

Media Release
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Tourism's new quality endorsement system officially launched

Pilot participants give it the thumbs up

Tourism operators are already giving the industry's official quality endorsement system the thumbs up, with nearly all of the businesses that have been part of the pilot programme deciding they want to carry the Qualmark™ quality mark.

Qualmark chief executive Fiona Luhrs says 33 businesses underwent the pilot programme of the new Qualmark™ endorsement system in August and September. Their feedback was overwhelmingly positive, and many have taken the opportunity to be among the very first non-accommodation businesses to take up the quality endorsement which was officially launched by Tourism New Zealand chief executive, George Hickton, today.

"The feedback from the pilot programme showed that operators relished the opportunity to benchmark their businesses against industry standards," says Ms Luhrs.

"The prospect of an outside assessor coming in to look at the business was daunting for some, but almost all of them told us afterwards that their businesses would improve as a result of the independent onsite assessment.

"Many of those pilot participants are already signing up for a Qualmark™ licence, so they can demonstrate to customers, i-SITE visitor information centres, travel agents and inbound tour operators that they've met the quality standards defined by the industry."

The Qualmark™ licensing system is designed to identify professional and trustworthy businesses so that domestic and international visitors can book and buy tourism products and services with confidence. Until now the programme has primarily featured star graded accommodation businesses, but the endorsement system opens the way

for all other types of tourism businesses to join, including adventure and visitor transport operators, attractions and activities.

Instead of star grades, the businesses participating in the new system will get a quality endorsement as a “visitor activity”, “visitor transport” or “visitor service” operator

Feedback from the official pilot programme

The pilot programme included a broad range of businesses from across the country, including well known operations like Kelly Tarltons, the Buried Village, Agrodome and the International Antarctic Centre, and less well known operators like Taupo’s Rock’n’River Adventures, Nelson’s Ocean River Sea Kayaking, and North Canterbury’s Hurunui Horse Treks.

Ms Luhrs says common feedback from among pilot participants and other operators involved in the final consultation over the assessment system, was that the endorsement system’s quality benchmarks had to be high enough to ensure they had credibility with visitors.

“The initial thresholds we had proposed were 50% on the generic quality scoring criteria and 70% on sector specific criteria. That’s been lifted to 60% and 75% which reflects standards that a visitor will see as professional and trustworthy. In other words, if a business is well run and focused on meeting their customers’ requirements, they should meet the eligibility criteria for a Qualmark™ endorsement.”

Of the 33 pilot participants, 26 met all of the quality benchmarks on the day of the assessment and 4 more have subsequently rectified “minimum requirements” to become eligible, Ms Luhrs says.

“A feature of the system is that if a business doesn’t quite reach the necessary thresholds, or certain minimum criteria aren’t met, they’ll have the opportunity to rectify that and still gain entry to the licensing system.

“Of the 30 pilot programme businesses that are eligible, 28 have already officially joined up, some businesses that were involved in earlier trials have also joined up in the past couple of days. That reflects a recognition of the benefits tourism’s quality mark can offer operators through credibility, visibility and profitability.”

How the endorsement assessment system works

All tourism businesses seeking the Qualmark™ endorsement are assessed against standard generic criteria based around customer expectations in six core quality areas.

Some businesses must also be assessed against additional criteria that are specific to their type of operation in order to achieve the Qualmark™ endorsement. These sector specific criteria enable the emphasis of the assessment to be placed on critical aspects of those businesses.

For adventure tourism and transport operators, in particular, this means added emphasis on safety, staff training and facilities & equipment, Ms Luhrs says.

All criteria have been based on work done by industry operators through the Tourism Industry Association (TIA) , Adventure Tourism Council, TIA sector committees and operator associations, and have been the subject of extensive trialing and consultation with operators during the development of the assessment systems.

Strong benefits

Ms Luhrs says the endorsement system will now be taken to industry operators around the country with the message that there are strong benefits to be had from participating in the programme.

“Businesses that seize the opportunities created by the Qualmark™ endorsement will have a more credible position in the market, will be more visible, and can enhance their businesses through increased yield and better utilisation of resources.

“Operators will join the programme because they see that it’s going to help them achieve their aspirations to grow or enhance their business, whether they’re at the premium or budget ends of the market, whether they’re big or small, and regardless of the type of experience they offer.”

Annual licence fees

Ms Luhrs says the initial set up of Qualmark’s expanded licensing system has been funded by government, but that it aims to operate on a self funding, not-for-profit basis within four years. For that reason, a lot of focus has gone into keeping annual licence

fees at a level that's both sustainable for the Qualmark™ programme, and acceptable for small operators.

The result is a fee schedule that's equivalent to less than \$50 per month (\$595 excl GST per annum) for small operators with up to 3 full time equivalent employees, increasing to around \$83 per month (\$995 excl GST per annum) for operators with between 21 and 30 full time equivalent staff.

"Part of the issue being faced by smaller operators is that they have many confusing and competing demands for their discretionary dollar from publishers, advertisers and web site operators, as well as Qualmark™.

"At an equivalent of \$50 per month we can cover most of the costs associated with providing the service, including the on-site assessment, while creating very real and tangible benefits for operators.

"Not least of these is the integration of Qualmark™ licensees into Tourism New Zealand's international programmes through priority listing on destination New Zealand's official website, www.purenz.com, and listings in the Qualmark directory and web site.

"There will be ongoing education of international and domestic consumers to ensure awareness, recognition and preference for the official quality mark continues to grow."

Following are some of the comments from businesses that participated in the pilot programme:

*John Robson
Kelly Tarltons*

"I see the Qualmark endorsement as an excellent tool to assure inbound tour operators that we have been robustly audited and they can have confidence in our ability to stand by their clients should something go wrong."

"The on-site assessment was extremely valuable. It validated many of our procedures and confirmed that all our work establishing procedures and manuals to limit risk and enhance the customer's experience was time and effort well spent."

*Jonathan Milne
Simply New Zealand*

"It enables the customer to shop with confidence in the knowledge that they are dealing with a retailer that will ensure customer satisfaction and a complete shopping experience."

*Robert Rutherford
Glenorchy Air*

"The Qualmark endorsement provides a stress reduction mechanism for the visitor when deciding which supplier will meet their needs. It should

give us a competitive advantage.”

“There are positive spin off benefits for all flightseeing operators who participate. The ultimate success of Qualmark is the industry buying in and the travelling public knowing what the brand means to them as consumers.”

*Lawrie O’Carroll
Alpine Horse Safaris*

““More and more people in NZ understand the Qualmark™ and what it stands for. They will see we are a quality organisation because we display the logo.”

It made us aware of our position in the business and recognize our strengths and what areas we could improve in

*Brent Pasley
Pride of Auckland*

“There’s good marketing exposure on the purenz website and we will use the Qualmark™ in our marketing to differentiate ourselves from the competition.”

*Rob Stanley
Hurunui Horse Treks*

“As a progressive company we value the external audit of our site, processes and procedures which can only improve the performance and profitability of our business.”

*Geoff Ensor
Air Safaris*

“We have already used the assessment criteria as a measure of our own performance – it has helped to highlight our strengths and identify the areas we can improve. Qualmark assessments will complement our own quality assurance scheme which has traditionally focused on safety.”

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