

Are Hungarian conference organizers environment-conscious? - The findings of a survey

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ABSTRACT

The choice of venue is an important issue for conference organizers. Given the increasing deterioration of earth's ecosphere, environmental consciousness is already an essential selection factor, which will continue to have an increasing influence in the choice of conference venues in most countries of the world. Green events, however, are still far from prevalent in Hungary. In this paper, we look for the reasons and identify other factors that influence the venue selection decisions of Hungarian conference organizers. In particular, we look for answers to the following questions: 1. what are the relevant factors of venue selection for Hungarian conference organizers; and 2. is environmental consciousness one of these selection factors?

Keywords: conference organization, venue selection, environmental consciousness, green events, selection criteria, Green Hotel Award

1. Introduction

1.1 Factors influencing conference venue selection

The concept of conference can be defined as follows: a congress or conference is the "essential instrument of knowledge mediation and experience gaining", during which the participants may exchange their experience and knowledge. Furthermore, they can gather information on important changes and developments in their branch or field of interest. Besides, a meeting like this offers a splendid opportunity to make contacts or to preserve and cultivate already existing connections (Faragó, 2000:9).

Venue selection for any kind of event is based on very thorough process of preparation. The venue is a very important success criterion of the event as the venue "can make or break the event" (Allen, 2009:81). According to IMEX Global Data Exchange, "the professional aspects of venue selection are: high level infrastructure (airports, hotels, options of passenger transport); brand new and therefore attractive venue in the market; easily approachable to the majority of the participants; at the event a proper price/value rate can be expected; reliable, appropriate to the event purposes, conscious environment protection" (IMEX, 2008). Járási (2004:45) recapitulates that easy approach, civilized and attractive touristic supply, experienced venue staff, experienced technical and organizer staff, the technical equipment of the venue, security, the attitude of the locals (population and institutions), parking opportunities, professional assistants, nearby accommodation, catering possibility at the venue (with sufficient capacity and high quality) and perfect communication devices are arguably the most relevant criteria of venue selection. Other authors, such as Getz (1997), also mention the atmosphere, ambience and image of the venue as important selection criteria. One may add to the list other factors deemed important by conference participants themselves. Robinson and Callan (2005) surveyed the opinion of participants on the venue selection criteria and found that the delegates considered cleanliness and the quality of the served food the most important factors.

1.2 Hungarian conference tourism

In Hungary, conference tourism is the most important segment of inbound tourism. The statistics of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH) show that "10% of the visitors in Hungary are here to attend conferences and congresses and 22% of the visitors come here with business purposes" (KSH, 2008:2). However, this considerable demand encounters difficulties in supply. The greatest disadvantage of the Hungarian

conference market is its remarkably tight conference room capacity: the number of rooms that are able to host at least 1000 persons is rather low. Although there are several venues in Hungary that are capable of hosting a conference, their capacities are usually limited to a few hundred persons. Furthermore, the market is centered heavily in Budapest and rural conference cities cannot compete with the capital neither in publicity nor in capacity (Bokor, 2000:95). As for the type of venues, a study by Faragó and Karikás (2000:9) shows that "55% of the meetings were organized in congress centers, 24% in hotels and 17% in universities". Besides these, other venues include stadiums or corporate headquarters.

1.3 Environment-conscious conference organization

Our environment is an integrated system in which all factors influence each other and every single human being and every branch of business interacts with the others. Events are also part of this system along with the several thousands of participants as they contribute significantly to carbon dioxide emission and, therefore, to climate change. Consequently, event organizers share the responsibility for sustainable development and have to consider environmental consciousness as an important selection criterion (Jones, 2010: 167).

The greatest proportion of ecological footprint of events is made by the travelling of participants. In order to reduce ecological footprint, organizers increasingly look for more environmentally sound logistic solutions and encourage alternative modes of transport such as the railway networks (Henderson, 2009 in Beer, 2009).

The Sustainable Event Summit 2009 made 50 suggestions to enhance the sustainability of conference organization in the long run. From the 50 suggestions, we think that the most relevant and venue oriented ideas are the followings:

- easily accessible, nearby location, which helps to reduce environmental pollution and the costs of the participants;
- employment of local suppliers, whose equipment/products can be transported easier and more quickly to the venue;
- incentives to use public transport or walk in the venue area;
- water-saving or efficient water usage;
- preserving the natural environment of newly built venues, preventing its damage;
- realizing an environmental project that will leave a good legacy on the venue, e.g. sustainable construction, selective waste management.

