

## Friends and Family Reunited – Reaching the Growing VFR Market © Susan Briggs

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**Do you realise how many potential customers are effectively queuing on your doorstep? Just waiting to be targeted by you?**

Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) has long been seen as the Cinderella of the tourism industry. After all, if they're visiting their friends and relatives they'll presumably stay with them too so the impact of this form of tourism is low. And VFR traffic can't be influenced because it's the friends and relatives who decide when they'll visit. Or so the theory went. But suddenly we're starting to think again, and realise that VFR is not only an essential component of the domestic (and often incoming) tourism industry but also really worth influencing.

This article starts by taking a brief look at the contribution which VFR tourism makes and some of the statistics, before considering how some towns and cities have managed to influence VFR and making some suggestions about other possible marketing activities. It also makes a call for a national promotion, designed to increase awareness of the contribution of tourism to the domestic economy and how local residents can help.

### Visits to Friends and Relatives - a Few Facts

There's no point in trying to promote more VFR if England isn't seen as an attractive holiday destination or if the size of the VFR market isn't significant.

A survey by the then English Tourism Council (ETC) in April 2002 showed that 88% of the domestic population agree that "England is a good place for a short break". Over two thirds (67%) say they would consider taking their main holiday at home and over three quarters (76%) agree that there's plenty to see and do on holiday in England. Even those people who take their main holiday overseas agree that a holiday at home has a lot to offer. 85% agree that England is a good place for a short break. So we know that there is willingness to take a holiday or short break in England.

Let's take a look at the actual size of the market, taking some details from the United Kingdom Tourism Survey. VFR tourism is growing. The following figures are no longer new but you can nonetheless spot the trend.

Visiting Friends & Relatives Trips (Millions) 1995-2000				
	UK	England	Scotland	Wales
1995	29.72	24.12	2.46	2.24
1996	33.75	28.58	2.49	2.22
1997	34.67	30.19	2.28	1.68
1998	32.41	27.89	2.05	1.82
1999	39.59	33.56	3.11	2.34
2000	40.58	34.42	3.21	2.41

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Visiting Friends & Relatives <b>Nights</b> (Millions) 1995-2000				
	UK	England	Scotland	Wales
1995	84.84	69.02	8.07	5.16
1996	90.39	76.04	8.33	5.02
1997	91.49	78.41	6.93	3.96
1998	88.86	74.50	7.28	4.41
1999	100.51	83.30	9.45	5.70
2000	104.50	86.73	9.86	5.85

Visiting Friends & Relatives <b>Spending</b> (£Millions) 1995-2000				
	UK	England	Scotland	Wales
1995	2,376	1,864	234	107
1996	2,338	1,916	239	130
1997	2,663	2,158	247	137
1998	2,755	1,976	304	157
1999	3,033	2,378	332	199
2000	3,179	2,521	342	199

Source: United Kingdom Tourism Survey

There is a perception that VFR trips are mainly taken by lower income groups who perhaps can't afford other holidays. This is certainly not true. English Tourism Council research shows that 74% of ABs took a VFR trip in the last 12 months compared to 56% C1, 45% C2, 35% D and 38% E. Abs took an average of 8 trips a year compared to 5 for Es.

Another reason why VFR tourism has often been dismissed is because although visits seem high in number, the actual value of VFR and visitor spend appeared low. This is not true. Tourism statistics measured visitor spend. This is appropriate for most other forms of tourism but not for VFR where the host friend or

relative is almost certain to buy meals, admission to attractions and other elements of a trip as well as the guest, so the multiplier effect is high. Research by the English Tourism Council just before they were merged with the BTA into VisitBritain, looked at this and other aspects of VFR tourism.

A massive 47% of hosts surveyed said that they feel they should pay for everything when they have visitors to stay. Some of the other findings are also extremely encouraging and help to make the case for taking VFR tourism more seriously.

