

DETERMINANTS OF CONVENTION & CONFERENCE SITE SELECTION: THE POLISH EVENT PLANNERS' PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents results of research on Polish event planners. The overall purpose of the study is to investigate main destination selection variables Polish event planners consider important in destination selection process. The current research focused on the destination selection variables that event planners used for events they held in 2013. The research was based on structured interviews carried on in February 2013. The research group consisted of members of four leading MICE associations. Questions created for the survey were based on an extensive literature review and previous studies which concerned main destination attribute requirements. The findings of the study suggest that overall cost is important or extremely important for 81,8%, accessibility by air and by roads is important or extremely important for 87.4% respondents whereas 98,3% event planners find support services for events very important. The results of the study will help the destination marketing organizations as well as marketing professionals in hotel meeting facilities and convention centres better position their services and better understand event planners' needs and requirements.

Keywords: convention site selection, requirements of event planners, MICE

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INTRODUCTION

The meetings, incentives, conventions and events (MICE) industry has shown tremendous growth in the past two decades (Braun, 1992; Dwyer et al., 2000; Chacko & Fenich, 2000; Weber & Roehl, 2001; Kim et al., 2003; McCartney, 2008; Rogerson, 2012; Janakiraman, 2012). The growth of the industry can be attributed to various factors including the globalization, growth of business and technological advancements. The MICE industry is characterized by three highs (high growth potential, high added values and highly beneficial innovations), three larges (large output, large opportunities for employment and large industry associations) and finally by three advantages (the efficient utilization of human resources, technological know-how and assets). The MICE industry is one of the most crucial drivers of tourism destination development as well as an essential generator of employment, income and foreign investment.

The event tourism represents non-leisure and leisure form of tourism, and event tourists are usually recognized as the highest-spending category of travellers (Holloway et al., 2009). Countries and destinations are vying with each other to promote themselves as a popular MICE destination, but the distributional potential of the MICE sector is highly dependent on the activities of professional conference organisers, event planners and their willingness to discover and market new destinations. One of the most important decisions that event planners have to make is selecting an appropriate site for an event (Vogt et al., 1994). The decision they make influences the number of attendees and determines how successful the outcome of the meeting will be (Lee & Back, 2005). The subject of this study is to identify the determinants of event site selection process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The studies of the economic impact of MICE tourism have been undertaken with respect to particular countries (national economies), destinations or events (Peters & Jones, 1996; Dwyer&Forsyth, 1997; Lee & Back 2005) including the distribution of economic impacts of MICE tourism throughout nations (de Kadt, 1979; Archer&Cooper, 1994) as well as between the gateway cities and regional areas (Mistilis&Dwyer, 1999). Understanding event planners and the criteria they take into account is crucial for both meeting buyers and meeting suppliers (Comas and Moscardo, 2005; Vogt et al., 1994). The following literature review helps to look at site selection factors so far studied in the literature.

The event planners' decision making process has been present in many studies conducted since the early 1990's, as starting from that time the MICE sector occurred to be one of the fastest growing segments of world tourism with an extremely distributional impact. Clark and McCleary (1995) revealed that understanding risk factors facing event planners and reducing those factors will improve a site's chances at being selected. Clark et al. (1996) argued that meeting planners for associations have different selection criteria for choosing convention sites. Organisers look for venues that will fit the theme of their event (Whitfield, 2009). Associations' planning and site-selection processes vary according to the size and budget of the association (Kim et al., 2003).

The vast majority of early research on planners' decision making process has focused on physical facilities, equipment, attributes and amenities (Renaghan&Kay, 1987; Lowe, 1984; Wright, 1982; Hosansky, 1982), however Stavro and Beggs (1986) as well as Rutherford and Umbreit (1993) found that although the most important factors during site selection were meeting-room configuration and hotel location, the greatest concern during the meeting was hotel personnel. Lee and Hiemstra (2001) argued that many business possibilities lie in creating long lasting relationships between the salesperson of a hotel and the meeting planner. Also Lee et al. (2005) examined event planners' perceptions of the hotel sales personnel. Certain characteristics of salespeople (expertise, power, willingness) could be a determining factor in building a lasting relationship between event planners and salespeople.

