motel makeover guide
RENOVATING 3-4 STAR MOTELS

Executive Summary

Justin Beall, Linda Roberts and Leo Jago
The Hotel, Motel and Accommodation Association (HMAA) network would like to recommend the *Motel Makeover Guide* to all owner operators of 3-4 Star Motels. The Guide has been compiled to assist businesses with property renovations in order to maintain the standard necessary to compete successfully in the highly competitive tourism and travel environment.

The Australian accommodation industry has undergone significant changes since the emergence of the popular motel accommodation facility in the 1970s and 1980s. At that time these developments met the needs of the travelling public, both for business and leisure requirements.

The demands of consumers, especially within the last decade, have developed and increased significantly, resulting in a far more discerning customer for accommodation operators to satisfy. The changes have largely been driven by the higher standard of living, and considerable increase in investment by consumers within their homes by the provision of luxury amenities and the inclusion of high-tech appliances. In essence, when away from home the average consumer will not settle for less than the quality of amenities enjoyed on the home front.

For accommodation operators embarking on newly constructed projects, the task of incorporating current trends and technical facilities has been relatively straightforward. However the passage of time, combined with low levels of profitability and other financial challenges, have resulted in many older establishments facing significant demands to meet consumer expectations in order to remain viable and stay in business.

The *Motel Makeover Guide* for renovating 3-4 Star Motels is presented as an all-inclusive resource for operators to examine their individual establishments and identify opportunities for developing cost effective renovation programs.

The HMAA network congratulates Tourism Tasmania for initiating the project and for the extensive work undertaken by the Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Centre.

Dennis Winchester  
CEO HMAA
INTRODUCTION

This is a summary document of all the major issues and research findings contained within the Motel Makeover Guide, an 80 page, step by step manual available from the Sustainable Tourism CRC (www.crctourism.com.au).

A large percentage of commercial accommodation for travellers particularly in regional areas is provided by motels. Many of these motels were built in the 1970s and 1980s yet they have had little or no refurbishment undertaken. Due to this, many are failing to meet continually increasing consumer expectations, which leads to poor referrals and low repeat visitation. As the level of consumer dissatisfaction for accommodation in the area increases, the challenges faced by the agencies responsible for promoting the region become much greater.

This project and the subsequent Guide were initiated to identify the gap between what properties currently offer and what visitors expect. The intention is to find ways to refurbish and renovate properties to match these expectations. This Guide offers straightforward advice on the problems and solutions to renovation.

The Guide also offers advice on how to better present your motel to your guests without having to spend an enormous sum. Therefore the Guide will be beneficial for you whether you are looking to renovate or simply want to modernise your motel to attract more customers.

“Guests are now staying over for more than one night and steady clientele has been boosted” stated Andrew Mierendorff, Owner of Bali Hi Motel, after the refurbishments.

If you own a 3-4 Star Motel then the Motel Makeover Guide will assist you. Review the following questions to see if you should consider motel refurbishing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you have a large number of repeat guests?</td>
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<td>Have you upgraded your facilities in the last 5 years?</td>
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<td>Have you invested at least 5% of your revenue in refurbishment?</td>
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<td>Do guests often compliment you on the standard of your Motel?</td>
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<td>Do you get strong referral business from other motels?</td>
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<td>Are you able to increase your tariff each year?</td>
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<td>Does your property compare well with newer properties in the region?</td>
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If you answered no to two or more of the above, then you are strongly encouraged to invest in the Motel Makeover Guide. Go to the Kitshop at www.crctourism.com.au or contact STCRC on +61 7 5552 9055.
THE BIG ISSUES

What are the real concerns and where should you spend your limited refurbishment funds? There is no short answer as to the best place to start a refurbishment program. However the study reveals that the following places are very important to consumers. So let's begin by considering the following questions, which are thoroughly covered in the *Motel Makeover Guide*.

