Victoria Matey, Dissertation Summary

Pre- and Post-Conference Activities: How They Can Help to Create Better Value of Conferences?

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Introduction

There is hardly ever a professional who has not taken part in a meeting or conference. The dynamic development of business events industry, which gets its recognition as not part of the larger tourism field but rather as an individual sector, seems to be secured for the future. In the 21st century meetings have got some new and sometimes unusual features, but generally speaking, they have long been an integral part of almost every business.

The range of business events has been reflected in one of the adopted names for the industry, namely the 'MICE' abbreviation which stands for 'meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions' (Pearlman and Mollere, 2009). This term is thought to reflect the main types of generally speaking meetings, each of which has certain features. The specificity of the meetings business is that it involves a lot of people-to-people interaction, as on the preparation and follow-up stages, as within the event running.

Conferences in particular represent the largest portion of the MICE sector, and in general imply an event held either by corporate companies or professional or trade associations with specific aims and objectives in mind which relate to the nature of stated organisations (Casanova *et al.*, 2006; Lee and Back, 2005). Meanwhile, notwithstanding the type of organisation, a conference can serve to meet different aims; education and networking are thought to be one of its primary goals.

Management of conferences and meetings is a complex matter. The industry has been getting its recognition as an individual and diverse sector since only recently, and therefore there is a lot to be done in terms of researching its facets. As in every industry, there are certain challenges. In the conference environment they concern conference organisers and conference delegates. The researcher herself has been participating in a number of conferences both as the organiser and a delegate, and has had an opportunity to evaluate the conference management process from those two perspectives. This has become one of the reasons to conduct a research in the field of conference management specifically. Another reason has been in that - although a growing body of research in the area is developing - many aspects are still relatively under-researched; conferences are one of such areas.

Conferences are used for a various sorts of purposes. Companies organise them internally to inform their employees about current developments or provide corporate networking; associations utilize them to educate and share best practices among their members. For conference delegates meetings and conferences present a number of professional and networking opportunities, and there are various sorts of motivations to attend business events; for some professionals it is a chance for personal career development, whereas for others it is a part of their current duties. In either case, delegates spend their time and money to take part in a conference or meeting, but it is not always rewarding experience for them. It can be claimed that a challenge for conference delegates is in that they rarely get 100% value from attending business events.

The efficiency of any conference depends on how it is organized and to what extent various needs of conference delegates are met. Organisational, or logistics, aspects of conferences, as well as providing hospitality for its attendees have got due attention of both researchers and practitioners (Fox and McCormick, 2009; Lee and Back, 2005). However, it has become evident that in the new century, given the technological

developments, social transformations, change of generations and different consumer behaviour it is not enough to provide the hospitality side of conferences alone. The increasing need of the audience for lifelong learning and a tendency to receive value for money under the modern economic conditions have also contributed to the necessity of changing the approach to conference management. Thus, increasing the value of a conference by providing more quality in content side and measurement of learning outcomes are widely discussed at the moment (MPI, 2011; Ramsborg and Tunnish, 2008).

The development of new sophisticated technologies and Internet tools contributed to the overall picture of the present environment in which meetings are organised. This all made value of such events be called-for more than ever before. Thus, to be able to meet new demands and consequently be profitable in their business, conference organisers should strive for providing as much value as possible. It is obvious nowadays that to be able to successfully run their business conference organisers should not be simply administrators, but much beyond that; they have to be psychologists and to understand their customers; they should follow the global societal, economic and other trends to ensure the meetings they organise and offer are up-to-date and interesting to their clients.

To understand what their delegates need, conference organisers have a number of tools, such as surveys and various forms of feedback. But do those methods provide with all the information required? To what degree are the answers obtained reliable and do they meet conference organisers' needs? How can one be sure that interpretation of the feedbacks is correct? These all pose a threat to conference managers as they might be misled in what they offer to conference delegates.

Technological and other developments mentioned above also have given rise to a range of new methods at hand of conference organisers. Social media,

videoconferencing, meetings' applications and software, online networking solutions, and so on – all of them cater for making communication with delegates constant. Constancy is imagined to be a key to the successful management of conferences. On the one hand, it allows for accessing an up-to-date information about delegates' needs and interests and therefore for understanding customers better. On the other hand, constant communication helps to increase involvement of delegates in the process of conference organisation which means that they might become collaborators in it, and not just passive consumers. This, in turn, opens new perspectives for conference management, as it is beneficial for both conference organisers and conference delegates. The former would be able to improve the performance indicators, while the latter would be satisfied with outcomes of participation in a conference.

The different methods and techniques emerging are also thought to have a significant potential for enhancement of learning and better engagement of delegates. However, learning component is primarily discussed in terms of what should be learnt rather than how it should be learnt (Hilliard, 2006). In addition, it is mainly referred to as the on-site activities (MPI, 2007) and hardly considers those that can be applied well before or after the event and thus can support and influence the actual flow of the conference itself when it happens. While actual running of a conference is obviously the peak of its management, it is deemed necessary to pay more attention to the stages before and after the event.

It is obvious that a lot of work has to be done prior to any event; the more solid the ground, the better the event. The same applies to the after-event phase, when a meeting is analysed and new steps are made to improve the performance. This all implies that methods and tools employed during the before and after stages should also be carefully chosen and sophisticated. Moreover, the importance of considering pre- and post-event activities in conjunction with actual event presents itself. Given such link between pre/post phases and an event, it is suggested that the organisation of pre- and

post-conference activities can contribute to enhancing learning outcomes of conferences and consequently increasing overall value of the event. However, these tools and activities have got unequal attention. Although a lot of tools is constantly described, and some of them are presented in academic literature, it is obvious that more research is required to understand what role they play in conference management process. The present study is aimed to research what pre- and post-event tools are used by conference organisers, and why, and importantly, it is aimed to understand if they can help in providing better value for the actual event.

