Natalia Piechota
Uniwersytet Ekonomiczny w Poznaniu

CONVENTION BUREAUX' ROLES IN THE GLOBAL MEETINGS INDUSTRY – A METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK[1]

Summary

The aim of the paper is to present a methodological aspect of research on convention bureaux' roles in the meetings industry. The online survey was conducted among almost 300 cities listed in the ICCA's ranking. Convention bureau managers were asked about the tasks of every convention bureau and the performance of their own institution. Every task was incorporated into one of the main five roles of convention bureau: an agent, a coordinator, a leader, a representative, and a marketer. The research method was based on the IPA (Importance-Performance Analysis).

Key words: convention bureau, meetings industry, Importance-Performance Analysis, IPA, institutions.

JEL codes: L83

Introduction

Because of the expected benefits from hosting meetings by cities, many entities have been established to "sell a city" on the international meetings market (Gartrell 1988). These institutions are known as convention bureaux, or convention and visitors bureaux, and their role may be much wider than just being "a seller" (ICCA, n.d.; Morrison, Bruen & Anderson 1997; Wang 2008). However, on the basis of literature analysis it is hard to state which functions are crucial and which ones are supplementary to the development of the local meetings industry and a city.

This paper presents a methodological framework and the preliminary results of a research project among the convention bureaux' representatives. The purpose of the research was to identify the roles of convention bureaux in the local meetings industry according to the international potential of the local industry, measured by the number of international meetings and the position of a city in the ICCA's (International Congress and Convention Association) worldwide cities ranking. Therefore convention bureaux acting in the cities

listed in this ranking were included in the research. On the basis of literature analysis five main roles of these institutions were distinguished: the function of an agent/seller, a coordinator, a leader, a representative, and a marketer. It was expected that the convention bureaux in the cities from the top of the ranking combine all the roles mentioned above, whereas the entities in the cities on the lower positions focus mostly on the tasks ascribed to the agent function. The research were conducted from May to August 2016.

The roles of convention bureau

Many authors have tried to provide the definition of a convention bureau (CB) or convention and visitors bureau (CVB)[2] (Beaver 2005; Ford & Peeper 2008; Gartrell 1988; Getz et al. 1998; Morrison et al. 1997; Rogers 2013; Swarbrooke & Horner 2001). It can be stated that researchers agree about the overall character of CB, but they see its crucial role in the different ways. R.B. Gartrell (1988) claims that "bureaus sell cities" and through winning the right to host the meetings they contribute to the economic development of society. Swarbrooke & Horner (2001) and Ford & Peeper (2008) focus on city marketing, T. Rogers, (2013) concentrates on promotion of a city, whereas Beaver (2005) emphasises the necessity of providing information to the meeting organisers.

The functions mentioned by the authors supplement, rather than exclude each other. Therefore, in a few papers authors have tried to identify and list the roles of CB (e.g. Gartrell, 1993; Getz, Anderson, & Sheehan, 1998; Morrison et al., 1997; Wang, 2008). A complex overview of the literature about this topic was carried out by Y. Wang (2008), in which he classified the functions of CB into: destination/community marketer/promoter, destination image/brand developer, industry coordinator, advocate/supporter/facilitator of tourism projects, economic driver, builder of community pride, partnership/alliance builder, destination planner/manager, destination product developer. On the basis of the literature analysis it can be stated that the functions mentioned above can be divided into five main general roles:

1) an agent or a seller,
2) a representative,
3) a marketer,
4) a leader,
5) a coordinator.

