

## **SUSTAINABLE SPORT-TOURISM EVENT PLANNING IN VIETNAM: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF EVENT PLANNERS IN HO CHI MINH CITY**

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**Abstract:** Service marketing plays a crucial role in today's economy, with the service sector expanding rapidly in developed and developing countries. Unlike product marketing, service marketing is focused on building relationships and providing value to customers. This paper delves into the importance of service marketing, its marketing mix, new service development, service failure and recovery, and the significance of the service sector in contributing to economic growth, employment, and exports. The marketing mix for services includes seven elements: product, price, place, promotion, people, process, and physical evidence. Each element is essential in the process of service marketing, from creating new services to testing and evaluating them, and launching them to customers. The role of promotion, in particular, is significant as it adds value to services, and subjective impressions play a greater role than concrete evidence in building consumer trust. New service development is a vital process for the survival of organizations, but it can also be expensive and time-consuming, with the possibility of service failures even after considerable effort. However, the attraction of new services to customers can be exciting and increase revenue. Service failure and recovery can be frustrating for consumers and result in negative word of mouth. As such, companies should define service goals, hire the right people for the job, provide proper training and offer consistent service to gain customer confidence and maintain a clear vision for the company.

In conclusion, the service sector is becoming the primary revenue-generating sector worldwide, and service marketing is essential to maintain the sector's growth. Understanding customers' needs and fulfilling them by providing appropriate services is vital, and human resource management plays a significant role in service marketing. The references provided in this paper offer insight into various aspects of service marketing, providing valuable information for companies seeking to improve their services.

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**Keywords:** service marketing, marketing mix, new service development, service failure, human resource management.

### **1. Introduction**

The Vietnam event industry was witnessed impressive development in recent years, especially in sport-tourism events. According to Vietnam tourism, Vietnam's Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism Nguyen

Ngoc Thien has pledged to diversify the country's tourism products and services, including sport-tourism to lure more international tourists. Hence, this event type is considered a newly and potentially developing domain, although it is still a narrow business in the Vietnamese market (Thanh, 2017) <sup>[9]</sup>.

Amid all forms of tourism, the type of sport tourism become ubiquitous and vigorous growth in affluent nation's worldwide (Joy Standeven, Paul de Knop, 1999) <sup>[5]</sup>. Each mega sporttourism event reaps great economic benefits and social benefits to the host countries, which not only contributes to tourism demand but also stimulates the economy and accelerate the process of international integration (Jackson, 2003) <sup>[4]</sup>. Simultaneously, it is a precious opportunity to promote the image of the homeland to friends and foreign tourists (Kyriaki Kaplanidou& Christine Vogt, 2007) <sup>[6]</sup>.

Despite these benefits, events also take a heavy toll on the environment. It has released a great amount of waste, used too much energy, and even discharged pollution. Typically, one participant will remove about 1.89kg of waste per day, of which the burial material is 1.16kg. To put this into perspective, this could translate into 3480 kg of cars that 1000 attendees would bury in 3 days (Event Manager Blog, Meet Green, 2014) <sup>[2]</sup>.

However, many organizers may not be consciously aware of how people will attend the event - by bike or airplane, how much paper will be wasted when sending leaflets, posters, tickets and disposable products, the amount of water that will be consumed from plastic bottles, the carbon footprint of buffet meals will be wasted. While Generation Z and Y pay more attention to environmental issues, health, and green lifestyle. Therefore, if you cannot meet their expectations, they will be less likely to accompany or return to future events (Do, 2020) <sup>[1]</sup>. With sustainability and social responsibility at the forefront of the mind, the trend of the event industry over the coming years is to develop in the co-existence of a strong economy and a clean environment.

Although the concept of sustainability has been around for a long time, it has not been really commonplace in Vietnam's event market. It has become the need of the hour so that event organizers in Vietnam can do our bit in making an impact on the economy, society, and environment, especially in sport-tourism events. Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to attempt to introduce some effective applications and propose a sustainable sporttourism event plan.

