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Creating Memorable Visitor Experiences by Assessing the Satisfaction Level and Behavioural Consequences of Attendees

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Abstract

For many organizations, attending and organizing an event are perceived as being essential, because it is necessary to do business, to advance one's career, or because it is required by one's job. Conferences have a tremendous effect both to the organizers and the attendees. Therefore, it is paramount for an organization to appreciate the importance of memorable experience provides and gains in a conference. Many event organizers, especially those that hold conferences on a national or international level, have to understand the multiple and sometimes complex dimensions used by attendees in assessing the performance of the conference, and in their intentions to revisit or recommend the conference to others. Due to the scarcity of empirical study related to this topic especially in Malaysia, this research attempts to investigate the relationship of satisfaction level on a conference performance towards the behavioral consequences of the attendees. Independent variable includes (1) value for money, (2) educational value, (3) family value, and (4) business value. Dependant variables are (1) return intention and (2) intention to recommend to others. The framework is adapted from Severt, Wang, Chen, & Breiter (2007). It is estimated that the questionnaires will be distributed to the attendees at prospective international conference in Kuala Lumpur. It is expected that this study will provide a better understanding to both conference organizers and attendees specifically and to the MICE industry generally on how the performance of a conference determine the behavioral consequences of attendees, thus assisting MICE key players on which of the perceived performances should be emphasized in order to entice maximum attendees.

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1. Introduction

Producing an event has been getting more and more costly. The increased prices of venues, food and beverages, hotel rooms, and transportation, among other factors, have all contributed to this reality. Yet, for many organizations, business events are perceived as being essential, because it is necessary to do business, to advance one's career, or because it is required by one's job (Getz, 2008). Therefore, organizations need to address how best to entice attendees to the event, while at same time maintaining the necessary functions and intents. Therefore, it is a paramount priority for a company to appreciate the importance of memorable experience in an event. This could be done by conducting a research on motivation and satisfaction level of business event attendees.

In addition to higher costs, it has becoming increasingly difficult to put on successful events because of the competition for potential attendees money and time (Bieger & Laesser, 2004). Business travellers are generally recognized as the most important contributor to the MICE industry due to their large expenditures (Bauer, Law, Tse & Weber, 2008). These groups of travellers realize that they can pick and choose which event best meets their needs, in terms of time of event, location, program, intent and perceived value (Gursoya, Kimb & Uysal, 2004). Event organizers and planners, therefore have to pay attention on how attendees and potential attendees view the value they received for their time and money (Severt, Wang, Chen, & Breiter, 2007) "...while, at the same time, minimizing their operation's vulnerability to external threats and emulation" (Pegg & Patterson, 2010).

Many event organizers, especially those that hold conferences and/or conventions on a national or international level, have to understand the multiple and sometimes complex dimensions used by attendees in assessing the performance of the conference, and in their intentions to revisit or recommend the conference to others (Severt, et al., 2007). As noted by Li and Petrick (2006), attending events and festivals is an effective way to satisfy one's socio-psychological needs. Several studies also have advocated the importance of experience and the need for examining the relationships and factors that influence visitors' decision-making to attend a business event such as conventions and conferences (Deery, Jago, Fredline, & Dwyer, 2004; Jago & Deery, 2005).

To be a successful event planner today, one must be excellent at combining all the motives mentioned above. Organizers must learn to prioritize and understand the needs of the events as well as the attendees, and create "perceived value," by carefully crafting all aspects of the event (Li & Petrick, 2006). In order to do so, event planners must begin by making their program interesting and enticing (Rumelt, 2008). Major conferences and expos are often held in areas that will attract wider audiences, and have auxiliary programs for family members that usually include touring, shopping, and even activities for children. This is done in order to provide a memorable experience.

Consequently, it is important to fully understand the motivation behind their decision to attend this type of event because it "leads to better planning and marketing of events, and better segmentation of participants" in future (Li & Petrick, 2006). Therefore, the issues of motivating business travellers to attend meetings and business events, and satisfying the needs of this group, have been and always will be vitally importance to industrial practitioners, policy makers, and academic researchers (Bauer, Law, Tse, & Weber, 2008).

"...successful organizations in this experience economy embrace the position that their mission is to stage experiences rather than deliver services, their buyers are guests rather than clients or customers, and their factors of demand are sensations and memories rather than intangible benefits" (Ralston, Ellis, Compton, & Lee, 2007).