Two studies on marketing to event planners (Bloom, 1981; Lowe, 1984) showed that recommendations by others and post-event reports were three of the top five factors influencing the choice of a hotel as a meeting site. Oppermann (1996) and Day et al. (2002) found that previous experience with a destination city influences the perception that event planners have when choosing destinations for their future events. His findings revealed that meeting planners with previous experience perceived destinations as better than those without previous experience with the given cities. However the findings of the study by Baloglu and Love (2005) were contrary to the findings in studies by Lowe (1984), Vogt et al. (1994) and Oppermann (1996): while examining 21 attributes to assess meeting planners' selection criteria they showed that there was no connection between previous experience and image of the destination.

Grant and Weaver (1996) shed more insight on what the attendees of conferences considered when selecting a meeting (networking, education, leadership and destination attractiveness and recreation/social programme). Oppermann and Chon (1997) studied the decision making process from the perspective of the main three players: the association, the destination and the potential delegates, where most emphasis was put on the last group. The authors identified four sets of variables influencing the participant decision process: the association/conference factors, locational factors, personal/business factors and intervening opportunities.

Crouch and Ritchie (1998) developed a descriptive model to explain the variables involved in the site selection process important to event planners. The model covered six site selection factors (accessibility, local support, extra-conference opportunities, accommodation facilities, information and site environment). Another research (Upchurch et al., 1999) revealed the following attributes: availability of meeting room facilities, hotel room availability, hotel service quality, ease of transportation access and safety/security.

Quite a few researchers investigated the importance of destination attributes which had to do with an overall destination image as a convention host city. However Getz (2008) determined: "Planned events are spatial-temporal phenomenon, and each is unique because of interactions among the setting, people and management systems including design elements and the program. Much of the appeal of events is that they are never the same and you have to „be there“ to enjoy the unique experience fully; if you miss it, it's a lost opportunity."

Fenich (2001) and Crouch & Louviere (2004) developed a scale to evaluate the most important characteristics which influence the choice of picking major cities as convention sites. The authors argued that despite convention facilities and the availability of rooms destinations must offer additional features to successfully compete.

"Meetings Market Report" (2009) suggested that the most important factors for convention planners evaluating a destination were: availability of hotels or other facilities suitable for meetings, affordability of the destination, safety and security of the destination, ease of transporting attendees to the location, and distance travelled by attendees.

Sometimes the perception of conventions attendees differ from those of meeting planners. Oppermann & Chon (1997) and Jago et al. (2003) studied factors influencing convention decision making and the relationship between the three main players identified

in the model (international convention associations, international attendees and professional conference planners). The findings of the former study suggested that the first model should cover more players such as the local government organizations, convention centres and bureaus.

Hinkin and Tracey (2003) indicated that similar factors were of importance to both event planners and the meeting participants. Security was ranked as the most important factor while other variables included: staff, meeting rooms-sensory, guest rooms, pricing and billing, food and beverage, public areas, recreational amenities and convenience. This study and its results could be compared with the results gained through similar studies conducted in different market segments in the US and the United Kingdom (Breiter & Milman, 2005).

Jago and Deery (2005) examined the key factors for a successful convention and indicated some new emerging trends in the convention sector: the increasing number of female conference delegates, the increased need for internet facilities for conventions and the high priority placed by convention participants on the safety of the convention destination.

New media seem to be underrepresented in the event planners' decision making process. Kim et al. (2004) investigated the role of web-based marketing in the site selection process and argued that web-based marketing is not used to its full potential by convention sites. Bartfai (2011) gave an overview of conference facilities in three capital cities in the Central European area, along the Danube (Budapest, Bratislava and Vienna), analysing and comparing their possibilities and venues. At the end of his study the writer makes recommendations for the place of the mega-conference centre.

