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### Exploring Intangibles in Event Design

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## Exploring Intangibles in Event Design

### Abstract

Event coordinators are constantly faced with the pressures of developing innovative strategies based upon new consumer desires. Because of this, planners need to be aware and receptive of consumer and participant responses. However, it is questionable whether coordinators actually turn these responses into action when planning events. Through an ethnography design with the National Senior Games in Houston, Texas and Rochester, NY, this study seeks to improve the way events are implemented by analyzing data for both intangible and tangible factors. It was found that strong communication between management levels, recruiting the right people to your organization and listening to your audience were essential in producing successful events. Ultimately planners will better be able to segment their targeted audience in large and small markets to produce better overall events.

### Document Type

Undergraduate Project

### Professor's Name

Emily Dane-Staples

### Subject Categories

Sports Management

Exploring Intangibles in Event Design

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### **Abstract**

Event coordinators are constantly faced with the pressures of developing innovative strategies based upon new consumer desires. Because of this, planners need to be aware and receptive of consumer and participant responses. However, it is questionable whether coordinators actually turn these responses into action when planning events. Through an ethnography design with the National Senior Games in Houston, Texas and Rochester, NY, this study seeks to improve the way events are implemented by analyzing data for both intangible and tangible factors. It was found that strong communication between management levels, recruiting the right people to your organization and listening to your audience were essential in producing successful events. Ultimately planners will better be able to segment their targeted audience in large and small markets to produce better overall events.

### **Exploring Intangibles in Event Design**

Have you ever thought to yourself, after facilitating an event, “I could have done better,” or “If I only had thought of that before?” As human beings we are programmed to critique ourselves and often have self-doubt. However, this can be good fixation because things are re-created and mistakes and flaws can be eliminated. Event coordinators and marketers are constantly being hit with consumers wanting more and better from them (James & Ross, 2004). Thus, they need to be constantly innovating and satisfying the consumer if they want to keep up.

The purpose of an event is not only to create brand awareness and promote organizations or a cause, but to also generate revenue, create a collective bond and provide entertainment for the host city and its tourists (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2007). When it comes to hosting events there are many factors that go into the management and facilitation. Everything from creating a basic outline, finding sponsorships, marketing to a target audience, to making sure all logistics are in order; all need to be addressed when implementing an occasion (Mullin et al., 2007). With that being said, a great deal of attention to detail needs to take place. Those events that are successfully planned, managed and facilitated can leave a lasting positive effect on a host city. However, there are many intangible factors behind the scenes that can make it harder to plan for which can put doubt in success in even the greatest planned and managed event.

There are two overall ways to determine an occasion’s success or impact. One way is to collect data on the tangible aspects such as the financials, economics and tourism; then analyze whether these aspects increase or decreased a host city’s current standing and how. Another way is to measure the intangible factors such as consumer response,

motivations to attend, motivations to participate and emotions. Ultimately it is the intangible factors, such as motivation, that event coordinators and marketers need to understand because they are much harder to plan for and leave room for doubt in success. However, obtaining both aspects will allow a researcher or event coordinator to implement his ideas more efficiently. It is also important to discover the motivations of employees and participants and what elements make for a great team. Finally, it is also essential to discover the specific factors or elements that differentiate one event from one another. This will answer what motivates people to attend and what are the factors that impact a host city. Therefore by becoming more consumer-centric and understanding the intangibles, smarter events can be created, making one more profitable.

### **Literature Review**

In order to conceptualize an event to determine its value and affect, there are four areas that need to be addressed; tourism and motivations, perceptions that differentiate support, impacts on the host city and marketing techniques. Tourism issues explore specifically what motivates people to come to events. The perceptions aspect is concerned with factors that differentiate one occasion from another between a visitors and residents mind. Exploring the impacts, both positive and negative, that linger in the host city is of great concern to planners for a more effective event management. Also, marketing techniques must also be assessed in terms of segmentation in order to conduct the right strategic approach. Motivations, perceptions, and impacts of an occasion and the segmentation of marketing strategies are all points of interest within the literature review.

### **Tourism & Resident Motivations**

The first area we can explore is the aspect of tourism, specifically what motivates people to attend an event. "Motivation is a force within an individual which causes him or her to do something to fulfill a biological need or psychological desire" (Fridgen in Kurtzman & Zauhar, 2005, p. 53). A person's motivation to attend an event is everything; if you cannot get them excited and interested in what you are planning, how do you expect them to actually come and invest time and money in you? You must show the tourist that your event is worthwhile and that it will give them an exclusive positive experience.

When exploring perceptions one must recognize differences between a host city's resident and a tourist. The resident and tourist may act and perceive things differently in terms of an event's implications on their lifestyle, what they value, what benefits they are seeking, and so on. A resident may attend an event simply just to support its city. However, they also may not attend out of protest from new infrastructure built, that increased their taxes (Turco, 1998). On the other hand, a tourist may focus more on the benefits he will receive from attending or if the special event coincides with one of his values. Sometimes a tourist is easier to target, market to and obtain because they are not involved in the implications of the occasion on the city (Turco, 1998).

In general people have similar motivations to attend or participate in an event. The primary reason being that it gives them self-satisfaction, happiness, or personal benefits (Mullin et al., 2007). Also, the influence of family, friends and or co-workers can also lead a person into attending an occasion. Often we find this within sporting events, in which they create an atmosphere of togetherness and provide an experience to bond with others of similar interests (Mullin et al., 2007). However, as one digs deeper, the motivations begin to differ for residents of a host city and those simply visiting. Since residents are in the

midst of the action, they most directly receive the costs and benefits. They will often be more focused on how the event will impact their lifestyles in both a short and long term context, rather than self-satisfaction for a weekend, so to be. A visitor on the other hand, does not live in the host city and will not have to face the potential repercussions of the event being held. Therefore, they may be more supportive of an event based upon these circumstances.