## 2. Study Area

The research was primarily conducted at Pulse Active Company having seven years of proven experience in the Vietnam market and specialized in sports-tourism and lifestyle-entertainment events industry. They would like to bring fantastic events to inspire people with sports activities for a healthy and active lifestyle. Until now, their events attracted roughly 220.000 participants, which have more 75.000 foreign tourists and awarded many prestigious certificates such as the first professional Marathon in Vietnam certified by IAAF – AIMS (International Association of Athletics Federations and Association of International Marathons and Distance Races), the best overall race: long course category in the 2019 best races awards by ASIATRI (Pulse Active, 2019) <sup>[8]</sup>.

This research concentrated on analysis Pulse Active's events with the massive attention from the community such as Da Nang International Marathon, Ho Chi Minh Marathon, and Challenge Viet Nam. These events are a kind of race-cation that combines racing with vacation. It has become the perfect opportunity for participants to enjoy race activities and discover plenty of landscapes in Vietnam.

Apart from that, for a more objective and comprehensive view, it was also surveyed at four other major event organizations in Ho Chi Minh City. The respondents are event planners representing the first line in

event programs so that their attitudes and actions toward the sustainable event will have a crucial role to play in the event planning.

### 3. Research Methods

A qualitative approach was conducted to grasp a profound understanding of event planners' perspectives on sustainable events in Ho Chi Minh City. For this study, primary data was collected via an in-depth qualitative interview method from Rubin and Herbert (1995). The method follows a semistructured style, in which the research does not strictly adhere to a formalized list of questions. They will ask more open-ended questions, allowing for a discussion with the interviewee rather than a straightforward question and answer format. The interviewees were notified in advance to ensure they are available for the interviews, and appointments made via phone calls or emails informing them of the interview date, time, and location. The reason for choosing to carry out a personal interview was due to the belief that some questions answered face-to-face interviews could be better than a phone call interview. Three sectors of qualitative questions were introduced in this study.

**Main Question:** Before exchanging with the interviewee, the researcher prepared several main questions to initiate and lead the conversation. The main questions may change during the interview, as the researchers identify what to ask and who to ask.

**Probes:** Probes function as an aid to help specify the degree of depth the researcher wants. They signal the interviewees that the researchers wanted longer and more detailed information. They help the interviewees to keep explaining. Furthermore, they asked the interviewee to conclude a specific response that is currently being provided. The researcher may ask the interviewee to clarify the data that is not clear or lacking necessary to understand the answer. The probe can indicate that the researcher is paying attention.

**Follow-up questions:** Key questions were proposed to guide the structure for the interview, control the conversation focusing on the topic, and relate what is asked in the personal interview to the overall design. Depending on the response of the interviewee, the researcher could elucidate and enlarge the responses, thus making them comprehensible and mark the interviewees about the anticipated level of depth. They also reassure the interviewee that the researcher was paying to the answers. Follow-up questions are designed to gain depth to the gist of qualitative interviews by reinforcing the topics found, describing the context of the responses, and surveying the implications of what was mentioned.

### 4. Findings and analyses

**The awareness and perspective of event planners about the sustainable sport-tourism event in Ho Chi Minh City** The researcher found that all sport-tourism event organizers participating in this survey have heard of the term "Sustainable event". However, only three respondents defined and understood this phrase correctly and most respondents claimed that their events have a propensity to sustainable practices. Thereby, it can be seen that most event organizers in Ho Chi Minh have initiated to take sustainability into account, yet it seems hard to attain a deep understanding of this concept and is claimed that the sustainable event is organized and implemented to minimize the negative impacts on the environment but lacking social and economic responsibility.

Furthermore, all event organizers agreed that sustainable event documentation is essential, but they were convinced that organizing a sustainable event is prohibitively expensive and most of them argued that its planning is relatively intricate. Despite that, all event organizers strongly agreed that they will make an arduous effort to plan for the sustainable events in the future.

### **The current situation of sustainable sport-tourism event management in Ho Chi Minh**

The tourism-related sport event in Vietnam is a relatively new field, so far very few scientific researches related to the concept and orientation of sports tourism have been published in almost world's countries. The concept and overview of sports tourism has not been thoroughly researched and summarized. The macro management level still draws a blank for the requirements in developing sports tourism strategies in accordance with the current rules and trends of global integration (Thanh, 2017) <sup>[9]</sup>.

