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To cite this article: Aswin Sangpikul & Seongseop (Samuel) Kim (2009) An Overview and Identification of Barriers Affecting the Meeting and Convention Industry in Thailand, Journal of Convention & Event Tourism, 10:3, 185-210, DOI: [10.1080/15470140903131822](https://doi.org/10.1080/15470140903131822)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15470140903131822>



Published online: 18 Aug 2009.



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An Overview and Identification of Barriers Affecting the Meeting and Convention Industry in Thailand

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Thailand's meeting and convention industry has developed dramatically over the last decade. Interest in the industry has grown, and competition has intensified in the marketplace due to the significant contributions to the local and national economies. Yet, there is a paucity of research exploring Thailand's meeting and convention industry. This article provides an overview of Thailand's meeting and convention industry and identifies strategies that can improve the country's competitiveness. Using primary and secondary data approaches, major barriers are identified, namely, availability of industry information, industry infrastructure (i.e., convention venues, transportation), human resources, industry co-operation, and political instability. Recommendations are proposed to increase the competitiveness of the industry.

KEYWORDS *meeting, convention; meeting, incentive, convention, and exhibition; Thailand*

INTRODUCTION

One of the most attractive and lucrative segments of the meeting, incentive, convention, and exhibition (MICE) industry is the meeting and convention sector. Many enterprises, corporations, organizations, and associations of various sorts hold one or more events, meetings, conferences, conventions, exhibitions, and other related activities every year. Today, these functions are

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organized almost anywhere in the world. Over the past decades, the growth of the meeting and convention sector has generated a significant contribution to the local and national economies of host destinations. Moreover, it also enhances the growth of the overall travel and tourism sectors. This results in an intensified competition among host destinations that are keen to attract more meetings and conventions.

In addition to the growth of the convention market in North America and Europe, Asia has lately been a popular region for hosting international meetings and conferences. Among the popular convention destinations in Asia, Thailand has devoted considerable marketing resources to target the meeting and convention market segment. These efforts, with approximately US\$25 million in 2008, aim to attract more convention business and stimulate the tourism industry of the country (Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau [TCEB], 2008). In international terms, promoting a country as a tourist destination for holiday travel can be enhanced by the meeting and convention industry (Cooper, 1999).

During the last decade, Thailand's meeting and convention industry has developed dramatically with the growth of participants and the expansion of related facilities. Today, there is an abundance of supply in Thailand to serve the market, with over 3 million square feet of meeting and convention space and more than 10,000 hotel rooms (see Tables 1 and 2 in the next section). However, attracting more convention business to the destination is a challenging task with today's intensified competition in the region. As the competition increases, major Asian countries have become more aggressive in their efforts to attract convention business.

To enhance the competitiveness of Thailand's MICE industry in the international marketplace, this article provides an overview of Thailand's meeting and convention industry and identifies strategies to improve the country's competitiveness. Providing an overview of Thailand's meeting and convention sector is necessary for industry practitioners to appropriately develop further plans, policies, and strategies for better performance and improve the chance of success in the competitive market.

TABLE 1 Major Purpose-Built Convention Venues in Thailand

Convention venue	Location (region)	Total capacity (sq. ft.)
IMPACT	Bangkok (central)	1,500,000
QSNCC	Bangkok (central)	645,000
BITEC	Bangkok (central)	430,000
PEACH	Pattaya (east)	170,000
PHECC	Bangkok (central)	77,000
Total		2,822,000

Source: Individual convention venue's website.

TABLE 2 Major Convention Hotels

Hotel name	Location (region)	Total capacity (sq. ft.)	Number of guest rooms
Ambassador City Jomtien	Pattaya (east)	107,000	4200
Centara Grand at Central World	Bangkok (central)	87,500	505
Sofitel Centara Grand Bangkok	Bangkok (central)	75,000	607
The Ambassador Bangkok	Bangkok (central)	52,000	830
Holiday Inn Chiang Mai	Chiang Mai (north)	50,000	526
Royal Orchid Sheraton	Bangkok (central)	43,000	734
Imperial Queen's Park	Bangkok (central)	40,000	1250
Shangri-la Bangkok	Bangkok (central)	38,500	799
Sofitel Raja Orchid	Khon Kaen (northeast)	38,000	293
Sheraton Grande Laguna	Phuket (south)	20,400	423
Hilton Phuket Arcadia	Phuket (south)	19,000	676
Chiang Mai Orchid	Chiang Mai (north)	15,000	266
Total		585,400	11,109

Source: Individual hotel's website.

According to the literature, the terms “convention,” “conference,” and “meeting” are similar, and they may be used interchangeably (Lee & Park, 2002; Rockett & Smillie, 1994). In this article, the term “convention” may be more frequently used since it deals with an entire spectrum of meetings of all types, as well as for the sake of convenience. In addition, the MICE acronym may be frequently mentioned throughout the discussion; however, the article primary focus is the meeting and convention sector.

OVERVIEW OF MEETING AND CONVENTION BUSINESS IN THAILAND

Evolution of Meetings and Conventions in Thailand

The early development of the meeting and convention industry in Thailand has not been well documented. It was not until 1977 that the International Convention Division of the Tourism Authority of Thailand was established. This could be regarded as the starting point for recognizing the importance of international conventions in Thailand (Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, 2003). In the first years following the founding of the International Convention Division, most meetings and conventions were held in city hotels. By 1984, the Tourism Authority of Thailand established the Thailand Incentive and Convention Association (TICA) with the purpose of closely coordinating between government and private sectors to effectively develop and promote the MICE industry. In the beginning, TICA's members included hotels, destination management companies, tour operators, convention/exhibition organizations, contractors, convention centers,

advertising agencies, and other tourism suppliers. Later, the Bangkok Convention Center of the Sofitel Central Plaza Hotel (currently Sofitel Centara Grand Bangkok) was built. This venue was recognized as the first international standard convention hall in Thailand (Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, 2003). By 1991, Thailand's first national and world-class convention center, the "Queen Sirikit National Convention Center" (QSNCC), was opened to serve the industry's growing needs and to host major international events. Since the opening of the QSNCC, the Thai government has played an active role in supporting the MICE industry and has aimed to promote Thailand as one of the leading convention destinations in the Asia-Pacific region.