The first role includes "selling a city" actively and passively. It means that CB looks for a current request for proposals or just responds to the inquiries of the meeting organisers. Hence, CB is responsible for creating the relationships

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[2]   It should meet three criteria: (1) be attended by at least 50 participants, (2) be organised on a regular basis (one-time events are not included), (3) move between at least 3 different countries (ICCA, 2016).

with the entities outside a city, especially with the meeting organisers. Acting as an agent can also require cooperating with other CBs. A representative's function focuses on representing a local meetings industry inside a city – in the relationships with a local government and with other institutions (cultural, financial, etc.) influencing organising a meeting and the industry's progress. CB as a marketer promotes a city as a meeting destination on the international market. Being a leader is associated with providing directions for the industry's development and monitoring the situation on the market (also by conducting research in a city). A coordinator's role is connected with previous functions, because success in winning and hosting meetings requires combining the offers of different entities into one coherent and complex product of a city. Therefore, there should probably be a coordinator who creates the conditions for cooperation and coordinates all actions in the local industry.

Method

The IPA method (Importance-Performance Analysis) was created by Martilla & James (1977) and first used in research on an automobile dealer's services. Consumers were asked to assess the different attributes of the dealer's services in two aspects: how important every attribute is (Importance) and how the dealer performed in each sphere (Performance). In this method the results are presented on a grid and their location in one of the four quadrants indicates one of four possible marketing strategies (Figure 1):
– Concentrate here,
– Keep up the good work,
– Low priority,
– Possible overkill.

Figure 1. IPA Grid
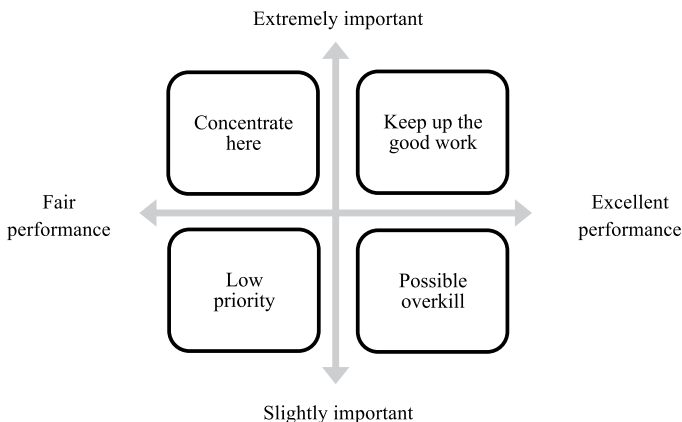
Source: Martilla & James (1977).

Choosing the method of creating the boundaries of quadrants depends on a researcher, but Martilla & James (1977) suggest applying a mean value or a middle value, when a five- or seven-point scale is used.

The IPA method is frequently employed in market research on consumer satisfaction and is applied in the field of tourism research. It was used for its primary purpose – to assess the products and services of enterprises (e.g. Chu & Choi 2000; Huan 1999), but also in a wider scope – to measure perception of a tourism destination and its competitiveness (Caber, Albayrak & Matzler 2012; Enright & Newton 2004; Erbas & Percin 2015; Mihalic 2013). The opinions of tourists, employees of tourism facilities as well as people responsible for destination management were taken into consideration as the subject of analysis (Dwyer et al. 2005). Moreover, the IPA was used to appraise the events (Baker & Draper 2013) and to assess the city's competitiveness on the international meetings market (Go & Zhang 1997).

The method was applied in this research, but the tasks of CB were included instead of the attributes of the products, services or destinations. It was assumed that the scope of tasks is different in cities with a divergent international potential of the local meeting industry. This potential was measured by the position of a city in the ranking prepared by the ICCA (International Congress and Convention Association). Such a measure was employed, because the ranking is available and commonly used as a basic indicator of the international comparison.

In the 2015 ranking 430 cities were included. Each of them hosted at least five international meetings according to ICCA's classification[3]. The mean number of meetings was 24 and the standard deviation equalled 31. This confirmed the quite high dispersion of the population. Therefore, because of the research purpose, the first step was to divide cities from ranking into smaller, more homogeneous groups. The endpoints were created as multiple mean values and six groups were formed (Table 1). What was interesting, 52% of cities hosted only 16% of meetings, whereas the top of the ranking (just 4% of cities) hosted ¼ of meetings.