In term of social responsibilities, the majority of respondents found and associated with local partners and organizations, which also helps them save significant transportation costs, and also mitigate environmental pollution in mobility while increasing the income of local workers. In contrast, only two event organizers hosted a significant piece of content honoring the natural beauty, history, and / or local culture of the event venue.

### **The opportunities and challenges of sustainable sporttourism event management in Vietnam**

#### **Opportunities**

On the one hand, there are four fundamental benefits that the sport-tourism event organizers perceived in a sustainable event. Firstly, all event planners strongly advocated that they could take advantage of the materials from the previous event to cut down on the expenditure from purchasing. This means that they can both cost-saving and environmental protection by reusing and recycling.

Additionally, it is noticeable that the millennials are considered as a young generation of “green thinking” so that the issue of sustainable development is actively supported. Therefore, three out of five event planners stated that sustainable sport-tourism events will pay the attention of the community and society, thereby serving as a premise to improve education and raise awareness the community. Along with that, the reputation's event organizations are also enhanced significantly when an event is well-known as one of the pioneer sustainable events in Vietnam. In the long-term, this will attract a host of partners, sponsors, and participants, which certainly bring tremendous success and fame to the event organizations. Although it is currently costly to apply sustainable initiatives into events, two respondents still believed that sustainable events would reap a great profit. The advantages mentioned above are the background for organizers to continue to implement sustainable sport-tourism events and inspire other event organizations.

#### **Challenges**

On the other hand, data collected from the interview inform the barriers of sport-tourism events that they confronted with sustainable event management. Through analysis of this data, six key barriers will be discussed in elaborate details. The biggest obstacle associated with sustainable event management is the application of sustainable solutions as most respondents find it relatively hard to look up appropriate partners and implement effective initiatives in Vietnam. They said that practical initiatives that can be applied to the event are quite rare, otherwise, it will need high costs.

Henceforth, all event organizers perceive the second challenge of the sustainable sport-tourism event is the financial burdens to apply sustainable initiatives and limited resources to put toward reality. As mentioned before, they argued that the sustainable event is more prohibitively expensive than conventional events as it needs to be prepared and applied information technology, creative initiatives.

Along with a great deal of budget, the feasibility as well as the effectiveness evaluated after the event is also one of the challenges that event organizers have to consider when holding a sustainable event? It requires event planners to think out of the box for more innovative and effective initiatives. Therefore, they admitted

that if just giving environmentally friendly gifts for participants like they are doing, this has not brought the most positive and meaningful value.

Creating awareness and engagement of participants around sustainability in events is the fourth challenge among six key factors. Attendance participation plays a mandatory role in the sustainability process because they are active and central stakeholders of events. Therefore, the extent to which participants attend sustainable solutions will contribute to the effectiveness of those initiatives. A number of interview responses underlined the difficulties in implementing measures to increase the engagement's degree of participants such as pre-event promotion strategies and incentive systems to encourage them to cooperate on sustainability initiatives.

The next difficulty of a sustainable sport-tourism event involves gaining support, commitment from all event stakeholders to run in a sustainable direction. The challenge in encouraging stakeholders to support and participate in sustainable development is the need for a commitment to ensure profitability, program quality, the event organizers' zeal to support partners.

Lack of government assistance is the final challenge to sustainable event management. This is the least discussed among the six main challenges but is still considered a fundamental factor affecting the development of a sustainable event. Event organizers claimed that the sustainable event is not yet concerned by the government at a macro level. Therefore, they have not grasped the sustainable event planning process or have not had any specific standards to evaluate sustainable events. They are looking forward to having specific guidelines to make sustainable event building easier.

The six main difficulties mentioned above are taken directly from the event organizers' experience and perspective in their work. These challenges help the author to have a deeper knowledge of the current situation of sustainable event management generally in Vietnam and particularly in Ho Chi Minh City.

## **5. Conclusion and suggestion**

Sustainability is increasingly concerned across all industries, particularly in the event. However, it is impossible to implement sustainable initiatives if the perception of event planners is not heightened. Henceforth, assessing the perception of event organizers play an indispensable role as it makes a profound contribution to develop sustainable events in the right way, minimize the negative impact on natural and ecological resources as well as remain good living conditions for the community at events taking place. Apart from that, the assessment of event planners' perceptions can stimulate stakeholders such as local authorities, community decision-makers, vendors, and participants to identify real concerns and issues, from which lays a foundation to identify strategies for sustainable sporttourism event management in Ho Chi Minh as well as Vietnam.