Therefore, the aim and objectives of the research can be defined as follows:

Research aim: to investigate if and what types of pre- and post-event activities are used by the organisers of conferences and how these can help to create better value for an event itself.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of data suggests a number of implications. First, some similarities with literature are found. Generally, the respondents' answers confirm the point that delegates' satisfaction is critical to a conference's success. Moreover, they also emphasize the importance of satisfaction with content in particular, which complies with a claim that learning needs of conference delegates become the priority for conference organisers.

Although in fact it is stated by all respondents that their conferences to more or less degree have education and/or networking aims, the choice of tools they use varies, depending on a range of factors, including the nature of event and financial terms. For instance, in case when a conference was organised by volunteers it was stated that no

necessity was seen in employing or probing new tools to involve delegates', assuming this was due to the fact that it required additional efforts from people who did not have time for that.

A delegate's profile seems to play an important role in choosing the specific pre- and post-conference tools. Some tools are deemed as not applicable for certain types of delegates or sectors in general. As was discussed earlier, there is a gap in researching delegates' profile in more detail, and thus it can be stated that such study would be thought by practitioners as helpful.

Furthermore, there were some remarks made by respondents which suggested they considered important the link between the conference content and learning outcomes, and real life. In other words, conference environment in this case is considered to be some form of work-based learning. This corresponds to the conclusions made by some researchers regarding continuing professional development concept and its application to conferences.

With regards to usage of each specific activity discussed with each respondent, several conclusions can be made. First of all, standard and established activities and tools, such as email updates, newsletters, research on delegates' needs or post-conference feedback survey are well-known to conference organisers and are used predominantly. These activities are used by tradition and no necessity in involving delegates in other ways is seen if what is currently employed, works well. While there is no harm in following the traditional paths of organising events, it is necessary to note that taking into account increasing demand in better content from delegates and increased competition on the conference market, conference organisers would need to develop new ways they communicate and provide value of the events for their customers. Therefore, it may be not enough to use only those tools that proved to be effective in the past.

On the contrary, some of the activities (e.g. CoP, face-to-face meetings) are either not used at all, and even not known to conference organisers; or are employed on a limited scale (e.g. ROI measurement, webinars) due to a range of reasons described above. While financial and other factors should be taken into serious consideration, it seems that 'challenge of change' (Respondent B) can play its role in not using emerging tools.

Despite some of the activities are not currently introduced in the interviewees' practices, the majority of them seem to agree that there is a great deal of value thereof for learning and/or networking. Various tools cater for various ways of increasing and diversifying delegates' involvement. The latter in turn serves to help forming the content and thus meeting need in content more precisely.

As was mentioned earlier, the Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions industry is a young developing sector, and thus many issues still require careful studying within this field. Conferences represent an interesting and dynamic environment providing various possibilities to individuals and business. But not only are there plenty of opportunities, there are also challenges as for conference managers, as for their customers, conference delegates.

Review of academic literature and trade publications showed that on the one hand, there is a growing need in obtaining educational benefits when attending conferences from the delegates' perspective; and a shift from logistics to content side of events has been made recently. On the other hand, there is a growing level of competitiveness on the conference market due to availability of various sophisticated methods and tools. Overall, this leads to the necessity to provide better value for money from the point of view of both conference organisers and delegates.

Literature suggested that the majority of studies conducted concerned the actual event and tools employed during the conference itself. The present study was aimed to investigate the stages before and after the event, as it was deemed equally important

for providing and moreover, increasing its value. It was planned to research how pre- and post-conference activities could help to create better value for conferences, and the organisers' perspective was considered.

It was found that conference organisers were aware of some types of pre- and post-event activities and used them to promote an event, to communicate with customers and to understand what content to deliver. All respondents paid specific attention to content which implied that they were aware of the growing demand in that of their delegates. However, it can also be claimed that at present conference organisers do not use potential of pre- and post-conference activities to full extent. Some of them do not do it due to financial considerations, some – because of adherence to traditional ways which still work well for them. It may imply that more practical goals (for instance, attendance numbers) are set by them when organising the conference. While this is absolutely clear and natural as with every business, it can be claimed that more attention to content value would bring more benefits in future.

Further, at present conference organisers use pre- and post-conference activities mainly for promotion and receiving required information from delegates. It can be argued that even with engaging some new methods and activities, content generation is still a prerogative of conference organisers. Thus, in the words of Respondent E, communication with delegates remains one-way street. However, taking into account that content and learning becomes more valuable for delegates, it is obvious that they should be much more involved in the process of content generation and in active learning. A range of activities and tools constantly emerging allows to make this process multilateral and to make communication two-way.

The research found that some of the pre- and post-conference tools were more used by conference organisers, whereas some others less; the majority of respondents perceived them as valuable despite the degree of usage of such. This means that there

might be some barriers - of economic, psychological and other nature - which to various degree influence the decision of conference organisers when they choose what tools to employ. However, there are some tools which are not known and not used by managers at all.

Overall, it can be concluded that pre- and post-conference activities are considered helpful for increasing the value of conferences. They are recognised to play a important role in increasing delegates' involvement in various ways, and through it to contribute to increasing attractiveness. They are also thought valuable in terms of supporting delegates' learning, and since learning, according to interviewees, is one of the main conference aims, such tools consequently influence the overall value of a conference. However, their potential is not used in full at present. The current findings suggest that several steps have been already made towards recognising the importance of the before and after stages of managing conferences. Yet, both more research and best practice is required to develop an understanding and raising awareness of these important instruments supporting conference management process and thus influencing its value within much longer period of time.

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