Three major research areas were identified by conducting the literature review on site selection criteria. The first area of research explores the destination and venue attributes, the second area investigates the event attendee motivation, and the third area deals with destination/venue salesperson and event planner relationship. In a review of literature on site selection criteria there were nine destination selection factors most frequently identified in the studies: accessibility, availability of facilities (conference rooms, exhibit space, hotels, restaurants etc.), service quality, affordability, destination image and reputation, attractions, safety/security, previous experience with a destination and overall cost (Oppermann, 1996; Oppermann & Chon, 1997; Crouch & Ritchie, 1998; Chacko & Fenich,

2000; Getz, 2003; Taylor & Shortland-Webb, 2003; Comas & Moscardo, 2005). They were used as a basis for conducting the present study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

There is a need for research which will help to identify the specific sets of variables that meeting planners perceive as the most important in selecting destinations for events. This study investigates the perceptions of Polish MICE associations' members as well as non-attached event planners regarding destination selection criteria.

There are four main organizations in Poland, which were established to provide member services such as education, networking opportunities, research reports and information on the trends in the MICE industry. One of them constitutes the Polish branch of an international association (MPI Poland Club, 59 members), the other being of regional character: Event Industry Association (Stowarzyszenie Branży Eventowej – SBE), the Conferences and Congresses in Poland Association (Stowarzyszenie Konferencje i Kongresy w Polsce – SKKP, 85 members) and Incentive Travel Operators Society (Stowarzyszenie Organizatorów Incentive Travel – SOIT, 21 members). The members of those associations conduct most of their work in four areas: corporate events (including incentive meetings); conferences and conventions, sales meetings and training meetings.

The primary objective of the following study is to determine how members of Polish event industry associations rate destination selection variables in comparison with attributes most commonly enumerated in international literature. The research method used structured interviews with Polish meeting and conference planners. The aim of this research approach is to ensure that each interview is presented with exactly the same questions in the same order, what ensures that answers can be reliably aggregated. In-depth telephone interviews were conducted with representatives of four event planners' associations and forty five PCOs in the areas of destination selection and event planning.

The survey was conducted in February 2014. Respondents were asked to provide details on events they held in 2013. The survey was pre-tested for face validity with a president of one of the four event professional associations in Poland. The questions created for the survey were based on an extensive literature review. The set of site selection variables investigated in the study includes: (1) accessibility by air and by roads, (2) number of first class hotel rooms or brand name hotels, (3) amount of dedicated exhibit space, (4)

choice of restaurants, (5) image as a desirable place to visit, (6) reputation for hosting successful events, (7) previous experience with a destination, (8) safety and security, (9) support services for events, (10) overall cost.

The respondents were asked to rate the level of importance at the time of destination selection of ten attributes. A Likert type 1-5 scale was used, where 1 represented “Not at all important” and 5 represented “Extremely Important.”

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

When describing the largest events held in 2013, respondents indicated that they organise events in all of the four categories with the predominant majority indicating annual conference or convention (Table 1).

Table 1: The largest events held in 2013

	corporate events	conferences and conventions	sales meetings	training meetings
MPI	12.8%	84.2%	18.8%	23.4%
Poland				
SBE	17.4%	56.7%	26.3%	32.5%
SKKP	16.7%	78.3%	12.5%	43.8%
SOIT	19.1%	45.9%	15.6%	15.9%

The respondents were asked to rate the level of importance at the time of destination selection of ten attributes (Table 2).

The ease of accessibility by air and by roads was indicated as important and extremely important factor by more than 87% of respondents in each of the associations. Only 3.2 % of them indicated the ease of accessibility was not at all important.

The number of first class hotel rooms and brand name hotels in the destination was indicated as important and extremely important by over 68% of respondents, however almost 20% of respondents indicated that it was not at all important to them. On the other side 32% of respondents declared that when organising international conventions and conferences they start the planning process with the decision on the proper hotel brand and then start looking for the appropriate destination.