For example, a tourist's motivating factor may be entertainment, while for a resident it may be socialization (Pegg & Patterson, 2010). Many times these decisions to attend an event are subconscious, in which an individual is unaware to the hidden forces that shape their attraction to an event (Kurtzman & Zauhar, 2005). However, this subconscious decision is intentionally generated from external forces such as family, friends, marketing techniques and advertisements. This is referred to as the pseudo choice. The conscious decision making part of the brain represents the intentional choice in which the tourist can pinpoint specific implications for why they will or will not attend (Kurtzman & Zauhar, 2005). Tourists can then further be broken down into the types of motivation. One factor that a tourist will look for in an event is if they will have a great experience. A tourist desires self expression through any activity and will attempt to bridge a connection between him and the activity (Kurtzman & Zauhar, 2005). Another key factor of motivation through self expression is the pure enjoyment and love for an activity. For example, when visitors were surveyed at the Gold Guitar Awards on their reasons for attending the most important factor was simply their enjoyment and love of country music (Pegg & Patterson, 2010). A study conducted by Bowen and Daniels (2005) determined that the highest motivator for



visitors was again self-expression in which enrichment of themselves through life was gained by attending the event.

In terms of depicting the motivations for a resident to attend an event in their city, factors that will impact their lifestyle are taken much more into consideration. Residents, like tourists, want to fulfill their self-experience and have a great experience through an event. They also are influenced by socialization and if they event will product social benefits (Turco, 1998). However, a resident is much more in tune with the city itself and their role within. When their city is hosting an event, they must consider what will be the benefits and possible repercussions. In D.M. Turco's 1998 study at the largest hot-air balloon event in the world, he determined that residents' perceptions toward a tourist event are impacted by their perceived social cost and benefits as well financial implications. Through this study, this event showed to have little social costs but a multitude of social benefits. However, when financials began to play a role where residents' property tax would increase, few were in favor of the event. Residents also became uneasy to hosting an event in fear that it would imply traffic congestion, parking issues and potential increase in the cost of living (Ritchie, Shipway, & Cleve, 2009). Although there are still positive socio-demographic characteristics and impacts an event can bring to a host city, the negatives can often outweigh. These issues specifically impact a resident's motivation to attend an event because they are the ones that will ultimately directly benefit and/or suffer.

Once an event manager understands the motivating factors for both tourist and residents, the next step is to create and implement tools to drive consumer participation. Research conducted by James and Ross (2004) explained that sport demand variables such

as pricing issues, promotions and residual preference factors all impact attendance. Sport marketers should be aware of the time and accessibility of the event, what types of promotions or giveaways could draw people in and setting affordable ticket prices and prices that are in tune with the standard of living for that specific area. However, as previously mentioned, the intangible factors are just if not more important in determining motivations and tourism attraction. Aesthetics, catharsis, drama, entertainment, escape, social interaction and vicarious achievement are all emerging intrapersonal motives (Trail, Anderson, & Fink, 2000 in James & Ross, 2004). In an example conducted by James and Ridinger (2002) (see James & Ross, 2004), consumers' motivations for attending men's and women's college basketball games were found to be, "influenced by the action in the games and the opportunity to escape from one's daily routine" (p. 19). This explains the need for aesthetics to be incorporated to increase attendance and satisfaction. If the tourist can identify himself with the event and obtain personal benefits, the tickets sales for an occasion will increase.

### **Differentiating Factors**

The next area of this study attempts to discover what factors differentiate one event from another. This will be analyzed through the perceptions of a visitor and a resident towards an occasion. "Event managers are constantly under pressure to produce the best event with new strategies to optimize advantages and minimize threats" (Pegg & Patterson, 2010, pg 85). Therefore managers must create elements that help to differentiate one event from another and in order motivate people to attend their event over another. For this, it is important to segment special event attendees from non-attendees and visitors from residents to effectively determine what factors of an event are beneficial and

contributing to attendance. Factors such as visitor characteristic, perceptions of the host city, spending expenditure patterns and travel motivations all need to be depicted of attendees and non-attendees (Soyoung, Miyoung, Jones, 2009). Because each group will have different perceptions, we will be able to determine what are those specific factors that differentiate one event from another and why people may attend this event but not a competitors.

For a resident of a host city, concerns about burdens on the local community to finance events, like the Olympic Games make people hesitant to attend or sport the occasion. Concerns over traffic, inflation and excessive costs also affect the perceptions of residents (Guala & Turco, 2009). However, after most Olympic Games, concerns of residents decreased significantly and attitudes became more positive. "In a landmark study by Ritchie and Aitken (1984), residents were asked before the 1988 Winter Olympic Games whether they felt in general it was a good idea for Calgary to host the event. Nearly 85 percent responded positively which increased to 97.8% after the event" (Guala & Turco, 2004, p. 24). Therefore, if event managers and marketers are to focus on attitudes of the resident and understand the perceptions and then address them, they could increase attendance and support from the beginning.

On the other hand, perceptions of a visitor to an event seems to be more positive in which they do not have to face the potential backlash of an mega-special event in terms of financial turmoil. A mega-special event is a term widely used in research studies, "that is used to describe events like the Olympics or the World Cup" (Mortemp, 2007, p. 1). Henry H. Hiller from the University of Calgary stated, "A mega event is first of all of fixed duration and on a short term basis. The event has a high profile, there is a worldwide interest linked

to the event and there is a sustainable and measurable economic outcome” (Morttenp, 2007, p. 1). Mega events like the Olympics can attract visitors to job opportunities that are created for the event and even ones created after. For example, when the Winter Games were held, tourism dramatically increased in Utah and the following year they had a record business for skier visits because of the event (Guala & Turco, 2004). Another aspect to becoming in tune with the visitors perceptions is to focus on service quality. This involves the quality of the competition and the functional quality including the service delivery, personnel working the event and the location. This will thus impact their attitude and satisfaction toward the occasion before they event attend (Kelley & Turley, 2001).