2. Methodology

Based on available information, it is impossible to determine the exact size of the Hungarian conference organizer market. Nevertheless, in our research we had to select the objects of the survey from among the many Hungarian conference organizers keeping in mind the aspects of credibility, professional competence and comprehensiveness. In order to insure all the three aspects, we chose to survey the 16 conference organizing enterprises that are members of the Conference Organizer Department of the Association of Hungarian Conference Organizers (MaReSz). This list of companies virtually covers the entire core of the conference organization sector in Hungary.

We first contacted the organizers with a short questionnaire, followed by a longer deep interview, consisting of 6 open questions exploring the opinion and experiences of the respondents. The questionnaire was sent back by a total of 10 conference organizers while a total of 14 participated in the deep interviews. Although our research sample seems small, it is representative as it covers the overwhelming majority (88%) of the observed population.

2.1 Questionnaire survey

The questionnaire contained direct questions, divided into 3 main subsets. These were the descriptive data of the company of the conference organizer, the data of conferences organized in 2011 and the personal value judgment of the respondent regarding the criteria of the conference venue selection.

2.1.1 Sample features

The first subset of questions covered the descriptive data of the company (company name, year of foundation, company site, specialization). From the point of view of the research, the data on the company seat and

specialization are the most important. 9 of the 10 respondents are headquartered in Budapest and one is seated in Debrecen, reflecting the dominance of the capital. Among the surveyed conference organizers there are only two companies with specialization, a quite low rate. One of the two specialized in international conferences while the other one specialized in scientific and professional conferences.

2.1.2 Data of conferences organized in 2011

The questions in the second subset aimed to create a transparent picture of the organized conferences (by venue, topic, etc.) in 2011. We think that this review is essential for the further examination of venue selection aspects.

In the first question we asked the 10 conference organizers about the total number of conferences in 2011. Based on the answers, this value ranged from 5 to 45 although the conferences varied both in their topics and in the quantity of their participants. Table 1 lists the types of the conferences organized by the respondents in 2011 sorted by venue and topic.

Table 1. Conferences organized by the respondents by topic and venue

	Hotel			Conference center			Educational institution			Total
	Budapest	County seat	Other	Budapest	County seat	Other	Budapest	County seat	Other	
Medical	9	3	4	3	3	1	1			24
Tourism	1									1
IT	1			7						8
Economics			1							1
Science	11		5	1			8		1	26
Corporate	1		1							2
Marketing	1			3						4
EU project	1			2						3
Other	4		4	1						9
Total	29	3	15	17	3	1	9	0	1	78

Source: own research.

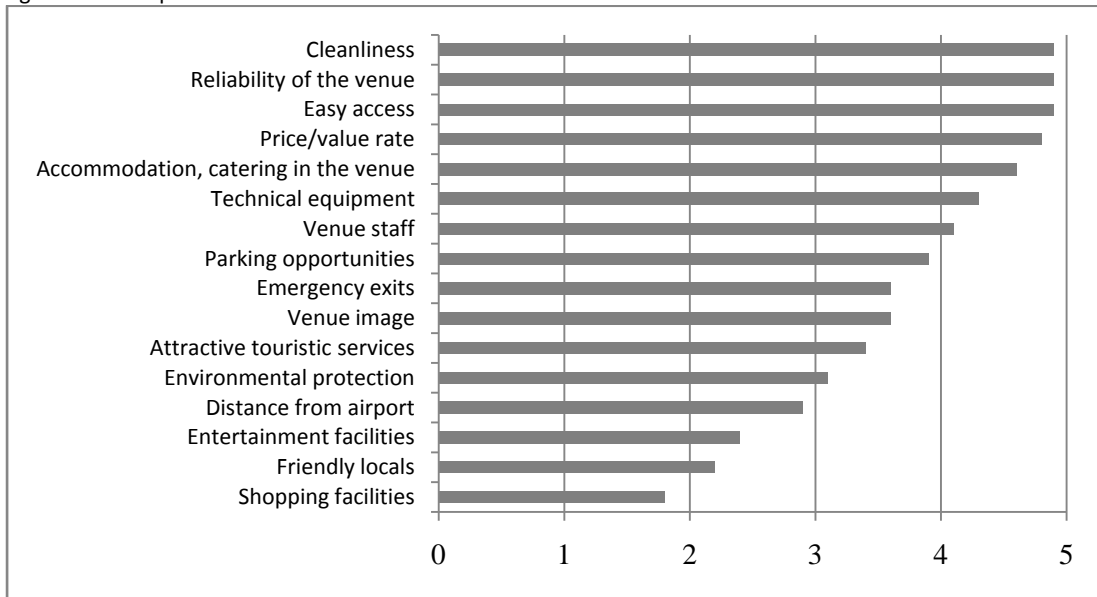
One can draw the following important conclusions based on the table:

1. Most of the conferences (55) were organized in Budapest. This is 71% of the total number (78) of conferences.
2. Conferences organized in hotels of other settlements represent a relatively high proportion: 32% of the total sample. On the other hand, these towns have a very low market share in conference centers and educational institutions.
3. The ratio of conferences organized in county seats is very low, a mere 8% of the total.

2.1.3 Conference venue selection criteria

In the first question of this subset, the organizers were asked to mark the listed venue selection criteria they apply in the choice of venue of future conferences on a likert scale of 1 to 5. On this scale, the least important aspect was marked by 1 while the most important aspect was marked by 5. Figure 1 displays the value judgment of respondents regarding the importance of the selection criteria.

Figure 1. The importance of venue selection criteria

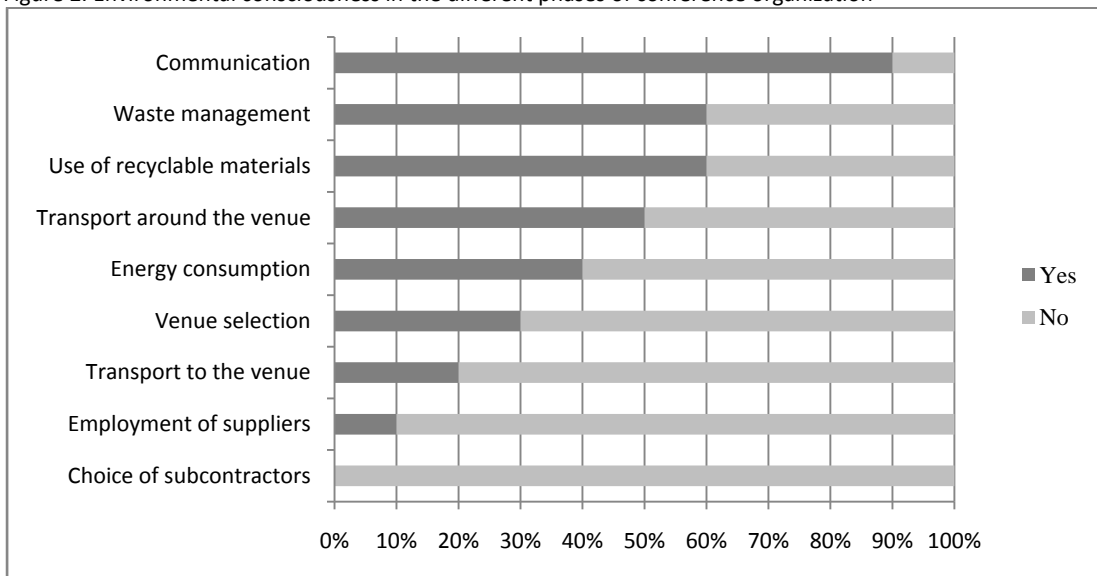


Source: own research.

According to the organizers, the most important factors are cleanliness, reliability of the venue and its easy access. These factors were, with one or two exceptions, marked 5. The respondents considered the entertainment and shopping facilities and friendly locals as the least important of the listed aspects. These criteria were mostly marked 1, which means that most organizers ignore these factors in their venue selection.