**BATHROOM**
- Should I install a bathtub and a shower (separate or combined) or just a shower?
- Should I install more mirrors?

The Guide suggests that increasing the size of the wall mirrors can give the illusion that there is more of the room around a corner and also serves to reflect light, colour and pattern.

**KITCHENETTE**
- Should I install a kitchenette?
- What equipment should I include in the kitchenette?
- Is a microwave oven sufficient or should I install a stovetop and regular oven?
- How do I deal with cooking vapours and odours? How can my concern over strong cooking smells being absorbed by the furnishings and grease accumulation on surfaces be addressed?

The Guide reveals the need to ensure excellent ventilation. A kitchenette must have an exhaust fan. It's not just the smells that are left behind and you can't afford to set off fire detectors (that costs time or money), it's a building code requirement.

"The refurbishments have paid off!"
Barbara Lamont, Co-owner, Grove Motel Cairns

**FURNITURE AND FITTINGS**
- Will a coat of paint be enough or will I need to replace the fitted furniture?
- If I remove the fitted furniture what freestanding furniture will be needed? (For example, would hanging space suffice rather than a wardrobe)
- Should I install fitted carpets or an alternative, e.g. polished floors?

The Guide reveals the need to match the market. The requirements for seating, desks, and tables vary by market segment. Ensure you understand what your guests need.
SPACE

- How do I create the appearance of space when my units are quite small?
  Points are awarded in the AAA Tourism Motel Guidelines for ‘free floor space’.

The Guide reveals simple approaches like encouraging diagonal views that can improve the sense of spaciousness in a room, and will simply allow views outside through well-placed windows.

SEATING

- How do I create the space needed to provide a sofa as well as making a second bed available?
- Would a sofa bed be satisfactory?

AAA Tourism Motel Guidelines suggest there is trend away from queen size configuration and a move to a king sized bed with sofa and occasional seating. The Guide reveals buying good quality furniture will keep ongoing costs down if the item is commercial and of proven quality.

LIGHTING

- How much lighting should I provide?
- How can I control the use of electricity if I provide extra lighting?

The guide reveals a compact fluorescent light draws about 60% less power, and lasts 5 times longer, than an incandescent bulb.

UNIVERSAL ACCESS

Access for the disabled is an important aspect of any refurbishment. Not only does the law require it but it may also provide a marketing aspect for your property.

A refurbishment that includes a substantial part of your property may result in a building code requirement to improve the accessibility of some rooms and the reception areas and parking. Because of the importance of this issue, seek advice from access consultants, your local council building department and the AAAT star rating body. Never add access rooms without following the applicable Australian Standards AS 1428 (2002) and the Building Code of Australia.

SUSTAINABILITY

One of the biggest issues facing society is sustainability. Sustainable design may incorporate ‘deep green’ ideas or just energy efficiency. The website twinshare.crctourism.com.au provides an excellent resource on sustainable motel and hotel design and should be used in conjunction with the Motel Makeover Guide.
WHAT DO VISITORS WANT?
THE CONSUMER PERSPECTIVE

When it comes to finding motel accommodation in Australia, travellers usually have a choice. Except for the occasional peak period such as a holiday weekend, there are regularly more rooms than travellers to fill them. Supply exceeds demand on most occasions and operators are aware of this. They also know that if they are to have sustainable, profit-making businesses they must provide the type of accommodation that will attract both first time and repeat customers. This means that the range and standard of facilities offered by motels must keep pace with the changing needs of consumers and this requires constant investment.

So what do consumers want? This question was at the heart of the research that was conducted to underpin this Motel Makeover Guide. The research involved extensive engagement with industry groups such as AAA Tourism, the Hotel, Motel and Accommodation Association (HMAA), Best Western, Flag Choice and Tourism Tasmania, as well as focus groups and surveys of motel patrons.

