



# *Mid North Coast Event Network Final Report*

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# *Executive Summary*

Events throughout the Mid North Coast region (Coffs Harbour to Port Stephens) are primarily recognised and supported by one of the region's key industries of Tourism which contributed an estimated \$1.655bn in 2005 (National Visitors Survey) to the regions economy.

However, many events throughout the region are not recognised as, nor do they identify as being part of the tourism industry. This is sometimes due to the event size but more often the capacity of its organisers in terms of event management and marketing skills.

As an emerging industry within the region, most events are coordinated by volunteer committees who have little to no formal events industry training.

The Mid North Coast Event Network Project researched events throughout the region with the aim of gaining an understanding of how events in the marketplace could be assisted to increase participation in tourism marketing activities.

From the outset it was understood the primary mechanisms for the achievement of this aim would be development of marketing, operational and financial skills and improved co-operation and collaboration between events and tourism stakeholders.

Before these activities could be implemented it was imperative that an understanding of the existing marketplace and its perceived needs were analysed.

The project implemented research activities throughout the region in the form of a survey, two forums, an online forum, informal questioning, a blog and networking activities between February and August 2006.

During this time a strong network of supporters were engaged in the project who span a broad range of events industry involvement including arts and cultural groups, sports, local government, community festivals and markets, business events, community services, community interest groups and enthusiast groups.

Research identified many gaps in the level of understanding of event managers in marketing activities as well as other functional areas of event management by event managers throughout the region.

The project also found collaboration and cooperation between events both throughout the region and within local government areas was limited.

In all research activities support for the development of a formal Mid North Coast Events Association was strong. The most desired functions of the Event Association involved marketing support followed by opportunities for resource sharing and collaboration, networking and educational opportunities.

Market research clearly indicated the major proportion of events throughout the region were community based activities with 83% of surveys completed by events indicated they attracted less than 5,000 people each year. Most of these events were coordinated by volunteers only.

Therefore it is unlikely membership fees would sustain the Association, at least in the interim.

However, it is clear that the development of a formal Events Association throughout the region has the potential to bring together the events industry with positive repercussions in economic development, tourism, community development, employment and capacity development of the region.

# *Project background*

## **Project brief**

The initial research component of the Mid North Coast Event Network project was funded by NSW Tourism, the Department of State and Regional Development and North Coast NSW Regional Tourism. The project is supported by Arts Mid North Coast and coordinated by Evolve Network Australia.

The five month research project aimed to identify ways in which the events industry throughout the region could be supported to “improve the viability of events and their contribution toward tourism growth by enhancing the skills of event managers with focus on the areas of marketing, resourcing, co-operation and collaboration.”

## **Reach and scope**

The project addressed events throughout the Mid North Coast Region (Coffs Harbour – Port Stephens) of all size, nature and genre.

A network which incorporates local government, arts councils, existing events, events related businesses, venues and community groups throughout the region has been identified and contacted by the project coordinator to participate in the project.

## **Research activities**

Over one hundred people throughout the region participated in some level of the project. Participants engaged via a number of research mechanisms:

- A questionnaire which was distributed widely throughout the region generated 65 responses
- Forums were held in Wauchope and Bellingen. A total of 40 guests attended the groups. At the Forums there was stronger representation from both sporting and business events than shown in the survey.
- Additional information was gathered from Creative Volunteering workshops throughout the Great Lakes region, via e-mail, an Online Forum and conversations with the project coordinator

## **Research analysis**

The following questions were developed to support the project aims:

- What are the support needs of events throughout the region?
- Is there support in the development of a formal Mid North Coast Events Association? What might the function of a formal event network be?
- What is the level of understanding of tourism processes in events throughout the region?

These questions were addressed throughout the research project with the following results.

### **What are the support needs of events throughout the region?**

Surveys and Forums indicated strong support needs in the marketing environment. This primarily included support in marketing services, distribution of media releases and listing in an events calendar. Forums indicated more functional needs such as networking, mentoring, resource sharing and education.

Many event managers indicated feelings of isolation and lack of support from local government. They were unsure of the existence of any support mechanisms.

### **Support for a formal Mid North Coast Events Association**

Support throughout the region for the concept of an Events Association was strong. Of 65 surveys collected throughout the region 38% said yes, 15% said no and 53% indicated 'maybe' to joining a formal Events Association on a fee for service basis. The concept of a formal Association was further supported by additional industry and local government representation at Forums.