Table 1. Groups of cities

No.	Mean value (x)	Intervals	Percentage of cities	Percentage of meetings
I	1/2x = 12	5–12	52.09%	16.28%
II	x = 24	13–24	22.33%	16.01%
III	2x = 48	25–48	13.26%	18.81%
IV	3x = 72	49–72	4.88%	12.26%
V	4x = 96	73–96	3.26%	11.60%
VI		above 96	4.19%	25.04%

Source: own elaboration.

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[3] It should meet three criteria: (1) be attended by at least 50 participants, (2) be organised on a regular basis (one-time events are not included), (3) move between at least 3 different countries (ICCA 2016).

The second step was to identify how many cities have CBs. The investigation was carried out via an online search and typing the phrase "name of a city + convention bureau"in a search engine. The first ten results were considered and the websites were checked, if they were managed by city or regional CBs, or similar entities. Afterward the contact details were searched to send a questionnaire in the next step of the research. It was identified that 315 cities out of the 430 listed in the ranking have or had a CB. Probably in the rest of the cities it was not necessary to create such an entity, because national CB or local congress center fulfil the responsibilities.

Finally, the contact details of 92% of the CBs (290 institutions) were collected and a questionnaire was sent at the end of June. A kind reminder was sent twice every two weeks. The questionnaire was dedicated to the management staff of CBs as meeting industry experts. It consisted of two parts: the first one was the appraisal of importance and performance of CBs' tasks (Table 2), the other one included general information about the institution (the full name of a CB, the year of foundation, the organisational form, the number of employees, the budget, the position of a respondent and for what kinds of events a CB applied). On the basis of the literature analysis twelve main tasks divided into five roles of CB were identified (Table 2). The respondents did not know the roles and which tasks were ascribed to which function.

**Table 2. Tasks of a convention bureau divided into five roles of the institution**

No.	Tasks	Roles
1	Answering the inquiries from the organisers/hosts of the events	Agent
2	Searching for requests for proposals and making bids	
3	Mediating between event organisers/hosts and entrepreneurs from the local meetings industry	
4	Cooperating with other convention bureaux	
5	Providing direction for development of the local meetings industry	Leader
6	Conducting research on the local meetings industry	
7	Creating the destination meetings industry product (combining the local entities' offers)	Coordinator
8	Coordinating activities and creating local cooperation environment in the local meetings industry	
9	Indicating the importance of the meeting industry in a city	Representative
10	Mediating between local meetings industry entrepreneurs and local government	
11	Mediating between entrepreneurs in the local meetings industry and related industries (e.g. finance, culture, recreation)	
12	Promoting the destination meetings industry product	Marketer

Source: as in Table 1.

Preliminary results

The process of collecting the questionnaires was completed in August and the return of answers was 25% (73 questionnaires). Refusals to participate in the research were sent by 2% of CBs' representatives. The minimum sample size for the population (N=315) equals 173 units (the confidence interval = 95%, the fraction = 50%, the maximum error = 5%). The sample in this project was 73 (n), thus the maximum error equals 10%. The mean value and the standard deviation were calculated and amounted to: 35 and 41, accordingly. The examined cities were divided into six groups identified in one of the previous steps (Table 1.). The Figure 2. presents the percentage of cities in every group, which was a little bit different from the population. However, in both cases the biggest group was the first one (I) and last three groups (IV-VI) included the fewest units.