	<b>AGREE</b>	<b>DISAGREE</b>	<b>DON'T KNOW</b>
<i>I usually buy in extra food when people come to stay with me</i>	88%	8%	4%

<i>I always try to find a local event or attraction to go to when I have visitors</i>	45%	40%	15%
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<i>I always take my visitors out to eat in local restaurants at least once during their stay</i>	58%	33%	9%
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<i>When going out with my visitors I avoid places I know will be overcrowded with other tourists and day trippers</i>	63%	24%	13%
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AGREE	DISAGREE	DON'T KNOW
<i>If I didn't have room for visitors to stay overnight at my house I would recommend other accommodation locally</i>		
69%	22%	9%

<i>I feel I should pay for everything when I have visitors to stay</i>		
47%	40%	13%

<i>Going out with my visitors makes me realise how much my local area has to offer</i>		
61%	23%	16%

Source: English Tourism Council research carried out by BMRB in April 2002 amongst representative sample of 959 adults in UK

<i>Staying overnight with friends or relatives is a cheap way of having a holiday</i>		
62%	30%	8%

<i>Many of my friends live so far away from me that visiting them requires staying overnight</i>		
68%	28%	4%

<i>I try to combine trips to visit friends or relatives with an event of interest to me in the area</i>		
41%	50%	9%

<i>It's important that the people I am staying with come along with me to visit local attractions or events</i>		
57%	33%	10%

AGREE	DISAGREE	DON'T KNOW
<i>When I stay overnight with relatives it is usually because of a family event or special occasion</i>		
53%	38%	9%

<i>By going to stay with friends or relatives you get to see parts of the country you may not otherwise visit</i>		
77%	18%	5%

Source: ETC research carried out by BMRB in April 2002 amongst representative sample of 1,998 adults in UK

A little common sense will further help to illustrate how important VFR tourism is. The [www.friendsreunited.co.uk](http://www.friendsreunited.co.uk) website has evoked huge interest among people of every age. One of the effects of 11th September 2001 was a re-examination of how we spend our leisure time and the recognition that our families are very important to us.

Consider also how many people move away from their home town at some stage in their lives, leaving behind loved ones with whom they presumably want to be reunited from time to time. Think of your own circumstances or those of all your relatives and friends. How many have moved from one area to another? In April 2002 the English Tourism Council found that 62% of respondents to their survey replied that they had lived in different parts of the UK in their lifetime.

It has been traditionally thought that VFR tourism's impact is limited because host accommodation rather than commercial

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accommodation is used. This may be the case where hosts have large homes but in areas like London where space is at a premium it is more likely that there is “overspill” into commercial accommodation.

It is also worth considering another form of tourism which is perhaps not exactly “visiting friends and relatives” but meeting them at a central location to spend some time together. With families and friends increasingly being spread through-out the country, more and more people are seeking opportunities to either book a hotel or perhaps a Landmark Trust property in which to enjoy a holiday or short break together.

### Local Residents’ Attitudes towards Visitors

The most obvious way for a tourism provider to promote to people visiting their friends and relatives is to target the host population. This can have other positive effects too. It can boost visitor numbers by helping to stimulate more VFR traffic and encouraging local residents to “be a tourist in your own town” and it can heighten residents’ awareness of the economic benefits of tourism.

The English Tourism Council recently published the “Community Perceptions Survey” in February 2002 which looks at the English community’s perception of tourism and highlights some interesting points, which might make local authorities want to increase their spending on tourism promotion. The survey used a representative

sample of people who live in tourist areas of England and found that:

- 31% felt that there were too few tourists in their area and that they would benefit from more
- 93% were proud that tourists considered their area worth visiting
- 73% felt that visitors made their area more fun and lively
- 97% were aware of the positive economic impact of tourism
- 61% believed that thanks to tourists they had a wider range of attractions and leisure facilities
- 88% thought that tourism helped to promote local food, arts and crafts in their area
- 82% felt that their heritage was better preserved thanks to tourism

### Promoting to People on Your Doorstep

The effects of 11th September and the Foot and Mouth Disease have made us all more aware of the need to promote to our domestic market as well as to visitors from overseas. Perhaps it is time to look even closer to home and consider the dormant target market on our doorstep.

