**DETERMINING QUALITY OF TOURISM EVENTS**

**Michael Risteski, MSc** – *Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality – Ohrid, University “St. Kliment Ohridski” – Bitola*, Ohrid, Republic of Macedonia

risteski\_m@yahoo.com

**Nadica Risteski, MSc**

**Abstract**

Tourism events play an important role in the development of contemporary tourism. In the past decades the scientific community and tourism experts developed different approaches towards planning and management of tourism events. Tourism events can be regarded as separate tourism products. Several specific tourism types intended for different target markets exist. There is also a fierce competition between destinations which organize their own events. Also competition can arise between different events organized in the same region. Therefore it becomes crucial to improve the quality of events in tourism which can be realized through improving the management process. In this paper an approach for determining the level of quality of tourism events will be elaborated. Several local, regional and international events that are held in Macedonia were evaluated by different stakeholders and experts. The goal is to determine the areas for improvement in the tourism event management process.

***Keywords:*** *tourism, events, event tourism, event management, event planning, quality of events.*

INTRODUCTION

Events in tourism represent an important tool for the overall tourism development of a given destination, often playing an important role in its development strategies and management plans. The meaning and impact of planned tourist events are analyzed and documented by numerous scientific authors, as well as by the general public. The same can be said about defining and differentiating the events. Good planning is a continuous process because events themselves represent a type of tourism product with its own life cycle. Creators of tourist politics should carefully monitor the processes of planning, implementation and management of tourist events.

The characteristic strengths of an event should be improved or enhanced and the disadvantages that may arise and that can have internal or external nature have to be eliminated as well.

Events may represent an important tool for reducing the unfavorable seasonality at certain tourist destinations. This means extending the tourist season by enriching the tourist offer for tourists during their stay. Only in recent years, events have led to the emergence of a modern and selective type of tourism that is intended for a strictly defined and narrow tourist clientele. This type of tourism is called event tourism. The manner of organizing, content and duration of events directly affects their quality as well as the quality of event tourism in general. On the other hand, the quality of events directly affects tourists’ level of satisfaction which influences the repeated visits to the destination or event.

DEFINING AND DIFFERENTIATING EVENTS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE FOR TOURISM

Events have an important motivational function in the tourism process and play an important role in the development and marketing plans of tourist destinations. Events themselves are important in terms of the destination’s competitiveness. Event tourism has established itself in the hospitality industry only in the past decades.

The defining of tourism events is an important task not only for tourism theory, but also tourism practice. In order accurately to achieve this, a differentiation of tourism events is needed. Often only the three main types of tourism events are mentioned: MICE, cultural and sport events.

Organized events can be defined in several ways, but the different definitions have common elements. Events can be defined as a spatial and time-based phenomenon which is unique for its specific relations between the location where they are organized, the visitors, the local population in the wider destination and the management systems that are used, especially the design and program of the event.

In the past events were organized by individuals or the community as an initiative with another purpose. Today, they are being organized by professionals and specialized companies or organizations.

Many criteria for differentiation of events exist. Differentiation is crucial because the defining of separate types of events will allow for a specialized tourist offer. This, on the other hand, influences the level of quality of the tourist product. The management process is more standardized and easier for these specialized events that are characterized by a very narrow target market.

One of the most famous differentiations is the typology of events developed by Getz (Getz D., 2005). According to this typology there are several types of events:

- cultural events (festivals, carnivals, religious events);

- political / state events (summits, festivities, political gatherings, VIP events);

- artistic / entertaining events (concerts, award ceremonies);

- economic events or, business and trade events (meetings, consumer and trade events, fairs);

- scientific-academic events (conferences, seminars, workshops);

- sport events (amateur / professional, participants, spectators);

- recreational events (entertainment sports and games);

- private events (wedding, parties, social events).

Although all of these events have tourist potential, the most emphasized types of events are the following (Weed, M., & Bull, C., 2004):

- business events (MICE tourism);

- sport events;

- festivals and other cultural events.

Whatever typology is taken into account all events belong to one type of tourism, the so called “event tourism”. This concept has appeared only recently, since the 80-s. It was defined as an important and growing segment of international tourism (New Zealand Tourist and Publicity Department, 1987). Later on a framework for development of event tourism has been developed (Getz, D., 1998). In the beginning several terms were used for defining event tourism, such as social events, special events, typical events and so on. Today event tourism is considered to be an integral approach towards marketing and development processes.

Agencies that operate in the domain of destination management often regard events as attractions, accelerators of tourism development, forms of entertainment or tools for creating and development of the destination’s image. Usually, in the more developed tourist destinations, organized events are a part of the development department of Destination Management Organizations (DMO’s). For those organizations events can contribute to prolonging the tourist season, increasing tourists’ satisfaction and maximizing the profit (Getz, D., Anderson, D., & Sheehan, L., 1998).

