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PolyU Study Shows Exhibition Organiser Focus Needed

Feasibility studies conducted before the construction of exhibition centres should take into account the site- and destination-specific factors professional organisers consider most important, argue Dr Jin-Soo Lee and his research postgraduate student Hwabong Lee of the School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM) at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University in a recently published article. Breaking from the traditional focus on the factors that attract visitors, the researchers consider the exhibition sector in Korea and provide convention and exhibition (C&E) management and stakeholders with useful information about the factors that ultimately determine the “effective ways to manage an operating centre”.

The meeting, incentives, convention and exhibition (MICE) industry continues to grow as its significant economic benefits are recognised worldwide. The researchers note that C&E centres are “believed to serve as economic catalysts” that can “revitalise downtown business districts”. Consequently, many countries vie for opportunities to host conventions and exhibitions in efforts to boost local tourism and trade. These events can bring in huge numbers of visitors and provide economic benefits not just for the exhibition organisers, service contractors and venues, but also for the local hospitality industry, which provides accommodation, food and beverages for both exhibitors and visitors.

In Korea, the exhibition industry contributes well over US\$2 billion to the country’s economy and provides more than 17,000 full-time equivalent jobs. The researchers note that Korea currently has 13 C&E centres offering 324,368 square metres of space for MICE, ranking it third in Asia in terms of capacity. Both the national and regional governments “substantially invest in MICE infrastructure” to promote the country as a MICE destination, and the number of exhibitions that took place in 2013 was more than four times higher than the number in 2000. Although manufacturing-based exhibitions tend to be hosted in China, Korea is popular for “education/publication, culture/art/broadcast, food and beverage and government/public-related” exhibitions.

Understanding the factors that attract both exhibitors and visitors is clearly helpful for the effective planning of new venues and successful management of existing centres. The researchers argue, however, that although some studies have investigated the factors that attract visitors to conferences and exhibitions, no study has yet “explored the factors that exhibition organisers carefully consider when selecting a C&E centre”. To address this, they set out to identify both the centre- and destination-specific attributes that Korean exhibition organisers consider most important when selecting a venue.

In the first part of the study, interviews were conducted with nine industry professionals from different companies in Korea, all of whom were in senior positions and had at least 10 years of experience in organising exhibitions. The researchers asked the professionals about what they considered the “important attributes for selecting a C&E centre”, and then combined this

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information with a literature review to generate a list of questionnaire items. After review by an expert panel and statistical analysis, they compiled a questionnaire consisting of 33 items referring to C&E centre attributes.

The second part of the study comprised a survey of staff members with at least 3 years of experience in organising exhibitions. To “minimise bias unique to the destination environment (i.e. Korea) and the types and themes of shows”, the respondents were asked to complete the survey as if they were selecting a C&E venue for an exhibition with no specific theme and in no specific country or city. One hundred and sixty-six employees from 21 exhibition organising firms provided usable answers. The researchers then grouped the 33 items into 9 different dimensions, of which 5 were centre-specific and 4 were destination-specific, and assessed their relative importance.

The accessibility of a centre was found to be the most important dimension overall, because it was deemed to be highly critical for attracting both exhibitors and visitors. The researchers measured accessibility not just in terms of ground and air access, but also in terms of logistics, which they comment are “an important component” for exhibitors that need to ship their exhibition materials to the centre.

The next dimension, the image of the centre, is important for promoting and branding an exhibition. As the researchers point out, major exhibitions are “mainly held in internationally renowned C&E centres” that boost the image and branding of the exhibition through being associated with the centre’s image. Unsurprisingly, organisers also considered the cost of renting an exhibition hall as an important attribute because exhibitions are profit-oriented commercial events.

Although the quality of staff and service contractors were perceived as less critical by the interviewees, they were still important. In particular, the quality of staff members and service contractors who work closely with the organisers in the “planning, management and on-site operation” of an exhibition directly affects the quality of the exhibition and is thus a significant selection factor.

The centre’s facilities were considered the least important factor, but the researchers explain that this is probably because Korea’s C&E centres are relatively new and offer excellent facilities, thus organisers may not need to give them high consideration. They also note, however, that organisers are increasingly expecting centres to be “equipped with a visitor promotion assistance programme”, including promotion through social networking sites, to attract as many visitors as possible.

Among the destination attributes, the organisers considered the “synergy and cohesion” between the industrial environment and the theme of the exhibition to be the most important factor. The industrial environment includes the support of “relevant industry associations and government bodies”, which can be used to promote the event and attract both exhibitors and visitors.

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The availability of a wide range of hotel accommodation was another important destination attribute, given that most exhibitors and visitors will require overnight accommodation. This is more important than the C&E site environment, which includes the local language and security, and extra-exhibition opportunities, such as the availability of shopping, dining and local attractions.

The results of the study provide C&E centre management and stakeholders with valuable insights into the factors that should be considered when planning new centres and managing existing ones. As the researchers warn, a “highly optimistic and inappropriate feasibility study” could lead to huge losses that damage the local economy and “tarnish the destination image”. Their findings imply that stakeholders should carefully assess the local environment as the most important factor in a feasibility study. In particular, accessibility, the industrial environment and hotel accommodation are critical because exhibition organisers value these attributes highly, yet the C&E centre management will have little control over the local infrastructure after the centre is built.

The findings also have implications for how existing centres can “strategically boost revenues from exhibitions”. Management needs to “continuously monitor and manage” the centre to remain competitive, and the results of the study suggest that focusing on the centre’s image, its facilities, the cost of exhibition halls and the quality of staff and service contractors will be most beneficial in terms of attracting event organisers. As many centres already offer similarly high-quality facilities, it may be difficult to create a competitive advantage, but the study findings point to visitor promotion facilities as one area that can create added value. Thus, centres could consider providing advertising facilities through indoor and outdoor billboards, social networking and credit card companies.

Whereas attention is usually focused on the factors that attract visitors to exhibitions and conferences, the researchers focus on the alternative perspective of the exhibition organiser. This is an important shift, because their findings offer valuable new insights that should help existing and prospective C&E centres to plan, manage and operate their facilities more effectively.

Lee, Hwabong and Lee, Jin-Soo. (2017). An Exploratory Study of Factors that Exhibition Organisers Look for when Selecting Convention and Exhibition Centers. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 34(8), 1001-1017.

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