims and feedback could be collected and the service provider contacted. Depending on the results, the centre might warn a business that its actions are likely to hurt the city, or seek an investigation by the appropriate authority. And the work generally would provide useful information to the city council about negative perceptions.

If a client had to leave the country before the outcome of their claim, a follow-up letter informing them of what happened should be sent to the person. In this way our customers will feel they have been heard by the city authorities and offered help and emotional support. They may be still angry towards the service provider or the retailer, but they won't feel angry to our society.

Depending on whether it makes sense to have this kind of service as part of the city's marketing effort, the office could be set up as a part of Christchurch and Canterbury Marketing Ltd or perhaps at the Community House, where the Citizens Advice Bureau has its office and access to useful resources. We think it could be done with a paid coordinator (a good listener with the right skills) and some volunteer language assistants to provide translation and interpretation services.

## **In summary**

When people get ripped off with no redress, they feel powerless, bitter, angry and sad. If nothing is done, the anger and bitterness will be pointed towards the society which allowed these bad systems and businesses to thrive. It's very important we offer help and support before they leave, so that they don't take bad impressions and angry feelings back to their own countries.

Setting up an ombusman's office/visitor, international students' drop-in centre would mean we are acknowledging them as valued costumers, and that we value their honest feedback to improve our services and products. It would help us as a society to point out and omit bad systems or practices which rip off our important costumers. We are sure it would do a lot to help reestablish and maintain a good reputation for the city as "a great place to visit, stay and study", and would promote the healthy operation of this very important industry to our local economy .

**\* Yasue Parker and Yurie Somerville are 2004 Volunteer Recognition Award recipients from Volunteering Canterbury. Together, they established and helped run a drop-in service for Asian women in the city. They compile and maintain a list of organisations and services which are useful to people who may run into difficulty when new to New Zealand and make it available in several languages.**