

Education and Social Networking Key for Convention Attendees

Convention attendees value opportunities for education and social networking more highly than features relating to the convention site itself, according to the SHTM's Dr Jinsoo Lee and a co-author. In a recently published article, the researchers identify the sensitivity of attendees to a multidimensional conceptualisation of value. The ultimate objective, they note, is to provide suggestions for convention planners on how best to cultivate attendees who are sensitive to not only functional value but also emotional and social value, thus generating loyalty and additional profit.

Value Can Have Multiple Dimensions

How customers perceive the value of goods and services is an important issue because such perceptions are closely related to "customer loyalty and profit", thus providing a "sustainable competitive advantage" for provider. However, the researchers argue that our understanding of this issue is too narrowly focused on functional or economic value, such as whether the service offers value for money. They suggest, in the context of convention attendance, that value should instead be considered multidimensional, covering social and emotional as well as functional value.

The first dimension, emotional value, is particularly important for assessing the value that attendees gain from conventions, suggest the researchers, because attendees are "excited and pleased to learn and exchange knowledge". The second dimension, social value, is significant because opportunities to "develop social networks and gain peer recognition" are important motivations for convention attendees. The third dimension, functional value, while seeming to be of less significance is still relevant, with the researchers explaining that the cost of attending conventions can be high. Value for money is an important part of the decision to attend.

Convention Goers Surveyed

To investigate the plausibility of their multidimensional perspective, the researchers surveyed attendees at three international academic conventions held at the COEX Convention and Exhibition Centre in Seoul, South Korea,

one of the leading convention facilities in the region. Their objective was to explore the "motivators, facilitators, and inhibitors" of convention attendance in a broad cross-section of academic and industry attendees.

The attendees were asked to rate the convention quality according to the three aspects of multidimensional value: emotional, social and functional. They were also asked to rate the extent to which another six dimensions influenced their perceptions of multidimensional value: accessibility in terms of time and convenience; extra-convention opportunities such as entertainment and shopping; the site environment, including the climate and hospitality; social networking; professional education; and staff service. Importantly for convention organisers, the attendees were finally asked about their intentions to revisit or to recommend the convention to others.

More than 65% of the respondents were academics, and the remainder worked in industry. Only around a third of the total were female, and the largest single age group was 36-45 years. Statistics that should be of particular interest to convention organisers are that 43% of the attendees had been to the same event between 2 and 5 times, and 19% had attended more than six times.

Professional Status Influences Perceptions of Convention Value

The researchers categorise the attendees into groups with low, medium and high sensitivity to multidimensional value according to how they rated the importance of the value three dimensions. Looking at whether the groups differed in terms of demographic characteristics, they show that there were more doctoral degree holders among the group highly sensitive to multidimensional value than the other groups, mainly because there were more academics in that group. It seems, then, that the academics were more likely to rate the value of all three dimensions higher than were the industry attendees.

Between 33% and 46% of attendees in each group were attending the convention they were interviewed at for the first time. However, those in the groups with medium

and high sensitivity to multidimensional value were more likely to have attended more than eight times. In other words, regular attendees rated the emotional, social and functional benefits higher than less regular and first-time attendees.

Effects on Groups Distinguished

The researchers also identify which of the various factors that best distinguished the groups with low, medium and high sensitivity to multidimensional value. Functional value, such as value for money, was the most important factor in all three groups, suggesting that convention attendees relied more on “cognitive, economic evaluation of what they received and what they paid” when judging multidimensional value. First-time attendees were more sensitive to “value for money” than to emotional and social values, presumably because they had “no prior experience with and less attachment to” the convention.

Convention-specific dimensions of quality, such as educational and social networking opportunities, better explained the three groups than site-specific dimensions, such as the site environment, extra-convention opportunities and accessibility. The researchers note that the attendees placed more emphasis on education and networking opportunities than on the quality of the site when judging the value of the convention. However, those with high sensitivity to multidimensional value rated both the convention-specific and site-specific dimensions higher than those with the lowest sensitivity to multidimensional value.

Word of mouth distinguished between the groups better than their stated intention to revisit, observe the researchers. Those attendees highly sensitive to multidimensional value were more likely to report that they would be willing to “spread positive word of mouth communication”, whereas attendees with low sensitivity to multidimensional value were more likely to provide negative referrals.

The researchers suggest that word of mouth is a “more reliable and powerful” indicator of how people will act, because those who state that they intend to revisit may do for reasons other than genuine loyalty. That is, they may intend to revisit because there is no alternative, or because finding an alternative would be too costly.

Implications for Convention Organisers

The researchers suggest that convention organisers should

pay particular attention to providing opportunities for “professional education and social networking” because these features are the most highly valued by attendees. For example, they could “assign volunteer greeters and connectors to each session” to maximise networking opportunities. Speakers could also be asked to generate networking opportunities, such as by arranging brainstorming sessions in small groups.

To improve educational opportunities, speakers could be encouraged to “clarify learning outcomes and identify teaching formats”, the researchers state. Collecting feedback could be helpful in evaluating whether learning outcomes have been achieved, and identifying whether “specific changes could produce more relevant and rewarding learning opportunities”. The researchers also suggest that there is little point selecting a convention site that exceeds expectations, because site features have little influence on attendees’ value perceptions.

Higher Profitability from Selecting the Right Attendees

The researchers conclude that attendees more sensitive to multidimensional value “are a highly profitable attendee group for convention organisers” because they are more likely to provide positive recommendations, attend more frequently and evaluate the convention more favourably. In contrast, attendees less sensitive to multidimensional value provide little benefit to convention organisers because they are more likely to perceive the convention negatively and are unlikely to return.

Points to Note

- Perceptions of value are multidimensional, covering social, emotional and functional value.
- Convention attendees highly value education and networking opportunities.
- Site-specific features are of lesser importance.
- Willingness to provide positive recommendations is a good indicator of value.

Lee, Jin-Soo and Min, Chung-ki. (2013). “Examining the Role of Multidimensional Value in Convention Attendee Behavior”. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research*, Vol. 37, pp. 402-425.