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What we can learn about the relationship between 'Events Strategy' and 'Event Business' in the region

Jackie Mulligan

The UK Centre for Events Management is pioneering a project to enhance the infrastructure of Yorkshire to host, stage and benefit from events and festivals. The project, funded by the European Regional Development Fund and Higher Education Innovation Fund, is born out of regional economic strategies aimed at using events to bring regeneration benefits to the region. The 'Event Market Development' project seeks to use research on events, supply chains and event small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to assist the regional event strategies to address skills gaps and bring tangible commercial benefits to event business. The lessons learnt through the actual delivery of the project will be used to inform assessment, learning and teaching within the Centre and within events management as a subject area.

In its initial phase, a team of specialist event academics have been working with event SMEs to identify mechanisms to improve their businesses. The approach builds on the research findings from a key national study (Wood et al, 2003) on 600 small event organisations conducted by the UK Centre for Events Management in 2003. This revealed that there are recruitment difficulties in the sector owing to skills shortages, only 21% have formal systems of quality management, there is limited use of outsourcing, and pricing methods focus on internal cost structures and profit objectives rather than external market factors. Furthermore event SMEs tend to use informal and ad-hoc marketing planning methods with very limited competitor research.

As the project has evolved, the team is discovering that whilst the same obstacles still exist for SMEs, it is the interaction with the policy and strategic agencies charged with supporting the sector that can present both the most challenges and the greatest potential for growth. The team's experience thus far supports the findings from a study entitled 'Events based tourism: a survey of local authority strategies in the UK' (Thomas and Wood, 2003), where it was highlighted that whilst many economic development agencies use events to boost visitor volume and spend, few create measures to explicitly help local businesses exploit the potential benefits arising from such activities.

Furthermore, whilst the nature of events and their ability to engage businesses across sectors makes a strong case for support at senior economic and political levels, it appears that the very cross-sectoral nature of events companies places them in a vulnerable position between core sectors and outside accepted business support clusters. The project team has been working alongside festival and event businesses that range from festival organisations to conference co-ordinators, from distinct event caterers to fashion show promoters, to help them address challenges in sustaining business activity and building long term marketing plans in this dynamic sector. However, as the project develops, the team is now focused on bringing the SMEs together with the public sector agencies so that all can benefit from the learning and research in events and events management. The work will ensure that students will benefit from seeing the practical application of theory in the region.

Whilst policy-makers would not advocate placing events strategies in isolation, this so easily occurs when the delivery organisations, or 'the frontline', are not included from the outset in the formulation and implementation of event strategies. The region's own commissioned research,

which has been published in the Major Events Strategy, has highlighted weaknesses in co-ordination, effective measurement tools and collaboration. The latter point in particular, as in many other regions and indeed countries, results in numerous agencies being involved in events from destination marketing agencies to conference bureaux, from local government event divisions to regional cultural consortia. This desire to 'co-ordinate and support' and to some degree 'control' event activities can result in a labyrinth of second and third tier agencies that can mystify and as a result frustrate attempts by event SMEs to integrate and support regional event policies and strategies.

In 2006 the Yorkshire Tourist Board (YTB) launched a new conference guide to encourage companies to host meetings and conferences in the region. The value of this initiative alone was deemed to have a potential of generating in excess of £1.5 million in delegate expenditure in the region through new conferences, exhibitions and meetings. However, without integration with the SMEs who will directly deliver and support those events, the guide does not maximise economic benefit to the region nor minimise environmental impact by using local suppliers. Thus the guide could easily become a mere paper exercise.

The Yorkshire Tourist Board and the region's cultural and investment agencies have identified 'events and festivals' as a key method to raise revenue and provide social and economic regeneration to the region. According to YTB's research in North Yorkshire alone, festivals have generated significant impacts in urban localities like York, where three festivals are cited as creating an economic impact of £50m, as well as in rural areas such as Bedale and Ingleton where festivals have "a disproportionately high impact" given the size of the resident populations (Shaw, 2003).

A regional focus on events recognises that almost a third of the business base in West Yorkshire is in retail, hotels and distribution. Whilst events provide opportunities for growth across those sectors, the ability to host events and conferences also increases the opportunities for the region to showcase its potential for investment in other areas of research innovation strength, including creative, digital, bioscience and healthcare technologies.

The UK Centre for Events Management will be using the lessons learnt from this 'Event Market Development' project in West Yorkshire to inform research and build on the national survey of event SMEs. The team hopes that the work will develop across the region, and in other regions, resulting in some in-depth case studies for use in the classroom and beyond. In the classroom at Leeds Met, the project will see members of the academic team able to draw on contemporary and local examples to demonstrate the challenges students may face in the sector. In addition the interface with SMEs and the project delivery is already resulting in a more enriched assessment, learning and teaching experience, with businesses engaging student volunteers and placements. In addition there is, thanks to the events company competition launched in 2007, more awareness among students of the enterprise support available at Leeds Met. As the project progresses opportunities will undoubtedly be strengthened further. However, it is the development of the case studies that could provide the most insight and learning for students. This learning will have significantly supported and built on the research conducted in 2003, as it will build on the team's experience with the SMEs. By using this engagement with businesses, the team will not only be helping to prepare students for the internal challenges of growth within SMEs, but also giving them an appreciation of the complex pathways that businesses may need to negotiate in order to play their part in supporting and benefiting from regional event strategies.

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