In recognition of the importance and contribution of the MICE industry to the national economy and the increasingly competitive global market, the Thai government established the TCEB in 2002 as the key government agency responsible for the nation's MICE industry. The establishment of the TCEB represents a long-term commitment by the Thai government and private sector to promote and develop the country's MICE industry. The TCEB plays an important role as a coordination and facilitation center for Thai business operators by offering an integrated one-stop service and supporting businesses involved in MICE in Thailand.

During the past decade, several major convention venues were built to respond to the increasing demand of the MICE market. Most of these venues are located in Bangkok, namely, the Impact Convention and Exhibition Center (IMPACT), the QSNCC, the Bangkok International Trade & Exhibition Center (BITEC), and the Paragon Hall Exhibition & Convention Center (PHECC). In 2008, another major convention venue, the Pattaya Exhibition & Convention Center (PEACH) was opened in Pattaya, in the eastern region (150 kilometers from Bangkok). In addition to purpose-built convention venues, many international events are held in deluxe hotels in some regions. For example, in Chiang Mai (north), most events are held in hotels such as the Chiang Mai Orchid Hotel, the Holiday Inn Chiang Mai, and the Chiang Mai University's Convention Center. In the northeast, in Khon Kaen, there are some convention venues, such as the Golden Jubilee Convention Hall of Khon Kaen University and the Sofitel Raja Orchid Hotel. In the south, in Phuket, many events are held in deluxe hotels such as the Hilton Phuket Arcadia and the Sheraton Grande Laguna Hotel. In general, the majority of the convention hotels are international hotel chains, while some are local. Tables 1 and 2 present the information regarding major purpose-built convention venues and leading convention hotels in Thailand.

Information on the Meeting and Convention Industry in Thailand

This section presents information regarding international meetings and conventions in Thailand during recent years (2005–2007). Table 3 shows the number of participants attending meeting and convention events in each

TABLE 3 Number of Participants Attending International Meetings and Conventions in Thailand

Region	Number of international participants			Number of local participants			Total participants		
	2005	2006	2007	2005	2006	2007	2005	2006	2007
Bangkok	188,000	264,000	269,000	74,100	99,400	96,600	262,100	363,400	365,600
Central	32,500	37,000	39,200	7800	15,200	17,300	40,300	52,200	56,500
North	39,500	56,700	55,800	12,600	16,800	24,100	52,100	73,500	79,900
South	46,800	48,900	57,800	8700	16,300	20,800	55,500	65,200	78,600
East	47,500	52,200	60,200	16,600	23,700	25,100	64,100	75,900	85,300
Northeast	8100	4000	3600	3100	1500	3800	11,200	5500	7400
Total	362,400	462,800	485,600	122,900	172,900	187,700	485,300	635,700	672,700

Remark: the central area excludes Bangkok.

Source: TCEB (2005, 2006, 2007).

region, including Bangkok. During the past three years, the number of total participants (both international and local) increased from 485,300 in 2005 to 672,700 participants in 2007. Based on the information, the proportion of international to Thai participants was approximately 70% to 30%, with more than half of them attending the events held in Bangkok. In addition to Bangkok, many events were held in different parts of the country, including the east, the north, and the south. As can be seen in Table 4, more than 4000 events were held in Thailand each year. Bangkok was the most popular destination, while other popular cities included Pattaya (east), Chiang Mai (north), and Phuket (south).

It should be noted that the above information from the TCEB is currently available only up until 2007. For the years 2008 and 2009, at time of writing this article, it is expected that there will be a decreasing number of international meeting and convention events in Thailand (by 20–30%) due to recent political problems (Karantzavelou, 2009; Pakdeekul, 2008). Looking ahead,

TABLE 4 Number of International Meeting and Convention Events Held in Major Cities

Cities	Number of events		
	2005	2006	2007
Bangkok (central)	2197	2167	2834
Pattaya (east)	420	426	440
Chiang Mai (north)	405	370	453
Phuket (south)	347	354	338
Hua Hin (central)	248	201	285
Chiang Rai (north)	115	124	129
Other cities/areas	390	396	113
Total	4122	4038	4592

Source: TCEB (2005, 2006, 2007).

TABLE 5 Size of International Meeting and Convention Events Held in Thailand

Number of participants	Percentage		
	2005	2006	2007
50 or less	12.72	10.30	13.27
51–100	27.95	28.83	31.71
101–200	33.47	38.21	32.73
201–300	17.25	14.81	13.34
301–400	5.28	4.09	4.23
401–500	1.45	1.73	1.31
501–1000	1.88	1.71	2.41
1001 or more	0.48	0.32	1.02
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: TCEB (2005, 2006, 2007).

if the problems remain unsolved, this may significantly affect the industry and the image of Thailand as a secure MICE destination.

As shown in Table 5, the size of meetings/conventions ranged from below 50 participants (including foreigners and locals) to 1000 participants or more. Most of the international meetings and conventions ranged between 101–200 participants and 51–100 participants, while events with 301 participants or more was less than 10%. Table 6 presents the duration of the events held in Thailand. The common duration of the event ranged from one day to five days; however, the most popular length was a three-day meeting. Events lasting more than six days represented less than 10%.

Table 7 presents the information about market segments of the meeting and convention industry in Thailand. Excluding the local market (Thai participants), major overseas markets include Asia, Europe, and North America. Table 8 shows the number of events held in each month. It seems that there is not much difference between events held each month, with an average of 344 events in 2005, 337 events in 2006, and 383 events in 2007. However, it

TABLE 6 Duration of International Meetings and Conventions Held in Thailand

Number of days	Percentage		
	2005	2006	2007
One day	13.00	14.74	17.4
Two days	21.36	19.86	16.26
Three days	25.40	27.28	24.18
Four days	16.38	14.88	17.97
Five days	11.17	11.31	14.30
Six days	3.85	3.43	3.19
Seven days	3.10	2.16	2.21
More than seven days	5.73	6.34	4.49
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: TCEB (2005, 2006, 2007).