In the destination management processes, events are often divided in three major types: Mega events, significant events and local events.

*Mega events* are difficult to define. Often they refer to an absolute measure of size or a relative term describing an event's scale or importance (Getz D., Svensson B., Peterssen R., Gunnervall A., 2012). They are usually analyzed in terms of their tourist attractiveness, the possibility for increasing the destination’s image and their developmental role (Gnoth, J., & Anwar, S., 2000).

*Hallmark events* can be defined in several different ways. They are regarded as large one-time or periodic events which have a fixed duration and primarily have the function of increasing awareness, attractiveness and profitability of a given tourist destination (Ritchie, J. R. B., 1984). Also they are defined as events that create an identifiable image and develop marketing and the destination’s tourism brand. In other words, hallmark events are those events that have characteristic qualities such as traditionalism, attractiveness and recognizability that leads to a larger competitive advantage (Getz, D., 2005).

*Regional or local events* are the lowest type of events in the hierarchy and can cause more problems than the other types of events. These events can have a different level of attractiveness that ranges from not causing any interest in tourists and visitors to being the main motivational factor for visiting a certain destination. If they have many local and traditional elements and thus are not interesting to visitors, they should be left out of the tourist offer in order to preserve the local culture and traditionality.

Although many scientific and professional papers already exist that deal with the planning, organizing and managing events as part of event tourism, event tourism is still an unexplored field (Higham, J., 2005). There is a need of detailed research about the involved organizations, stakeholders, networks, carriers of activities, policy makers and so on.

Event tourism primarily manifests itself in generating benefits in the form of increased financial gains (profit). However, event tourism generates also other types of benefits that range from individual to social gains. Those benefits can be positive or negative. Contemporary tourism is primarily focused towards sustainability. In this sense, sustainable event tourism represents an important goal for policy makers. Alongside economic effects of event tourism, more and more attention is put on social and cultural effects, as well as on the generated environmental impacts (Sherwood, P., 2007).

DETERMINING TOURISM QUALITY AND QUALITY OF ORGANIZED EVENTS

It is common knowledge that tourism is a multidimensional phenomenon that connects different economic and non-economic activities. It is an amalgam of different partial products and services (Zeithamel V.A., Bitner M.J., 2000). Therefore, it is very hard to define the tourist product. The concept of a tourist product to some does not necessarily mean the same to others. The consumers individually define the tourist products. This makes the management process a problematic activity, because it is very hard to meet consumers’ needs and to satisfy or even exceed their expectations. The scientific community deals with the research of tourism. One important aspect of tourism is determining its quality. There exist numerous scientific methods for defining quality in tourism (Harrington D., Lenehan T., 1998). Quality is the main driving force of directing development policies by the tourist offer. It is predicted that quality will continue to serve as a tool for increasing the competitive advantage of organizations and destinations as a whole (Kandampully J., 2000).

The World Tourism Organization is defining quality in tourism as the process that implies satisfying the consumers’ needs for products and services, as well as their expectations for an acceptable price. The tourist products should satisfy some basic elements of quality such as security, hygiene, accessibility, transparency, authenticity and harmonization of tourist activities in terms of protecting the natural and social environment (WTO, 2003).

One of the most famous means for determining the quality of tourist services is the so called SERVQUAL method (SERVice QUALity) (Parasuraman A., Zeithamel V., Berry L.L., 1988). According to this method there are 5 crucial dimensions that must be determined. These dimensions are the following (Fitzsimmons J., Fitzsimmons M.J., 1994):

- Reliability - ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately;

- Responsiveness - willingness to help customers and provide prompt service;

- Assurance - knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence;

- Empathy - Caring, individualized attention the firm provides its customers;

- Tangibles - appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials.

The extend of achieving the above mentioned dimensions directly affects the level of the quality of the products/services, and therefore, the level of consumers’ satisfaction (Parasuraman A., 1998).

The same can be applied to tourism events. Events can be regarded as a type of tourist service/product. The quality of tourism events can directly impact the destination’s image and reputation. Therefore, developing a high quality event becomes a crucial activity of the destination management processes.

In order to improve the existing tourist offer, thus improving the quality of a certain event, certain areas of intervention can be recommended:

- creating new and innovative complementary tourist products/services related to the event and that can be included in the general tourist offer of the destination;

- improving the quality of traditional accommodation and catering facilities and the quality of the total tourist offer related to events;

- corporation type of adopting event programs in joint market performances;

- increasing the image of accommodation and catering facilities as a specific branded category;

- adopting a high level of professionalism in the domain of catering activities related to events;

- encouraging this type of tourist offer in the context of diminishing the concentrated seasonality;

- encouraging the offer of small and medium sized tourist enterprises for creating an individual, distinctive and specific tourist offer in this sense.

