Attendee engagement for academic conferences

Case study: ATLAS Business Tourism Special Interest Group Conference in May 2019, Porvoo.

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Abstract

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Academic conferences haven been misunderstood as events for blandish research paper presentations, hence, attendee engagement in such conferences is impossible. This thesis aims to explore techniques for improving the attendee engagement for conferences.

Based on the review of the literature concerning attendee engagement, some techniques of improvement were found, such as venue setting, welcoming package, panel discussion, short breaks, gamification, surprise elements and extra offers for the attendees. To support the findings, the thesis also offers the explanation of the term "attendee engagement" and its result measurement.

To practice the findings, the techniques of improving attendee engagement were applied into a case study of ATLAS Business Tourism Special Interest Group Conference 2019. As a member of the organizing team for the conference, the thesis author conducted a feedback survey, combining with observations and interviews from other members with the attendees, to help analyse the results of the found techniques.

Keywords

Conference, attendee, audience, academic, engagement, interaction, communication, gamification, experience

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1   Introduction

Conference industry is an extensive industry that generates enormous contribution in job creation and business revenue (Rowe, 2018). However, conference in general, or academic conference, is considered a blandish sector to serve researchers or corporate leaders in form impassive presentations, that purpose of learning is well emphasized, but the attendee experience is somewhat diminished or completely ignored. This impression was proven by the result of a survey in 2018 concerning attendee's perception of conferences.

WHAT COMES TO MIND WHEN YOU HEAR THE WORD....

CONFERENCE

FUN
2%

NETWORKING
15%

BORING
52%

LEARNING
31%
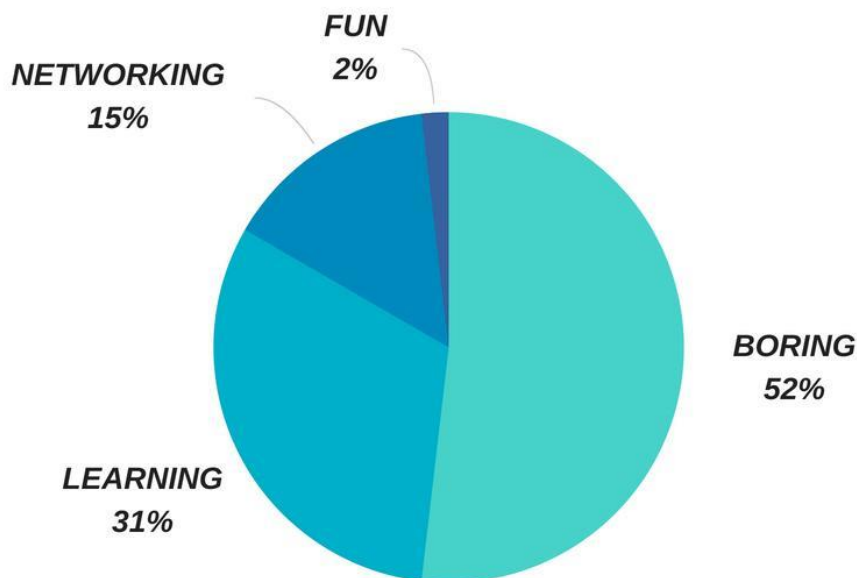
Survey run by Paul Heil - Director Of Innovation & Strategy, European Business Conference Group

Figure 1 Impression on conferences (Heil, 2018)

What if these negative impressions are a misunderstanding, that conferences can be insightful and exciting at the same time? What if bribing attendees with famous performers, games, awards and gifts are not the only methods to fascinate the attendees, that each stage and session in the conference program can be captivating, too?

To take "yes" as the answer for the above questions, the author conducted this thesis with the goal of exploring techniques for improving the attendee engagement for academic conferences. To achieve this goal, explanations of the term "attendee engagement" and its

measurement were presented in the first two parts of the thesis, followed by methodology of facts and data collecting. Based on all theories, facts and data collected, the author then suggested different techniques on how to improve attendee engagement, specified in each stage of a conference. In the last parts of the thesis, the author revealed the result of applying the found techniques, according to an attendee feedback survey, as well as observations and attendee interviews conducted by the organizing team members of the conference.

Most of those techniques were applied into ATLAS Business Tourism SIG Conference 2019 as a case study for this thesis. The conference took place on May 9th and May 10th, 2019 in Porvoo campus of Haaga – Helia University of Applied Sciences, Porvoo city, Finland. The author of this thesis is a member of the conference organizing team.

2   Academic conference

Not all events and conferences have the same goals, hence they all have their own audience, program and operational requirements. This chapter introduces the event categories to clarify the components of the academic conferences, as well as ATLAS Business Tourism SIG Conference 2019 as an academic conference.

2.1   Academic conference as a unique event type

There are several methods of defining an event types: to base either on the purpose of the event, on the target attendees, on the scale of the events, or on the activities within the events. The most popular defining method is to focus on the purpose of the event as Evenesis does. They categorize events into four main types: Bridal events, Educational conferencing, Commemorative events and Product launch events. Academic conference, also known as professional conference, is just a small part of the Educational conferencing besides seminars, webinars, debates and forums. Professor Amy M. Buddieis described academic conference as a networking channel for professionals within a field to present their researches and share the insights, to stay in touch with their colleagues, and to boost motivation for researching in the future (Buddie, 2016).

Adding to the defining methods, in the book "Essential tips for organizing conferences & event", Fiona Campbell, Alison Robinson, Sally Brown & Phil Race described in more details of why – who – when – how – and how often each conference format takes place. An academic conference usually lasts from 2 days up to one week, or even longer. In this type of event, the attendees are given opportunities to exchange their insights with experts in their field, to share the same interest with their colleagues, to raise more research questions for the impact on the community, to get professional feedback on their work, to have a space for concentration on their interest and to informally socialize with their community face-to-face. (Campbell, Robinson, Brown & Race, 2003)

Furthermore, among academic events, there are several types for organizers and attendees to choose from. Alston (2019) prefers categorizing academic conferences into four types based on the purpose of the organizers and benefits the events bring to their attendees: conference, seminar, workshop and symposium.

According to Alston, a conference has the largest scale of all types. It could host up to thousands of attendees, with several speeches and sessions happening at the same time in different corners or rooms in the same conference venue. Its program could be filled with

lots of sessions and activities for the attendees, that it could last for a few days or up to one week. Therefore, if an event organizer need to host an enormous number of attendees, and the attendees aim to make connections and reach to an ambitious number of people in an academic event, a conference is the most suitable option.

On the contrary, seminar aims to host five to ten participants only, and its sessions tend to be brief, and its total occurrence usually last for a few hours. Seminars are suitable for presentations that is still in early stages and in need for further discussions or feedback. The third type of academic events is workshop, which emphasizes on discussions over one or two specific topics. The workshops are often open to both members of an organization and to visitors with or without prior registration. Attendees of a workshop are not necessarily from the same field or in the same academic rank, but all are seeking for action-oriented sessions and opportunity to learn and share new skills.

The last type of academic events is symposium, which adopts some features from each of those three types. A symposium is considered a conference in a smaller scale, which has less discussions than a seminar and has more expert presentations than a workshop. Although the definition of a symposium is somewhat vague, its format is often chosen when the event organizer needs to balance out the features given in their event. (Alston, 2019)

2.2 ATLAS Business Tourism SIG Conference 2019

2.2.1 ATLAS as an association

ATLAS – Association for Tourism and Leisure Education and Research – was found in 1991 to develop transnational educational and research initiatives in tourism and leisure. The objectives of ATLAS are to promote exchanging staff and students, researching transnationally and facilitating curriculum and professional development.

Picture 1 ATLAS

One of the main activities of ATLAS is to host regional conferences to connects its members and other industrials professionals, and support research publications. It forms Special Interest Groups (SIG's) to run research programs, as well as organize conferences to cover topics of their interests.