In the second question of the subset Hungarian organizers were asked to reveal how much they were influenced by the aspect of environmental consciousness. We listed 8 phases of the organization process and asked organizers to state whether they considered environmental consciousness as an important component of that particular phase. Figure 2 shows their responses.

Figure 2. Environmental consciousness in the different phases of conference organization



Source: own research.

Environmental consciousness is an influential factor for 90% of the respondents in communication. This means that they send out all necessary information in electronic form and make efforts to minimize the use of paper. 60% of the respondents is influenced by environmental consciousness in waste management and the use of recyclable materials. The majority of respondents care about selective waste collection in the conference venue and they do their best to reduce the amount of waste produced.

Half of the respondents said they were environmentally conscious in the transportation of participants in the venue. These respondents try to encourage participants to use public transport in the conference venue using different means such as distributing free mass transport tickets among the participants. However, the transport to the conference venue was marked by only 20 % of the respondents as a phase in which they apply environmental consciousness. Their explanation was that they try to choose conference venues that are located in the proximity of the homes of the majority of the participants. When this is unfeasible they still try to encourage participants to use public transport (e.g. trains) to approach the venue.

Energy consumption was chosen by 40% of the respondents while venue selection by only 30%. Organizers saying yes to these said that they try to select an environment-conscious venue for their conferences, e.g. hotels with Green Hotel Award or other energy efficient hotels. However, all the organizers who chose energy consumption stated that environmental consciousness was a primary factor only when the client was specifically looking for an environment-conscious venue.

The phases in which environmental consciousness is the least important are the choice of subcontractors (10%) and sponsors (0%). This finding contradicts the assumption that the prestige of a conference is enhanced by the fact that its suppliers and sponsors are environmentally conscious companies.

2.2 Deep interviews

In the following subsection, we summarize the findings of the interviews conducted with 14 respondents.

2.2.1 The future prospects and the competition of different venue types

In the first question of the interviews we inquired about the differences in the potential venues and we asked organizers to formulate an opinion on the future prospects of these venue types. The answers given to the first question were relatively homogeneous. Organizers shared the opinion that, in the long run, hotels and conference centers will both be in demand in the conference market. The reason they said was the different advantages of the two venue types.

However, opinions on the competition between the two venue types are equivocal. Three respondents said that there is high demand for the construction of a large conference site with a capacity of several hundred people as it would attract several conferences, e.g. from other hotels. One other respondent, however, thought that this was an idealized concept because the maintenance of such a large conference center would be uneconomical. Three respondents opted for the competitive advantage of hotels, saying that additional new conference hotels with relatively larger capacity could redirect more events from conference centers to hotels, thereby increasing the market share of the latter.

2.2.2 Prospects of conference centers in other settlements

The majority of our respondents believe that conference venues in the country will be in demand in the future, but serious infrastructural development and the construction of several high standard hotels and other accommodation sites is necessary in the proximity of the conference centers. "Currently existing accommodation opportunities fail to meet either quantity or quality requirements" – claimed one organizer.

A number of our respondents underlined that venues in other settlements are likely to attract more national conferences in the future. Two respondents thought that these venues have no future, at all, under current conditions, pointing out the need for large investment projects, infrastructural development, the construction of high quality accommodation, the expansion of local services and the establishment of fast moving transport networks including international airports in the countryside. They added that they do not foresee such developments in the near future. Our respondents considered only five cities – of which, four country seats – to be competitive venues in the country: Debrecen (East), Sopron (Northwest), Szeged (Southeast), Pécs (Southwest) and Eger (Northeast).

2.2.3 Environmental consciousness in the Hungarian conference market

Our respondents were asked about the degree of environmental consciousness of the Hungarian conference organizer market. The majority described environmental consciousness as a "brand new, so far totally immature trend". They believed that currently the Hungarian market cannot be considered environmentally conscious because neither the organizers nor the venues themselves emphasize this aspect. Defying our preliminary expectations, our respondents' attitude towards the future of environmental consciousness was also rather pessimistic.