“What the consumer wants is for motels to be a ‘home away from home’. Consumers want the motel experience to replicate their home-based comforts as closely as possible. It was not surprising that there was a strong view that many of the older mid-market motels did not do this. They were not homely in a modern sense. These motels were often seen to be very dated in appearance and in the standard of facilities offered. There was consensus that dark units with exposed brickwork and a cluttered feel were no longer acceptable.

Outdoor gardens or at least planter boxes with colourful, live displays were seen as important in softening the external appearance of motels. Outdoor seating near to the rooms was also considered highly desirable. There was no mention of additional facilities beyond those currently available in modern motels - except for connections for electronic equipment - even though the question was asked in a number of ways.
As you would expect, there was variation in the requirements for different types of travellers. This means that motels require different room types or flexibility in the way that particular rooms can be presented depending on their mix of customer markets. Business travellers have different requirements to leisure travellers and there are other variations depending on the length of time people stay at particular motels. Size and structure of the travel party as well as factors such as age and gender also have an influence on the facilities that are expected.

CONSUMER STUDY
A follow-up study was undertaken to find out just what features of a motel were most important to the various consumer groups. This knowledge is necessary if moteliers are to optimise the value of their refurbishment programs. Nearly 400 consumers participated in this follow-up study. In order to keep the study firmly anchored in the ‘real world’, price was incorporated into the study as a key factor. Price is critical because there must always be a balance between the standards of the facility on offer and the price the guest is prepared to pay.

Price and Value
Motelier thinking about refurbishing must understand the relative importance of price in the mind of the consumer. A traveller might expect five star facilities in a three star property but if the customer is prepared to pay only three star prices then the addition of the extra facilities is not a viable option.

It was not surprising to find that price was a very strong factor for nearly all categories of consumers. More correctly, it was the issue of ‘value’ rather than ‘price’ that dominated. Many consumers were prepared to accept a lower accommodation standard provided that the tariff was appropriate to the room on offer. In some regions where room tariffs had risen sharply in recent years, there was substantial concern that older, less well-maintained motels were charging tariffs well above the level that could be justified based on the facilities offered.

Study Results
In the focus groups that were held with motel customers and in-depth interviews with motel operators, seven attributes were considered important in driving customer choice of motels and satisfaction with the experience.

VISITOR EXPECTATIONS? THE TOP 7
1. **Price**: universal endorsement of good value for money and preference by most groups for prices under $100 per night.
2. **Seating**: major support for additional seating with variation as to whether this should be in the form of an easy chair or a sofa bed.
3. **Furniture**: a liking for traditional light-toned furniture or free-standing modern furniture.
4. **Space**: strong affirmation for a spacious feel with similarly strong preference for light-painted plaster walls.
5. **Kitchenette**: strong support for a compact, modern kitchenette with microwave oven and sink.
6. **Bathroom/ensuite**: strong support for a bright, modern appearance.
7. **Lighting**: preference for bright lighting using recessed fixtures throughout the room.
The relative emphasis given to these features differed across the various types of travellers as follows:

Groups
Groups staying longer than a single night placed more emphasis on price than anything else. They also displayed a preference for comfortable, light-toned furniture and light-painted walls. The longer the stay the more this sector preferred the freedom of flexible furniture. If they were staying only a single night, however, the bathroom quality was the feature that most enhanced their satisfaction.

Business people
This was the one group for which there was a factor stronger than price, and that was space. Business travellers expressed a strong preference for space, and comfort - they wanted an easy chair - and other free-standing modern furniture. Lighting was also very important for them.

Leisure
Leisure travellers placed substantial emphasis on price, there had to be value. Interestingly, space was not rated as strongly for this group as were elements such as modern bathrooms, traditional light-toned furniture and light-painted walls. The addition of a sofa bed was also a strong preference.

Age
All age groups had seating, furniture and space in the same descending order of concern. However there were differences across the age ranges. The older the visitor, the more concern there was regarding price. The 55+ years group would trade off other benefits to keep the price low. The younger traveller, particularly those under 35 years, indicated a stronger preference for modern bathrooms.