2.2.2   ATLAS Business Tourism SIG Conference 2019 as the study case

Special Interest Groups (SIG's) of ATLASS are formed by members of ATLAS to focus on more specific education and research topics or for specific geographical areas. There are currently 9 groups of Special Interest as below:

- Cultural Tourism Research Group
- Gastronomy and Tourism Research Group
- Business Tourism Research Group
- Cities and National Capital Tourism Research Group
- Volunteer Tourism Research Group
- Events Research Group
- Dark Tourism Research Group
- Heritage Tourism and Education Research Group
- Space, Place, Mobilities in Tourism Research Group

(ATLAS, 2019)

Loaction: ATLAS Business Tourism SIG Conference is a part of those SIGs. It is arranged annually in different location each year. In 2019, this conference is organized at Porvoo campus of Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences in Porvoo city, Finland.

Stakeholders: This conference is helped organized by a group of students of the campus, along with their supervisor – as known as the coordinator of the SIG Business Tourism. The invited audience are researchers and industrial professionals in the business tourism field. In addition, staff and students at Porvoo campus of Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences are also welcomed to attend the sessions of the conference. Partners of this conference are the Porvoo campus of Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences and the ISS.

Missions: ATLAS Special Interest Group Business Tourism work as a playground for researchers, teachers and practitioners in the field to gather, connect, share ideas, and together advance their knowledge of the field. Therefore, the priority mission of the ATLAS Business Tourism SIG Conference 2019 is to invite and host those targeted audience during a two-day conference in Porvoo. In the program, most of the sessions are reserved for research paper presentations and other thought-provoking speeches from the guest speakers.

Host and guest speakers: "Finland – Business events at the top of the world " by Ines Antti-Poika – Head of the Finland Convention Bureau, "Artificial Intelligence and Business Tourism: New Frontiers and New Possibilities " by Dr Nicole Ferdinand – Senior Lecturer at the Oxford Brookes School of Hospitality Management, and "The contribution of universities to the development of a body of knowledge for business tourism" by Rob Davidson – Managing Director of MICE Knowledge.

3 Attendee engagement

It is claimed by many event planners that the success of an event depends on the attendee engagement. But not all of them define what "attendee engagement" means, and whether it can be measured.

3.1 Attendee engagement definition

According to Cambridge dictionary, the word "engagement" refers to "the fact of being involved with something" (Cambridge dictionary, 2019). Therefore, in event 's point of view, engaging in an event means the attendees show their anticipation, immersion and involvement into the event from the beginning until the end.

The tendency of attendee engaging is created by the dimensions of the event as demonstrated in the figure below. The vertical axis shows the level of attendees' participation. According to Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore, the inventor of the dimension axes the attendees tend to participate passively when "they do not directly affect or influence the performances" (such as audience listening to an opera at the theatre), and vice versa for those who participate actively (such as gamers at an arcade centre) (Pine & Gillmore, 1999).
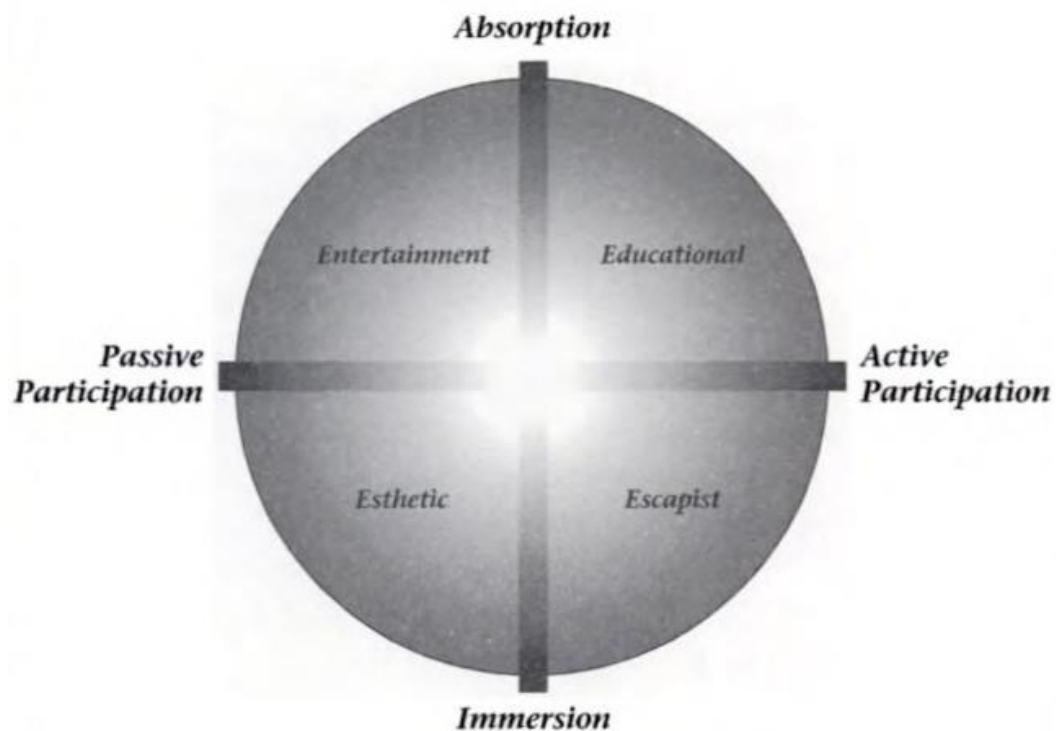

Figure 2 Experience Realms (Pine & Gillmore, 1999)

Meanwhile, the horizontal axis the environmental relationship between the events and their attendees. "Absorption" is the situation, in which the attendees have their attention captured and have their mind filled with the experience inside. On the other hand, "immersion" dimension of engagement means "to be a part of the experience itself" (Pine & Gillmore, 1999). For example, people that listen to speakers at Ted Talks absorb information and knowledge presented by the speakers, while people that come to a Joensuu Ilosaarirock immerse into music and its side activity there.

3.2 Attendee engagement can be measured

Measuring the attendee engagement helps the organizers evaluate how successful their event is. The result of measuring the attendee engagement is in concern of all the stakeholders, such as the organizers and the sponsors. Below are the most common measurements applied for events in general.

3.2.1 Web traffic

Website is commonly used as an event information storage and as a promoting channel for its event. Moreover, the website traffic is also a helpful method of measuring the engagement of attendees during pre – event. It delivers data regarding:

- Number of website visitors
- Number of website sub-pages visited
- Duration of time spending on the website
- Actions of visitors on the website (for example: downloading materials, filling in contact form, clicking redirect links, etc.)

3.2.2 Attendance

The number of attendees, who attend the conference, shows the effectiveness of attendee engagement during pre-event. The greater the number of people showing up, the better result the organizers get.

Every conference has different size of audience and capacity. In order to define whether a certain number of attendees is enough to be considered a success, there should be benchmark, for example comparing with the attendance from the same conference of the previous years, or of the same conference in other locations.

3.2.3   Social media

Actions on social media of attendees includes interacting with the pages and groups related to the conference; and sharing posts or pictures of the conference to their own account page. The channels could be Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc., or all of them. To easily keep track of attendees' actions on social media, the organizers should generate a hashtag for their conference and encourage their attendees to use it for posting and sharing.

Eventsbrite gave an example of measuring social media engagement in phase one of an event to calculate the return-on-investment. According to their framework, there are plenty of attendees' actions that contribute for the measurement, such as: impressions/ reach of posts, likes/ comments/ share/ retweet posts, conversations or direct messages, video views and link clicks etc (Eventsbrite, 2016).

3.2.4   Observation

Conversations, discussions, laughter, excitement on the faces, curiosity in the eyes, etc. are proofs of active engagement in the conference content. All these conversation and expression are usually shown between the speakers and their audience, or they could be seen among attendees inside or outside the conference venue. They could be seen during direct conversations, or they could be found in online conversations on the given platform of the conference.

However, observing the interactions and expressions of the attendees is not an effortless job. It requires patience, understanding, and unbiased minds. To perform the observation in a more systematic way, Jeff Hurt (2014) introduced four observing methods based on an ethnographic research conducted by the LUMA Institute. Those methods are:

Interviews and Focus groups method, in which the interviewers ask prepared questions to encourage the participants to share about their stories, experience and feelings in depth. In addition to their sharing, the body language is also a hint to include into the interview outcome.