Four of the respondents believed that conference organizers are responsible for the creation of green events and environmental consciousness could get a little more emphasis at the expense of the profit factor. The above-mentioned four conference organizers pointed out that recyclable material, such as conference bag materials, are far more expensive than traditional disposable materials, which is why the majority of organizers decide not to choose these. Most organizer will choose a sustainable venue, e. g. a green hotel, only when their client expresses his or her preference for environmental consciousness. One of the respondents said, however, that he bumped into such a request only once in the ten years of his career. The lack of professional enthusiasm is, therefore, the result of a lack of interest on clients' part in creating sustainable events.

Among the respondents there were only a few who were not familiar with existing green conference venues and hotels. The majority was aware of these venues and even highlighted a few names as good examples, most often including in the list the Congress Center of the University of Szeged, which opened its gates in 2005. The name of the most renowned Hungarian green conference center, the REC Conference Center¹ in Szentendre, however, was less well known among our respondents.

2.2.4 The Green Hotel Award as a venue selection factor

The Green Hotel Award, established by the Hungarian Hotel and Restaurant Association, has been given to environmentally conscious hotels every second year since 1995 in two categories: hotel chains and independent hotels. Based on the 3R (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle) methodology, the list of the points of evaluation of applicants includes staff commitment, the hotel's external environment, energy efficiency, waste management, water usage, suppliers, green office, protection of the ozone layer and preservation of biodiversity.

Unsurprisingly, only 15% of our respondents (two organizers) consider the Green Hotel Award as a factor in the process of decision on the venue. One respondent noted that he always draws clients' attention to the qualified hotels and considered this a good strategy to arouse clients' interest in environmental consciousness, whose future mainly depends on their attitude towards green events.

Half of the respondents believe that qualification is only a selection factor when choosing between two hotels offering similar services, location and price. When other conditions, e.g. location, price, are different, however, this factor entirely loses its significance. 36% (5 respondents) do not consider the Green Hotel Award, at all, arguing that one very rarely chooses between two venues of the same category that only differ in environmental consciousness. There is always an aspect in which one venue is more appropriate than the other.

2.2.5 The promising future of video conferences

We asked organizers at this point in the interview about the future prospects of traditional and video conferences. The majority of our respondents believe that video conferences will hardly replace traditional conferences because video conferences are not proper substitutes for "normal" conferences but appear to have a rather supplementary character. One of the greatest advantages of traditional conferences is the opportunity to make personal contacts. Besides this, the number of participants and the amount of time spent in video conferences can be limited. Our respondents mentioned supplementary programs, raising the standard of traditional conferences, as an additional argument as these programs cannot be included in video conferences.

Two organizers believed, that the prospect of video conferences depends on the conference topic: in the case of corporate events video conferences are considered a useful alternative, unlike in the case of scientific conferences, where video conferences are hardly an option. There was only one respondent who agreed that

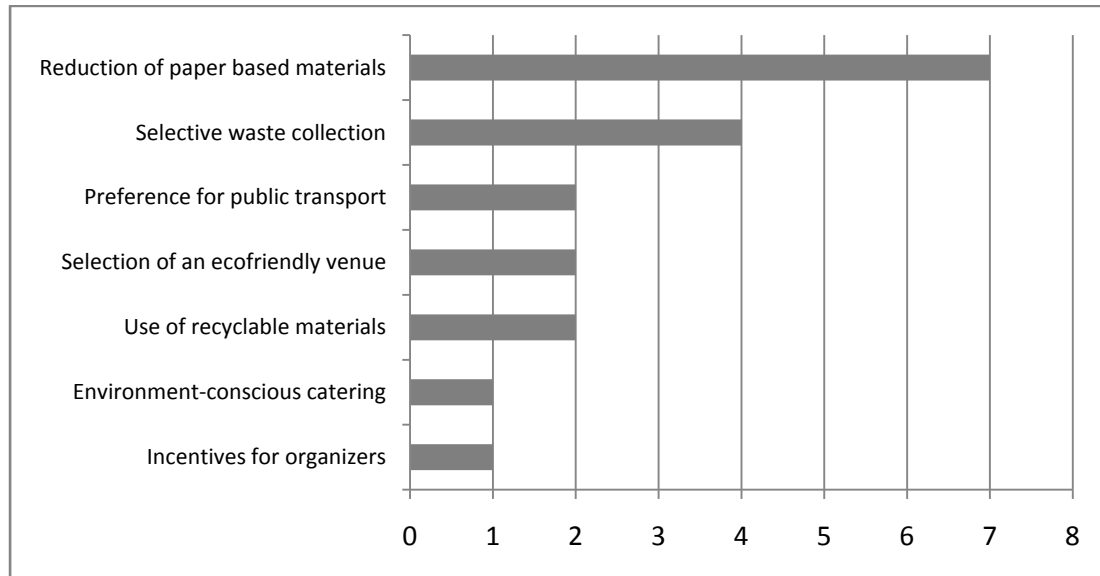
¹ The REC conference center in Szentendre, built in 2008, is the first Hungarian center to emit absolutely no carbon dioxide. Its operation is based exclusively on recyclable energy resources, including geothermal and solar energy, making it a unique venue in the conference tourism market.