The third area to explore in conceptualizing an event is the impacts it has on the host city. This includes economic, tourism, socio-cultural and image. Marketing comes into play in how the impacts can be facilitated. Promotions and the way an occasion is marketed prior to its occurrence will be the first step to get individuals aware and in support. Mega special events especially attract a great deal of media and public attention creating a global appeal (Dwyer & Fredline, 2008). For example, the Super Bowl is one of the most watched television programs in the world and provides a rare environment where the audience tunes in specifically for the purpose of watch new and entertaining commercials (Dwyer & Fredline, 2008, p. 8). Therefore, the organizations or location that is associated with these types of events are receiving a great deal of exposure and lead into extended benefits from there.

“The economic impact of a special event has been defined as, ‘...the net economic change in a host community, excluding non-market values, which results from spending attributable to the event’” (Crompton & McKay, 1994, p. 33) (see Daniels & Norman, 2003).

The economic impact is an important factor because it determines the allocation of future resources and how the community will financially be as a conclusion. "A growing body of research illustrates that regularly scheduled sport events have a great economic potential for a host site" (Daniels & Norman, 2003, p. 215). However, mega-special events like that of the Olympics can either result in a positive or negative return and is never a stable guarantee. This is because they typically require that construction of special infrastructure and diverse resources, bearing an opportunity cost (Daniels & Norman, 2003).

The brand image is another influential impact created from a mega-special event. The image that an event creates within itself is directly reflective upon its host city and the organization behind the event. Therefore, it is important for event coordinators and marketers to pay attention to this to make sure they are incorporating the right fit for the intended host location. It is also crucial in this case to research the socio-culture of the city to find out how residents would feel about the event and if it would fit in within their culture. For example, if the intended host location were classified as a basketball city, then it would be smart for event planners to implement the Final Four tournament there rather than a city that has a culture centered on football.

Brand image can also be created from the sponsors of an event. "Sponsorship activity has become an increasingly important field in marketing research and now represents a significant part of the marketing mix" (Chavanat, Martinent, Ferrand, 2009, p. 644). In an event, especially mega-special's, sponsors are a crucial component to help create brand awareness and to provide financial assistance. A great deal of research has been conducted today on the impact sponsorships have and how to create a better fit and cohesion with the partnered brand or event. Finding the right fit between a sponsor and an

event will increase attitudes toward the relationship and increase purchase intentions and thus profitability (Chavanat et al., 2009).

Based upon the review literature thus far and the previous research conducted, it can be inferred that there is a great deal of evidence for both tangible and intangible aspects that encompass an event. It has also been discovered that although the intangible factors are difficult to understand, they are crucial in recognizing what motivates the consumer to attend an event and elements that influence their perceptions, differentiating factors compared to other occasions and purchase intentions. Research has also shown that attention needs to focus on the differences between residents and visitors for the factors stated above. This is necessary to better segment the market and create smarter events.

What is ultimately missing from the body of literature is research that unifies both the tangible and intangible in a single study. Research to date has been missing the link to connect these two concepts together and thus to formulate a plan from this for event coordinators and marketers to implement in their developments. There has been research in discovering what motivating factors are for consumers or the intangible aspects. Separate research studies have also explored the tangible aspects such as marketing techniques and economic impacts. Previous research has also failed to account for differences between large and small markets. There are numerous factors that differentiate each market in terms of finances, image, culture, resources and people in general. This directly impacts the types of events incorporated into each market and how they are both perceived and facilitated.

The research project fills these gaps. The purpose of this study seeks to improve the way events are implemented and assessed by collecting and analyzing data for both intangible and tangible factors. The research will also explore variations in large and small markets, and that understanding these differences are essential in producing redefined occasions in the right elements. The primary research questions are as followed:

- 1) How do event planners discuss and plan the intangibles of an event?
- 2) Does this planning differ between large and small markets?
- 3) How does the composition of the event planning team impact the execution of the event?
- 4) How does the event planning team evaluate the success of their event?
- 5) What was the participant experience of the Senior Games?

### **Method**

In order to achieve the objectives of this study an ethnography design was used. “An ethnography essentially involves the in-depth study of a group through immersion into the culture of that group, often for an extended period of time, using multiple methods of data collection” (Gratton & Jones, 2010, p. 109). This study specifically looks at the mega-special event of the National Senior Games in both a large market, Houston, Texas, and a small market, Rochester, New York. Although there are many differences between large and small markets, they both incorporate all the intended objectives. The ethnography design allowed for a deeper investigation of the motivations of visitors and residents, and the factors that truly differentiate events that only one could discover from being immersed in the culture (Gratton & Jones, 2010). It also allowed for a more insightful focus on the management side of each organization to find out what goes into the planning aspect and if

event coordinators are in reality acknowledging responses of the consumer. By working with each organization in Houston and Rochester, becoming a part of the system gave a direct insight into what goes behind the scenes to explain how things appear in the limelight or are even shadowed away from the public

### **Participant Selection**

The selection in this study primarily consists of the management within the National Senior Games. The type of sampling is theoretical in which the study is examining an organization with a certain level of experience in Mega-Special events (Gratton & Jones, 2010). The participant selection was observed and analyzed in two segments; the first including directors and managers, while the second focused on the athletes. These positions are divided into two categories for Houston and Rochester. Participants were then intentionally chosen to obtain a truthful and insightful representation. These individuals were also chosen based upon one or all of the following: their experience and involvement in the sport industry and/or National Senior Games, the level of their involvement in the event, their demographics and city of residency. It was important to be able to discover both ends of the spectrum to discover what was really going on and why, as well as what was needed moving forward. In order to be mindful of confidentiality rights, pseudonyms were used in place of the actual people in management and participation (see Appendix A.)

### **Management**

Management was the participant selection that was observed and analyzed the most. Management included both individuals from the national office as well as the Local Organizing Committee. In the national office there were five individuals on staff. The



national office included individuals who were all based in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, ranged from 24 years old to 60 years old, and consisted of two women and three men. Whereas in the local committee for Houston there was the executive director, eight managers; where there was an even divide of males and females as well as a diversified age group from all over the states. The local committee in Rochester had only four directors which contained an even divide on age and gender, similarly to Houston.