Fly-On-The-Wall Observations, in which the impacts of the observer on the target participants are minimized. The most valuable information gained by this method is through the actions, body language and facial expressions of the participants.

Contextual Inquiry, in which the observer needs to take both words and actions of the participants into consideration, because not all participants have their words and actions matched.

Walk-A-Mile Immersion, in which the organizing team members have to go through all the stages as the attendees have to, for example sit through a few conference sessions to see if the staff themselves find it exciting, insightful and energetic until the break. The purpose of this method is for the organizers to understand the feelings, including both fun and challenges that their attendees have to go through.
(Hurt, 2014)

3.2.5 Survey

A survey at the end of the conference will help the organizers explore opinions and impressions of their attendees of the conference. Robert W. Walker, CEO and Founder of Surveys & Forecasts, LLC presented about what questions a survey could help answer: To what extent the objectives of the conference are met? To what extent the participants are satisfied or dissatisfied with the conference details? To what extent the return on investment in the conference is achieved? What are the experiences and suggestions on improvement the participants have to share? And many more. (Walker, 2019)

ATLAS Business Tourism SIG Conference 2019 also take these advantages of the survey to measure their conference engagement and success. More details of the survey are demonstrated in chapter 5.

4　Methodology

After identifying the mission and the measurements, this chapter continues with methodology of collecting data and ideas, as well as methodology of collecting and analysing the attendee feedback at the end of the conference.

4.1　For engagement tools

To search for ideas and suggestions, the author used Documentary Analysis for Secondary data. Each source for secondary data has different advantages and disadvantages. For example, some books from libraries are published years ago. Although some definitions and framework are still applicable, the methods or tools are not up to date, such as the lack of implementing the social media and modern technology in conference industry.

As the result, the author decided to combine different types of sources for her thesis. Her sources vary from physical books and e-books from her University library, to blogs and articles of event companies' websites and individuals. Books and e-books are advantageous sources for theory framework, while blogs and articles are valuable sources for up-to-date information, technological tools and trends.

4.2　For engagement measuring

The most two common research approaches to collect data are Qualitative research and Quantitative research. Those two methods could be used separately or mixed to produce valid and reliable answers for the research questions.

> "The qualitative naturalistic approach is used when observing and interpreting reality with the aim of developing a theory that will explain what was experienced. The quantitative approach is used when one begins with a theory or hypothesis and test for confirmation or this is confirmation of that hypothesis." (Newman & Benz, 1998)

The differences between Qualitative and Quantitative approach are found in four main steps of the research. The first step is the population and sampling, in which Quantitative approach tends to select more random sampling and focus more on the amount of samplings, while the Qualitative approach requires planned and purpose sampling and has no requirement for number of sampling. The second step is data collection, in which the Quantitative approach produces well-structured questionnaires, while Qualitative approach depends more on observations, less structured interviews with more open-ended questions for the

interviewees. In the third step, data analysis, statistical calculations are applied in the Quantitative approach, and quotation and meaning research are applied in the Quantitative approach. In the last step, results and reporting, Quantitative approach is expected to present generalizable results, mostly in numbers, while Qualitative approach is expected to generate deeper indefinite results.
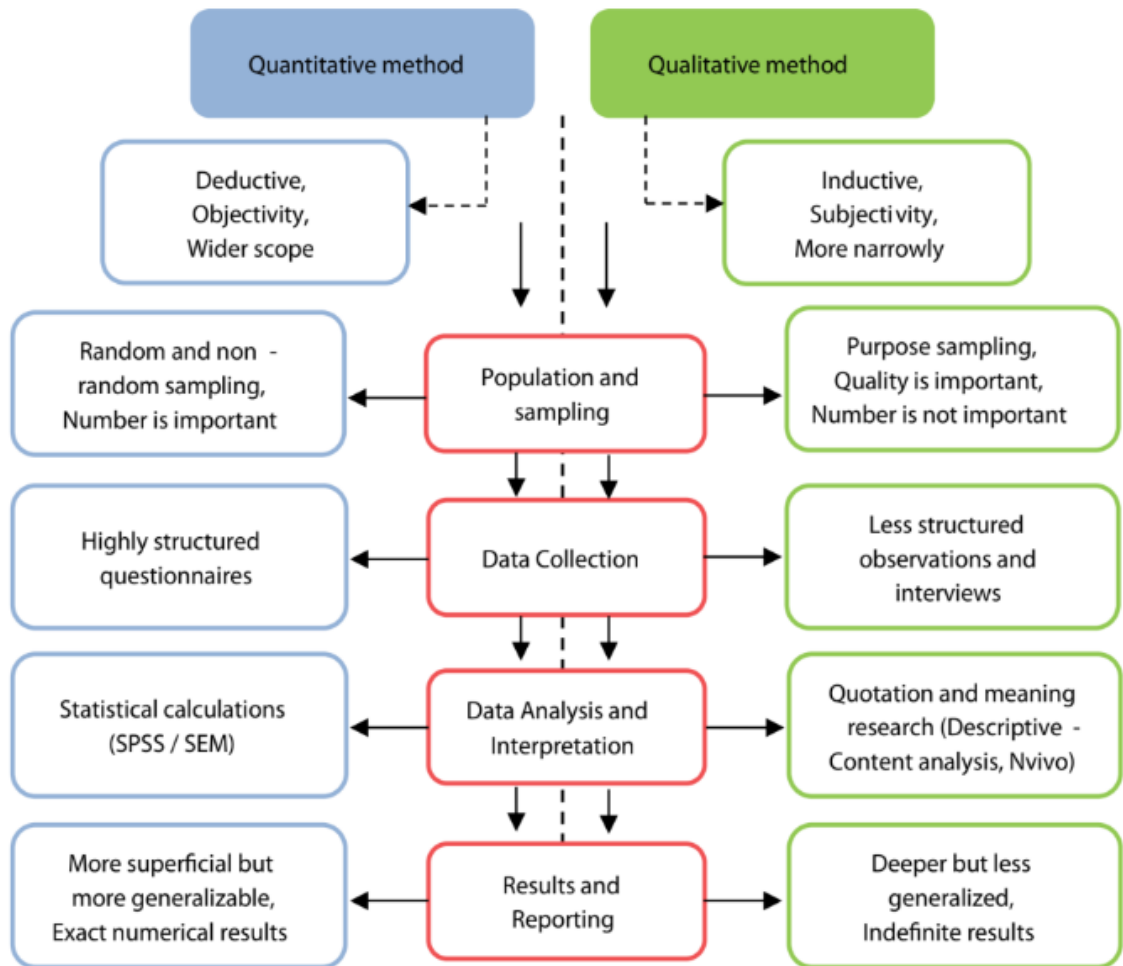
Figure 3 Qualitative and Quantitative research methods (Oflazoglu, 2017)

To apply those two research approaches into the ATLAS case study, the author decided use both to serve her measuring job. The Qualitative approach were applied by interviewing attendees during the conference days, adding with the organizers' observations over attendees' interactions such as conversations, discussions, questions asked, etc both directly and online. The Quantitative approach were applied by collecting numbers from social media, as well as from collecting data from a feedback survey after the conference. The questionnaire for the feedback survey is attached in Appendix 1, and its result is specified in section 6.3.

One thing worth noticing is that in Quantitative approach, the response rate plays an important role of reducing the nonresponse bias. The response rate is defined as "the ratio of the number of units with completed interviews (the units could be telephone numbers, households, or persons) to the number of units sampled and eligible to complete the interview." (Brick, Collins, Chandler, 1997). Up until now, there is no fixed number of acceptable response rate to be consider valid for analysing and reporting. Although all researchers agreed on one theory, that the higher the response rate is, the lower the nonresponse bias gets, they brought different limits. For example, Babbie (2004) claimed that response rate of 50% is adequate, 60% is good, and 70% or more is excellent; while Singleton and Straits (2005) emphasized that response rate 85% is the lowest limit to show validity and non-bias for analysing and reporting. (Groves, Fowler, Couper, Lepkowski, Singer, Tourangeau, 2009)

5 Techniques on improving event engagement for an academic conference

Based on the findings from numerous of articles and researches, a list of techniques on improving attendee engagement is indicated in this chapter in chronological order. The list is divided into three main stages of a conference: pre-event, during event, and post-event.

