Conventions as mega-events

A new model for convention–host city relationships

Harry H. Hiller
Department of Sociology, University of Calgary, 2500 University Drive NW, Calgary, Alberta T2N 1N4, Canada

Conventions represent a special form of tourism with a high degree of ecological differentiation from the host society. The encapsulation of conventioneers in highly planned convention activity creates an intrusion-reaction response from the host city – particularly when the convention reaches a size threshold that makes it a mega-event. Conventions can be analytically distinguished from conferences and the characteristics of conventions as mega-events can be identified. In place of the intrusion-reaction model, an interactive-opportunity model is proposed through the use of case studies. A sociological perspective demonstrates how interaction benefits (rather than merely economic benefits) can transform the convention–host city relationship.

Conventions represent a special kind of tourism. People leave their home community as individuals or in small groups to join hundreds or thousands of others at a destination for a common purpose. In many ways, the destination is less important than the purpose for the group gathering, and the ‘tourism product’ is the facilities to host the event at the destination. Theoretically, then, the convention in itself is the attraction rather than the characteristics of the destination as the propelling factor in attendance. All things being equal, the convention could be held in Singapore or Sioux Falls, and delegates would still attend because of their commitment to the purpose of the convention. In practical terms, factors such as distance, cost, accessibility, safety, climate or downturns in the economy may affect the size of the convention or conference, but since conference organizers generally seek to maximize their attendance and/or serve their constituency, considerable care is taken in site selection. One study found that accessibility to the destination site was more important than the attractiveness of the site for convention tourists.1 (See also Fortin and Ritchie.2)

Conferences, congresses and conventions involve a form of travel in which the meeting serves as the primary purpose for the travel. These meetings are distinct from corporate travel in that the primary purpose is not individual or small-group encounters, but a multifaceted event of a fixed time collectivity involving speakers, seminars, and workshops, exhibitions, banquets, social events and association meetings. While corporate meetings are more likely to be more frequent and smaller, association meetings of trade, union, fraternal, educational, service and charitable groups are larger and follow a more regular cycle (eg annual meetings). Expenditures for conferences, congresses and conventions also tend to be larger because of the package format of events.3,4

Convention attendance as voluntaristic behavior

A central characteristic of an association meeting is that attendance is voluntary. Attendance is dependent on the level of interest in the purpose of the meeting and the priority which potential delegates give to the event to clear their calendars to attend. Persons may become regular attendees because of their commitment to the sponsoring organization (eg an organization of worker specialists) or their interest in the theme of the meeting. Whether the form of the meeting is work related or a leisure
activity, the farther the meeting is from home, the greater the likelihood that the conference organizers will package the event around the destination to enhance attendance. Packaging may involve everything from an official airline, car rental companies and select hotels, to theme events based on the special characteristics of the host region, and pre- and post-conference tours. In other words, as a vehicle to optimize attendance, the destination may be marketed to potential delegates in order to enhance the success of the meetings. Note that in contrast with usual conceptions of a tourist, the destination is an ‘add-on’ to the essential purpose of the meeting itself.

The voluntaristic nature of meeting-based tourism means that attendance may vary and that organizers may explicitly develop a marketing strategy to encourage positive responses by individuals. However, once the individual has decided to attend the meeting, she/he becomes part of a social group at the destination that is distinct and separate from the host community. One of the primary functions of the meeting organizer is to organize social events that will foster interaction among delegates. These may vary from large assemblies and thematic workshops to receptions and excursions. In sum, the conference or convention becomes a self-contained entity at which a full program of activity keeps attendees busy from morning to night frequently including even meals and coffee breaks.

The differentiation of tourists

Cohen has noted that mass tourism means that tourists are ecologically differentiated from their host society. They are surrounded by, but not integrated into their destination community because their dealings are almost exclusively with tourism agents such as taxi drivers, desk clerks or tour guides. A package tour accentuates even further the degree of differentiation, but the end result is the creation of an illusion that the tourist has ‘been there’. The tourist may have ‘seen the sights’ but there certainly has been no meaningful interaction with local residents.