The survey respondents were asked to indicate if the following benefits were considered valuable attributes in a potential Events Association. Respondents could choose any of the following benefits and collated results were:

- Listing in a calendar of events 91%
- Distribution of media releases 89%
- Marketing services 78%
- Resource sharing 69%
- Networking with other events staff 62%
- Newsletter 55%
- Online networking 40%
- Volunteer training 46%
- Online training 35%
- Mentoring 35%
- Discount card 22%

It should be noted that a major proportion of events surveyed were small community events (83% of surveys completed were by events that attracted less than 5,000 people) these events have little revenue to pay for an Events Association on a membership basis. While a user pays system may be applicable for networking and educational events it is highly unlikely that membership fees will be enough to sustain the development of a formal Association.

### **Understanding of tourism processes in events throughout the region**

Many project participants identified gaps in linkages between tourism organisations and their events. Many indicated while they desired more involvement with tourism in the region they were confused about how they could be involved, or where to go. The topic of an events calendar was continually in focus throughout the project.

# *Interpretations*

Events throughout the region are generated by community groups, government organisations, schools, sports clubs, local government, social groups and committees, arts associations, enthusiasts and hobbyists, businesses and individuals.

The events industry is emerging within the Mid North Coast and many of the event managers mentioned above do not identify as being part of the events or tourism environment. To further grow the industry while maximising the impact of events in the tourism environment it is imperative that event managers gain an awareness of the capacity of their events. This will only come through networking, education and nurturing within the industry.

While events throughout the region identify with many different genres (sports, culture, community, business etc.) distinctions within the existing industry are more easily made by classifying events as community focused events and business focused events.

The main distinction being that community focused events are primarily about the community in which they are hosted, attention is paid to their capacity to build social capital, foster community spirit and to showcase local talent and culture. They are coordinated by volunteers with little to no formal events training and they operate to a small budget. Any revenue raised by events within this category is used to refund the event or is donated to charitable causes.

Events defined as having a Business focus most often have larger budgets, are operated by experienced and paid events staff, have a clear purpose, direction and knowledge of their contribution to the region and events sector. Revenue raised within this area is generally used for personal or organisational gain.

Impacts that further development of the events industry throughout the region may have on these two markets are discussed below.

## **Community focused events**

The category of community focused events clearly serves to gain the most from a formal Events Association as it is this area that requires the most support and has the smallest amount of capital to acquire it.

Community events are operated by volunteers who participate in event development activities for numerous reasons. While the volunteers often have a wealth of life experience and work experience outside of the events industry they tend to have little to no formal training within events or tourism.

Greatly because of this lack of training, recognition of the benefits community focused events bring to a community are not measured.

This lack of training also becomes evident in marketing approach, the ability to address business planning, risk management and other legal issues as well as financial planning.

Much of this lack of experience is currently supported by Local Government which neither has the staff nor resources to adequately support these needs, particularly in smaller LGA's.

Lack of co-operation and collaboration between community focused events also brings about difficulties, particularly in the use of community resources, sponsorship and marketing.

Community based events can put a great strain on local business in terms of sponsorship requests. Collaboration between events could ease the sponsorship burden on a number of levels, firstly events could work together to identify target businesses rather than canvassing whole areas and secondly collaboration could increase the buying power of individual events who would as a result require less sponsorship revenue to operate.

In terms of marketing events tend to compete rather than collaborate. This is unproductive both in terms of overspending on marketing collateral and missed opportunities in the tourism market.

For an Events Association to succeed it would need to appeal the needs of participants in the events industry. Characteristics of people involved in community focused events are identified below:

- Many community event volunteers who engaged in the project were aged 55 plus. They are retirees (or early retirees) and volunteer primarily for social reasons. These people may be part of social or recreational groups (CWA, Lions, Rotary etc), they may support charitable causes or be part of support groups, they may also be members of interest groups (arts and cultural associations, hobbyists and enthusiasts). While this group do not have work commitments they often volunteer on a number of activities and tend to keep very busy in this manner.
- Volunteers are also mothers (and to a lesser extent fathers) aged 25-40 who organise school fetes and fundraising activities and sports activities. This group may also work full or part time and are busy tending to family requirements outside of volunteering.
- For younger event volunteers aged 35 and under volunteering may be perceived as a pathway to employment and a means of gaining work experience.
- A rapidly growing demographic in volunteering are those people forced through Federal Government Mutual Obligation requirements (aged 18-49). There is great potential for the events industry to harness this group of people who would benefit from work experience within the diverse industry. In the case of Work for the Dole participants funding can also contribute to and in effect sustain under-funded events activities. Evolve Network Australia has extensive experience in the coordination of Work for the Dole activities, particularly in the area of events.
- While projects such as those supported by Indent (Music NSW) work very well in engaging youth participation in events this age group are traditionally difficult to engage in the organisation of activities. Youth are more likely to be motivated by Council Youth Development Officers, Youth Workers and to a growing extent involvement in Church and other religious groups and their associated activities. There is potential to grow this area of volunteering.