5.1 Pre – event

For an event that lasts a few hours, it could consume weeks to research and plan. For a conference that lasts two days as ATLAS Business Tourism SIG Conference 2019, the preparation would require months. This chapter presents what tools and methods the organizers used before – during – and after the conference to improve the attendee engagement.

5.1.1 E-mail as personalized invitations

There are many options of how event organizers send invitations to their target attendees, such as sending e-mail as an invitation, sending physical letters of invitation along with gifts that have logo of the event on, or sending invitation on social media. ATLAS Business Tourism SIG Conference 2019 is new in the field, and its attendees are many to be invited for the first time. Therefore, an e-mail is an efficient tool for invitation, since e-mailing helps create personal connection and deliver enough information to excite the target attendees.

Moreover, a research conducted in the UK and the US with a hundred of event planner experts by Eventsforce proved that e-mail is chosen by 98% as a format of invitation (Eventsforce, 2017). This means email is a tool not to be missed.

Before drafting the e-mails in our case, we first explored the information and experience of the person, to make sure that his/her interest is relevant to our conference. With all the information collected, we could then write a personalized e-mail to each person to show our concern in their research or experience in the field, and that it would be our pleasure to have him/her in our conference.
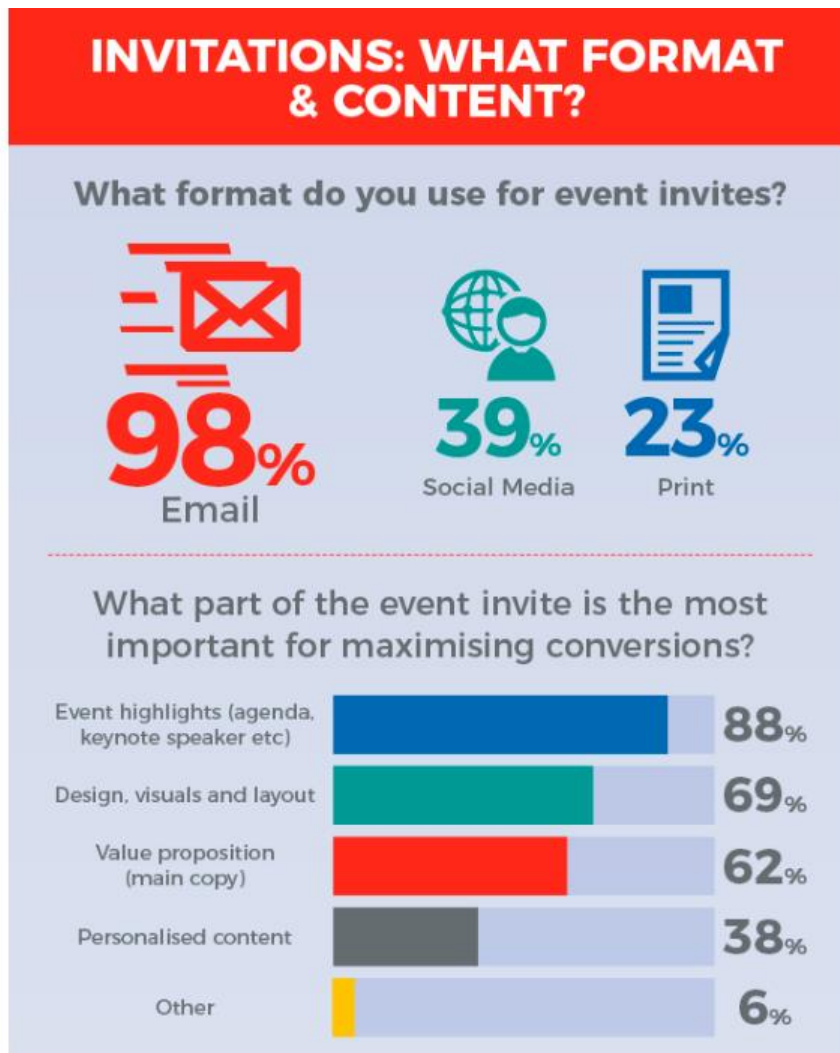
Picture 2 INFOGRAPHIC: The Power of Event Invitations (Eventsforce, 2017)

5.1.2 Website as information package

A well-built content website would transfer website visitors into potential attendees. If the e-mail is the first touch for the target attendees, the website is normally used as the info package with pictures and videos to increase the excitement for the website visitors. The more detailed information and interesting and alluring visual demonstration of the event idea, the higher chance the website visitors would consider about participating.

To apply this technique, a website was built for ATLAS Business Tourism SIG Conference 2019, where potential attendees could find all related information and even more to explore than the invitation they received. For instance, information of Keynote speakers for the conference might catch the attention of the researchers and those attendees, who expect inspiring and insightful speeches of topics in their field.

Picture 3 Website for ATLAS Business Tourism SIG Conference 2019

Not only does information regarding the main program of the conference raise the excitement for the attendees, but some hint of entertaining activities would also increase their engagement before the conference. For ATLAS Business Tourism SIG Conference 2019, it is the introduction of a Post – tour in Helsinki to make the conference trip much more amusing.

Picture 4 Information of Keynote speakers on the website

Suomenlinna

Suomenlinna is a world heritage site sea fortress displaying European military architecture of the 18th Century, situated on a group of islands in front of Helsinki harbour.
It has become one of Finland's most attractive and popular go-to spots, offering an authentic experience to all its visitors.

Suomenlinna Brewery (Lunch)

Located beside the main dock of Suomenlinna, this fascinating brewery offers handcrafted beers and a versatile selection of food, influenced by Russian and Swedish culture cooked with fresh Finnish ingredients.

Picture 5 Information of Post-tour program on the website

Among many reasons why an event website is necessary, Jay Sitapara mentioned in his findings that the event website is a playground to integrate multiple networking platforms, where attendees exchange information and develop either professional or social contacts. The next section discusses this matter and how it was implemented into ATLAS Business Tourism SIG Conference 2019 (Sitapara, 2017).