TABLE 7 Market Segments of International Meetings and Conventions in Thailand

Market	Number of participants		
	2005	2006	2007
Asia	191,953	200,164	229,710
Europe	58,544	76,107	91,729
North America	27,845	42,693	45,437
Oceania	15,688	23,095	25,484
Africa	4387	8076	12,145
Middle East	5498	7147	11,781
Thailand (locals)	122,900	172,900	187,700
Unidentified/no information	58,485	105,518	68,714
Total	485,300	635,700	672,700

Source: TCEB (2005, 2006, 2007).

can be observed that during the early months of the year (from January to March), there were more events; October, November, and December tended to be less busy months. Table 9 shows the major themes for meeting and convention held in Thailand during the past three years, which include management, medical science, commerce, social science, and technology.

Table 10 presents a comparison of the recent information between international tourism and business tourism (meetings/conventions) in Thailand. Although the number of business travelers (486,338) is approximately 3% of the overall tourist arrivals (14,464,228), the revenues generated from this sector alone (US\$1.235 billion) were almost 10% of the overall tourism revenue (US\$15.951 billion) due to higher spending by business travelers. According to Table 10, the average expense per day of business travelers (US\$388) is approximately three times higher than that of leisure tourists (US\$120). With

TABLE 8 Monthly Events of International Meetings and Conventions Held in Thailand

Month	Number of events		
	2005	2006	2007
January	582	574	380
February	612	723	435
March	542	689	495
April	245	261	300
May	378	360	453
June	266	257	401
July	305	208	384
August	245	270	401
September	233	218	361
October	252	164	295
November	247	211	468
December	215	103	219
Total	4122	4038	4592
Average per month	344	337	383

Source: TCEB (2005, 2006, 2007).

TABLE 9 Major Themes of International Meeting and Convention Themes Held in Thailand

2005	2006	2007
1. Management (435 events)	1. Medical science (444 events)	1. Management (486 events)
2. Medical science (429 events)	2. Management (374 events)	2. Medical science (452 events)
3. Commerce (378 events)	3. Commerce (349 events)	3. Commerce (429 events)
4. Social science (354 events)	4. Social science (324 events)	4. Banking and finance (348 events)
5. Technology (337 events)	5. Technology (316 events)	5. Technology (336 events)
6. Communication and transportation (304 events)	6. Education (268 events)	6. Social science (329 events)
7. Banking and finance (272 events)	7. Communication and transportation (244 events)	7. Communication and transportation (267 events)
8. Education (242 events)	8. Banking and finance (242 events)	8. Ecology and environment (246 events)
9. Industry and manufacturing (234 events)	9. Ecology and environment (228 events)	9. Education (243 events)
10. Ecology and environment (215 events)	10. Industry and manufacturing (221 events)	10. Industry and manufacturing (228 events)

Source: TCEB (2005, 2006, 2007).

high spending and a growing market, Thailand is attempting to attract more meeting and convention business to the country to increase the nation's revenues and stimulate the growth of the hospitality and tourism industry (Sritaman, 2008; "Thailand as the MICE destination in ASEAN," 2007). In recent years, the Thai government has allocated more budget (from US\$10.2 million in 2004 to US\$26.7 million in 2009) for the TCEB to use for marketing activities (e.g., advertising, promoting) as well as for international bidding, road shows, and trade shows ("TCEB received 350 million Baht to promote MICE," 2004; TCEB, 2008).

Contributions of the Meeting and Convention Industry to Host Destinations

Over the past decades, the growth of the meeting and convention industry has generated substantial direct and indirect impacts on local and

TABLE 10 Comparison Between International Tourism and Business Tourism in Thailand, 2007

Tourism information	Business tourism (meetings and conventions)	International tourism (leisure tourism)
Number of international visitors	486,338 visitors	14,464,228 visitors
Average length of stay	6.55 days	9.19 days
Average expense/person/day	US\$388	US\$120
Revenue	US\$1,235,979,393	US\$15,951,150,638

Source: TCEB (2007).

national economies (Grado, Strauss, & Lord, 1998; Lee & Back, 2005a). The meeting and convention market is a complex and fragmented industry. It consists of many stakeholders, including suppliers (convention venues, accommodation, caterings, airlines, travel companies, service providers), agencies/intermediaries, and industry organizations (government and private). With a wide range of related businesses, organizing meetings and conventions in the host destinations can generate revenues for many stakeholders (Cheung & Law, 2002; O'Brien & Shaw, 2002). According to the TCEB (2006), the receipts from the MICE industry in Thailand generated two to four times more revenue than other tourism sectors. In addition, hosting meeting and conference events can provide job opportunities for local residents and generate tax income for the government (Cheung & Law, 2002). According to Chen and Lalopa (1999), hosting a wide variety of events may stimulate repeat visits by people who had visited the host destination in the past and subsequently choose to return with family or friends, or by people who come via word of mouth, or even by those who wish to host another convention or exhibition.

The meeting and convention industry is often a reason for the generation of investment in the tourism and recreation infrastructure, and it provides an opportunity for the stabilization of tourism inflows to a nation and sub-regions. It also stimulates business activity within and between nations (Dwyer & Forsyth, 1999 cited in Cooper, 1999). In this regard, the meeting and convention industry not only contributes economically to host destinations, but also accelerates growth of the overall hospitality and tourism industry. This is particularly true of international meetings and conventions. Many convention attendees bring their families for leisure activities, bringing additional revenue (Lee & Back, 2005a).

