



Visitor attendance motivations at consumer travel exhibitions

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 June 2011

Accepted 4 November 2011

Keywords:

Exhibitions

Consumer show

Visitor attendance motivations

Travel fairs

Thai visitors

MICE

ABSTRACT

This study identifies the major motivations of visitors for attending consumer travel exhibitions and segments visitors based on their motivations. The findings suggest that visitors to consumer travel exhibitions have multiple motivations: acquiring purchase information, being attracted by the theme, or being encouraged to visit by media coverage. Half of the visitors perceived travel fairs to be an important distribution channel through which they could get special deals on travel to desirable destinations (or at least sourcing information on travel). It seems likely that consumer travel show attendance may be closely linked with the individual leisure desires of the visitor. The study suggests two clusters: 1) Shopper cluster whose major motivation is purchasing and 2) Total Visitors whose motivation is to undertake an ongoing information search and attend seminars to maintain their awareness of new trends with the tourism industry.

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1. Introduction

Exhibitions, in the form of trade and consumer exhibitions, represent major sales promotion opportunities. Companies spend millions of dollars on trade show participation, selling products, identifying prospects, introducing new or modified products, testing new products, and servicing current customers (Dunn & Barban, 1986; Gopalakrishna, Lilien, Williams and Sequiera 1995; Hass, 1982; Hutt & Speh 1985; Kerin & Cron, 1987). Lee, Yeung and Dewald (2010) note that in the US alone, exhibitions contributed US\$122.31 billion to GDP. In the tourism context, Poorani (1996) states that the trade show budget was ranked as one of the top three highest marketing budget allocations among tourism firms. Furthermore, Pizam (1990) notes that exhibitions are frequently used by a range of organisations, including both public agencies and private enterprises to encourage tourists and travel retailers to buy tourism products, and visit tourist destinations. For instance, almost all state tourism agencies participate in trade shows and consumer travel exhibitions to increase destination or product awareness, reach potential audiences, and increase business (Pizam, 1990).

There has been substantial research on trade show visitors over the years (Bello, 1992; Bellizzi & Lipps, 1984; Berne & Uceda-Garcia,

2008; Borghini, Golfetto & Rinallo 2006; Dekimpte, Francois, Gopalakrishna, Lilien & Bulte 1997; Gopalakrishna et al., 1995; Kerin & Cron, 1987; Lee et al., 2010; Ling-Yee, 2006; Munuera & Ruiz, 1999; Shoham, 1999; Tanner, Chonko & Ponzurick 2001). Nonetheless, Rosson and Serinhaus (1995) call for more academic research to provide greater detail on methodology and more extensive data analysis rather than using descriptive statistics such as frequency distribution, means, and cross tabulation (Rosson & Serinhaus 1995). Although their paper is somewhat dated now, there is still plenty of scope for increased research in the exhibitions sector. Indeed, in a review of business events literature over a decade, Mair (2010) states that along with incentive travel, all aspects of exhibitions are notably under-researched.

As Kerin and Cron (1987) note, systematic marketing research on visitors is necessary. However, to the authors' knowledge, no previously published research has empirically examined visitor motivations for participating in consumer travel exhibitions. Despite the importance of visitors and the implications for exhibition organisers of attendance motivations, empirical research on motivations is lacking (Lee et al., 2010). As consumer exhibition visitors may have a fundamentally different motivational orientation for attending (based on their leisure needs as compared to the business needs of trade show visitors), an examination of their attendance motivations is vital to ensure that their needs are being met by exhibition organizers.

The purposes of this study are threefold: to identify the major motivations of visitors for attending consumer travel exhibitions; to identify the underlying dimensions of visitor motivations; and to segment visitors based on their motivations. Building on existing

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work on trade show visitors (Tanner et al., 2001), this study proposes to enhance theory and knowledge of the motivational orientation of consumer travel exhibition visitors. This research will provide important first evidence of the underlying motivational dimensions of visitors, thereby assisting professional exhibition organizers to design exhibition themes and exhibition itineraries which will maximise attendance. Since consumer exhibitions rely on high visitor numbers to attract high numbers of exhibitors, in turn leading to increased income generation for exhibition owners and higher potential for sales among exhibitors, an enhanced understanding of the consumer behaviour of visitors is vital. Further, as Pizam (1990) states, the more specific the goals of the exhibition are, the more effective booth personnel will be. Understanding the motivations of consumer exhibition visitors would help exhibitors and exhibition owners to effectively achieve organizational goals in consumer exhibition participation.

2. Literature review

2.1. Exhibition

Exhibitions are an important component of the Meeting, Incentive, Convention and Exhibition (MICE) industry, also known as the business events industry. Although “exhibition” and “trade show” are frequently used interchangeably to refer to showcases of products and services (Breiter and Milman, 2006; Polvika, 1996), technically, “exhibition” has a broader meaning than “trade show”. Exhibitions can be subdivided into three categories, of which a trade show is only one. The other two categories are consumer exhibitions, and trade and consumer exhibitions. These three types of exhibitions are markedly different in terms of visitor profiles. Trade shows are open only to invited customers and suppliers, as well as to the news media (Browning & Adams, 1988). In contrast, consumer exhibitions or consumer shows are open to the public to provide information and sell products directly to consumers. Finally, trade and consumer exhibitions or trade and consumer shows are a hybrid of the previously mentioned two exhibition categories. This last category is open to business visitors during the first days of the exhibition (usually on weekdays) and open to the public during the final days of the exhibition (usually on the weekend) (Chansate, 2008).