5.1.3   Social media as communicating and promoting channels

After acquiring sufficient information about the conference, we expected that the potential attendees might need to have to communicating platforms for questions, discussion, exchange of information, or simply to get connected to other attendees. Although we already have a Facebook group for the ATLAS Business Tourism SIG to announce the conference, we still offered another group solely for the conference in 2019, so that it is easier to reach to the relevant Facebook group members.
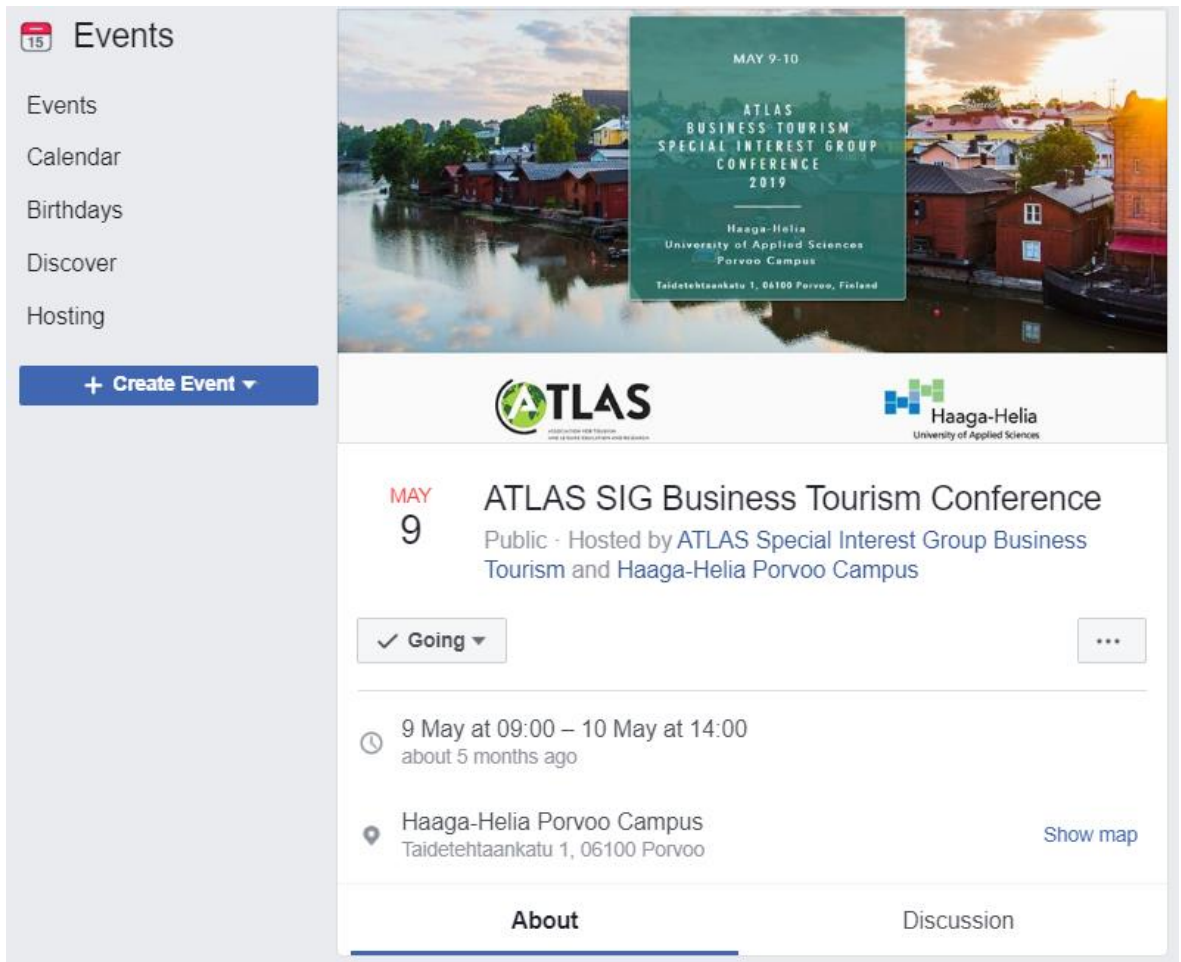
Picture 6 Facebook group solely for the ATLAS Business Tourism SIG conference 2019
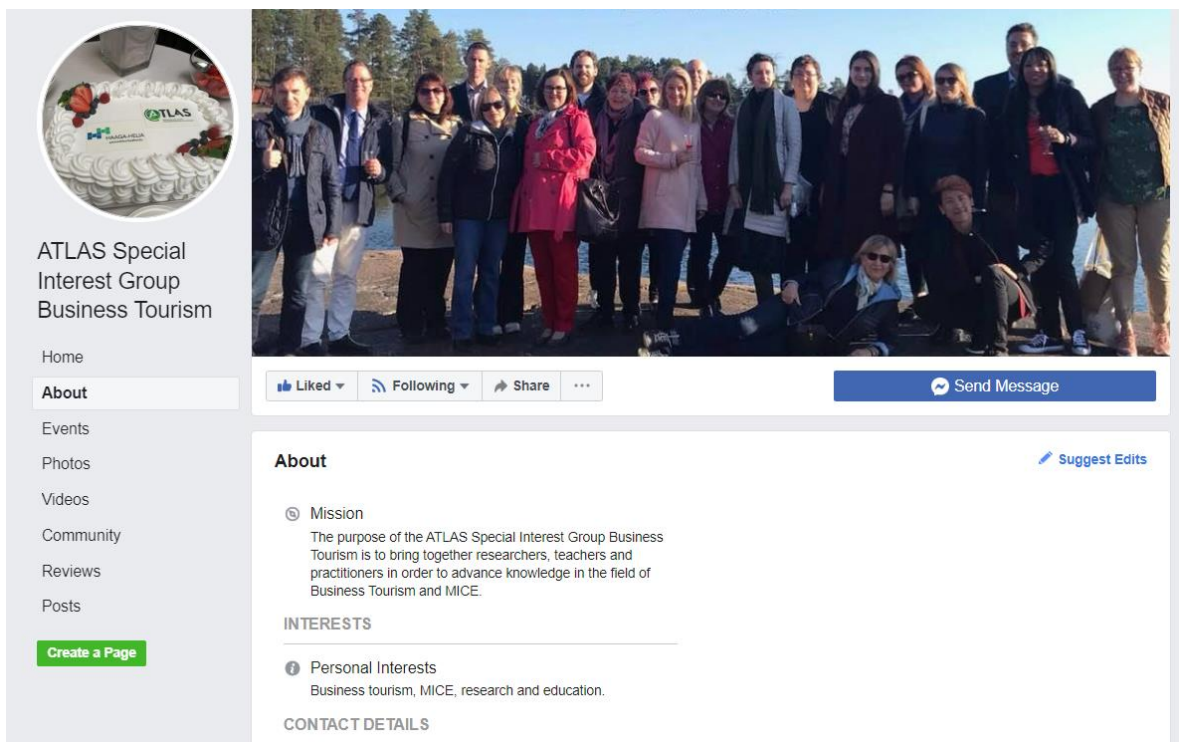
Picture 7 Facebook group for ATLAS Business Tourism SIG

The organizing team created the Event Facebook group about one month before the con-
ference, and already started from there with introductions about keynote speakers, the con-
ference venue and the city. One week before the conference day, the organizers publish at
least one post per day to excite the attendees.

5.2   During event

5.2.1   Venue setting as a warm welcome

The first impression is either a deal maker or a deal breaker. The venue setting and its
friendly ambiance is one of different factors for the first impression. (Campbell, Robinson,
Brown & Race, 2003, 78)

First, the venue setting should be well – guided. There should be conference posters both
outside and inside the event venue, so that the conference attendees would acknowledge
that they arrive to the right location, and that the conference staff are ready to welcome
them in.

Picture 8 Big screen for welcoming the attendees

Second, signs for each part of the venue – such as cloakroom, registration table, toilets, coffee tables serving the conference – should be placed around the venue. This thoughtful arrangement will help guide the attendees to the places they need to get to without any worry and doubt (Campbell, Robinson, Brown & Race, 2003, 79).

Picture 9 Signs to help guide the attendees

Third, logo of the conference, which the organizers introduced to their attendees through social media before, should also be attached in all conference materials, for example: post-

ers, signs, printed materials in the welcoming folders, screen, name badges, etc. This setting is useful for engaging the attendees with the brand and logo of the conference, not to mention that the logo will appear much more frequently in attendees' pictures on their social media channels (social media engagement, again!).

5.2.2 Info package as an engaging material

Besides the surroundings and the ambiance, another factor to contribute to the attendee engagement is an "info package", which contains detailed but brief information about the content of the conference. Although the info package could simply be a schedule displayed as a list of activities, the organizers could attach much more to it, to raise attendees' excitement much higher when they open and explore the package.

First, it is a must to include basic information about the program of the conference, such as: detailed schedule for attendees to keep track of the program; a list of emergency numbers and person in charge for attendees to count on during their stay in the conference; a name list of speakers and presenters, Wi-Fi password, and a simplified map of the conference venue. These basic information details could be printed into a handbook, or they could be stored on a mobile application for quick and offline access. No matter how long the details are and how the attendees can access to the details, the organizers should ensure that they are useful, necessary, and "help avoid or overcome the CADS". (Campbell, Robinson, Brown & Race, 2003, 78)

Second, it is optional but recommended to attach a small notebook and pens to the info package for the attendees to take note during the speeches and presentations. This notebook can be equipped with the logos of the events and sponsors on its cover, and some other small surprise inside, such as a restaurant coupon or a tiny phone screen wiper.

Third, if the conference has any relations with or sponsors from the city or its Destination Marketing Organization (DMO), the brochures and marketing materials for the city, where the conference is located, are also helpful for both the DMO and the attendees. Especially for the attendees, the city marketing materials are the suggestions for enjoying the destination after the conference hours, which help them enjoy more and engage much more in their trip.