Gender
Males were generally more concerned about the price than females who were more concerned about comfort, seating in particular. A sofa bed was a strong repeating theme for the women surveyed.

Couples
Couples with children were not so much concerned with price as they were with the presence of free-standing modern furniture and light-painted walls. They appeared to want flexibility. The presence of a good kitchenette also featured heavily in their preferences. Couples without offspring expressed preferences for traditional, light-toned furniture and light-coloured walls.

Income Level
Not surprisingly, the higher the income ($104,000+) the less price was a consideration. Kitchenettes became important factors for people on higher incomes, which seems contrary to what you would expect. Those on lower incomes (less than $52,000) would trade off space and a kitchenette for a lower price. Relative to the other groups, middle income travellers ($52,000-$104,000) preferred space and free-standing, modern furniture and light-painted walls.

“It (the motel) was a totally derelict hangout with a bad reputation, just unbelievable. Now tariffs have been increased and the customer base has become very loyal.”
Barbara Lamont, Co-owner, Grove Motel Cairns
CUSTOMER TRADE-OFFS BETWEEN MOTEL ATTRIBUTES

Customer values are not always rigid. Although price was seen to be a key driver for most groups, there was evidence that this could be ‘traded off’ against some of the other attributes. Business guests were most appreciative of space, a kitchenette and good lighting for working, relaxing and eating. Couples with children were very responsive to a sense of space while high-income earners put a premium on having a kitchenette and space was important.

Although men were very concerned about price, they also placed substantial importance on good seating. The older age group in general was slightly less concerned about space, bathrooms and lighting. The people who stayed longer than five nights, however, were more concerned about free-standing furniture and a sense of spaciousness.

SURVEY FINDINGS AND REFURBISHMENT

These findings suggest that mid-market motel customers are very price/value conscious although that is not always the case for business travellers. Visitors are looking to get value for money and they are conscious of the differences between prices charged and facilities and services provided. Motel users have distinct preferences and those choices are often influenced by their age, gender, income, family structure and reasons for travelling.

The results outlined above provide motel owners/operators with some direction as to where they can focus their refurbishment efforts for particular market niches. Refurbishment can help reduce the reliance on price as the critical factor in consumer choice between different forms of accommodation (e.g. B&Bs, hostels, self-contained units, caravan parks, hotels) and more specifically, between individual motels. Refurbishment can also:

- Allow for increased tariffs;
- Increase the number of guests;
- Add to visitor satisfaction; and
- Increase the resale value of the property.
It can also have more intangible benefits through such things as improved staff morale. However, refurbishment also raises many issues, some of which have already been flagged:

• Is it wise to try to make all the changes suggested in the research or concentrate on a few specific areas?
• Is it better to spend money on renovating all units or upgrade some to the relative detriment of others?
• Is initial investment best aimed at renovating the external appearance of the property or is the money better spent on internal refurbishment?

The answers to these questions will be very much determined by factors such as:

• The money available for refurbishment;
• The time available;
• Knowledge of the customer demographic;
• Familiarity with guest usage patterns.

**SUMMARY**

The research underpinning the *Motel Makeover Guide* indicates clearly that consumers felt that many of the mid-market motels available in Australia were somewhat dated and did not meet the needs of the market. Most indicated that they were looking for something akin to their own home in terms of the experiences that they were seeking in a motel stay. A spacious feel, light colours, comfortable furniture and a modern appearance were seen as the key drivers of a motel stay. Value for money in terms of the tariff charged for the facilities provided was seen as the most important factor by most categories of consumers.
The \textit{Motel Makeover Guide} will help you achieve a standard of facility that will attract your target consumer, and increase your customer satisfaction. This in turn will increase repeat customers, word of mouth, and revenue for your motel.