The meeting-oriented tourist is another variant of packaged tourism. There is a full schedule of activity that keeps the visitor busy and socially and psychologically differentiated from the host community. It is not unusual for delegates to move from the airport to hotel to meeting place and back to the airport with only brief forays into other selected locations such as a store or a restaurant. While there may be an economic impact to such tourism, the visitor has hardly experienced the local culture. In that sense, the location of the meeting is indeed of marginal importance and the host community is only understood in terms of its meeting-related facilities and service personnel.

The impact of tourism on the host community

The relationship between tourist and host community is one of considerable debate. While the economic benefits of tourism are substantial, it is also recognized that there may be both economic and social costs. Inflation, demonstration effects, traffic congestion and increased crime are some of the potential negative impacts. Research has demonstrated that not all local residents are affected in the same way by tourism and that there may indeed be a wide range of responses to tourism. Ap and Crompton have suggested that there are four basic strategies by which residents respond to tourism: embracement, tolerance, adjustment and withdrawal. Davis et al identified five clusters of resident responses: haters, lovers, cautious romantics, ‘in-betweener’ and ‘love’-em for a reason. Pizam, not surprisingly, found that the more a community resident was economically dependent on tourism, the more favorable they were towards tourism. It could also be assumed that the more differentiated tourism is from the host community in all respects, the less likely it is that local residents will perceive harmful effects.

One of the key factors in resident/visitor relationships may be volume. Pizam suggests that heavy tourist concentrations in a destination may be more likely to affect local residents. Doxey points out that, as volume increases, host communities may reach a saturation point where irritation increases. His ‘Irridex’ along the saturation continuum moves from euphoria to apathy to annoyance to antagonism. On the other hand, the work of Butler implies that factors such as cultural distance, economic disparities, or the spatial distribution of tourist activities in the host community may be more important than sheer volume, and that these factors may again provoke a considerable range of responses.

Tourism is an industry and it is not surprising that there would be as wide a range of responses to it as there would be to any industry. It is for that reason that concepts like ‘sustainable tourism’, ‘resident responsive tourism’ and ‘community based tourism’ have become important. Most of the literature in this approach focuses on the local community having input into the nature, scope and pace of tourist development. The emphasis also seems to be on tourist delivery systems such as facilities, attractions and labour needs. There is little emphasis, however, on the visitor/resident relationship once tourism is well established and part of the fabric of the community.

When the cultural gap between the visitor and the local resident is significant, there is a greater sensitivity to the cultural impact of tourism. Tourism between developed and less developed societies has brought into sharper relief the negative effects of tourism (compare Witt and Smith).
ism occurs within developed societies and particularly urban-to-urban tourism, the cultural conflict is minimal and the delegate/resident relationship may even be forgotten. Mega cities such as New York, Chicago and London are capable of handling large numbers of tourists without much observable consequence. However, in smaller cities, large-scale tourism can have a very different impact on local residents and provides some unique opportunities which are usually overlooked. The primary purpose of this article is to show how mega event conventions can provide the occasion to transform the visitor/resident relationship in medium-sized cities.

The convention as a mega event

For the sake of this analysis, it is important to distinguish conceptually between a conference and a convention in relation to mega-events. Conferences, seminars and workshops drawing people from some distance are an ongoing recurring activity in just about every community regardless of size. There are some locations that draw more such events and perhaps larger ones than others but, in general, conferences are everywhere. What is more unique, however, is the large conference which I will call a convention. Setting a size threshold may be totally arbitrary, but the emphasis here is an increase of scale that requires the following:

- the use of numerous lodging establishments rather than just one or two;
- a major planning organization with considerable lead time for planning;
- a complex program including spousal programs, pre- and post-programs;
- the need for many meeting rooms including at least one large assembly hall;
- the tendency towards national/international representations.