2. Related Cases of Satisfaction and Behavioral Consequences

To name a few, Severt *et al.* (2007) did examine the perceptions of the convention attendees and the relationships involved in their decision-making process including performance evaluation, satisfaction judgment, and behavioral intention regarding the conference. For the satisfaction section, two areas were identified as the most satisfying performance about the convention; (1) activity and opportunity, and (2) educational benefits. Severt *et al.* (2007) also investigated the relationship between motivation, satisfaction and behavioral consequences and concluded that those who were happy with the educational benefits reported a stronger satisfaction with the conference and were more likely to return and to tell others to attend the conference.

Meanwhile, Bauer *et al.* (2008) investigated the different factors of motivation and satisfaction of both local and overseas attendees to the ITU Telecom World 2006 in Hong Kong. ITU Telecom World is usually organized once every three years for government and business delegates to meet, network, exhibit, and conduct business. Of over 60,000 attendees, only 171 questionnaires were usable, showing a very low return rates compare to the size of the attendees. The result showed that respondents rated ‘networking and business opportunities’ and ‘business and education content’ of the ITU as fairly high as to their influence on their decision to attend the event amongst all eleven motivation factors listed. On satisfaction, amongst fourteen satisfaction factors listed, ‘accessibility’ of the destination and venue as well as ‘safety and security’ of destination and venue were rated the most satisfactory factors. However, this study did not focus on the actual event but on the different destinations which the event was held.

3. Problem Statement

Recently, despite the fact that conference attendees are important in term of their contribution towards business and academic realm and the MICE industry generally, the existing literature only comprised a limited number of prior studies that investigated the issues such as factors influence a conference decision making (Jago & Deery, 2005), level of exhibitors satisfaction in a conference (Breiter & Milman, 2007), analysing convention delegates’ evaluation on services and facilities (Breiter & Milman, 2006; Wu & Weber, 2005) and the importance of food quality towards attendees satisfaction (Lee, 2008), for example. Yet, studies on motivation and satisfaction of business event attendees are critically scarce. Moreover, there is even less studies that examine the relationship between the level of satisfaction toward the behavioral effects of the attendees specifically their return intention and to recommend the event to others. Except Severt *et al.* (2007) and Bauer *et al.* (2008), the scarcity of previous studies on what influences attendees to attend conferences and how satisfied they were with different aspects of this type of event is an issue that must be addressed, particularly in the Malaysian setting since business events and conferences are multibillion dollar industry

Therefore, this study intends to investigate motivation factors and satisfaction level of international conference attendees and whether their level of satisfaction affects their behavior after the event. This study is expected to be the first to investigate the issue of motivation, satisfaction and behavioral consequences of business event attendees in Malaysia. This study will also adapt the model of Conference Performance and Behavioral Consequences by Severt *et al.* (2007) in order to determine the relationship between motivation, satisfaction and behavioral consequences of the event attendees.

4. Research Objectives

1. To determine the satisfaction level of conference attendees on the conference performance.
2. To identify the most satisfying performance of the conference.
3. To examine the relationship between the level of satisfaction of conference performances and the behavioral consequences of the attendees.

5. Research Questions

1. What are the levels of satisfaction of conference attendees on the conference performance?
2. What is the most satisfying performance of the conference?
3. Is there any relationship between the level of satisfaction and the behavioral consequences of the attendees?

6. Significance of the Study

This research is important to any organization that is bound to organize an event, especially business event despite the size and the geographical difference. The result of this research could be use as reference in generating strategy to develop more “experience-based” business event. This research will also contribute to the field of tourism generally and event management specifically which recently is lack with studies focusing on motivation,

satisfaction and behavioral effects of a business event attendees particularly in Australia. The results of this research could also be an assistant for further research undertakings by academician and event practitioners.

7. Limitations of the Study

This study will only focus on motivation (conference performance), satisfaction level (intervening/moderating variable) and behavioural effects (dependent variable) of the conference attendees. The information pertaining the control variable such as age and gender and the confounding variable such as level of education of the attendees will be collected and presented in this study and might influence the outcome, however will not be measured. As the population sample of this study will mainly involve the respondents within the interest of business and academic, the result of this study might or might not be generalised to other areas.