Determining the quality of organized tourist events is a difficult task. There are numerous reasons that cause this. Firstly, as mentioned previously, tourists’ satisfaction can’t precisely be defined. Their satisfaction is directly dependant of the service providers’ level of performance. Providers continuously try to satisfy consumers’ expectations for the certain tourist product/service. The second reason for complicating the determining of the events’ quality is the fact that the wider tourist products perceived by tourists are actually a sum of many individual products and services. The perceived total product changes from individual to individual and even changes in a given time-frame for the same individual. Tourists differently experience the attended event and it is very difficult to anticipate their reaction. Measuring the level of quality of tourist events is an integral part of the control and monitoring activities in the process of management. The monitoring process is further complicated because there doesn’t exist a common system or frame of activities that can be applied in different events. Every event is characterized by individual features. The experience gained from one event can’t be implemented in another. The structure of tourists also changes permanently from event to event however similar they might be.

The method for determining quality in this paper refers firstly to a detailed inventory of all events in a given area, or destination. After that a detailed valorization process is needed in order to arrange the events according to their level of quality. Furthermore, there are some strictly defined criteria used for determining the significance (impact) of events in several fields. A total of 7 key areas are needed to be analyzed (Korunoski S., Marinoski N., Nestoroska I., Markovikj N., 2015):

- **Impact of the event on tourism and attendance** in general;

- **Impact on the business community** and economy in the destination;

- **Impact on creating the image** of the destination;

- **Impact on the level of media coverage** of the event;

- **Impact on the level of stakeholders’ participation** in the creating, planning and organizing of events;

- **Positive impact on the environment** like protection, improvement, raising awareness, developed inter-connections, etc;

- **Positive social and cultural impacts**.

All the events’ impacts can be positive or negative and they can have different duration of effects (short term or long term effects). It is important to mention that not only the larger events (international or national) should be analyzed. Even the smaller ones (regional, municipal and local) can play an important role in tourism development if they are characterized by a high level of quality. Determining the level of quality according to this method should be done by experts and service providers that have experience in this field.

During the development and implementation the project “Sub - strategy for traditions and events in the Republic of Macedonia - 2015”, this evaluation method for determining quality of events was used. A total of 300 significant events were defined on the territory of the Republic of Macedonia. They were divided into 5 types of events according to the size of the impact area: international, national, regional, municipal and local. Each of them were subjected to evaluation of the 7 key areas (impacts) mentioned previously. The assessment was done by several experts and service providers who rated them from 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 the highest).

The summary results are presented below:

**Table 1**: Summary results of the impacts (significance) of events in the Republic of Macedonia

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Impact  Area | Attendance | Business | Image | Media | Participation | Environment | Socio - cultural | Total |
| Local (1) | 17 | 32 | 25 | 27 | 24 | 235 | 25 | 385 |
| Municipal (2) | 109 | 167 | 108 | 111 | 107 | 39 | 106 | 747 |
| Regional (3) | 81 | 75 | 102 | 93 | 75 | 16 | 111 | 553 |
| National (4) | 44 | 25 | 53 | 66 | 38 | 8 | 52 | 287 |
| International (5) | 49 | 1 | 12 | 3 | 56 | 2 | 6 | 129 |
| Total | 300 | 300 | 300 | 300 | 300 | 300 | 300 | 2100 |

Source: Sub-strategy of traditions and events in the Republic of Macedonia, 2014/2015

The results show a significant unfavorable situation of events organized in Macedonia. Municipal events were mostly evaluated regarding all 7 criteria. Regional events that have a medium level of importance follow. Subsequently follow local and national events and the least events are international events. This demonstrates a relatively low level of quality of events.

In future tourism development processes, new methods and means for improvement in all domains of event tourism development are needed. It becomes essential to increase the size of the impact area of certain events. Accordingly, national events should be transformed into international, regional into national events and so on.

CONCLUSION

Events can represent a significant tool for promoting tourist destinations, as well as for tourism development in general. Therefore a new domain in tourism has been developed, called event tourism. Determining quality of tourist products and thus quality of organized events, represents a significant issue in theoretical and application research approaches. Defining and improving events’ quality is still an unexplored area. One significant method for determining quality of organized events is the defining of 7 crucial areas where the organized event has its impacts and provides a detailed insight in events in the Republic of Macedonia. According to this method, those events are evaluated as having a lover level of quality. International events are the least organized events in the Republic of Macedonia. This shows an unfavorable situation in this sense. It can be concluded that event tourism in Macedonia is still in its infancy that needs further development in many areas.

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