\section*{THE QUESTIONS FOR REFURBISHMENT}

As the level of funds available to undertake a refurbishment program is usually a major constraint, it is important to prioritise the refurbishment options. In order to do this, it is crucial to be able to identify your key target market and potential target markets. As was shown earlier, different markets have different needs in relation to mid-market motel accommodation. Knowing this will mean that one can then discern what they expect and what can be done to encourage repeat visitation and referrals. Without some idea of the profile of people who stay at the motel, refurbishment is likely to be a largely hit-and-miss affair. Refurbishment is costly and one cannot afford to waste money in this area. Knowledge of the client base is therefore an essential forerunner to thinking about the best way to spend limited renovation funds. Talking to the local and regional tourism authorities can assist with this process as they may be trying to attract different markets to the region.

Rather than spreading their limited refurbishment funds across all units, some moteliers elect to renovate a smaller number of units extensively, which often results in having a property with units at two different star levels. For example, a motelier with 20 units and $200,000 to spend on renovation, may spend $20,000 per unit on 10 units rather than $10,000 per unit on all 20 units. As a result, the 10 renovated units may move from 3 stars to 3.5 stars for example. This has the potential benefit of being able to set two tariffs to cater for different markets and makes the operation more flexible. For this approach to be viable, however, the standard of facilities in the unrenovated rooms must meet at least a minimum level.

Upgrading a room in a substantial fashion has a much stronger impact on the motel guest than less significant upgrades in all rooms. Whilst progressive upgrades are the best way to keep a motel in line with market needs, they are not as beneficial for a motel that has fallen well behind market needs. In trying to bring an ageing property into line with the market, the cumulative effects of progressive upgrades may be lost. Shiny new bathroom plumbing may not be enough to counteract dowdy and dark walls in the minds of patrons.

It is also important to consider the relative merits of undertaking external versus internal upgrades. Which will have the most impact on business and in what order should they be done? There is no simple answer to this except to say that it is probably a balance of both. Whilst some would argue that an extensive external upgrade will enhance the street appeal of the property and attract more customers to stop, there is a great risk that this approach will lead to high levels of dissatisfaction when the customers find that the inside product is not consistent with the ‘packaging’. If all attention is focused on upgrading the rooms but the external appearance of the property remains poor, customers will tend not to stop at the motel and thus it will be difficult to get a return on the renovation expenses. The \textit{Motel Makeover Guide} will help find a balance between the competing demands of internal versus external renovation.

\begin{quote}
\textit{“It most definitely has increased the overall value of the motel”}. \hfill Carolyn South, Manager, Pioneer Way Motel
\end{quote}
CASE STUDIES

Although refurbishment of a motel can be a costly exercise, it can have very substantial benefits for the motelier that far exceed the cost of the exercise. The following case studies of actual moteliers who have undertaken refurbishment programs in recent years highlight the benefits that can be derived from these investments. You will find more of these case studies in the Motel Makeover Guide.

Case Study 1: Comfort Inn on Raglan, Warrnambool, VIC
Roger Whyte, Manager of the Comfort Inn on Raglan in Warrnambool Victoria says, ‘The facility was pretty basic beforehand. We made massive changes inside and outside. All the rooms were gutted and stripped to the bare walls and the whole building was re-plumbed, re-wired and re-roofed. Everything went in brand new and we modelled the changes on the requirements set out in AAA standards.’

The response has been ‘all positive’ says Roger Whyte, ‘The tariffs have been lifted in the new rooms. We’ve lifted the STAR rating from 3 to 4. We’re picking up new business clientele and in this corner of Victoria, where representatives might once have made stops in three different towns over three days, we’re now getting people stay the whole time with us and commute out and back to their clients daily.’