The overall impact of the convention business is expected to be much larger than the spending associated with attending a convention (Braun & Rungeling, 1992; Kim, Chon, & Chung, 2003). The amount of convention-related spending initiates a broad set of economic interactions that produce additional spending in other sectors of a region's economy (Braun & Rungeling, 1992). Thus, the economic impact of meetings and conventions can be doubled or tripled due to the extensive indirect impact on the host's economies (Lee & Back, 2005a), and meetings and conventions can also provide a year-round demand, especially during the off or shoulder seasons (Abbey & Link, 1994 cited in Oppermann, 1998).

In addition to the economic contributions, intangible benefits generated from the meeting and convention industry cannot be ignored. These may include associated social and cultural benefits to the host destinations, the exchange of ideas, the cultivation of business contacts, the provision of forums for continuing education and training, and the facilitation of technology transfers (Dwyer & Forsyth, 1997). With significant contributions to the national economy, as well as the hospitality and tourism industry, it is worth

examining associated barriers that might affect the success of Thailand's meeting and convention industry.

METHODS

This research adopted a qualitative approach as it sought to understand the barriers impeding the success of Thailand's meeting and convention industry. For exploratory research, a combination of primary and secondary data approaches was used to collect required information. Primary data were collected through a semi-structured in-depth interview with six industry executives and two academics who are involved with Thailand's meeting and convention industry. The interviewees were chosen based on a purposive sampling method together with the advice of tourism/MICE scholars. Data collection began with the interview of two scholars from the Tourism Academic Association of Thailand, and followed with an interview of a group of industry executives (e.g. directors, managers) from the TCEB, TICTA, IMPACT, BITEC, QSNCC, and Thai Hotels Association. The interviewees were asked to express their opinions regarding barriers or problems that might affect the success of Thailand's meeting and convention industry. They were also asked to suggest ways to overcome these barriers. The interviews ranged from 30–50 minutes, and all interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed. With the qualitative approach (personal interviews), it is common to find some differences in opinion among the respondents. In order to support the primary data and search for additional relevant information, the secondary data approach (documentary method) was undertaken through a review of related websites, reports, newspapers, research, journal articles, and other relevant literature to help identify similar or related problems. After the collection of primary and secondary data, which took place during October to December 2008, all information was summarized and then discussed with two scholars specializing in the MICE industry in an effort to put the information in context in terms of its relevance and importance to the industry.

RESULTS

Based on the primary and secondary data methods together with the discussions with tourism scholars, five major barriers inhibiting the success of Thailand's meeting and convention industry are identified. These barriers include availability of industry information, industry infrastructure (i.e., convention venues, transportation), human resources, industry cooperation, and political instability. The results are presented in the following.

Industry Information

Insufficiency of meeting and convention information. Convention customers (e.g., associations, corporations, and meeting planners) may search the Internet to look for information on convention venues and related facilities. Prior studies have indicated that the effective use of the Internet will assist hospitality and tourism marketing promotions (Cheung & Law, 2002; Sammons, 2000). Effective websites can serve as online advertising channels to market destinations for searchers who are interested in meetings and conventions (Cheung & Law, 2002). A review of websites from Thailand's major convention organizations together with industry executives' points of view revealed some weaknesses of Thailand's major MICE websites regarding the provision of detailed industry information. A case in point is the website of the TCEB (www.tceb.or.th). This website is the official point of contact for the MICE industry in Thailand. The website provides information on conventions and exhibitions in general, but the comprehensive/detailed information, particularly the essential information for which the clients may be looking (i.e., location map of convention venues, lists of major hotels with meeting facilities) was not adequately provided. Other information that has been indicated as key site selection criteria in the literature, such as public transportation (accessibility), leisure activities, or safety/security, was not provided. Although the website provides some lists of MICE suppliers, there were no links to those suppliers at the time of survey. And, although meetings and conventions can be arranged/organized in several parts of Thailand (e.g., major tourist cities), the information promoting those cities was not supported.

Furthermore, the information addressing the question of "why Thailand?" did not really sound attractive/convincing for primary audiences (e.g., corporations, meeting planners) in persuading them to hold meetings/conventions in Thailand. The information provided in this part (why Thailand?) is a key message to create interest and build confidence for the potential organizers to hold conferences in Thailand. However, the message seems too general and lacks information explaining why people should hold their meetings or conventions in Thailand.

The website of the TICA (www.tica.or.th) is another important website for the MICE industry in Thailand. As with the TCEB, the website seems to lack the comprehensive/detailed information to attract audiences' interest. The campaign on the website at the time of the survey was "Thailand, Where the World Wants to Meet." However, the promoting message did not really reinforce the campaign. The key messages on the websites, such as "why Thailand," "choose Thailand," and "exceed expectations" did not sound attractive. In particular, in "why Thailand," the messages did not seem to be relevant to the theme. Instead, it presented different types of MICE businesses (e.g., staff incentives, conferences and conventions, and exhibitions). The

messages did not present the reasons why people should select Thailand as the convention destination. The website also contained a member directory (list of service providers) but no search tool for a specific purpose (e.g., selecting downtown venues or city hotels) was provided. This may pose difficulties for the prospective clients as they search for desired information.

It should be noted that the above comments were given based on the purpose of the research, which was to review the major MICE websites in Thailand. It is not the intention to isolate problems in the above websites but simply to find possible areas to further develop or enhance the effectiveness of the information and how it is presented.

Limited research on meetings and conventions in the Thai context. Several interviewees expressed concerns about the limited MICE research from the Thai context. Some of them argued that although the MICE industry has been a growing segment over a decade and the market has been intensified, Thailand still lacks adequate MICE research examining important areas such as marketing, service quality, human resources, and industry standards. A review of literature indicated that existing studies, mostly conducted by local researchers, were limited in scope. These studies examine areas such as participants' perception and satisfaction toward convention venues, developing Thailand as a MICE destination, competitiveness of Thailand as a MICE destination, and crisis vulnerability of the MICE sector. It appears that most of those studies focused on the MICE industry in general, rather than emphasizing the meeting and convention sector.