When all of these conditions apply, the impact of the event becomes much more significant for the host community. Meetings drawing 1000 or more delegates, then, could serve as an arbitrary baseline for being a convention.

When conventions become very large, they can take on the character of a mega-event for a host city of medium size (approximately 500 000 to 1 million residents).

- When mega-cities such as Toronto or New York host a large convention for which they are routinely prepared, the convention does not become a mega-event. However, when medium-size cities that do not routinely attract larger gatherings on a regular basis host a substantial convention, it can become a mega-event.
- When there is a 'bid' process and a sense of being 'selected' as the site of the event, and a facilities and logistics assessment to ascertain carefully the suitability of the site, the host community develops a sense of the excitement and expectancy of the challenge as a mega-event.
- When the convention has national/international status with considerable prestige, the host community anticipates it as a mega-event.
- When the impact of the convention is in some sense dispersed throughout the city and not just restricted to hotels and restaurants surrounding the convention centre, the convention becomes a mega-event.

In sum, conventions of over 5000 people with the above characteristics in mid-size cities are most likely to be viewed as mega-events.

While delegates may have the sense of coming to a big convention, it is primarily the host community of medium size that transforms the convention into a mega-event.

- The local media carry the details and progress of the bid process which stimulates public interest and conveys a sense of a positive outcome as a 'prize' or achievement.
- The local media also carries news of the logistical concerns of organizers and the sheer size of a big convention intensifies public interest and the need for cooperative public input for a successful event.
- At least some members of the community and the corporate community are persuaded to participate on the grounds that this is a unique opportunity to show local hospitality through volunteerism and financial support for hospitality events. The sense of people coming from 'all over the world' is especially attractive to young cities and their élites seeking to enlarge their global impact. (Compare with the Olympic experience.)
- When the mega-event is defined as a 'one-time' special opportunity to host this convention, there is a greater rationalization to treat the event much differently from other types of conferences.

The intrusion-reaction model

When a convention as mega-event occurs in a host city, it is best described through an intrusion-reaction model. Acquiring the large convention is usually considered a prize to which all energies in preparation must be mobilized. The sudden influx of delegates requires detailed attention to logistics and delegate services concerning which the host city does not want to be embarrassed. If one description of this process is 'planning to cope', the other descriptor is the anticipation of economic benefits as measured by bed nights and per capita multipliers of delegate spending. In any case, the intrusion-reaction model makes the host city a rather passive community that braces itself for the influx and
merely provides services as required or requested. Delegates are viewed as temporary though welcome interlopers on home territory, and the convention itself takes on a cocoon-like character with its own schedule of activities and events. The host community maintains a distance from the convention as a private event from which they are shut out, and the community is only represented by the friendliness and competence of service personnel in the hospitality industry.

While this relationship may be preferred by many as the least disruptive to the host community, there are two things it does not do. First, it does not personalize the welcome to the community. Visitors and service personnel are anonymous objects in a client relationship. Visitors can leave with no sense of local life and interaction with local people. Second, as a mega-event with significant local publicity, local people do not participate and cannot personally benefit from the event itself beyond economic spin-offs.

The interactive-opportunity model

In place of the intrusion-reaction model, an interactive-opportunity model is proposed. This model visualizes the convention as a unique opportunity for host city/delegate interaction.

From the host city's point of view, the visitor/delegate must be transformed from a client or temporary interloper to a 'guest' with all of the warmer meanings of hospitality attached to that term. Once a convention is defined as a mega-event, citizens with civic pride are reasonably easy to recruit as volunteers in the demonstration of local hospitality. Visitors are usually very impressed with the warmth exhibited by proactive volunteers and local staff.

From the convention organizers' and delegates' point of view, the convention must not just colonize temporary space in a foreign territory but must view the community as a partner in the total convention experience. The convention should contain specified elements that are accessible to interested members of the community either at a reduced registration rate or for free, and these events should be publicized. Program organizers should also incorporate local distinctives (e.g., history, traditions, economic strengths) into their activities in creative ways that sustain positive feelings towards the local community.