Case Study 2: Bali Hi Motel, Tuncurry, NSW
Andrew Mierendorff, Owner of the Bali Hi Motel in Tuncurry NSW says, ‘The Motel was attracting a rather transient population, people just looking for a bed for the night. As a result, refurbishment was a high priority. We looked at what we’d invested, what we needed to get back, and considered how we were to do that. But we didn’t want to go over the top with the new décor. What we wanted was a neat, tidy, clean, comfortable, well-presented venue - a “professional” motel’, says Andrew Mierendorff.

The Mierendorffs have been taking it one room at a time as funds have become available. It has meant completely stripping every room and putting it back new, even down to putting in larger water pipes so that...
guests ‘could actually get hot water.’ The Motel was painted outside; the car parking area was bituminised; the pool surrounds upgraded and a new sign installed as well.

The results have been significant and justified the hard work and cost of the restoration. The STAR rating went from 1 to 3. Room tariffs have been increased by 50 per cent in most cases. More importantly, guests are now staying over for more than one night and the regular clientele has been boosted.

Case Study 3: Pioneer Way Motel, Faulconbridge, NSW
Carolyn South, Manager of the Pioneer Way Motel in Faulconbridge NSW says, ‘From an old and tired red brick facility, it’s now, “beautiful, modern”.
‘These days it’s a pleasure to show people the rooms. Some old customers can’t believe the changes. They just say “It’s lovely!”, Mountain tourism has been in a bit of a trough lately but we seem to have increased our clientele as a result of the changes. It most definitely has increased the overall value of the motel itself.’

THE GUIDE

The way people view or derive satisfaction from buildings is complex and determined by many factors, including the market demography, visitor’s expectations, the location, the neighbourhood and the reason for visiting. Design has an important role to play. It is impossible to provide solutions that match any unique situation but good design principles can be applied anywhere.

The arrangement of chapters is based on the sequence of the guest’s movements from arrival, travel to the room and the parts of the room itself, as shown in the figure below. All parts of the sequence are important.

It is hoped that the ideas presented here will show that major changes can be made to an ageing motel without massive expense.
The *Motel Makeover Guide* will cover all of the points in this summary in full detail as well as provide much more information.

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APPENDIX A:
**RECOMMENDED RESOURCES**
The star rating of a property is intrinsically linked to the quality of the property. Throughout the Guide suggestions for alteration and renovation are made but it is important to examine the way any changes will affect your star rating. Consult the AAAT rating guidelines available on its website.

STAR Ratings have a twofold function. First, the ratings provide a quality assurance for travellers, the accommodation displaying a STAR sign has been inspected and approved by an independent agency. Travellers can assume that the accommodation they are considering will be of a standard consistent with the AAA rating displayed. Visitor confidence is largely based upon the long history and success of the STAR ratings. It is an accepted industry standard for providers and customers alike.

Second, accommodation providers use AAA Tourism’s STAR ratings to help identify their target market. STARS are a major source of information for travellers when planning vacations or business trips. It appears that more than 70% of travellers use the STAR ratings to assist in their selection of accommodation.

“We’ve lifted the STAR rating from 3 to 4. We’re picking up new business clientele”. 
Roger Whyte, Manager, Comfort Inn on Reglan

The Motel Makeover Guide is available for purchase from the STCRC online Kitshop:
• Paperback $85.00
• Electronic (PDF download) $63.75

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Executive Summary

The *Motel Makeover Guide* is targeted at moteliers considering refurbishment of their property. This Guide combines consumer perspectives with refurbishment options to allow motel operators to match the needs of their target consumer.

The extensive research carried out by the Sustainable Tourism CRC (STCRC) to produce the *Motel Makeover Guide* was initiated to identify the gap between what properties currently offer and what visitors expect. The intention is to find a range of options to refurbish and renovate properties to match these expectations.

This Guide offers straightforward advice on the problems and solutions to renovation and is applicable to all parts of Australia.

The *Motel Makeover Guide* is available through STCRC's online bookshop. Alternatively complete the online order form at STCRC's web site (www.crctourism.com.au/bookshop) and send to STCRC.

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