The rapid development of MICE activities, combined with the economic benefits associated with the industry, drive the need for MICE research (Ladkin, 2002). Research is important for MICE stakeholders to acquire a body of knowledge that can be used to encourage industry development. There is a wide range of businesses involved in the industry (e.g., convention venue suppliers, hotels, airlines, travel companies, catering services, professional conference organizations), which highlights the importance of research for related parties to get a better understanding of this complex industry. According to the industry's perspectives, lack of sufficient research may impede the long-term development of the industry to compete successfully with more established MICE destinations and counteract the growing competition.

Industry Infrastructure

Convention venues. From the industry's point of view, it seems that there is an adequate availability of purpose-built convention venues in Bangkok along with deluxe/convention hotels to serve the needs of the market. Furthermore, there is another convention venue (PEACH) close to Bangkok in Pattaya, which is approximately 150 kilometers to the east of Bangkok. As shown in Table 4, it appears that Bangkok (central) and Pattaya

(east) are the two most popular convention cities in Thailand with a total market share of 65%, while other cities shared the rest. According to the TCEB (2006), the Thai government has a policy to promote meetings and conventions in major cities in order to boost economic growth and tourism in the local areas. However, it seems that most events were concentrated in the central area. In order to be an attractive MICE destination and be competitive in the market, Thailand should have more options (Sokcho, 2008). Other cities should be equipped with a full range of convention facilities accommodating a wide range of convention sizes. Unfortunately, there is no purpose-built convention venue in major cities, such as Chiang Mai and Phuket, and these two cities are the major tourist and MICE destinations in the northern and southern regions, respectively. Most meetings and conventions in these two cities were held in hotels with limited capacity (see Table 4). It is generally argued that convention venues and facilities are regarded as the key site selection factors for holding international events (Montgomery & Strick, 1995; Upchurch, Jeong, Clements, & Jung, 1999). Lack of sufficient convention venues in major cities, such as Chiang Mai and Phuket, may impede the growth and development of Thailand's MICE industry in the long run, particularly the economic contributions to the local areas and the industry's competitiveness (Sokcho, 2008). As the TCEB aims to promote Thailand as the leading convention destination in Asia by marketing Bangkok and other cities as premier convention places, lack of convention venues in major cities may be a major barrier to success.

Ground transportation. According to interviewees' opinions, although there are several convention venues in Bangkok, some of them are located in suburb areas, notably the major ones such as the BITEC and the IMPACT. These two convention venues are located approximately 25–30 kilometers away from the city center, and traveling to and from these convention venues by public transportation (bus, taxi) may not be convenient for many conference participants due to traffic problems. Currently, Bangkok's sky train and subway systems, which are the most effective and convenient public transportation in the city, are not directly linked to these two venues. This affects "accessibility," which is defined as how convenient it is for delegates to travel to and from a conference site, traveling time, effort, and costs of transportation (Go & Govers, 1999).

The lack of effective ground transportation to reach major convention venues can be viewed as a barrier for those looking to organize large international conventions in Bangkok. According to the literature, ground transportation is regarded as a major site selection criterion for many corporations, associations, and meeting planners (Montgomery & Strick, 1995; Upchurch et al., 1999).

Furthermore, the lack of an effective transportation system for convention events may affect the desired image of Bangkok as the leading convention city in Asia when compared to other competing cities such as

Hong Kong, Singapore, and Seoul (Sokcho, 2008), all of which have effective public transportation and accessibility to convention venues. Other cities, such as Chiang Mai and Phuket, also suffer a similar public transportation problem to Bangkok ("Thailand," 2007). In particular, Phuket lacks an effective local transportation network. Delegates may have difficulties traveling between convention sites and their hotels or to down-town areas or tourist attractions, since there are not many local buses and they often do not operate on a regular/fixed schedule. The issue of public transportation seems to be another barrier that requires urgent attention from the government if Thailand wishes to promote itself as a leading convention destination in Asia.

Human Resources

According to the industry's perspectives, another major barrier for promoting Thailand as a leading convention destination is the insufficient number of professional or skilled staff at the management level to run international convention businesses. It is argued that Thailand still needs a lot of experienced staff (executives, directors, managers) who are skilled and well-rounded in convention businesses. Areas of particular need include project management, information technology, and business strategy. Several interviewees noted that people who work in the industry typically come from different fields in the hospitality and tourism industry. Although they have worked in a related field, specific industry knowledge and work experience in MICE business is required to fully understand the complexity of the industry and the sophisticated needs of customers.

Furthermore, interviewees indicated that differences in product and service standards delivered by local providers based in Bangkok and other cities are another important problem for Thailand's MICE industry. From the industry practitioners' points of view, staff based in Bangkok (e.g., event managers, operating officers, service people) seem to have a better understanding of the convention business and can provide more professional services than those who work in other provinces (e.g., Chiang Mai, Phuket, Pattaya). In particular, those who work for small companies may not fully understand their roles, job responsibilities, and the services required of MICE suppliers. This problem could affect the service quality delivered by local suppliers, particularly the small companies. To prosper in the industry and compete with other leading destinations, the development of human resources in Thailand's MICE industry needs serious attention ("Thailand," 2007).

Industry Cooperation

The survey identified cooperation among MICE stakeholders as another barrier that might affect the success of the industry. As mentioned, the MICE industry in Thailand has just emerged with the recent establishment of the

TCEB (government agency), which is in charge of MICE promotion. The TCEB, which was formed in 2004, is a young convention and visitor bureau (CVB) when compared to well-established CVBs in competitor countries. In this study, MICE stakeholders consist of three major sectors: government agencies, MICE suppliers, and industry associations. According to industry perspectives, several issues have been undertaken without adequate coordination or cooperation from key stakeholders. These include the determination of national policies, strategies of destination marketing, human resource training, and international convention bidding. In order to compete in the global market, it is vital that Thailand's MICE industry stakeholders closely work and coordinate with one another to deliver products and services that satisfy customers' needs. Due to the strong competition in the region, cooperation among stakeholders is needed to enhance the competence and competitiveness of the industry ("Thailand," 2007). As a fragmented industry, there is a wide range of key players in the MICE industry, thus the scope of cooperation appears to be a challenge in coordinating the activities to provide a quality product that meets the needs of organizers and delegates. In particular, cooperation at both national and regional/local levels should be encouraged (Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, 2003).