These groups were observed and analyzed in terms of the production of the event, as well as verbals and non-verbals. The verbals were found through individual interviews and discussions, group discussions in staff meetings, reactions to situations and ideas or troubleshooting, or lack thereof, based upon the athletes' needs or wants. The non-verbals included observations within staff meetings, during the actual event and simply in the work environment. Each market was analyzed with similar perimeters; however, interaction with the Rochester Local Organizing Committee was significantly less than that of the Houston Local Organizing Committee. The job title, size of market and which side of management they worked on was all taken into account when drawing conclusions from the research.

### **Athletes**

The athletes who participated in the both the summer and winter National Senior Games were the other participant selection analyzed. In order to be a participant in the Games, individuals had to be of the age of 50 or older, a citizen of the United States and have qualified from the State Games; placing first, second or third. Participants were then broken down into age brackets, gender, singles/doubles/mixed doubles/team, and by sport. *For example; Susan Brink, 50-54, female, singles, tennis.* Participants from each

market were analyzed separately considering the size of the event alluded to certain feelings, reactions, and situations. However, once both games were concluded, the researcher looked at both participants in Houston and Rochester to discover common themes.

### **Event Timeline**

Before the primary event, the pre-planning for Houston began in early April. The timeline in which all data collection took place was from the beginning of May of 2011 until the end of October of 2011. The observations in Houston began in early May and concluded in late July. The observations for the Games in Rochester began in mid-September and ended in early October. However; because the winter Games in Rochester did not fully conclude until early October, all interviews were not completed until late October. Interviews were extended in order to communicate further with both markets on the findings at the conclusion of both the summer and winter Games. The process of finding common themes, analyzing information and drawing conclusions began from the moment the researcher started with the Games in May, but was primarily done from October until January of 2012.

### **Data Collection Process**

The data was collected through extensive observational methods. It was important to establish a trust and rapport with management in order to collect the most valid data. Field notes were kept in a daily journal and used to record data throughout the interaction period. The journal was also used to record both structured and informal interviews and discussions. During the course of this process, it was important not to eliminate any bit of information to keep things accurate. This was important in order to uncover key facts,

conclusions and opinions. Interviews also gave the opportunity to converse about the issues at hand. This was helpful to work through information and find common threads through conversation (Gratton & Jones, 2010).

Finally, and most importantly, participant observation was incorporated. Being immersed in the organization and gaining an empathetic understanding of each market was necessary to understand various behaviors. The purpose of understanding these behaviors was to provide answers of all research questions stated at the end of the literature review. Specific behaviors that were observed and analyzed included;

- 1) How does management, both the national office and the Local Organizing Committee, interact with the participant before, during and after the event?
- 2) How do the athletes interact and respond to both the management of the national office and that of the Local Organizing Committee?
- 3) Does the results of these interactions result directly in the overall attitudes toward the Games itself? Are the positive or negative?
- 4) Does the participant feel that his needs and wants are met by both the national office and Local Organizing Committee? How so?

It is important to note that within each behavior for both management and participant, results differ between the large and small market. Also, it became easy to view the priorities on both ends of the spectrum in regards to the national and local levels of management to athletes.

By attending staff meetings and being directly involved with the decision making process, it was easier to make credible observations. The researcher could conclude why and how certain decisions were made, as well what the behaviors and attitudes that

contributed to them. Through the analyzation of this, connections between words and action were discovered. It is always helpful in the research process when people are talking about a certain topic or making decisions; or even the lack thereof, to see the rest of the members of management reactions. This observation was also vital to depict what topics made people uneasy or where the motivation lied. This is understood based upon conclusions made from previous research and interpretations made throughout the event. After each meeting and on a weekly basis, behaviors were recorded to draw out commonalities from the week.

On the participant side, observational methods were used to see if the athletes were enjoying the experience, as well as how they interacted with management. Recording these observations and concerns were important to the study and research to continue to find what intangibles were impacting an events success or lack thereof. Interviews were also taken with random athletes or those who voiced concerns to the researcher. Like with management, having conversations could allow the researcher to really dig and find out why the athletes felt the way they did and how those concerns came about.

After the games concluded in both markets, the process of finding common threads through the research was essential. By analyzing the statements and observations made, major themes began to emerge that ultimately helped answer the research questions. After the conclusion of the observations and interviews, the field notes were fully analyzed to allow for ease of concluding results. Thematic coding was done with all information to determine if any universal commonalities existed in both markets, participants of management and athletes and within management planning were found. Being able to depict valid and relevant information was important to be able to express what the current

issues are in the event industry and within management and to be able to develop insightful recommendations for success from that.

### **Results and Discussion**

This research sought to improve the way events are implemented and assessed by collecting and analyzing data for intangible factors. By observing data in both large and small markets many variations were discovered that are essential in developing success. The event planners that make up the event team and how they interact on planning the intangibles greatly contributed to the overall success the event. Also, the experiences of the participant are crucial for event planners to be mindful of in order to gain retention and value. By analyzing the management and athletes the researcher was able to gain a universal perspective to discover the intangibles and research questions.

#### **Interaction Between Local and National Organizations**

The most prevalent and possibly the most important result from the research was the interaction between the local and national organizations. This segment is related to the third research question; how does the composition of the event planning team impact the execution of the event? Having a national office and management team that work together in implementing an event is crucial in creating continuity and continued success in both large and small markets. Each is the face of the organization and event itself. They must develop a positive and sound relationship together to create a reputation that people will be pleasantly drawn to.