The objective of this approach is to move the convention-host city into a closer relationship which moves beyond merely the provision of facilities and services. When economic benefits are supplemented by interaction benefits, both the convention and the host community are strengthened in significant ways.

Case studies

Three conventions were held in the city of Calgary, Alberta (750,000 population) in recent years that demonstrated the success of this approach. A North American denominational church convention drew 7000 delegates in 1988, a barbershop quartet convention drew 12,000 in 1993, and a convention of academic scholars drew 8000 in 1994. Each convention utilized the interactive-community model in a different way, but all three set new standards for their own groups and received especially positive reviews from delegates and convention sponsors.

The denominational convention advertised select evening sessions with special speakers as open without charge. A pre-conference Music Festival was held at a downtown music hall using guest artists attending the convention but targeted primarily to local people. Host supporters put on a Chuckwagon Breakfast theme for guests at no charge and in return delegates contributed to a convention legacy to the city for a shelter for abused persons. Delegates could indicate on their registration form whether they wanted to participate in a hospitality night in local homes. Volunteers in uniform provided a 'wall of friendship' around the meeting site to answer questions and explicitly to welcome delegates or thank them for coming.

The barbershop quartet convention really strained the city's facilities, including the convention facilities, as the uniqueness of this event and caliber of the contesting musical groups also had a niche of interested city residents. Tickets were available to the public and hundreds of volunteers were mobilized to demonstrate hospitality. Guests were met at the airport by local volunteers with a proactive western welcome. A special rodeo event demonstrated the unique local tradition to all delegates. Delegates also received free transit passes which facilitated access to all parts of the city rather than the usual mobility limitation to the downtown.

The academic conference at the University of Calgary drew the community into its program through a special 'Community Participant' registration category purchased on site for $10 and for which a list of sessions open to the public was exchanged. To commemorate the mega-event, a city-wide 'Celebration of Learning' was mounted which involved posters in every classroom, encouragement to every school to celebrate learning in some way during the event. Special activities for the general public and high school students on campus, and special events in the community (especially downtown) to which the public was invited such as a Music Festival and Downtown Noon Hour Symposia. Volunteers were used, primarily at hospitality functions, and chuckwagon breakfasts and mountain ranch barbeques were thematic highlights with supper attendance as optional events.
Conclusion

Conventions provide a unique opportunity to bring visitor and resident together because they are highly planned activities and of limited duration. In place of the passive hospitality preferred by visitor centers or the home-stay programs oriented to the individual traveller, the interactive-community model of conventions as mega-events opens up new possibilities for successful tourism.

The interactive-opportunity model has the following benefits. From the convention sponsor’s point of view, it allows the group to spread goodwill in the host community about its organization and its objectives. In other words, the convention organization reaps significant public relations benefits that lie dormant in the encapsulation model. Second, the host community has the opportunity for the event to enrich their lives through personal participation as desired and as specified. It is also able to demonstrate its friendly spirit and local culture in a highly personal way. From the tourist’s perspective, Prenite et al refer to this as ‘endearment behaviour’ to the destination location. Third, the local organizers create a greater sense of a more successful convention to both visitors and residents, and the legacy of a successful event enhances the civic reputation and encourages return visits.

Much of the literature on mega-events or hallmark events implies that these events have as their primary goal the enhancement of the site as a tourism destination or that they are effective mechanisms in re-imaging a city for both residents and outsiders in a positive and dynamic manner. Certainly these outcomes may be a by-product of conventions, but the convention as a collective meeting has a rationale and objective all its own. On the other hand, the convention represents a special type of hallmark event that, from the point of view of a medium-size city, is a one-time event of limited duration (cf. Getz).

When a convention becomes a mega-event to this type of host community, there are new possibilities for local organizers to create special benefits for local citizens that enrich the community beyond economic impacts. When viewed from this perspective, conventions are no longer intruders but guests and partners in a civic experience.

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