The Application of Systematic Survey Methods at Open Access Special Events and Festivals

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ABSTRACT

Conducting visitor information studies at special events can provide event planners with indispensable planning information. A lack of sound methodological guidelines has served as an historical barrier. This paper outlines a method for gathering statistically sound samples, and emphasizes the importance of using multiple methods of data collection to increase confidence in the results. Use of these methods are applicable for resort destinations, attractions, special events, or festivals; with or without gated entrances.

INTRODUCTION

During the recent years tourist-oriented carnivals, special events, and festivals have been the subject of much attention. Clare Gunn observed that festivals and events are "probably the fastest growing form of visitor activity" (11, 259). Researchers in this area have focused primarily on the area of economic impact (cf., 4, 26, 8). Many of these studies have been innovative in their sampling techniques and survey instrumentation due to a lack of a history regarding accepted sampling regimes in multiple-entrance, multiple-day festival settings. The deemphasis of methodology in many of the subsequent publications of these economic impact studies appears to delay the inception of a tradition in sociologically-based festival research techniques.

Previous investigations of festivals and special events across the State of Texas have revealed that less than 23% of the events conducted any form of visitor information studies (27a). This is unfortunate since it is increasingly important for event planners to make accurate decisions regarding the
allocation of scarce resources during the recent economic downturn. (Accurate figures are not available for attractions and resort destinations because of their private proprietary nature.) The most frequently cited barriers to conducting studies were people/labor, time, expertise, and expense.

A study conducted in 1987 at the Dickens on the Strand Festival in Galveston, Texas addressed the methodological perspective of on-site and mail-back survey instruments with controlled access admission gates (limited to individuals purchasing admission tickets). The research method tested at this event conducted two concurrent surveys: a short one page on-site questionnaire, and a longer mail-back questionnaire. Among other objectives, the goal of the on-site questionnaire was to develop a visitors' profile in an attempt to triangulate with the results of the mail-back questionnaire. The study utilized a systematic random sampling plan to collect the data from two different sets of respondents, and it was anticipated that the responses would not be significantly different. The convergent results from this study obtained through triangulating multiple methods provided increased confidence in the method of data collection (16, 17, 18). There existed a concern that the recommended procedures derived from the Dickens on the Strand study were not applicable to special events and festivals that lacked controlled access admission gates (open access events). Open-access events are defined as those which do not limit admittance to individuals purchasing tickets, or that lack any physical barriers which control the flow of participant traffic and, therefore, make traditional methods of systematic and random sampling more difficult.

In an effort to respond to this apparent void, the Texas Agricultural Extension Service developed the "Self-Survey" system. This process of a visitor information survey system for tourist destinations, communities, resorts, and attractions depends on the coordination between the local community, destination, resort, or attraction and the university personnel, with much of the labor being provided by the local volunteers or staff.

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study was to address the methodological perspective of research techniques conducted in events with either controlled access or open access, while attempting to verify the application of systematic methods by local volunteers (the "Self-Survey" system). Our hypothesis was that there would be no significant differences in the responses collected at the gated, closed access sites from the responses collected at the non-gated, open-access sites within the events when using a systematic procedure to collect the data.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

In defining what constitutes an "event," there is a great deal of ambiguity. Getz (8) defines a special event as "a onetime or infrequently occurring event outside the normal program or activities of the sponsoring or organizing body." These events are then classified into a topology ranging from mega-events, hallmark events, regional events, local events, and touring events. Although festivals generally reflect social or cultural celebrations such as religions, political, historical, or harvest themes, almost any event can be referred to as a festival, or fest; to include retail promotions. Reduced to its most generic form, a festival is a public, theme
celebration (8). They are characterized by their spirit, their atmosphere, the symbolism or political meaning attached, or the culture they represent and interpret in food, costume, dance, crafts, and values. Festivals or events do not have to be on a historical, cultural, or interpretative basis, but may be purely for enjoyment and have a wide range of objectives.

Research studies of festival and events rely principally on two types of data sources: primary and secondary sources. Secondary data sources utilize indirect measures collected from related organizations, such as occupancy rates and daily sales which are obviously influenced by the festival. Numerous studies have incorporated secondary data sources to evaluate events including studies of the Salzburg Festival (7), Canada's Wonderland (3), Kiel sailing week and five other leisure events (20), Olympic Games (14), and the Hayfield International Jazz Festival (10a). Primary data sources are characterized by information which has been collected specifically for one's research objectives. Research studies utilizing primary sources have been done on such events as the Fourth Budapest Spring Festival (21), Rich River Festival (1), Rust Europapark (25), Lothian Region Arts Festivals (10b), and several professional sporting events (2).

A review of otherwise excellent practitioner-oriented manuals on event planning and operation provide little or no guidance on reliable sample gathering (6, 12, 23, 27). Indeed, very little focus is directed toward the necessity and importance of reliable visitor information for planning, evaluation, and resource allocation in the areas of publicity, staffing, and visitor services (information, food and beverage, and entertainment).