Political Instability and Security Concerns

An important destination selection factor for meetings and conventions is the image of the country, particularly with regard to the issue of safety and security concerns (Campiranon, 2007). The issue of safety and security at the host destination has an impact on MICE customers' perceived risk in terms of buying MICE products and their decision to choose the destinations (Campiranon, 2007). In recent years, Thailand has faced situations of political instability and terrorism in the southern border part of Thailand (i.e., Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat provinces). According to the industry's opinions and secondary data sources (e.g., Chinmaneevong, 2008; Sritaman, 2008), these events have affected the image of Thailand as a safe and secure host destination.

One of the major events that significantly affected Thailand's image was the recent anti-government protests and the closing of the major airports in Bangkok. There is no doubt that the recent government protests and political problems in Thailand significantly hurt the tourism and MICE industries. According to local media (Chinmaneevong, 2008; Sritaman, 2008), several international organizations have postponed or cancelled meetings and conventions arranged in Thailand. With the unstable political situation and negative international media coverage of past political events, it is expected the industry might lose 20–30% of MICE business in the year 2008 (Pakdeekul, 2008). In general, it seems that political instability may have a

more lasting negative effect on MICE activities than other events such as natural disasters or terrorist attacks (Fletcher & Morakabati, 2008), and this would be a major barrier affecting the success of Thailand's MICE industry if the situation continues and remains unresolved. Although anti-government protests are common in democratic countries (Chinmaneevong, 2008), it is important for Thailand to learn its impact on the MICE industry, as well as to determine appropriate plans or strategies (e.g., security or crisis management plans) to rebuild confidence for MICE customers and to improve the national image in the world market.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this final section, recommendations are made based on the overall review of the meeting and convention industry in Thailand. It is hoped that the suggestions provided might help Thailand's convention practitioners refine or develop policies and plans to improve their performance, competence, and competitiveness in the marketplace, thereby attracting more MICE businesses to the country.

Industry Information

Provision of comprehensive/detailed information on meetings and conventions. One important factor for promoting and marketing convention business is the availability of necessary information, particularly through the Internet (Lee & Back, 2005a). Internet-based marketing strategy is a fast, cost-effective, and widely applicable method in the present market (Cheung & Law, 2002). Because marketing meetings and conventions through the Internet is powerful and effective, it thus requires attention from MICE suppliers (Carlsen, 1999). An overview of Thailand's major convention websites (TCEB, TICA) revealed some weaknesses. For example, the lack of comprehensive/detailed information of convention venues, related facilities, transportation, local attractions, and the attractiveness of the information/messages is problematic.

Promoting and marketing convention business through the Internet requires complete and detailed information for the prospective clients to consider regarding the host destination. The information available on the website often makes the first impression about the quality and professionalism of the destination's services. As meeting organizers/planners place considerable importance on the availability of necessary information (Oppermann, 1996), websites can serve as publicity networks and marketing intermediaries that offer a direct communication link to potential customers (Cheung & Law, 2002). Lack of necessary information might result in loss of interest at the initial stage and could generate a potential non-positive image for the

meeting and convention industry in Thailand. With increasing demands and expectations from customers in the competitive market, the issue of providing comprehensive information needs immediate attention should Thailand wish to remain competitive in the region.

Enhancing research in meetings and conventions. According to the results, there is limited research focusing on the meeting and convention sector in Thailand. Research is important for MICE stakeholders to acquire the body of knowledge that can be used for the development of the industry and to increase competitiveness in a global market. Studies relating to the MICE industry would help the stakeholders (government agencies, associations, business sector) better understand the complexity of the industry and deliver products and services that respond to the needs of the prospects (e.g., convention organizations, meeting planners, delegates). Lack of sufficient research could be a significant handicap to the long-term development of the industry. A review of MICE literature suggests that Thailand needs more research work in the meeting and convention industry, and this may present research opportunities for both local and international researchers to conduct more research in the Thai context.

As Oppermann (1996) pointed out, the meeting and convention industry generally involves three major players, namely, meeting suppliers (host destination, facility, service providers), meeting buyers (associations, corporations, government, meeting planners), and meeting attendees/participants. This suggests that researchers could examine different aspects of the three meeting players, and different MICE sectors should be fully explored. However, most of the previous research seems to focus on one aspect of the industry or the perspective of one player (Smith & Garnham, 2006). This may potentially oversimplify or underestimate the fragmented and complex nature of the industry, rather than exploring the relationships between and within it (Ladkin, 2002). In this respect, it is recommended that more work is needed on other elements/aspects of the industry in order to better understand how the various elements are interrelated and to examine their relationships within the industry (Smith & Garngam, 2006; Yoo & Weber, 2005).

In addition to the above considerations, other topics of the meeting and convention industry should be explored further because they may be associated with the success of the industry. Lee and Park (2002), for example, argued that the increasing competition and more demanding customers mean that careful consideration must be given, not only to convention facilities, but also to the services provided during the meeting programs. Leask and Spiller (2002) added that the provision of "a quality service" with supporting arrangements and assistance during the conventions may encourage repeat business and customer satisfaction. This suggests that research in the area of service quality cannot be overlooked, particularly that of the service providers (e.g., convention venues and hotels). According to Lee and

Back (2005b), as the competition among convention destinations intensifies, destination marketers face numerous challenges in creating positive destination images. In particular, Thailand's MICE industry has been affected by political unrest over recent years. This suggests more research is needed to investigate the current perceptions of the overseas customers in order to determine appropriate future plans and strategies.