While volunteers and their organisations cannot bear excessive rates for networking and educational opportunities, they are prepared to travel and pay for opportunities which meet their perceived needs. This was clearly illustrated in the Tiona experience where people travelled from throughout the Great Lakes and Hastings Region to pay for an educational experience as opposed to attending the free Event Network Project Forum the following day.

Supporting events at a community level is supporting the development of the events industry from grass roots level. Community events provide an accessible industry entry point which would otherwise be very difficult to attain in this industry.

### **Business focused events**

Recognised by the Department of State and Regional Development as “one of the fastest growing sectors of the Australian Tourism Industry” (2005), Business Tourism is a growing part of the region’s event sector.

The business events market, involving conferences, meetings, workshops, forums and incentives is primarily serviced by small business owners, venue employees and local council staff.

The business events market is well serviced by the tourism industry, economic development and other private providers and is promoted both within and outside of the region.

Businesses involved in these events also have budgets to pay experienced marketing staff or are part of formal and informal networks which aid business development.

Working together business focused events and community focused events can bring about great change within the region’s events industry.

Community focused events provide a training ground for future events staff who are more likely to experience sustainable employment opportunities within the business events environment.

There are also great opportunities for other events to ‘piggyback’ these activities providing entertainment and experiences for both guests to the region and families who travel with conference delegates.

# Recommendations

## Key recommendations

While the events industry throughout the Mid North Coast contributes a vast range of social and economic benefits to the region, the lack of Professional Industry Association and recognition within the industry is holding back its development.

The implementation of steps to formalise the development of the events industry throughout the region serve to enhance employment prospects, increase the incidence of collaborative marketing, the capacity of community, the development of professionally organised showcase events and increased tourism and economic potential throughout the region.

To gain this recognition, key areas requiring development as identified throughout the research component of the Mid North Coast Event Network Project were:

- Development and collation of industry statistics, particularly those that address community focused events
- Development and facilitation of a collaborative approach to marketing throughout the industry.
- Increased training opportunities throughout the region in the events industry.
- Increased opportunities for resource sharing, networking and joint purchasing.
- Increased awareness of tourism processes and opportunities and linkages between events and tourism associations.
- Development of mentoring opportunities.
- Development of a small grants program as seed funding for community focused events.

## Implementation structure

The formalisation of an industry requires the establishment of a peak body or organisation within the region which monitors and supports events. Often event managers feel isolated and unsupported as local governments are unable to service their needs. A formal **Mid North Coast Events Association** would facilitate these needs.

As events cross so many sectors within the community, the project research also pointed out the need of a **Centralised Marketing Unit** for the region which would incorporate the marketing needs of events, cultural industries, economic development, sports, tourism and regional development.

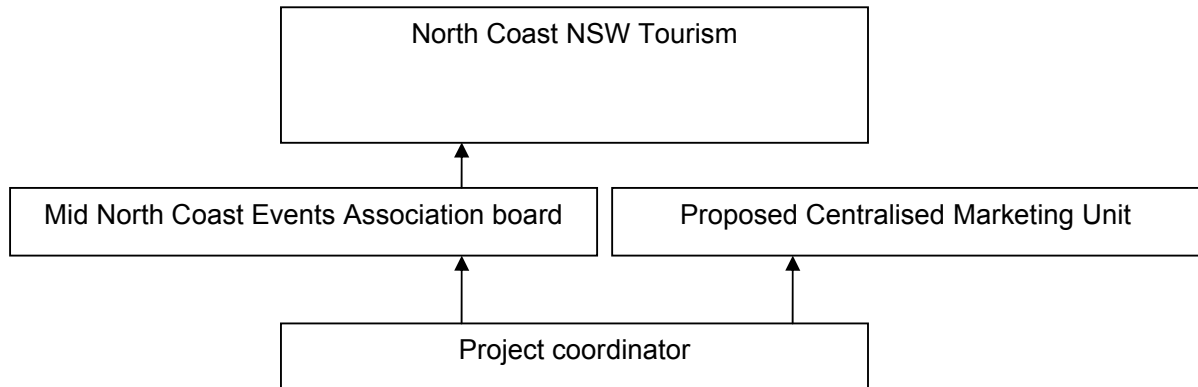
This concept would provide a collaborative approach to marketing across sectors saving revenue on marketing collateral, publicity and promotional campaigns, the duplication of networks and time and effort for both community volunteers and organisations involved in promoting the region.