This research revealed event organizers had positive awareness and understanding of the sustainable event in general. Most of them have already grasped the merits that they can get from the sustainability and their role of environmental and social responsibility in the events. All event planners admitted that they could take advantage of the materials from the previous event to save costs and also contribute to environmental conservation by recycling. Along with that, the sustainable event will also strengthen fame and fortune to the event organizers in the long run. However, there are various barriers that event organizers had to confront the application of sustainable solutions. This barrier is largely relevant to find appropriate partners and implement effective initiatives in Vietnam. Apart from that, event organizers also agreed that the sustainable event has more costly than conventional events as it needs to be prepared and applied to high-tech and novel initiatives. Furthermore, most stakeholders ranging from participants to vendors, sponsors,

and the government now are still lack of zealous engagement to achieve the effectiveness of those initiatives. Despite a great deal of invested - budget, the low feasibility and effectiveness evaluated after the event is also one of the key challenges that event organizers need to think of breakthrough initiatives.

### **Suggestion**

From revising the international guidelines and reports (How to Plan and Deliver Environmentally Sustainable Events, 2015)<sup>[3]</sup>, (Programme, 2012)<sup>[7]</sup> in conjunction with green organizations in Vietnam to propose some sustainable initiatives in tourism-related sport events.

Firstly, the sport-tourism events always draw a flock of international tourists, so that event organizers may create a list of hotels near the event venue and having good public transport on the event website. Another striking initiative highly recommended is introducing local homestays with a sustainable ethos, which not only stimulates local tourism industries but also helps to improve income for locals as well as introduce the beauty of local culture to tourists. Furthermore, event planners can encourage participants to travel via a car-sharing platform instead of private vehicles to reduce emissions associated with transport.

In term of food and beverage, a menu “finger food” is the great idea to eliminate the necessity for utensils. With food waste, event organizations can partner with homeless shelters that can take leftover food and disperse it to the needy once the event is over. Another practical solution is composting. For instance, bananas - nutritious food for athletes after sports events can be recycled into biofertilizer. Parallely, events can encourage participants to bring reusable water bottles by setting up water stations to fill up participants' bottles. Apart from that, event organizers can apply Ooho water that was applied in the London Marathon 2019 to mitigate plastic.

In the sport-tourism events, medals or trophies are two prizes given to participants after each race. An interesting initiative to mitigate e-waste is launching the campaign to engage citizens to donate e-waste for recycling into metal medals. In terms of T-shirts, event organizers can try to make it as environmentally friendly as possible by manufacturing a great quality T-shirt from recycled plastic bottles and other fibers.

With the advent of online-based communication tools, event planners can take advantage of social network sites that enable materials traditionally on paper to be replaced with digital versions such as e-ticket, e-voucher, e-guidebook, ecertificate. They are also a light shift and one of the easiest ways to make a big impact on the amount of paper being used and discarded at the end of the event. Moreover, reducing package in tool kits as well as food and beverage by encouraging participants to bring reusable bags certainly will make a great contribution to mitigating unnecessary waste. The sports-tourism events usually take place periodically or annually, so event organizers should avoid printing dates on backdrops, banners to be easily reused. Another impressive initiative is collaborating with the Green Hub organization to recycle banners into shopping bags. Events are able to partner with Reform Plastic Vietnam that use recycled products such as tables, chairs from plastic panels. Besides, the event can take advantage of old items from previous years such as the athlete's BIB, which not only saves resources but also stimulates participants to return to the event in the coming years.

In term of partners and sponsors, event organizations may think of developing a sponsor solicitation plan that they are recognized and awarded for their attempt to contribute ideas and expertise meeting the criteria of sustainable objectives during the event days.

Last but not least, sharing the successes of a sustainable sport-tourism event and spreading the word about what worked well with stakeholders via social media will offer a positive impact on people's frame of mind as well as inspire others to hold sustainable events in the future.

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