Through the National Senior Games it was evident in both markets that the national office needs to have more than just a presence. It needs to be hands on in terms of dealing with year to year issues and being in tune with the athletes' needs and wants. Competition

Manager in Houston, Enrique stated that, “They should be helping to promote the games through the local committees, but also focus on establishing a stronger foundation and continuity for the state games and national games” (Personal Communication, June, 2011). Fred, the Finance Director for the Houston LOC supported this by stating, “The national office is simply just a figure head and passes any issues onto the local committee to deal with” (Personal Communication, May, 2011). Helen, the Event Manager for the Rochester LOC agreed with the previous statements but said that in the small markets the situation is worse. “The national office comes in town only for the week of the event and does nothing but simply mingles around among the three facilities” (Personal Communication, October, 2011). By having a national office that simply acts as a figure head creates a problem for continued development. The national office is there to make sure things go according to their rules and regulations and be a face for the athlete. However, there needs to be more involvement from them since this organization is essentially theirs. The Games may get passed down from city to city, but the national office is the main hub that should be dealing with athletes and the planning stages year round.

In any well respected and successful event, extensive knowledge is a key component. In this case, the local committees expressed their need for more knowledge on the sports included, equipment and venue needs. This way the local management can spend more time on enhancing the event and catering to its participants and spectators. Competition manager from the Houston LOC, Donna supported this fact by stating,

“It seems that even though the national Office is the permanent staff for the national Senior Games and the LOC are the temps - the temps in this instance seem to have a more in depth knowledge of the event. I believe the National Office needs to take the lead and become the experts on their event, become more connected with the qualifying State Games, create long term connections with the sports specific national offices and more. There will always be a disconnect until the national

Office becomes the more experienced and more knowledgeable entity” (Personal Communication, July, 2011).

Another result or common theme drawn from this interaction is the lack of involvement of the national office for the actual event. Since the local committees are forced to build from scratch, they tend to reach out to the national office for assistance; however, the national office rarely responds effectively or at all for the matter. When Gary had several issues with registration and athletes were calling him complaining for problems he didn't know how to solve, he reached out to the national office for advice. Yet unfortunately Carlene responded with, “You're smart just figure something out, I'm too busy with matters over here. Just tell the athletes the rules are the rules” (Personal Communication, May, 2011). This in return made Gary frustrated and strengthened the disconnect between the national and local level of management. “I am not really sure what the individuals over there actually do [national office]; but I sure know they aren't making an effort to help us run their event” (Personal Communication, May, 2011).

If the national office simply wanted to be involved only for the actual timeframe of the event or wanted the local committees to be entirely responsible, it would have been helpful to have some sort of process or means of continuity provided to them. This includes a foundational manual or after action report, which would include troubleshooting, suggestions and how to make key decisions based upon the National Senior Games as a whole. This foundational manual would also outline specifics that the local committee would need to comply with to put on the event. It could include equipment and facility specifications, what is expected from the competition managers, a timeline to complete tasks within and marketing techniques. This way some continuity can be

developed among host cities and a foundation for the event itself. The after action report is crucial to have because it contains a full report on what occurred during the event. It is useful for the local committee to record what went well, what didn't and recommendations for the national office and the next hosting city. Although the national office did have something in place to wrap up the event, it was only intended for the outsourced competition managers and wasn't very in depth or helpful whatsoever. Gary from the Houston LOC stated, these reports were rarely used and the national office never held the local committees accountable" (Personal Communication, July, 2011). The LOC in Houston realized the importance of an after action report and developing a foundational manual that would incorporate each position in the LOC and not just the outsourced help. "As a group and per the request of our executive director, we want to leave a legacy. We wanted to help other cities improve this event a set a standard," stated Donna (Personal Communication, August, 2011).

Unfortunately, the national office was found to do none or little of these components in both large and small markets. Further, since the winter Games are currently a much smaller event, found in smaller markets, the national office was seen to have an even greater lack of involvement. The after action report was even nonexistent on this level. It appeared that because the winter Games were on a much smaller scale that the national office didn't think it was needed. Steven, Event Manager for the Rochester LOC stated, "When it comes to the winter Games, the national office doesn't seem to care about how they are run. Since the summer Games are a bigger event for them, the winter Games are just brushed under the rug" (Personal Communication, September, 2011). Darlene, a pickleball participant wondered where the members of the national office were during the



event and why things were on such a smaller scale. “Although it was still nice to have an event specifically for us seniors, I thought it was similar just another weekend tournament. Even when there was supposed to be a press conference to highlight our event, only one media station showed up. It was kind of sad,” stated Darlene (Personal Communication, September, 2011). The fact that there was little involvement from the national office directly impacted the event and how much the Rochester LOC could do. With limited budget, direction and information, the LOC was left to improvise and make do with what they already had developed through their sport commission.

This just goes to show how important both levels of management are to the perspective, image and outcome of mega-special events in both large and small markets. It is important to have a national office that develops the foundation for an event so that the job of the local committee is to enhance the event by being creative and diligent in making it all happen. It is also important that the national and local levels communicate and interact weekly to trouble-shoot issues based upon a specific city and its venues, vendors, and resources. Every event can develop a foundational base and structure, but every event will need to be tweaked to cater to the city and people within it, making it a right fit for the community and the loyal and new athletes participating.

### **Lack of Communication and Difference in Market Size**

Another result of the study was the wide spread notion of lack of communication on behalf of all facets of management. There was a lack of communication between the national office and local committee, between both levels of management and the athletes, and between the local committees and outsourced competition managers. Although much

of the disconnect lied behind the scenes, some of the athletes noticed the lack of communication at times too.

For example, when talking with basketball athlete, Ben, he wondered why the outsourced competition managers were not on the same page with the local committee. “I came down to the awards stage to receive my medal for the 54-59 Men’s C bracket. The competition manager said I could just come down here when I was finished with the game” (Personal Communication, June, 2011). However, after he talked with the local committee, he learned the competition manager was instructed to tell the athletes to wait until all games in the bracket were completed and the basketball intern would escort the winning teams down for the awards presentation. “I was extremely confused because different people in charge kept giving me different directions. It seems as though the local committee members needed to constantly re-instruct the competition managers so that we would receive the correct information” (Personal Communication, June, 2011). This became extremely troubling specifically for the Houston LOC because of the magnitude of the event. Competition manager, Enrique supported this by stating, “It was difficult to be everywhere at once making sure these athletes were receiving the correct information. We constantly had to be on our toes with our ears open” (Personal Communication, June, 2011). It was enough to deal with behind the scenes, but once the athletes start to realize areas where communication lacked, is something event planners never want to encounter because it has a direct impact on the event itself.