Some destinations recognise that although there are economic and other benefits for residents, visitors to the area can cause overcrowding and other problems. They seek to counter-act any negativity towards visitors by reminding residents of the benefits. One destination which does this very successfully every year is

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York. York receives four million visitors every year and tourism employs 8500 people.

The Residents First Weekend in York is the biggest event of its kind in the UK. It also makes a direct call for new recruits for tourism and hospitality jobs and encourages York residents to invite their friends and relatives to visit.

First Stop York (the city's tourism partnership) joins forces with 50 of the city's museums, attractions and hotels to showcase their facilities to York's residents, with a range of different offers to local people. Taking place every year in January, its aim is to give everyone in the city the chance to see for themselves the full range of attractions York offers these visitors - and explore different places and locations to recommend to friends and relatives. It gives residents the chance to visit over 30 of York's museums and attractions free of charge. In 2001 over 20,000 visits were made by local citizens to attractions over the Residents First Weekend. There were also opportunities for free hotel nights at various hotels in York.

First Stop York has found that the proportion of visitors to York who say that visiting friends and relatives is the "main reason for the visit" is increasing and a high proportion of those visitors belong to the AB socio-economic group. Their research also shows that people are keen to visit attractions with their friends and family and to recommend attractions for them to visit. The Residents First Weekend is promoted via the website

[www.york-tourism.co.uk](http://www.york-tourism.co.uk), local press, television and radio, libraries and of course the Tourist Information Centres which enjoy a high level of usage by local residents.

The potential for this form of promotional activity is clearly huge. But it could go much further. Imagine if every major tourism destination in the UK were to organise a similar event to that of York. Better still imagine if each of those places organised their event at the same time of year so it had a national profile and national media attention. There would be countless opportunities for local interest stories as well as national coverage of the different ways in which destinations sought to show their local residents what they have to offer. Also, it will heighten awareness of tourism's contribution to the economy which is not just stimulated by negative events such as Foot and Mouth Disease.

The American National Tourism Week takes place every year in mid May. Organised by the Travel Industry Association of America, it is now in its 19th year and is described as "the opportunity to emphasize and promote a wider understanding of the importance of travel and tourism as a major U.S. industry that is vital to the economic stability and growth of the nation.

Traditionally the Wednesday of National Tourism Week is celebrated as industry employee's "Wear Red Day" in recognition of the industry's 18 million jobs.

National Tourism Week was established in 1983 and had a high profile from the start. In a White House Ceremony, President Ronald Reagan signed a Presidential Proclamation urging citizens

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to observe the week with "appropriate ceremonies and activities." Industry leaders and public relations professionals from the major travel and tourism trade associations were the first volunteers to manage the annual event.

By 1986 industry leaders had formed a permanent Tourism Works for America Coalition, with a full time office to expand the concept into a year-round tourism awareness program. In 1998, the Travel Industry Association of America (TIA) absorbed all Tourism Works for America Coalition activities.

A wide variety of activities are used by US destinations to promote local attractions, hotels and other venues to their residents, with a view to stimulating off-peak tourism and encouraging more VFR tourism. In some cases all promotional activities take place during National Tourism Week but in other areas where May is already a peak month, they choose to acknowledge the Week but organise the bulk of activities at a time to suit local conditions.

Activities include:

- celebrations in Visitor Information Centres with refreshments, balloons, banners and celebrity guests;
- awards for tourism employees;
- tourism trivia quizzes;
- painting and essay competitions for local schools;

- outside broadcasts at unusual venues by TV and radio stations;
- chances to take tours behind the scenes of visitor attractions and hotels;
- special walking tours and guided sight-seeing tours.

One example from Waco in Texas by the Waco Convention and Visitors Bureau (WCVB) will suffice to show what can be done. Called, "Wild About Waco" the WCVB set out to make residents of Waco tourism ambassadors for the city. The ongoing campaign has several objectives, including:

- Promoting a sense of local pride;
- Raising awareness of Waco's tourism and convention business;
- Recruiting additional volunteers;
- Generating additional room nights.