Picture 10 Welcoming bag for ATLAS SIG Business Tourism Conference 2019

Last, it is obvious that the info packages are distributed at the registration tables on the arrival of the attendees. Therefore, not all attendees receive the package at the same time. For those who arrive a few minutes earlier than others, they may go through the info package while waiting for their friends/ colleagues, or for the program to start. How about those who come too early? To not let them wait with boredom, the organizers can include a mini game for the early birds to kill time with. This mini game will be discussed in section 5.2.6.

5.2.3 Panel discussion as a change in presentation

To avoid repeating the same format of traditional individual presentation for all conference content, the conference organizers could host a panel discussion for a group of panellists to bring the new conference ambience to the attendees. Panel discussions offer insightful viewpoints exchange among the panellists, and more interactions between the presenters and the audience (Nature Education, 2014). Although a panel discussion more challenging to prepare because of several off-script conversation inputs, it helps solve complex topics for individuals to handle, and at the same time, it brings the diversity in points of view to the audience (DeFinis, 2019). The Question and Answer session at the end of every panel

discussion is when the engagement becomes more visible. The more questions and contributions from the audience, the more engaging the attendees are.

At ATLAS Business Tourism SIG conference 2019, the topic for the panel discussion was "Tech vs. Human factors at Events and conferences", hosted by Nicole Ferdinand - Senior Lecturer at the Oxford Brookes School of Hospitality Management. There were four panellists, two of which are students of the campus, and other two are experts in the field. The panel discussion lasted 25 minutes of discussion and 5 minutes for questions and answers. To end the session, we add one question for all the audience to participate in: "Are you prepared for the technological development in the events industry?". This yes/no question was conducted on Slido.com – an audience interaction website.

Picture 9 Panel discussion at ATLAS SIG Business Tourism Conference 2019

5.2.4 Short breaks as opportunities for networking

Short breaks are short, but essential "for people to decide the session they want to attend next, figure out where it's held, take a bathroom break if needed, and get to their desired destination leisurely." (Segar, 2012) Short breaks often includes refreshments to boost the energy of the attendees, from the basic menu with coffee, tea and sweet, to more impressive and fun joys with local branded-food and high-nutrition drinks.

Picture 11 The campus lobby for the conference break

Not only are the breaks needed for the basic needs of the attendees, but they also play the role of a networking and engaging space. After sitting and listening restlessly to presentations, attendees can mingle comfortably with each other during the break, to either catch up with their existing colleagues or widen their network with new colleagues. Therefore, breaks are usually located in a space big enough for people to move around easily. In addition, it is a good opportunity for the conference organizers and staff to communicate with their attendees, to know more about their experience and collect feedback.

At ATLAS Business Tourism SIG conference 2019, there was at least one short break between the sessions, and one long lunch break. Short breaks are offered in the main lobby, where there are natural lights and plenty of spaces decorated with cocktail tables and seats. There were coffee, tea, cookies, Finish-branded chocolate, healthy nuts, fresh juice and fruits, and especially Karelian pie - a local food for breakfast. The organizers made sure not to repeat all the same snack options on the menu for each break, so that their attendees always find something new on the table to try out.

Picture 12 Refreshments for the conference break

5.2.5   Gamification as an engaging tool

Gamification has been widely used not only in business and education, but also in daily life. It is a process of applying game-based mechanics and aesthetics into ordinary activities. Its goal is to motivate people into engagement, actions, learning and solving problems (Kapp, 2012). Some examples of gamification are: driving schools use City Car Driving Video game for learning and practicing, or public stairs are added electronic lights whenever someone steps on each stair to encourage people to walk more, etc. For the ATLAS Business Tourism SIG conference 2019, the organizing invented crossword games for the early birds to explore the campus while waiting for the conference opening, toss box for introduction round in case the number of attendees is modest (for instant below 15 pax), and lottery with sponsored products as awards.

In fact, those gamified sessions above did not take place due to the circumstance of time shortage. The only noticeable gamification applied was the use of Slido.com into the speeches and panel discussion to help the speakers interact with their audience.

5.2.6   Surprise elements as a lasting memorable closing

"It doesn't matter how many wonderful moments there were throughout the occasion, if you end on a sour note, that's all they'll talk about." (Meyer-Delius, 2019). Closing a conference requires more than "enough". It is not only about a closing speech and awarding ceremony,

but also about how all the attendees say goodbye to each other, and about how organizers leave an emphasis of a chain of experiences for their attendees. There are plenty of examples for organizers to apply to their own closing ceremony, such as an impressive performance, a giveaway session, an after-party, luxurious firework or a group picture, etc. Whatever the idea is, keep it as a secret and save it for the last minute.

To close ATLAS Business Tourism SIG conference 2019, the organizers prepared a sizable cake with the logo of the conference and secretly put it into the main lobby. At the last minute, the host speaker finished his closing speech, and all attendees thought that the conference was official ended, without knowing there was a surprise waiting for them outside of the conference room. When the secret (the cake) was revealed, the attendees was fascinated that they were offered more than what they expected.

Picture 13 A surprise at the end of the conference

5.2.7 Performances, dinners and outdoor activities as extra offers

The main purpose of attendees at a conference is to attend insightful presentations and to expand their network with other experts in their fields. Some of them may even consider a conference abroad not only a business or study trip, but also a get-away-from-office trip for new and joyful experience. For this reason, conferences have more than presentations and

networking opportunity. Organizers fill the conference day with extra services and activities for their attendees.

A get-together-dinner, a piano performance and a post tour were extra offers at ATLAS Business Tourism SIG conference 2019. The piano performance was added into a short break to refresh the networking atmosphere, while the post tour was put after the conference day to end the trip for the attendees. After the whole trip, the attendees successfully expanded their network, learnt more about their fields, gain much recognition from their colleagues, explored the destination, tried local food, and had much joy.

Picture 14 The conference post tour (ATLAS, 2019)

5.3 Post – event

5.3.1 Letter of thank

After the conference, the organizers send a letter of thank via email to each attendee. Because the attendee engagement does not stop at the closing speech of the conference, but it lasts till the next one.

> A thank you email for attending an event is more than just a show of appreciation. It is a technique by which you retain the loyalty of those who have already attended your event. (Tomakh, 2019)

The content of the letter consists of the appreciation from the organizing team, with links lead to storages of information, pictures and videos of the event. In the end, no matter how many fascinating moments the attendees experienced during the conference, if they are not reminded of, all these experiences will be forgotten. Therefore, pictures and videos of the conference and its attendees are recommended to be included into the letter of thanks. The attendees would not only be delighted to recall the memories at the conference but would also happily use the materials to share with their connections on social media.

Another purpose of the letter of thanks is to let our attendees share their thoughts with the organizing team via a feedback survey, which is reported blow. Either compliments or criticism upon any detail of the conference, the feedback is valuable as the result analysis for the team to approve their work, and as the success of engaging attendees into communicating about the conference with the team.

5.3.2 Feedback questionnaire

Although questionnaire is not the only method for collecting feedback, it is the easiest to apply in a conference that hosts good number of attendees. The results are uncomplicated to analyse and are simple to store for the use of the next conferences.

In ATLAS SIG Business Tourism Conference 2019 case, the organizing team conducted a feedback survey on Lyyti platform. It covers 9 aspects of the conference:

- Role of the respondent
- Sources of invitation
- Email of invitation
- Website of the conference
- Welcoming bag
- Social media activities of the conference
- Program and schedule of the conference
- Hospitality of the organizing team
- Intend of the respondent about this conference and the next ones

6 Results of applying the above techniques into the project

After the conference, the organizing team collected numbers and facts around their project. Based on the measurements mentioned in section 3.2, this chapter presents the results of applying the engagement methods into ATLAS SIG Business Tourism Conference 2019.

