

Research Horizons

Highlights of Recent Research by the SHTM

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Targeted Marketing Needed to Influence Convention Attendance Decisions

Marketers need to recognise the homogeneity of convention attendees to optimise their related promotional efforts, according to the SHTM's Professor Kaye Chon and a co-author in a recently published research article. Focusing on potential participants at a major association convention in Thailand, the researchers show that the factors influencing the decision to attend differ across time. In particular, concerns about the ability to travel to the destination and health and safety during the convention can change significantly in certain groups of potential attendees. Efforts to influence the attitudes behind these changes, argue the researchers, will ultimately lead to "higher attendance and profitability for all".

Significance of Convention Participation

With their yearly gatherings, professional associations play a major role in the convention and exhibition sector of the tourism industry around the world. To indicate the potential scope of attendance at association conventions, the authors point out that over 70% of adults in the United States belong to at least one association. Yet this should not indicate that all, or even a majority, of an association's members attend its annual convention. Members, write the researchers, are "likely to choose a particular convention that is perceived to provide the most benefit".

This degree of choice makes convention planning a particularly difficult proposition. Association and destination marketers, the researchers note, need to "make considerable efforts to increase the number of attendees

for the conventions they host". Like other aspects of tourism, potential attendance at a convention is heavily affected by the cost and time involved, which means that the decision-making process is highly detailed.

The researchers suggest that potential convention attendees use a widely recognised method of 'funnelling' in making their decisions, "eliminating alternatives to arrive at a final selection". They move through a process of problem recognition, information searching, alternative evaluation, choice and post-choice evaluation. Most importantly, the researchers argue, "as the funnelling is dynamic, changes are likely to occur over time".

Potential Attendance at the Second Asia-Pacific CHRIE Conference

Rather than focusing on why potential attendees may have focused on particular attributes of a given convention, the researchers were initially concerned about the attitudes displayed towards attendance in general. This allowed them to consider a broad range of factors that could influence the decision to participate, including destination stimuli, professional and social networking opportunities, educational opportunities, the safety and health situation, and travelability.

After pilot testing the relevance of these factors, the researchers conducted a websurvey of Asia Pacific Travel Association members about whether they would attend the Second Asia-Pacific CHRIE Conference in Phuket, Thailand. The respondents were asked to complete two questionnaires three months apart. Both surveys collected

information on the likelihood of attendance and the level of importance of each decision-making factor.

Demographic information was collected only once, in the first survey. Of the potential attendees who completed both surveys, 60% were men and most were aged between 41 and 50. The largest single group was from Hong Kong, and just over 72% were educators. Around 24% of these people had 3 association memberships, and almost 30% attended 2 conferences a year. A majority expected to partially fund their travel to the conference themselves.

How Decision-Making Factors Changed

The researchers report minimal change in most of the major decision-making factors over time. However, the importance of professional and social networking opportunities and the destination stimuli did decline over the three months. In contrast, the importance of the safety and health situation and travelability increased as the conference date drew nearer.

Around a third of the respondents, write the researchers, “changed their participation decision over the surveying period”. To consider the precise implications of these changes, they break the potential attendees into three more specific groups – potential non-attendees, potential attendees and hesitant potential attendees. Marketers should note that the potential non-attendees did little to change their attitudes towards participation, but the potential attendees and hesitant potential attendees became markedly more concerned about the safety and health situation and travelability.

As the conference date drew closer, attitudes towards travelability understandably changed, given the cost of international travel. Confirmation of funding often takes time, explain the researchers, and changes in the cost of travel, particularly “the sudden availability of discounted airfares”, can change attitudes towards attending a conference.

Yet at this particular conference, the safety and health situation in Thailand became far more significant as time

passed. A month after the first survey, a bomb explosion in southern Thailand made international headlines, and a month before the second survey insurgents in the same area attacked Thai security forces.

These sorts of shocks, while hardly predictable, should be of concern to convention marketers and organisers, as they do happen from time to time around the world. The researchers suggest that potential attendees should receive messages that the convention will be safe to attend as soon as possible after any adverse events have occurred.

Importance of Harnessing Potential

The researchers also indicate a broader range of considerations that marketers and convention organisers should consider, with messages needed to stress “professional and social networking opportunities, and convention information emphasising affordable costs and travelling time.” Ultimately, effective communication that targets those association members who are most likely to change their attitudes will convert potential attendance into actual profit.

Points to Note

- Professional association conventions are a significant element of world tourism.
- Decisions to attend these conventions change over time.
- Marketers should focus on association members likely to change their attitudes about attendance.
- Increased attendance will bring increased profitability for convention organisers.

Yoo, Joanne Jung-Eun and Chon, Kaye (2010). Temporal Changes in Factors Affecting Convention Participation Decision. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, Vol. 22, No. 1, pp. 103-120.