The context for this discussion on festival and special event research methods is to draw on part of the literature base from contemporary thought in social science methodology. Much of this literature base is derivative of the pioneering work of Campbell and Fiske (5), whose writing lead to the recognition (within the social sciences) for the necessity of employing two or more methods of data collection (cf., 9, 19, 15, 23). The conceptual foundation for such a necessity has been referred to as triangulation (29). The general research strategy is to check each observation or measurement by another operational form. Since there is no method without bias, obtaining converging evidence by two or more methods increases the confidence in the results compared to evidence emerging from a mono-method study (13, 30).

**METHODOLOGY**

**Area of Study**

During 1990, three events were selected to field test the reliability of data collection procedures and survey instrumentation. One survey site at each event was used as a control. Within each event two additional (non-gated) survey sites were selected to simulate open access conditions. This replication offered the unique opportunity to assess the reliability of the data obtained from both gated and non-gated survey sites at each event. Since the same systematic procedure was used to collect the data from the three sites, it was hypothesized that the responses should be similar. If they were the same, this would enable a high level of confidence to be placed in the results. Secondly, it was possible to compare respondents at each event to each of the other events in the study using the same
methodology and survey questions. The three events were the: The Watermelon Thump in Luling, Texas; The Texas Gatorfest in Anahuac, Texas; and The Antique Machinery Show and 19th Annual State Tractor Meet in Temple, Texas.

METHOD OF STUDY

The instruments used at each event were adaptations from the "Self-Survey" system's generic pool of pre-tested and reliable questions (which were generated from previous successful instruments). This system allows a means of selecting pre-tested questions which will address the particular information needs of the event planner or attraction operator. Thus, three unique instruments were employed, but among the three there was a core of identical questions. Comparison of these questions across the three events is not discussed in this paper but can be obtained from the Texas Agricultural Extension Service. The types of questions most commonly selected are regarding accommodations, length of stay, repeat visitation, importance and use of information sources, expenditures, evaluation and satisfaction with specific event aspects, and demographics. However, any instrument could be employed, and visitor input can be gathered by a variety of means; whether by on-site personal interview, questionnaire distribution for mail return, or a simple intercept interview (for the purpose of obtaining names and addresses for subsequent contact by telephone or mail.

Site analyses were conducted with community representatives regarding traffic flow and activity scheduling. A systematic $l$-in-$k$ sampling design was developed for each event (22). The schedule of times and data collection points were randomly selected. The sampling plan varied only slightly for each event but primarily required that the questionnaire be distributed to every 25th person. Briefly summarizing the method, the researchers contacted 1 in every 25 persons, completed a brief contact form, and distributed a mail-back questionnaire in a pre-addressed stamped envelope according to the Dillman Method. The community assumed the responsibility for follow-up mailings, data coding and entry, while the Texas Agricultural Extension Service provided the data analysis and report preparation. (The complete process is outlined in the "Self-Survey" manual. 27b) Overall, the three events achieved a 62% response rate with 598 usable responses. Luling Thump received a 59% response (355 distributed/211 returned), Anahuac Gatorfest received a 57% response (390 distributed/223 returned) and Temple Tractor Meet achieved a 78% response (211 distributed/164 returned).

ANALYSIS

Responses were collected containing both continuous and categorical data. This necessitated using multiple methods of statistical testing to establish credibility. Using SAS (a statistical package), univariate analysis was performed to test for normality and to establish the mean and median values. Mean values were utilized for continuous data and median values were used for categorical (ordinal nominal) data. In looking at each event as a separate analysis, the categorical data were analyzed by Chi-Square and the Mann-Whitney non-parametric tests, because t-tests are inappropriate for categorical data. The continuous variables were analyzed using t-tests.
RESULTS

Overall, there were no significant differences between responses obtained via gated and non-gated data collection points at each of the three events; therefore, validating the distribution methods for use at either gated or non-gated events. This will allow a systematic sample of visitors to be confidently drawn from a wider selection of events than has been done previously.

DISCUSSION

This research study was successful in validating the use of self-administered questionnaires in open-access settings, thus fulfilling the primary objective of this study. It demonstrated that a systematic sample may be conducted with rigid controls at events lacking access controls. The lack of statistically significant differences among the respondents who were surveyed at these events indicates that the means of comparison, within each event, supported the reliability of the methods tested. Additionally, the "Self-Survey" system was successful in overcoming the perceived barriers of people-labor, time, expertise and expense, thus establishing the possibility that similar methods may be adapted for use by local event planners, tourist destinations, resorts, attractions, and local communities to obtain visitor information. The "Self-Survey" program was developed to meet specific needs of Texas communities, but the methods are easily transferable to other sites and events: such as resort destinations, attractions, or special events of any size or duration. Using systematic methods of randomized sample gathering can provide event planners with representative samples of visitors and information that can be used for decision making, strategic planning, and resource allocation.

REFERENCES