8. Theoretical Framework

Primarily based on Severt *et al.* (2007) and Bauer *et al.* (2008), this study will investigate four dimensions of motivation namely *value for money*, *educational value*, *family value* and *business value*. The Conference Performance and Behavioural Consequences model posited by Severt *et al.* (2007) is also modified.

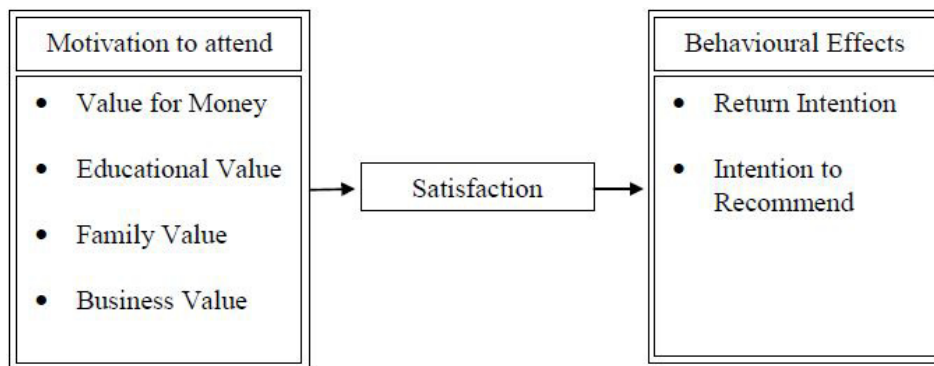


Figure 1: Conference Performance and Behavioral Consequences (Adapted from Severt *et al.* (2007))

This study will measure the conference performance against each of the motivation dimension to determine the level of satisfaction as a whole and its relationship toward the *return intention* and *intention to recommend* to others as the behavioural effects after the event.

H1: Conference performance will affect the behavioral consequences of attendees.

H2: Satisfaction level of conference performance mediate the relationship between motivation to attend and the behavioral consequences of attendees.

9. Methodology

9.1. Research Design

This study would be an investigative and correlation study coincides with the research objectives. The study will be conducted in one-time basis during the period of the event. This research will use a mix method (qualitative and

quantitative) through multiple choices and open ended question in the questionnaire to collect data. An interview will also be conducted .

9.2. Population

The population of this study will be the attendees of the selected conference which will be divided into two categories; presenters and attendees.

9.3. Sampling Technique

The technique to be used is multistage quota sampling. This technique is selected because there are two strata or layers present in the population (presenters and attendees). For the purpose of this study, the researcher expects a sample of 50% from the delegates and 50% from the seminar attendees.

9.4. Sample Size

The sample size will be decided based on Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table for determining sample size.

9.5. Data Collection Procedures and Instrument

For the qualitative method, an interview session with prospective respondents will be conducted to ensure the validation of the proposed variables. Thus, a set of open-ended questions consisting of proposed variables will be developed. The researcher will continue to collect data until the point of data saturation is reached.

The quantitative method will be applied after the researcher completed the qualitative method. A set of questionnaire will be developed for the purpose of data collection.

9.6. Data Analysis Procedures

Nominal, ordinal and interval scaling will be used to measure the instruments for this study. Nominal scaling such as 'yes/no' and 'male/female' will be used to assign subject to certain category or group. Ordinal scaling such as ranking of motivation factors will be used to describe order of factors in the survey. Interval scaling such as 5 points Likert Scale is used to perform certain arithmetical operations on the data collected from respondents, for example, in determining the extent of satisfaction level.

10. Conclusion

For any event, not exclusively for a conference type event to retain customer believe and infuse satisfaction, furthermore stimulate the return intention, in the ever competing global services market generally and in Malaysia specifically, there is almost no reference to just mere luck. Intelligent marketing strategies, including the value for money, education, family and business value as well as the determination in exploring opportunities are among the vital factors that are required to bring any event into such position. However, merely investing in promotion is just not enough. It is indicative that for a business to reach their short, medium and long term objectives, a well devised plan especially in the area of promotion and marketing which includes public relations and value adding services is at the paramount. As presented in this paper, organizers need to "go extra mile" in order to make sure their effort will not be a one-time success story. Investing more does not mean we risk more, but actually opening more doors to positively affect the consumers. This paper promotes an opinion that further research should be undertaken in the area examining conference attendees' behaviour; post-event. The researcher has found that it is very difficult to come across a study that discuss about this side of promotion and marketing model.

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