This then leads to a difference between large and small markets for events. In smaller markets, national offices may have limited contact with the local organizing committees and trust much of the planning to them. Event coordinator for the Rochester

local organizing committee, Helen stated, "Communication is truly the problem considering the event is done by the LOC and the national office provides little assistance, compromise, or even lay out what is absolutely needed, leaving the LOC to improvise" (Personal Communication, September, 2011). Since the smaller market draws in smaller participant numbers, as well as spectator numbers, the national office places its efforts elsewhere. Other differences that leave the winter games and smaller markets at a disadvantage are, but not limited to; the winter games only had one sponsor, where the summer games have several, the winter games having four sports, where the summer games have 18 and the summer games have a bigger budget to create better things and to create a buzz in the community. Considering this, the national office has limited involvement in the planning and implementation stages, which left room for error, misconceptions and again, a disconnect in the continuity piece.

Although the national office may spend more time and money into larger market cities because of the attendance, revenue and sponsors that are brought in, there is still value in the winter Games in smaller cities to develop the brand, create awareness, and manage retention throughout the states. Surprisingly, the winter Games in Rochester, NY actually drew in a handful of athletes out of state. When Darlene arrived to the Pickle ball venue, she was surprised on the difference between the Rochester and Houston Games. "Why is it that the summer Games are a huge event and this is so small," questioned Darlene. "It's a heck of a lot less competition, and frankly is almost degrading; I wish I'd been informed. Nevertheless, I am glad I can compete!" (Personal Communication, October, 2011). Although this response was a bit disorganized, it is important to note the difference

between large and small markets here and how it should be the responsibility of the national office to express that to its participants.

Another issue in communication was that there was no sort of after action report or manual guiding the planning stages of the National Senior Games provided by the national office. This made it extremely difficult for the local committees to do their jobs because they were constantly building from scratch. Donna stated, "In the case of Houston, it seemed that the LOC management was building the foundation of the event versus enhancing it. The perspectives of the national office in Baton Rouge and that of the LOC seemed to be too different at times, creating obstacles instead of solutions regarding the planning and execution of the events" (Personal Communication, September, 2011). This certainly led to issues of disorganization, problems with venues, panicked behaviors, changing information to athletes and ultimately trouble-shooting without a reference guide. For example it was not well communicated to the athletes that there would be no transportation provided in Houston. Whether it was phone calls before the actual event or when the athletes arrived in town, feelings of disappointment, shock and frustration were mutual across the board. Amy, a volleyball participant in the summer games stated, "My team and I were shocked to hear that no transportation was being provided. What national event doesn't provide some sort of transportation, especially when they expect people to travel around to different venues when they are coming in from all over the country, it's crazy!" (Personal Communication, June, 2011). Although this information was briefly mentioned on the website, it wasn't reiterated to the athletes enough. This then put the Houston LOC in a tough spot, forcing them to put out the fires the national office sparked by

not giving them enough funds to incorporate it in the budget. The Houston LOC was left taking the heat from disappointed athletes and had to fix communication to them.

Although the researcher had access to individuals from the national office once they came in town for the event, it was very limited. As stated previously, it was extremely important for the researcher to develop trust and a good rapport with management in order to uncover prominent detail and insight. However, since the only interaction with the national office was for the couple weeks of the event, it was difficult to uncover reasoning behind their actions or decisions made. Yet, by observing the winter games after the summer games, commonalities began to arise.

In the larger market, the awards portion of the event was much more prevalent and important than in the smaller market. Everything that was involved with the summer games was a bigger deal and was much more theatrical; whereas the winter games seemed similar to a local run tournament with little extras. It was fascinating for both the local committees and the athletes to experience these differences the size of the market, or season the games were in. Steven stated that, "The national office just isn't as invested in the winter games as they are the summer games; they should just cut their losses or make some changes" (Personal Communication, October, 2011). Carlene stated, "The summer games are where we put most of our time and energy on because of our sponsors, attendance numbers and publicity. Although, we would like the winter games to give us the same participation, they mainly serve to keep our older generation active" (Personal Communication, October, 2011).

### **Attentiveness to Participant Needs**

Working with the athletes through competition and the final stage of awards, clear feelings were expressed resulting mainly from lack of information they had received from management and lack of continuity between state and national games. Since management is essentially the face of the organization and event, it is important that they present themselves in a professional manner and show their interest and investment in their athletes needs and wants. Amy explained, "I don't feel understood and with all the differences between the state games and here, there is no continuity and someone needs to tell us what is going on. Whoever is in charge needs to do a better job" (Personal Communication, July, 2011). Hypothetically speaking, the event itself and competition could have been executed superbly, but it is all about the audience's perspective.

In Houston, some participants even exclaimed that they weren't coming to the games next time because they felt underappreciated by management. An important point to note in this situation is that the majority of the concerns by the participants were directed at the national office. "The tennis courts are embarrassing and are inadequate to fully perform, this will probably be my last year in this tournament if things don't change," stated Christine (Personal Communication, June, 2011). Considering the minimal presence the national office has with the actual event day of the games, the local committee is forced to put out fires. The LOC got hit with an abundance of complaints that the national office failed to respond to or resolve prior to the start of the event. Since the individuals who make up the national office were difficult to track down and the members of the LOC were present in front of the athletes, the LOC ended up receiving the blame for elements beyond their control and responsibilities. Like the example above, the LOC is not given a foundational manual or direction on competition needs; therefore, it becomes a trial and

error battle in finding suitable equipment. The LOC is given a strict budget which also makes things very difficult to satisfy the athletes' needs. Donna discussed that, "It is difficult to execute a well defined event and meet the participant needs if you are not given the funds to do so" (Personal Communication, June, 2011). Fred supported Donna's statement with, "The national office isn't working first hand with these athletes and planning the event, so they do not understand what lengths we really need to take to satisfy the participant" (Personal Communication, June, 2011).