6.1 Pre-event

The organizing team successfully invited 31 attendees for the conference from different countries, such as Finland, Poland, Netherlands, Bulgaria, Russia, Canada, United Kingdom, Rwanda, and Latvia. In addition, there were two groups of campus students to attend some sessions, and other guest speakers and panellists. This is considered a positive achievement of our engaging content in the letter of invitation and on the conference website, comparing to the number of attendees from the last year conference.

Concerning about the engagement on social media, we created 10 posts introducing about the conference venue, conference organizing teams and host speakers, and the conference city Porvoo on the Facebook event page "ATLAS SIG Business Tourism Conference". These posts gain interactions of 40 like clicks, 9 shares, and 4 comments. There were 39 Facebook users clicked "Interested", and 21 others confirmed "Going".

To show signs of further engagement by participating in off-venue activities the conference dinner, 22 out of 31 attendees registered to join the conference dinner. Furthermore, 20 people, including attendees and speakers, joined the post tour in Helsinki.

6.2 During the event

During the two conference days, the attendee engagement was marked down by the observation of the organizing team. The two most visible interactions of the attendees are during the Q&A of each sessions and during the break at the coffee table.

Picture 15 Visible interactions through observation

On social media, the organizing team created 10 posts on the conference event page. Those posts received 22 like clicks, 2 shares, and 6 votes for one poll. The most engaging post on the event page belongs to a poll about the surprise at the end of the conference.
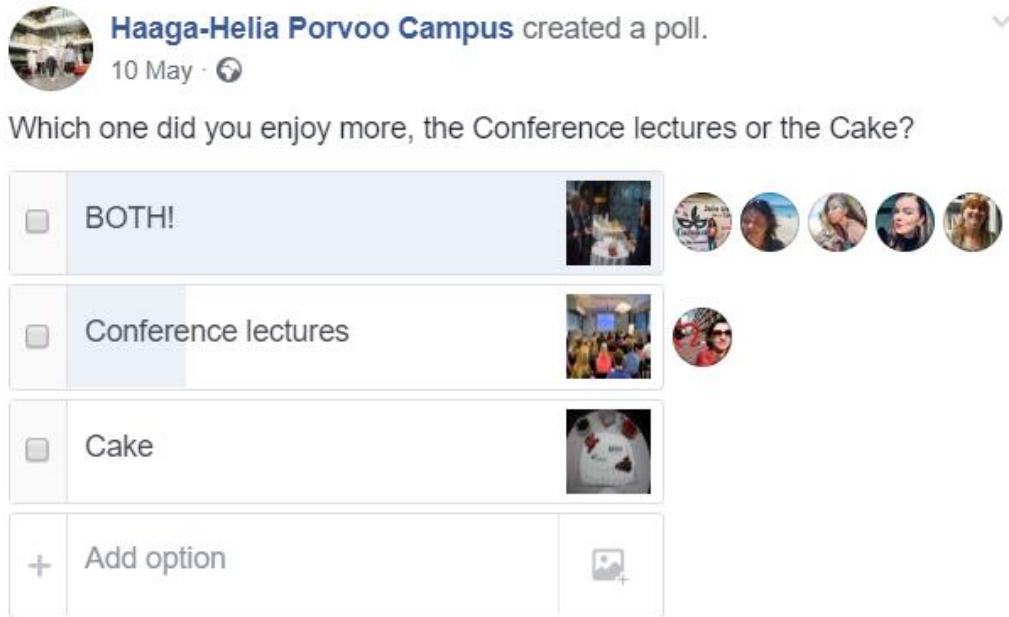
Picture 16 A poll on the Facebook event page

6.3 Post event

After the event, the only interactions between the organizing team and the attendees was through the feedback survey, which received 3 responses out of 31 attendees. As mention earlier in section 3.2.5, the quantitative approach requires the response rate of at least 50% according to Babbie (2004) or 85% according to Singleton and Straits (2005). Therefore, he author of the thesis concluded that the response rate of this survey is failed to meet its target, hence the result is not fit for analysing and reporting. This also means that the attempt at post-event attendee engagement was unsuccessful, as attendees no longer want to connect and interact with the post-conference activity.

7 Conclusion

Unlike social events and festivals, academic conferences rarely succeed in offering excitement and often stereotyped as uninteresting paper sessions. However, this thesis proved that there is possibility for attendee engagement at academic conferences, and it listed several methods of improving attendee engagement for three stages of a conference: before-event, during event and post-event.

Based on the findings through secondary data, the thesis presented attendee engagement tools, including e-mail for invitation, conference website for information, conference social media for communication, venue setting for welcoming the attendees, info package for materials during the conference, panel discussion for a change in presentation, short breaks for networking, gamification for interactions, surprise for lasting memories, and other extra offers. Then, the thesis collected and analysed its findings based on attendance, social media, observation and feedback survey. Among those engagement tools, there were some activities were not included into the program of the conference due to the time shortage in the schedule.

Concerning the results, the attendance was a success for attendee engagement at the beginning, and the interactions of the attendees throughout the conference days were also a sign of success during the conference. However, the failure at collecting responses for its feedback survey shows the lack of attendee engagement at the end of the whole process. The reason could be about the timing of sending the questionnaire, hence it is recommended to plan beforehand the date of releasing the survey.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Questionnaire

ATLAS BUSINESS TOURISM SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP CONFERENCE 2019 FEEDBACK SURVEY

Dear all delegates of ATLAS SIG Business Tourism Conference 2019 in Porvoo, Finland,

We hope that the conference was worth travelling all the way to Porvoo, and you enjoyed every moment there. To help us improve our conference design and service, please let us know how you felt about the conference via this questionnaire. Of course, every minute of your time is precious, and that is why we made sure our questionnaire takes less than 5 minutes.

1. What was your 'role' at ATLAS SIG Business Tourism Conference 2019 in Porvoo? (1 option only)

- Speaker
- Paper presenter
- Industrial representative
- Other ___

2. How did you hear about this conference? (More than 1 option)

- E-mail invitation from the Coordinator of ATLAS Special Interest Group
- Your colleagues
- ATLAS website
- Other source ___

3. How do you rate our E-mail invitation?

   3.1 The e-mail invitation was persuasive. (Completely disagree, somewhat disagree, neutral, somewhat agree, completely agree, I wasn't invited via e-mail)

   3.2 I made the decision of participating in the conference after reading the email. (Completely incorrect, somewhat incorrect, neutral, somewhat correct, completely correct, I wasn't invited via e-mail)

4. How do you rate our special separate website www.atlasbt.org for ATLAS SIG Business Tourism Conference 2019 in Porvoo?

   4.1 Did you visit the special separate website for ATLAS SIG Business Tourism Conference 2019 at www.atlasbt.org?

- Yes, I did.
- No, I didn't.

   4.2 All information I needed could be found on the conference website. (Completely disagree, somewhat disagree, neutral, somewhat agree, completely disagree, I didn't visit this website)

   4.3 I made the decision of participating in the conference after visiting the website. (Completely disagree, somewhat disagree, neutral, somewhat agree, completely disagree, I didn't visit the website)

4.4 I was excited for optional program of the conference after visiting the website (for example: the walk in the Old Town Porvoo, the get-together-dinner, the conference dinner, and the post-tour in Helsinki). (Completely disagree, somewhat disagree, neutral, somewhat agree, completely disagree, I didn't visit the website)

4.5 Which information on the website that helped you made your decision of participating the conference? (Can choose more than one)

- Keynote speakers
- Paper sessions
- Panel discussion
- Dinner conference

- Post-event tour
- Porvoo city
- Networking opportunity
- Other___

5. How do you rate our Welcoming bag?

5.1 I found all the information I needed from the Welcoming bag. (Completely disagree, somewhat disagree, neutral, somewhat agree, completely disagree, I didn't get the Welcoming bag)

5.2 The Welcoming bag helped me engage into the conference better. (Completely disagree, somewhat disagree, neutral, somewhat agree, completely disagree, I didn't get the Welcoming bag)

6. How do you rate out social media activities?

6.1 Did you follow the event social media hashtag #atlasporvoo2019?

- Yes
- No
- I didn't follow the social media activities of the conference

6.2 The social media posts of the conference were exciting. (Completely disagree, somewhat disagree, neutral, somewhat agree, completely disagree, I didn't follow the Social media activities of the conference)