The WCVB provided residents with hospitality kits free of charge. Each kit has a promotional videotape and CD-ROM, 25 visitor guides, a small bag of "Waco. The Heart of Texas" star-shaped pins, and sheets of "I'm Wild About Waco" stickers. With the kit, residents are armed with the latest information about attractions and accommodation. They also receive guidance for using these "tools" to encourage friends and family to visit and explore Waco.

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The CVB also teamed up with a local university to provide a continuing education course (students received one credit hour for a six-week, 2.5 hours a week course) called "We're Talkin' About Waco!" The class, taught by different community leaders each week, was a huge success as it explored Waco's treasures, rich history, the present and future economy, and its value as a tourist destination. Two of the 18 students became volunteers.

Local schools participate in an essay contest, a poetry contest, and an art contest. The local newspaper printed the top three essays, and the art pieces are displayed at an arts festival. A photography competition also invited resident citizens of all ages to rediscover Waco through the lens of their cameras.

"The success of this campaign will be felt for years to come," said Elizabeth Taylor, director of the WCVB. "As supplies from the hospitality kits are picked up in homes across the city and friends tell friends all the things they learned about what to see and do in Waco."

Other areas already had programmes before the start of National Tourism Week. Michigan Week was started in 1954 to simply celebrate the positive attributes of Michigan and now includes volunteer awards as well as a celebration of Michigan's diversity.

In Canada, Vancouver started a trend in VFR promotions several years ago and even published a case study with guidance notes for other towns to follow. They organised a programme called "Be a Tourist in your own Town" which was extremely successful. "Passports" were sold for 10 Canadian Dollars which were

redeemable at a number of attractions over a four-day period. Bus transportation was also provided. All 5,000 passports were sold and there was a crush on the first day with many people all wanting to go to one of the top three attractions. Being so successful isn't necessarily easy.

Tourism staff found that this was a difficult promotion to operate logistically and although they liked the exposure there were other downsides. Some people felt that since the attractions were offering free entry, they were also less respected. Other ways of achieving the objective of "Community Embraced Tourism" have been explored, with the appointment of a new Director to focus on this. They also developed a partnership with the publisher of the Vancouver Sun (daily newspaper) to produce the Official Visitors Guide which is distributed to 250,000 visitors and which has now also been distributed to 250,000 residents for the first time to highlight tourism and its importance to the local community.

Calgary has just initiated a similar programme which seeks to "get Calgarians to re-acquaint themselves with the attractions of their city during a slower time of year". It is hoped that this will have a positive impact on VFR tourism as well. Calgary's attractions were not willing to discount in order to entice visitors so instead the promotion uses a contest and prize as an incentive.

The unwillingness of attractions to discount or offer free promotion in order to attract residents and domestic visitors is probably going to grow. There is currently a plethora of promotions offering "two for the price of one" or heavily

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discounted entry fees. These are not sustainable over a long period of time, don't necessarily enhance the image of the attraction (often even making the public question their normal entry fees) and it is likely that their effect will diminish because there are so many of them.

The London Treasures campaign grew out of the fact that over 25 London attractions and boroughs were tired of constant discount promotions and wanted to do something which enhanced London's reputation and invited residents and repeat visitors to "take a second look". Launched over Easter 2002, it was a pilot project which ran until the middle of June.

It takes an innovative approach to stimulating interest in a variety of places and a different approach to informing potential visitors. They are essentially challenged to undertake research to answer a quiz which is web-based. The initial [www.LondonTreasures.com](http://www.LondonTreasures.com) website attracted half a million hits in two months from a standing start without any significant advertising or PR activities beyond distribution of free postcards and viral email. Over 7000 entry forms were downloaded in a bid to find out more about London and win one of over 150 prizes donated by the participating attractions.

What-ever promotional approach is taken, it is certainly worthwhile trying to attract more VFR tourism as the recent ETC research shows. Once these figures are published more widely, it is to be hoped that local authorities and regional tourist boards will start to take VFR more seriously. And to allocate budgets to promote to this important market which is quite literally waiting

on their doorstep. But the effectiveness of all local activities could be massively enhanced if every area were to undertake them roughly at the same time, under the same banner. And since many have already started the call for a national day for England, and wider promotion of St. George's Day, what better than to combine all this with National Tourism Week?

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