This paper takes as its focus consumer exhibitions. In order to clarify potential terminological confusion, the term ‘exhibition’ will be used in the broader sense of any showcase of goods and services. ‘Trade show’ will refer to exhibitions open only to invited customers and suppliers. Finally, this paper will consider ‘consumer exhibitions’ to be those exhibitions open to the public to provide information and sell products directly to the consumer.

Along with online marketing, public relations and direct mail, exhibitions are an effective marketing sales tool, which offer exhibitors the opportunity to establish their brand image, address potential buyers’ needs, observe competitors and make direct sales (Kaniewska-Seba et al., 2006). In addition, attending an exhibition allows the visitor to obtain information from many vendors in a one-stop shopping opportunity (Dwyer & Tanner 1999).

Exhibitions provide visitors with an opportunity to examine products, see how products work, look for something different, and enjoy entertainment at the exhibitions, as well as to see the latest innovations and observe market trends, often well in advance of their public launch (Kaniewska-Seba et al., 2006). Likewise, Getz (2008), Kozak (2006) and Pearce (2007) agree that exhibitions are effective distribution channels, enabling exhibitors and visitors to interact through activities and also enhancing the local community’s public image. Attendance at an exhibition allows visitors to: gather information on new products, view particular products,

observe companies, and make contacts (Rosson & Serinhaus 1995); examine products and compare brands (Tanner et al., 2001); reduce cognitive dissonance after making a purchase (Godar & O’Connor, 2001); and collect information for future purchases (Munuera & Ruiz, 1999). Moreover, exhibitions offer a personal element: face to face marketing (in which buyers and consumers can speak face to face with vendors); and experiential marketing (where customers can involve all their senses, to touch, smell, and taste products, as well as to speak and listen to exhibitors to determine how a product might match their needs) (McAllan, Criscione & Rees 2008).

Prominent areas of existing research into exhibitions include: exhibition service quality (Jung 2005); trade show managers’ use of technology (Breiter & Gregory, 2003); exhibition site selection (DiPietro, Breiter, Rompf & Godlewska 2008); association meeting participants (Lee & Back 2008; antitrust regulations (Abbott & Lanza, 1998); positioning of Asian exhibition host cities (Kim, Sun & Ap 2008); the economic impact of the exhibition industry (Kim and Chon 2009; Mistilis & Dwyer 1999); criteria for evaluating trade shows (Berne & Uceda-Garcia, 2008); and the exhibition industry at specific destinations, such as Korea (Lee & Lee 2006), Macao (McCartney, 2008), Beijing (Zhang & Go, 1999), China (Xin, Weber & Bauer 2009; Zhang, Qu & Ma 2010), and Thailand (Chen & LaLopa 1999).

2.2. Trade show attendance motivations

Previous studies have examined the motivations for attending trade shows (e.g. Berne & Uceda-Garcia, 2008; Ling-Yee, 2006; Tanner et al., 2001). Recently, some researchers have begun to expand this research direction to include attendance motivations at trade and consumer exhibitions (Kozak, 2006; Kozak & Kayr 2009; Lee et al., 2010; Rittichainuwat, 2009). However, as highlighted in the introduction, the empirical literature on consumer exhibition attendance motivations is in its infancy. A brief description of this body of research is presented in Table 1, including research methods used, study contexts and findings. More detailed analysis of this literature follows.

As can be seen from Table 1, most studies on exhibition attendance focus on trade shows. In the consumer exhibition context, little is known about motivations. Consumers may be interested in talking with experts to increase their knowledge of a topic, or may be keen to seek out bargains or discounts. Consumers may simply enjoy a visit to a consumer exhibition as a leisure experience – a pleasant way to spend an afternoon. Since the literature does not provide guidance on consumer attendance motivations, empirical research is required. However, it may be the case that consumers share some motivations with trade show visitors, and therefore, whilst it is anticipated that consumers may have a different motivational orientation from trade visitors, it is still imperative to examine the existing trade show literature in order to seek guidance for the design of this study. Further, it may be the case that visitors to consumer exhibitions also work in the trade but have simply chosen to attend as consumers. Therefore, while the main attendance motivations are likely to be consumer oriented, the possibility that members of the trade are also in attendance with their own motivations for attending cannot be discounted.

Previous studies have grouped visitor motivations for attending trade shows into purchasing and non-purchasing activities. Trade show visitors have been classified into ‘buyers’: short-term and long-term buyers, prospective buyers, current buyers, and ‘non-buyers’ (Godar, 1992; Godar & O’Connor, 2001). Whilst buyer activities relate naturally to buying goods and/or services at the exhibition, non-buyer activities have been conceptually categorized as consisting of ongoing information search, networking and

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