Figure 2. Percentage of cities in groups
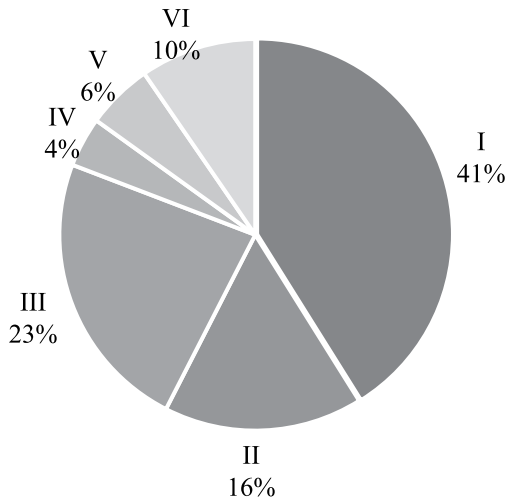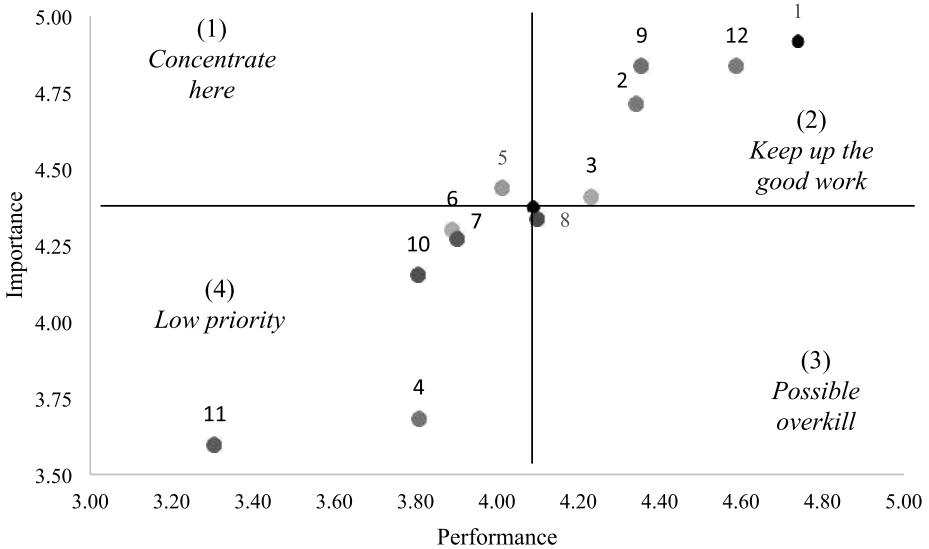

Source: own elaboration.

The sample was dominated by European CBs – the figure amounted to 56% of the sample. 19% of the institutions operated in North America, 11% were from South America, 7% from Asia and 7% from Australia and Oceania. CBs have operated for an average 24 years (n=68), but the mean value was increased by CB from the United States and Canada. The oldest CB has functioned for more than 100 years. The average of 25 full-time employees (n=73) worked in CBs and the average budget in 2015 was ca. 8.7 million USD (n=57). According to the types of the organisational forms[4] CBs operated mostly as non-profit

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[4]   The organisational forms according to UNWTO (2010).

private-public partnerships (53%, n=73). The second indicated option was the category "others" (29%), in which non-profit organisations dominated, but they were financed by the private or public sectors (separately; without partnership). 14% of CBs operated as a department of public authority, 3% – a company funded by the private sector, and 1% – a private sector trading. All CBs were responsible for winning business events. More than half of them bid for sport as well as political events (e.g. summits) and less than half – for cultural events. Category "others" included e.g. medical, religious, academic, and scientific events. Among the respondents were: presidents of CBs (7%), vice presidents (7%), directors (39%) and managers (44%). The more important information was not the name of position in organisational structure, but the fact that 46% of respondents were the head of the institution (n=68).

The crucial part of research was the Importance-Performance Analysis. The results were collected from the first part of the questionnaire and were presented on a grid (Fig. 3.) – the numbers of tasks according to Table 2.

Figure 3. Importance-Performance grid in the research of convention bureau

Source: own elaboration.