This point also goes back to the issue on transportation. The local committee realized how important transportation was to the athletes but couldn't take positive action on resolving the matter because the funds were not in their budget and the national office would not approve the need for extra funds. It was evident in the staff meetings the frustrations on the local committee members faces when things that were pertinent to the athletes needs were simply being ignored by the national office. Fred stated, "We need help financially or need to be allowed to fundraise if you want this to be a great event and have people keep coming back" (Personal Communication, May, 2011). On a conference call in May, Brett, a director in the national office, simply blew by the comment and stated, "The funds aren't there and I don't believe it is necessary. There are plenty of rental car companies the athletes can use" (Personal Communication, May, 2011). The frustrations of the local committee in Houston grew because they knew what was needed for this event, but their hands were ultimately tied.

Another issue discovered at registration and awards was that the athletes were ill-informed about NSGA's rules and procedures. Therefore, when it came down to event time, the local committee found itself taking a lot of time to explain what the NSGA wanted and

expected from the athletes. “If it weren’t for you young folks in Houston, we would have never gotten meaningful answers. Thank you for stepping up to help organize this,” stated Ben, a basketball athlete (Personal Communication, June, 2011). However some rules were not consumer-friendly making the athletes frustrated. It also became overwhelming for both LOC’s because instead of building upon the event, they were forced to backtrack and explain various procedures and policies to the athletes that the national office simply instilled but failed to communicate effectively. Gary found himself repeating things day in and day out, and putting out fires for the national office. He would spend countless hours on the phone talking to athletes about policies that he wasn’t even educated fully on and tried to trouble-shoot their concerns as best as he could. For example, all athletes seemed to be unfamiliar with the need for credentials in order to participate. Because they were ill-informed on the national level, the local level took the heat for the athletes’ frustration. Frank, a hockey participant in the winter games, was astounded when the Rochester LOC announced they would conduct a formal awards ceremony. “Seriously, we are grown men and this isn’t the grand Olympics. I have never waited on the ice for a bronze medal, it’s embarrassing, why can’t we just get the medals from our coach and be done with it” (Personal Communication, September, 2011). The researcher was startled to have received such feedback. Steven replied, “He’s right. These are grown men and the last thing they want to do after a hockey game is wait on the ice for a third place medal. It is just not applicable to conduct an awards ceremony in some sports” (Personal Communication, September, 2011). This is a huge barrier to success and clearly shows the disconnect between management levels and the willingness for the national office to listen to its LOC’s and athletes.



A common thread discovered between both sized markets, was that the national office did not welcome change and stubborn personalities made positive progression nonexistent. During the awards process Brett stated, "The rules are the rules and we must all abide by them, and if the athletes don't like it, they don't have to participate" (Personal Communication, July, 2011). There were many instances where the rules of the state games or sport itself did not match the national games rules; this in turn sparked many issues. An example of this was discovered during the final day of competition for the younger women's division in volleyball, where the rules of USA Volleyball did not match up with the NSGA's. Since awards for teams were given first through fourth place, the tie that occurred in the bronze game led to the team with the least overall number of points to come in fourth place. The women athletes were extremely upset and the outsourced competition managers were doing nothing productive to help. Additional competition managers, people that had experience in a specific sport, were hired to assist the LOC's. However, in some cases it turned out to be a hassle rather than extra help because of communication and the different ways people do things. The LOC's were alerted of this problem and had to put out fires that could have been avoided through the communication among the national office, the LOC, and the outsourced competition managers. Nevertheless, when the concern of the matter was brought to the national office's attention, Brett nonchalantly exclaimed, "Tough, these are the rules of our organization, go back and tell that team they will receive fourth place and not third. It's not my problem things weren't clear" (Personal Communication, June, 2011). However, it most certainly was this individual's issue and it would have solved many present and future issues by giving these women a bronze medal.

It is often unfortunate that events like the National Senior Games are created for its audience and meant to enhance the lives of those over 50 years old to stay active, but true purpose of enhancing the education, motivations and services that provide seniors with opportunities to stay healthy are ignored by the national governing body.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

After analyzing the results of the study, one can conclude three main points. The three points include; having interactive management levels, strong lines of communication and being attentive to your target audience's needs and wants. By taking the information on the tangible factors that is already out there on reforming your event and incorporating the intangible factors into the design, event planners can build stronger, more well-defined and successful event. Although discovering and implementing the intangible factors may be a bit strenuous, through this study they have shown to have a much greater and positive impact overall.

The first component of success is that having a well-balanced relationship between the national office and the local committees make for a better run event both internally and externally. Internally, people can develop an understanding for one another and begin to trust one another for their ideas, opinions and the work they do. Once everyone gets on the same page about what the goals and objectives are, and prioritize tasks or needed items, things can begin to run in a more organized fashion and create a team-like structure.

It shall be recommended to members of national offices and local committees to restructure their organizations to build sound relationships. Currently in the National Senior Games, interaction between the two branches is limited which causes a disconnected organization. The two bodies end up resenting one another and try to do

things on their own. When in reality they should be working hand in hand on continuing to build the organization and event together. The national office of the Senior Games needs to step up to develop a stronger foundation and production manual for the games. By the top management level failing to provide the needed resources, the games have been unorganized and a scramble to pieces components together with little knowledge of how to do so. As a result of the national office creating this manual, LOC will be able to better understand how to run this event effectively. It will also develop a level of continuity for a local committee to base their work on. One of the competition managers from the Houston LOC mentioned that with a manual like this, LOC's can know what are the right types of equipment needed, procedures for handling the registration and awards process and standard regulations for venues (Personal Communication, May, 2011). However, with the development of this foundation and manual, the national office needs to become more hands on to continue this progress of continuity through succeeding cities and local committees.