Research pertaining to the economic impact assessment is another rare area for Thailand's meeting and convention industry. According to Lee (2007), research on economic impact assessment is needed to better understand the meeting and convention activities and their impacts on the host destination in terms of social, cultural, and economic benefits. In the Thai context, though it is widely accepted that the meeting and convention industry significantly contributes to the country's economy, no empirical study has attempted to estimate its actual impact, including the impacts of industry revenues, attendees' expenditure/travel behavior, industry employment, and other related activities. It is recommended that the concerned parties, especially the government agencies, should provide more funds to conduct research in this area, as an understanding of the actual impacts would assist with accurate planning and development in the meeting and convention industry (Lee, 2007).

A review of literature also indicates that researchers have mainly focused on the perspectives of meeting planners and organizations, while research regarding delegates/attendees is still limited, particularly, research related to convention attendees' travel behavior and perceived attractiveness of a convention city (Boo, Koh, & Jones, 2008; Lee & Back, 2005b). Attendees play an important role in the meeting and convention industry since they can bring significant revenue to the host destination, and satisfied attendees can generate more revenues to the host destination by repeat visits (Lee & Back, 2005b). With a paucity of research in this area, studies examining attendees' perspectives may contribute to Thailand's meeting and convention industry.

In addition to the above considerations, a review of related literature suggests other research topics that are important to the development of Thailand's meeting and convention industry. These include convention site selection criteria and related decision-making processes, the city's or country's image, customer satisfaction, MICE product development, marketing issues, human resource issues, and service standards (Baloglu & Love, 2005; Campbell & Shaw, 2000; Crouch & Ritchie, 1998; Lee & Park, 2002; Mistilis & Dwyer, 1999; Oppermann, 1996; Upchurch et al., 1999).

Infrastructure Development

As noted, there is a lack of purpose-built convention venues in major convention cities such as Chiang Mai and Phuket. Chiang Mai (the north) is well

known for the beauty of its nature and attractive culture, while Phuket (the south) is world famous for its beautiful beaches. These two cities are the major tourism cities of Thailand, and the government is attempting to promote and market them as the leading convention centers in the northern and the southern regions. However, the lack of sophisticated convention venues may impact those two cities in various areas, including the opportunities to host large international events, economic contributions to local/regional areas, and growth/expansion of the local tourism industry.

As mentioned, most international conventions in Chiang Mai and Phuket were held in local hotels with limited capacity. Developing convention venues in those two cities (either from government budget or as private property) would increase the competitiveness of Thailand's MICE industry and generate benefits to the region. For private investment, incentives for investors should be encouraged. Moreover, having a new convention center in provinces would increase the options for the clients to consider or select their preferred convention venues in places besides Bangkok. According to the information from Table 4, if Chiang Mai and Phuket had new convention venues that could accommodate more than 1000 participants, they could attract more convention business to these regions, which would contribute to the local economy and the growth of the tourism industry.

With regard to public transportation, although the development of public transportation is a large project and requires a lot of investment, the Thai government needs to invest in this important infrastructure. Public transportation projects, such as bus, sky train, and subway systems, should be primary concerns and need serious attention from the government. This investment is needed to boost the country's economy, encourage foreign investment, and to benefit the social welfare of local residents. Efficient and adequate transportation would not only strengthen Thailand's economy and investment in the long term, but would also support the expansion of the tourism and MICE industries.

Human Resource Development

As noted by MacLaurin (2002), the demand for highly skilled employees is driven by the growth of the market and the increased sophistication of the industry and its customers. In a highly competitive market, human resources are ultimately crucial to sustaining the success of the industry, despite changing market conditions (Torraco & Swanson, 1995 cited in Dwyer & Mistilis, 1999). In this regard, it is suggested that Thailand should pay more attention to the development of human resources in the MICE industry if it is to continue to grow and prosper. Meetings and conventions are a complex business requiring staff skilled in areas such as management, marketing, budgeting, negotiation, interpersonal communication, and IT (Dwyer & Mistilis, 1999;

MacLaurin, 2002; Mistilis & Dwyer, 1999). Academics suggest that developing sophisticated training and career development programs to provide staff with various skills may be important for the development of human resources in the MICE industry (Mistilis & Dwyer, 1999). To do so, the TCEB is an important organization to determine a national plan for the development of human resources in Thailand's MICE industry. The plans should be co-determined by the industry stakeholders by emphasizing or enhancing the skills and ability of MICE managers and staff in various areas (e.g., management, marketing, service standard, IT) to serve the needs of the industry. The plans may include, for example, the provision of seminars, industry workshops, professional trainings, or even establish a short-term program such as a MICE certificate or diploma. In the long run, to sustain the success of the industry, stakeholders should plan to establish a MICE degree program to meet the industry's demand of qualified and professional MICE personnel. All of the programs should be designed on the basis of understanding the MICE industry, its trends, and industry needs (MacLaurin, 2002).

Enhancing Industry Cooperation and Networks

The meeting and convention sector, a sub-segment of the hospitality and tourism industry, is a multifaceted segment involving many different players. The complex relationship between firms in the MICE industry highlights the need for cooperation among the stakeholders for the success of the industry. According to Mistilis and Dwyer (1999), different MICE stakeholders complement each other when hosting an international convention (e.g., convention venues, hotels, airlines, travel companies). All of these stakeholders benefit from convention business. For this reason, the TCEB should play an active role in building close relationships among the stakeholders, particularly via the formation of a strategic network or alliance. To maximize cooperation, the TCEB should develop an integrated management approach by forming a team or an alliance consisting of key stakeholders in the MICE industry. The team may consist of representatives from various sectors (i.e., state agencies, associations/organizations, MICE suppliers, and other related businesses). They may work together and collaborate by setting industry policies, goals, and procedures to build a stronger sector and to increase competitiveness that will provide benefits to all parties involved. The team would help one another to manage any problems, barriers, or obstacles faced by the industry and the clients.