The respondents rated the variable called “amount of dedicated exhibit space” as important and extremely important aspect with over 80% of responses. Only 1.8% of respondents stated that it was not at all important at the time the destination selection was made.

Table 2: Factors influencing convention site decisions of Polish event planners

	Level of importance at the time of destination selection				
	not at all important	somewhat important	neutral	important	extremely important
accessibility by air and by roads	3.2%	6.3	3.1%	46.3%	41.1%
number of first class hotel rooms or brand name hotels	19.1%	6.6%	5.4	39.1%	29.8%
amount of dedicated exhibit space	1.8%	3.3	12.51%	40.1%	42.3%
choice of restaurants	22.9%	23.9%	20.3%	30.3%	2.6%
image as a desirable place to visit	32.3%	30.1%	24.2%	8.1%	5.3%
reputation for hosting successful events	2.2%	14.3.%	35.6%	29.7%	18.4%
previous experience with a destination	-	9.2%	12,3%	32.2%	46.3%
safety and security	3.3%	36.7%	44.8%	15.2%	-
support services for events	-	-	1.7	7.2%	91.1%
overall cost	4.3%	2.6%	11.1%	51.2%	30.8%

The choice of restaurant was one of the variables that seemed to show the most difference in the results of the study of the Polish event planners and those presented in the literature. The choice of restaurant was a neutral factor to 20% of the respondents and an important aspect to only 30% of the respondents. Only 2.6% participants declared that the choice of restaurants was extremely important, while 23% of them thought that it was not at all important at the time of destination selection. Close to 24% of them responded that it was only somewhat important.

The “destination image as desirable place to visit” factor was rated as important or extremely important with only 13% of the respondents. This aspect was another variable that showed the difference in the results of this study and the literature review. 32% of

respondents stated that a destination image factor was not at all important as a variable when selecting an event site and 30% declared it as only somewhat important.

Reputation for hosting successful events was important or extremely important for only 48% of respondents, while similar study of international association members indicated almost twice bigger result. On the other hand the previous experience with a destination was ranked as extremely important by 46% of respondents and important – by the next 32% confirming the similar observations made by Oppermann (1996) and Vogt et al. (1994).

Polish event planners varied from the foreign ones in how they rated the safety and security variable. This factor was important for only 15% of respondents and indifferent for almost 45%. No one declared it to be of utmost importance.

The variable of support services for events seemed to be most important to over 91% of respondents while the “overall cost” factor was important or extremely important for over 80% of respondents. Over 4% of respondents indicated this variable as not at all important.

CONCLUSIONS

As the competition grows it will become more important to destinations and conference facilities to identify factors influencing the event planners’ site selection decisions and appropriately position their services in the market. To have a chance of being selected as the host for a meeting, a hotel, city or destination must be included in the initial set of potential sites for the event. The results of the research could help determine what are the most important variables that Polish event planners consider when selecting destinations for different types of events.

The results of the study indicated that in some aspects significant differences exist in how Polish and foreign meeting planners rate the importance of site selection factors. A significant difference was found in how event planners rate three destination selection variables: the choice of restaurants, safety and security, destination image as desirable place to visit and its reputation for hosting successful events. No significant difference was found in how Polish and foreign meeting planners rate other destination selection variables.

The study provides more understanding in the search of an optimal combination of destination selection criteria. From a practical standpoint it could help marketing

professionals in destination marketing organisations, hotel meeting facilities and convention centres become successful in attracting more events.

As with all research, this study has some limitations, which must be acknowledged. The set of site selection variables investigated in the study is limited and can be broadened in the future research. However, the results presented in the paper are still broadly reflective and deliver crucial information for events' planners and managers. The area of MICE industry, event policy and planning as well as event logistics and staging will still represent a fruitful area for events researchers as in this area more work remains to be done.

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