A Centralised Marketing Unit could also more capably provide more consolidated information regarding the region and filter development opportunities throughout sectors as they come to light.

## *Proposed implementation strategy*

The MNC Events Association would compliment the objectives of Regional Tourism Organisation (RTO) in the context of bringing together private sector tourism operators, local business leaders, tourism associations, and local government with particular emphasis on the regions events industry.

### Organisational structure



### Staff

The Association would be managed by a part time coordinator over an establishment period of three years. The coordinator would answer to a board who would provide interim reports to key stakeholders in the project.

### Objectives of the proposed Mid North Coast Events Association

The primary objectives of the proposed Events Association would be:

- To provide professional development opportunities for volunteers and paid events staff.
- To promote awareness of the region's events resources within and outside of the region
- To encourage and enhance opportunities for collaboration and co-operation between events
- To improve and create new communication mechanisms between events and tourism organisations and businesses
- To improve existing and establish new marketing channels for events
- To establish sponsorship and funding opportunities throughout the region
- Increase the capacity of existing events thereby developing more events of regional significance

# Project plan

	Objective	Actions	Time frame (specify month & year)	Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) ie: measurement indicators/ expected outcomes	Actual Outcomes (to be completed as reports fall due)
1	To provide professional development opportunities for volunteers and paid events staff.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Establish links with Volunteering and employment services organisations to gain involvement of participants from this area.</li> <li>* Work with Volunteering Australia to ensure events address National Standards of Volunteering therefore enhancing the volunteering experience</li> <li>* Consult in the development of community projects such as Work for the Dole.</li> <li>* Lobby for increased educational opportunities in organisations such as TAFE and Adult Education</li> <li>* Facilitate mentoring and opportunities for work experience</li> <li>* Provide tutorials at monthly networking meetings</li> <li>* Provide information and tutorials at annual conference</li> <li>* Include educational component on MNCEN Website</li> <li>* Provide event industry pathway information in schools throughout the region</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Increased amount of volunteers within the events industry</li> <li>* Increased employment opportunities identified within the events industry</li> <li>* Increased amount of training opportunities available throughout the region</li> <li>* Increased amount of Work for the Dole projects which incorporate events activities thereby recognising the capacity of events as a means of developing identified skills shortages</li> <li>* Attendance at monthly networking meetings</li> <li>* Development of educational components of website (facilitated by Evolve Network Australia)</li> <li>* Schools incorporated to network and work experience commences</li> </ul>	

2	To promote awareness of the region's events resources within and outside of the region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Conduct a resource audit throughout the region to identify the current capacity of the area</li> <li>* Promote available facilities online via MNCEN website as a database</li> <li>* Provide opportunities for business to promote at annual conference</li> <li>* Provide information to organisations who promote events outside of the region (proposed Centralised Marketing Unit)</li> <li>* Establish network to identify events coming into the area</li> <li>* Establish an annual events conference within the region</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Audit information is available via MNCEN website</li> <li>* local business has more lead time to tender for events to the area</li> </ul>	
3	To encourage and enhance opportunities for collaboration and co-operation between events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Coordinate and promote monthly networking meetings throughout the region</li> <li>* Create an online message board and facilitate online meetings to encourage its use</li> <li>* Provide an online database of the regions facilities (Objective 2)</li> <li>* Develop case studies and present online to encourage experience sharing between events</li> <li>* Facilitate mentoring and opportunities for work experience (Objective 1)</li> <li>* Work throughout the region to incorporate marketing of events within various marketing collateral (e.g. lifestyle publications, tourism collateral, business development materials etc)</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Events promote utilisation of local services</li> </ul>	
4	To improve and create new communication mechanisms between events and tourism organisations and businesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Develop information kit for event managers regarding tourism promotional processes, contacts, marketing opportunities and key dates</li> <li>* Promote understanding of events calendars available and work towards promoting a primary site for the region</li> <li>* Promote the goals and marketing strategies of RTOs throughout the network</li> <li>* Encourage the establishment of events which fit within RTO marketing objectives</li> </ul>			