Common issues that need assistance or coordination from various MICE suppliers may include convention bidding, marketing, training, product/service standards, customs issues, visa/immigration issues, and other industry-related problems. In addition to a domestic network, international linkages/alliances should also be promoted. Both government agencies and

the business sector should help each other to create international networks and alliances by participating in international events such as trade shows, road shows, or any world events of the MICE industry. Participating in international MICE industry events would help local suppliers get exposure to the international business network and industry experience.

Promoting Country's Image and Security

Tourism, including the meeting and convention industry, is especially vulnerable to the negative effects of safety and security concerns since it is heavily dependent on people's perception of a destination (Campiranon, 2007; Fletcher & Morakabati, 2008). As discussed, in recent years, the image of Thailand has been negatively impacted by the problems of political instability and terrorism in the southern part of Thailand. These events have been frequently reported by the international media and other secondary information sources, and they are one of the major factors making Thailand a less attractive destination in terms of safety and security issues (Pakdeekul, 2008). Recent anti-government protests seem to be another hindrance that could affect the success of Thailand's meeting and convention industry (Chinmaneevong, 2008). Indeed, the political stability of the host nation is increasingly important as a site selection criterion for international MICE organizations (Weber & Ladkin, 2004). Thailand has faced political unrest since the coup in 2006, and that event still influences and impacts the current situation. Political problems in an evolving country like Thailand are complex. To stabilize the political system, it may need time, cooperation, and harmony of all the stakeholders to resolve the problems. Thus, it is vital for Thailand to actively try to counteract the negative press coverage in the wake of political problems, as well as terrorism, in order to place Thailand back on the map as a leading MICE destination in the region.

The recent political unrest could be recognized as a crisis affecting the tourism and MICE industries. As this adverse event has a major impact on the MICE industry, some suggestions will be proposed in relation to crisis management procedures. According to the literature (Campiranon, 2007; Young & Montgomery, 1998), there are several guidelines that could be used to develop comprehensive crisis management plans for CVBs and the industry. These plans, beginning from information-based approaches to action-based approaches, could be helpful and applied to the case of Thailand to prepare or take any appropriate actions to build confidence and reassure the international prospects in adverse events. In general, crisis management strategies can be taken in three steps: pre-crisis (proactive stage), during crisis, and post-crisis (recovery, reactive stage, or long-term plans) (Turner, 1976). The pre-crisis stage is generally based on two principles: (1) identify troublesome issues as soon as possible and (2) resolve such issues before they threaten

the destination, industry, or organizations (Regester & Larkin, 2002). The pre-crisis strategies may include environmental analysis, timely and effective decisions, effective communications, human relationship management, and short- and long-term planning and strategy (Gondlez-Hmero & Pratt, 1998). With the lesson from crisis events arising from political conflict, it is important for Thailand and concerned parties to develop and take appropriate measures to cope with any future crises or uncertainties.

The government should take full responsibility and conduct appropriate action to avoid a worsening of the crisis. In the case of a crisis, current or updated information should promptly be made available on the major websites of Thailand's MICE organizations (for example, TCEB, TICA, TAT [Tourism Authority of Thailand]). Destination websites are regarded as an important and effective tool to provide relevant information during the crisis events due to their reach, speed, and flexibility (Volo, 2007). Necessary information to be given depends on the state of crisis and may be determined by the MICE authorities. During the crisis, press releases and information should be distributed to MICE prospects informing them about the current situation and the scope of affected areas; which areas are affected, and which ones are not. Emphasis should be placed on the importance of accurate information, timing, and communication management.

The stage of post crisis should focus on recovery plans or long-term plans focusing on rebuilding MICE prospects' confidence and perception of the destination (country image) (Scott, Laws, & Prideaux, 2007). According to the literature (Campiranon & Arcodia, 2007; Pforr & Hosie, 2007; Scott et al., 2007), there are several strategies to take after the crisis in order to improve the destination's image and security concerns. They may include press releases, post-crisis information, special letters, special advertising campaigns, public relation, site inspection tours/familiarization trips, and international road shows/trade shows. It should be noted that all crises are different and crisis authorities need to tailor responses and strategies to the individual crisis; crisis management strategies should be planned in the context of the respective environment of socio-cultural, economic, political, and physical characteristics (Ritchie, Dorell, Miller, & Miller, 2004).

In order to prepare for future political uncertainty or any crisis situations, the industry should consider establishing standardized crisis management as well as forming a crisis management team for the MICE industry to develop strategy, process, and communications to all concerned parties and delegates. As a state authority in charge of the MICE industry, the TCEB should take a leadership role in setting up the crisis management team. It is important that the team should consist of various MICE stakeholders (including public and private sectors) and act coherently to ensure that the delegates and international MICE operators are provided with timely and relevant or accurate information before, during, and after the events. For long-term plans, the crisis management team should regularly monitor the current political

situations, economic trends, and global issues that might affect the industry and hold regular meetings to anticipate problems and develop appropriate plans and strategies.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As exploratory research, there are several limitations associated with this study. First, this study used a purposive sampling method together with the recommendation of tourism scholars to identify key industry respondents; such an approach may not cover a wide representation of key executives from the industry. Second, the current study focused on the meeting and convention sector alone, which is only a part of Thailand's MICE industry. Barriers or problems affecting other segments, such as exhibition or incentive tourism segments, were not examined. Future research may explore similar topics in other areas of the MICE industry, including the international context. Third, the number of international meetings and conventions held in Thailand based on the TCEB's information did not provide specific criteria for a minimum number of foreign participants, nationalities, types of meeting (international or regional), or duration of the events. Therefore, the information provided may not be able to be used to make a comparison with other countries or international associations (e.g., International Congress and Convention Association). The TCEB should provide standardized information so that all statistical information could be more usefully compared to other countries. Finally, as previously discussed, more research relating to Thailand's meetings and conventions industry is still needed. Future research may be developed from the results and recommendations of the current study to build the body of knowledge for the development of Thailand's MICE industry.

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