video conferences will spread at the expense of traditional ones. He explained that rapid technological development, longer and longer distances to travel, decreasing free time and the cost and communicational efficiency of video conferences will force traditional conferences out of the market, replacing them with video conferences.

2.2.6 Suggestions for a more sustainable Hungarian conference market

In answering our last question, respondents mentioned several ideas to make Hungarian conferences more environmentally conscious. The most frequently mentioned ideas are illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Suggestions to make conferences more eco-friendly



Source: own research.

Half of our respondents (7) suggested reducing the use of paper based materials. These organizers encourage the use of CDs, USB flash drives and the internet for communication instead of paper based methods. Selective waste management and its development were mentioned by 4 respondents, who would appreciate if every hotel created the possibility of selective waste collection during conferences. The use of recyclable materials was suggested by two respondents, who listed several ideas in addition to the solutions provided in the scientific literature, e.g. the use of conference bags made of recyclable materials. Our respondents' ideas included recyclable gifts to participants, eco-friendly memo pads or the use of recyclable installation.

Two organizers mentioned environment-conscious venue selection as an important factor in organizing environmentally sustainable conferences. According to them, a venue can host environment-conscious conferences when it is energy efficient, has modern cooling and heating systems installed and meets basic sustainability requirements such as selective garbage collection or the extensive use of recyclable materials. They say Hungarian organizers ought to pay more attention to this in the future in order to achieve and maintain the sustainability of conference organization in the long run.

The preference for public transport was also mentioned by two respondents. One of them explained that their company hands out free public transport tickets to the participants in the conference bags and delegates may use the tickets during the time of the conference. Another organizer believes that public transport opportunities can be better exploited in reaching the conference venue. Or, if public transport is not an option in a specific case, participants should be encouraged to share private cars (the organizer is currently only planning to use this method).

One of the respondents made a creative, but not-yet-implemented proposal. He believes that a centrally-funded incentive program should motivate organizers to work in a more environment-conscious fashion. Such a program should create the opportunity for organizers to buy cheaper recyclable materials instead of the current very

expensive ones. Another suggestion, formulated by a number of our respondents, is the construction of a congress center, with a capacity to host hundreds or, according to some, thousands of people in an environmentally conscious way. According to most respondents making this suggestion, this project should be realized in Budapest or in another large city that offers conference participants various touristic attractions in their spare time. However, almost all of these organizers admitted that such an investment would not pay off, or, only in a very long time. Generally, it is understood that because of the low expected rate of return and the high maintenance costs of such a desired congress center the probability of this project being realized in the near future is low.

3. Conclusion

Based on the above findings from the questionnaires filled by 10 experts and the deep interviews conducted with 14 experts, we can draw the following conclusions:

1) "Green" solutions are in their early phase in the Hungarian conference market. Among the many reasons the most important are clients' low environmental consciousness, high administrative costs of running an environment-conscious organization and the lack of interest on the part of conference organizers. Nevertheless, Hungarian conference organizers agree that these are expected to change in a way that will promote the long run sustainability of conference organization.

2) Although the "Green Hotel" Award was undoubtedly a positive initiative, it is not yet considered a factor in the venue selection process among Hungarian conference organizers.

Clearly, these findings show that the current state of environmental consciousness of Hungarian conference tourism leaves room for improvement. However, a few signs already indicate that, if Hungarian conference organizers implement both best practice conference organizing solutions and their own creative suggestions, they will become more environment-conscious in their work, thereby creating a more sustainable conference market.

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