5	To improve existing and establish new marketing channels for events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Identify promotional mechanisms for events throughout the region including local media, niche media, online resources, key contacts and resources</li> <li>* Include information within the online MNCEN database</li> <li>* Establish regional approach to marketing events throughout the region (including events calendars, newswire service, establishing a point of contact for media)</li> <li>* Incorporate marketing tutorials to monthly networking meetings and online tutorial information (Objective 1)</li> </ul>		Levels of audiences	
6	To establish sponsorship and funding opportunities throughout the region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Develop a pool of funding sourced primarily from the business sector and allocate to events as small grants</li> <li>* Promote publicly available grants and funding</li> <li>* Encourage and facilitate collaboration in funding proposals between events</li> </ul>			
7	Increase the capacity of existing events thereby developing more events of regional significance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Developing opportunities for education and networking (objective 1 and 3), and resource sharing (objective 2)</li> <li>* Work directly with events to develop business plans in workshops, online and at networking meetings</li> <li>* Provide events with a range of information from the events industry external to the region (online resources)</li> <li>* Promoting opportunities for market research within the events industry: Facilitating TAFE and SCU students, and software acquisition and training. Maintain and communicate data collated</li> <li>* Provide templates for event management online (risk management, business planning, media releases etc)</li> </ul>			

# Budget

## Project expenditure (draft only)

Item	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Coordinator (3 days/week/48wks) including office facility	43000	43000	43000
Administration			
Stationery and postage	1000	1000	1000
Telephone	2400	2400	2400
Internet connection	600	600	600
Travel	2500	2500	2500
Networking meetings (12/year)			
Venue hire	1200	1200	1200
Catering	3000	3000	3000
Guest speaker (tutorial)	4800	4800	4800
Website			
Development and maintenance	5000	1000	1000
Hosting	140	140	140
Marketing			
Event calendar advertising	1500	1500	1500
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$65,140</b>	<b>\$61,140</b>	<b>\$61,140</b>

## Proposed annual conference (draft expenses)

Annual conference			
Venue hire	2500	2500	2500
Production	1500	1500	1500
Marketing (and printing)	3000	3000	3000
Theming	2500	2500	2500
Administration	1000	1000	1000
Guest speakers / tutorials	3000	3000	3000
staff	2500	2500	2500
Other costs	1500	1500	1500
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$17,500</b>	<b>\$17,500</b>	<b>\$17,500</b>

## Proposed annual conference (draft revenue)

Annual conference			
Guest ticketing	= \$25 x 200 (\$5000)	= \$25 x 200 (\$5000)	= \$25 x 200 (\$5000)
Stall holders	= 25 x \$250 (\$6,250)	= 35 x \$250 (\$8750)	= 40 x \$250 (\$10000)
Additional Sponsorship	\$6,250	\$3,750	\$2,500
	\$17,500	\$17,500	\$17,500

# Conclusion

The processes undertaken through the course of the Mid North Coast Events Development Project have clearly indicated a need for further development of the Festivals and Events sector across the Mid North Coast region. It is clear that this sector is making a significant contribution to the economies of the Mid North Coast with great potential for capacity building and growth.

Through analysis of the results of the survey and consultations, it is clear that the key strategies to progress the sector involve three main priorities:

- The establishment of a Regional Festivals and Events Professional Association to drive the sector's development into the future;
- The development of a centralised approach to regional marketing and promotion creating greater opportunity for collaborative and more effective approaches;
- Further research and development strategies

The Festival and Events Association will work in collaboration with all sectors of the community towards industry recognition, building capacity, increasing employment, attracting new business to the area, creating new ways to package events, promoting dialogue between event managers and developing opportunities throughout the industry.

The Association will also manage and develop a regional database, undertake research and act as a clearing-house for information and relevant statistics and work in partnership with the tourism and local government sectors.

It is strongly recommended that funding be sought to progress this strategy as a priority through a variety of local, state and federal funding programs, including fee for service and sponsorship arrangements.