6.3 The social media posts made me feel excited for the conference. (Completely disagree, somewhat disagree, neutral, somewhat agree, completely disagree, I didn't follow the Social media activities of the conference)

7. How do you rate our conference program and schedule?

7.1 The session schedule was well designed. (Completely disagree, somewhat disagree, neutral, somewhat agree, completely disagree)

7.2 The topic of the panel discussion was thought-provoking. (Completely disagree, somewhat disagree, neutral, somewhat agree, completely disagree, I didn't attend the Panel discussion)

7.3 I was able to network effectively during the break sessions. (Completely disagree, somewhat disagree, neutral, somewhat agree, completely disagree, I was away during the break sessions)

8. How do you rate our hospitality during the conference?

8.1 The conference snack bar helped me feel refreshed for the next sessions. (Completely disagree, somewhat disagree, neutral, somewhat agree, completely disagree, I was away during the break sessions)

8.2 The conference dinner made the two-day conference less stressful and more enjoyable for me. (Completely disagree, somewhat disagree, neutral, somewhat agree, completely disagree, I didn't participate in the conference dinner)

8.4 The piano performance during the break session made the conference more pleasurable for me. (Completely disagree, somewhat disagree, neutral, somewhat agree, completely disagree, I wasn't there when there was a piano performance)

8.3 The cake was a nice surprise to close the conference. (Completely disagree, somewhat disagree, neutral, somewhat agree, completely disagree, I wasn't there when the cake showed up)

8.4 The Helsinki tour was an unforgettable experience to end the conference journey. (Completely disagree, somewhat disagree, neutral, somewhat agree, completely disagree, I didn't participate in the Helsinki tour)

9. In general:

    9.1 What did you like the most about the conference? (Open-ended)

    9.2 What did you like the least about the conference? (Open-ended)

    9.3 How do you think this conference could have been improved? (Open-ended)

    9.4 Based on your experience at this event, how likely are you to attend the next ATLAS Special Interest Group Business Tourism conference? (Very Likely, Likely, Neutral, Unlikely, Very Unlikely)

    9.5 How likely are you to recommend ATLAS SIG Business Tourism Conference to a friend/colleague? (Very Likely, Likely, Neutral, Unlikely, Very Unlikely)

Appendix 2. Crossword for the early birds

CROSWORD GAME:
because that 's how people
explore Porvoo campus

1. What goes up and never comes down?
2. What goes up and down, but remains in the same place?
3. What is it that stands up, but grows down?
4. What is the name of the institution hosting ATLAS Business Tourism SIG conference 2019?
5. Which room has no wall?
6. Which nail does a carpenter try to miss?
7. ATLAS was established in 199_.
8. What can be broken, but is never held?
9. What gets wetter and the wetter the more it dries?
10. What does SIG in "ATLAS Business Tourism SIG conference" means? "Special I_____ Group"
 11. What is the location of ATLAS Business Tourism SIG conference 2019?
12. Who is the author of this book?
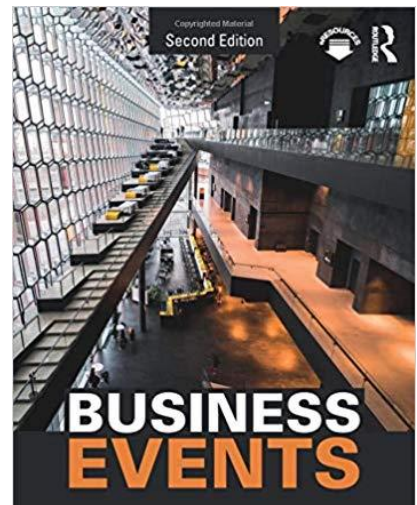
Conference Day 1 - May 9

8.30   Registration opens

9.30   Opening of the Conference
                Past & present coordinator of ATLAS SIG Business Tourism
                Rob Davidson and Monika Birkle

9.45 - 10.30   Keynote by Ines Antti-Poika Head of the Finland Convention Bureau
                "Finland – Business events at the top of the world "

10.30 - 11.00   Andrew Kirby, paper presentation
                "Driving the DMO brand and event experience forward -
                Marketing challenges and opportunities "

11.00 - 11.30   Maria Vodenska & Teodora Georgieva, paper presentation
                "Business Events as a Factor for Destination Sustainable Tourism Development "

11.30 - 12.00   Chiara Orefice & Andrew Smith, paper presentation
                "Blurring the boundaries:
                creating synergies between business events and cultural festivals "

12.00 - 13.00   Lunch in

13.00 - 13.45   Keynote by Dr Nicole Ferdinand Senior Lecturer at the
                Oxford Brookes School of Hospitality Management
                "Artificial Intelligence and Business Tourism: New Frontiers and New Possibilities "

13.45 - 14.15   Violeta Salonen & Mário Passos Ascenção, paper presentation
                "Creating storytelling-based experience events: The case of Viaporin Kekri "

14.15 - 14.45   Yana Shokola, Valery Gordin & Polina Kamenskaya, paper presentation
                "Utilizing cultural attractions to promote MICE destinations "

14.45 - 15.15   Coffee break and poster presentations

15.15 - 15.45   Krzysztof Cieslikowski, paper presentation
                "Key success factors of international conferences as systemic tourism products
                on the example of Erasmus + International Week in Kaunas"

15.45 - 16.15   Panel discussion: Technology vs Human factor at Events and Conferences
                Moderator: Dr Nicole Ferdinand

18.00   Transportation to conference dinner venue from Rauhankatu 20, 06100 Porvoo

18.30 - 20.30   Conference dinner at Nybergs Varpet,
                Address: Långholmintie 247 - 06200 Porvoo

21.00   Transfer to Porvoo, Rauhankatu 20, 06100 Porvoo

Conference Day 2 - May 10

9.30 - 10.00   Presentation on Space Tourism, Annette Toivonen PhD Candidate
"One business class ticket to Mars, please! - an Insight to Space Tourism "

10.00 - 10.30 Sonya Graci, Sarah Oliver, Ellie Godfrey, Ryan Fayle, Samantha Price &
Stewart Gray, paper presentation
"Determining Current Understanding and Awareness Levels of
Sustainable Tourism Amongst Travel Agents "

10.30 - 11.15   Coffee break

11.15 - 11.45   Martin Robertson & Joan McLatchie, paper presentation
"Business Events: the application of design and transforming access "

11.45 - 12.30 Lunch

12.30 - 13.00 Liisa Wallenius, Niina Moilanen & Annika Konttinen, paper presentation
"Implementing Design Sprint in Higher Education "

13.00 - 13.45 Keynote by Rob Davidson Managing Director of MICE Knowledge
"The contribution of universities to the development of a body of knowledge
for business tourism"

13.45 - 14.15   Closing of the Conference

Appendix 5. Panel discussion script

1. Participants:

- 1 moderator Nicole Ferdinand - Senior Lecturer at the Oxford Brookes School of Hospitality Management.
- 1 industry guest Valentina Voronova - Suomen Videoviestintä,
- 3 Students: Ekaterina Kemppi, Vivian Phan, Jani Hyppänen

2. Panel Topic: Tech vs. Human factors at Events and conferences

3. Duration: 30 minutes

4. Welcoming words (5 minutes)

5. A warm hello, introduce the panelists

6. Introduce the topic, short summary on how tech has influenced the event industry in recent years

7. Questions for panellists (20 minutes)

- From your point of view, what is the most influential technological advancement in the event industry in the past 5 years?
- Will people working in the Event and conference sector lose their jobs because of technological development?
- Will we at some point encounter robots at registration desks and cloakrooms? How do you think people will react to this development?
- What are the main skills and competencies needed for an event manager when it comes to event technology?
- How do you imagine the Event Technology is developing in the coming 20 years?

8. Q&A session with the audience (3 minutes)

9. Closing in form of a body voting (2 minutes)

10. Interact with audience: Please take a stand Yes / No to the question "are you prepared for the technological development in the events industry?"