

12 Securing MICE Tourism through DMO Collaboration

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Abstract

Tourism generated through meetings, incentives, conferences & exhibitions (MICE) is a growing and valuable industry in most countries. Destination management organisations (DMOs) face increasing competition when bidding to host MICE events. This case study presents a detailed look at the benefits of hosting MICE events and the challenges that DMOs face. This case study profiles the Sussex Visitor Economy Initiative which is a strategy that involves DMO collaboration in order to increase MICE tourism to Sussex, a coastal area of the UK. Views from senior DMO managers from the UK destinations of Eastbourne and Brighton further illustrate the benefits of this new form of DMO collaboration. Consequently, this case study provides students with an opportunity to (a) identify the current challenges for DMOs in terms of attracting MICE tourism, (b) evaluate the potential opportunities and challenges of DMO collaboration and (c) create a strategic plan for DMO collaboration.

Subjects: Business tourism; MICE, conferences; convention bureau; DMO; collaboration

Introduction

The MICE (meetings, incentive travel, conferences and exhibitions) sector is the largest and most profitable segment of the events industry, and most major countries are dependent on MICE tourism to support their economy (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2022). In the UK, the MICE industry has experienced massive growth in the last 30 years; it supports 25,000 businesses and half a million workers and is predicted to be worth £27.6 bn by 2026 (Business Visits & Events Partnership, 2022).

Association conferences, held by mostly not for profit organisations, are the largest type of MICE event in terms of length and delegate numbers and as many associations have an international membership, their events are peripatetic. The

lead time for international association conferences can be in excess of five years during which, destination management organisations (DMOs), such as convention bureaus will invest substantial time and resources in attempting to bid for and host the event. Competition to host conferences has intensified and there are a growing number of convention bureaus specifically targeting international association conferences. Consequently, destinations are finding it increasingly challenging to attract the attention of associations (Marques & Pinho, 2021).

The UK is a major competitor for international association conferences with several major conference destinations (including London, Manchester and Glasgow) and it has maintained a top ten ranking by the International Convention and Congress Association (ICCA) for many years. Other flourishing destinations include seaside resorts that have invested in suitable infrastructure including purpose-built venues and a range of hotel accommodation, such as Eastbourne, Brighton, Bournemouth and Torquay (Nolan, 2020). However, the challenge faced by all conference destinations now and in the immediate future is maintaining growth and realising the benefits of investment as the market has become densely competitive. Furthermore, the continued growth in air travel makes it not just possible, but desirable, to hold meetings in new and exciting destinations.

One way for destinations to maintain a competitive advantage is through collaboration with another DMO. However, partnering with a DMO who would otherwise be potential competitor, presents a number of challenges. This case study will explore the characteristics of association conferences, as well as the role of convention bureaus as a type of DMO. The case study identifies the benefits of MICE tourism to a destination and explores how convention bureaus are integral to securing conferences for a destination. The case study features the views of senior members of staff at VisitBrighton and VisitEastbourne and it presents the challenges and benefits of local DMO collaboration in order to win association conferences and bring valuable MICE tourism to destinations.

The Conference Destinations of Brighton and Eastbourne

The south coast town of Eastbourne is located within the county of East Sussex and has a population of just over 100,000, a quarter of whom are aged over 65 (substantially higher than the rest of the UK) (Lewes & Eastbourne Councils (2018). There are ten meeting spaces within the Devonshire Quarter complex, including purpose-built theatres, exhibition halls and many options for break out space, with a capacity for just over 1,600 delegates (VisitEastbourne, 2021). The destination and the Devonshire Quarter complex is managed by 'Conference Eastbourne', a convention bureau that is part of the local council's tourism department which operates under the name VisitEastbourne. After the slowdown in MICE tourism created by the pandemic, they reported a surge in repeat and new conference bookings for the town and specifically for the Devonshire Quarter, which should provide a much-needed boost to hotels, restaurants and many other local businesses (VisitEastbourne, 2021). However, during a recent presentation, Annie Wills, Eastbourne Borough Council Head of Tourism & Enterprise, confirmed that one of the major challenges the Conference Eastbourne team have when marketing the town, is perception and combatting the image of Eastbourne as 'God's