The second point that can be concluded from this study is the high importance communication plays in the event industry. Communication is the foundation for any organization, especially one in the events sector. It cannot be stressed enough and with evidence from the research stated, how vital it can be to the success of an event or detrimental if ignored. Based upon the examples with the outsourced competition managers in both markets, communication in some areas was either not clear or non-existent.

A recommendation to start would be finding the right people and put them in the right positions that will enhance the event and not bring it down. In Jim Collins's book,

*Good to Great*, he stresses the importance of getting the right people on the bus in the right seats first and then determine the direction (Collins, 2001). By interviewing various competition managers and telling them what is expected, event planners can find better matches for their event. Once managers are hired it is necessary to have a training session on what is expected, how the event should run, various scenarios that might occur and ways to trouble-shoot if there are issues to best solve for the event at hand.

The same recommendation can apply to finding the right individuals to encompass a local committee or national office. Finding those individuals who can work well together, and most importantly communicate effectively show to be the ones with successful events and structures of the organizations they are involved in. However, it is first important that the individuals who make up an organization stay in constant communication first before they get any other parties involved. As per the reference to the National Senior Games when the local committees struggled in the beginning to communicate effectively with the outsourced competition managers, this occurred because the national office was not on the same page with the LOC's on details of what was expected and the LOC's were therefore not on the same page about how to instruct or train them to do what was best for the event. If lines of communication are not organized and implemented at the foundation, a negative ripple or domino can affect multiple avenues the event encompasses. Therefore communication must be strong at the top first, to be able to have strong communication throughout each level of interaction from LOC's, to outsource help, to the athletes.

The third point that can be concluded from this study is to make the audience you are serving your number one priority. In this case with Mega Special Events specifically in the sport industry, it is important to keep the needs and wants of the athletes at the top of

your list to satisfy. Many event planners can often lose sight of who they are actually serving when many internal and external factors come into play; such as marketing techniques, sponsors, VIPs, and budget. When large companies are giving your organization a great deal of money, depending on the sponsorship package, but for the most part they hold a great deal of clout and people can get distracted to making them their number one priority. Scenarios like this can also create a divide in the organization where some chose sponsors and others chose athletes. This can be a direct blockage for communication between members of an organization because they have different priorities from each other and for the event.

It is also important for all levels of management to keep their target audience as one of their top priorities because the event is ultimately created for them. Management and event planners need to be mindful in their decisions and actions so participants keep coming back. One of the top issues from the National Senior Games is that the national office didn't truly listen to its athletes. As a result, the local committees didn't implement such needs that were expressed to the national office. Concerns and suggestions from athletes throughout the event were listened to by the local committees, but only so much could be done with a limited budget and no assistance from the national office to approve the need for change.

When some pressing negative responses are received from athletes who have either participated in the games for years or this was their first national event, those should be taken into account to make the event better next year. A recommendation for this would be to include a variety of responses from athletes about what they thought of the event in the after action report. After the event has concluded, the national office and the current

LOC could have a post meeting discussing measures of the event, but also these responses from athletes and make positive reformations.

In the book *Good to Great*, author Jim Collins explains the significance of developing a hedgehog concept. The hedgehog concept contains a plan that focuses on its main goal and determines what the organization is good at and only does things that comply with that (Collins, 2001). Based upon the difference in the small and large markets, it is possibility that the National Senior Games simply stick with the summer games since that is what they are better at and more focused on. This way the National Senior Games Association could become great at running the summer games because all its efforts are focused on one segment.

Taking this direction and also one of reform, the national office could begin from the bottom up. They could begin to work on developing a comprehensive plan for the state games that would entail rules, procedures and plans for how to efficiently organize the state games and to develop some continuity between that and the national games. This way when athletes reach the national games, they understand the rules, regulations and procedures and can simply enjoy the experience. The development of this plan would be a major breakthrough for the National Senior Games and be able to satisfy parts of the three problematic issues found within this study.

Although each event is different and many factors may play into a success or failure, the results of this study and the three crucial points discovered can be applied to any event or organization. They are basic rules but hold a great deal of importance that needs to constantly be at the forefront of any project. By truly implementing measures and taking action each day to build a well-balanced management team, lines of communication and

attention to the target audience, any event can make tremendous leaps to success. This study seeks to open the eyes of event planners and individuals in managerial positions to go back to the basics and work on things that often get taken for granted and pushed under the rug when things get busy. But the challenge of exploring and implementing the intangibles in event design is that it may be the toughest part of a job, but can create a domino effect of the most rewarding successes. This study suggests to management and event planners to take a deep look at their organizations and remember why they are there in the first place, for their audience, athletes and participants. It suggests a new direction, to not just simply learn and discuss the information researched or taught, but to make a plan from that information and put it into action. In doing so, participants will notice the difference in organizations and be more willing to support and take part in those efforts and events. Thus, creating better overall planned events for the targeted audience in large or small markets.

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## Appendix A

## Participant Information for National Senior Games

	Job Title	Side of MGMT	Houston, TX	Rochester, NY
Brett	Logistics Relations	National	X	X
Carlene	Athlete Relations	National	X	X
Donna	Competition Mgr.	Local	X	
Enrique	Competition Mgr.	Local	X	
Fred	Finance Director	Local	X	
Gary	Registration Mgr.	Local	X	
Ally	Awards & Event Mgr.	Local	X	X
Helen	Event Manager	Local		X
Steven	Event Manager	Local		X
Amy	Volleyball	Participant	X	
Ben	Basketball	Participant	X	
Christine	Tennis	Participant	X	
Darlene	Pickle ball	Participant		X
Eddie	Pickle ball	Participant		X
Frank	Hockey	Participant		X