The boundaries for quadrants were calculated as the mean value for both: the importance and the performance. Using the middle value would be unreasonable, because all tasks would concentrate in one quadrant – keep up the good work. However it means that all tasks were quite important and CBs performed quite well in realising them. Five tasks were in groups (2) and (4), only one were in groups (1) and (3). The most important task with the best performance was to answer the inquiries of the meeting organisers. In this

group (2) other two tasks related to an agent role and the relationships with event organisers were included. The cooperation with other CBs were assessed as less important and with the lower performance. City promotion (a marketer) and necessity of indicating the importance of meeting industry in a city (a representative) had high importance. Other tasks ascribed to the function of a representative, considering the relationships with the government and other local entities, were located in the fourth quadrant (4). The same group had: conducting research and creating the destination meetings industry product – the task typical of a leader and a coordinator. According to the grid CBs should concentrate on providing direction for local meetings industry's development, with regard to its relatively high importance and lower performance (1). Almost on the intersection of the lines (in the third group (3) point 8 lies – coordinating local meetings industry's activities and creating local cooperation environment.

Findings

In the beginning it was assumed that CBs should rather diversify the responsibilities. However, the preliminary results showed quite a different approach – a need of specialisation, especially in field of an agent activity. Therefore part of CBs probably unnecessarily concentrate their resources on too many tasks, instead of focusing on their responsibilities, which could be fulfilled by other entities. Though it should be remembered that all task got relatively high appraisal in both: the importance and the performance – the mean values were above the middle value in the five-point scale. It means that none of the responsibilities was evaluated as necessary. Therefore the crucial problem lies in graduating the tasks rather than eliminating the fields of activity.

The paper presents only preliminary results, without dividing CBs into more homogeneous categories. The detailed analysis within the groups created on the basis of ICCA's ranking should provide more answers about the topic. It should also enable the comparison between the cities from the top of the ranking and cities in the lower positions. Interesting findings can be made after analysis related to geographical location, because of the long experience and the different character of American CBs in relation to European institutions and entities from other parts of the world.

Conclusions

Increasing importance of the meeting industry creates a need of establishing the institutions responsible for the development of this industry. The role of such entities can be very wide and it can be difficult to state which activities they should focus on and which task they should fulfil. Therefore, it is necessary for

research to identify the best solutions gained from the experienced institutions. Nevertheless, it should be taken into consideration that the same solution can produce different results in divergent conditions (related to the purposes of entities, local environment etc.). These conditions can also be investigated.

The presented results offer an introduction to further analysis. The collected data need to be examined in more detail and the research has a few limitations. Using the ICCA's ranking as the measure of cities' potential on the international meetings market can be treated as oversimplification. However, there is not any more detailed and complex worldwide ranking than this. Also, the included tasks are quite general and only few indicators were considered, which can influence the scope of CB's activities. These limitations are related to the applied method (online survey), because too long a questionnaire could yield a low number of answers. As was mentioned, it is just an introduction to further research on this topic and it partly fills the knowledge gap.

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Role biur kongresowych w globalnym przemyśle spotkań – ramy metodologiczne

Streszczenie

Celem pracy jest prezentacja metodologicznego aspektu badań dotyczących roli biur kongresowych w przemyśle spotkań. Przeprowadzony w sieci sondaż objął prawie 300 miast z rankingu ICCA. Menadżerów biur kongresowych zapytano o zadania każdego biura i działalność ich instytucji. Każde zadanie przypisano jednej z pięciu głównych ról biura kongresowego: agenta, koordynatora, przewodniczącego, przedstawiciela i sprzedawcy. Metodę badawczą oparto na analizie istotności-osiągnięć (IPA).

Słowa kluczowe: biuro kongresowe, przemysł spotkań, analiza istotności--osiągnięć, IPA, instytucje.

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Afiliacja:
mgr Natalia Piechota
Uniwersytet Ekonomiczny w Poznaniu
Wydział Gospodarki Międzynarodowej
Katedra Turystyki
Al. Niepodległości 10
61-875 Warszawa
e-mail: natalia.piechota@ue.poznan.pl