Characteristics of CSR Activities and Perceived Feedbacks on International Business Travelers' Experience: A Study in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

This research studied the characteristics of corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities offered to Meetings, Incentive Travel, Conventions and Exhibitions or Events (MICE) segment in Thailand. Secondly, it studied the perceived feedbacks of business travelers on CSR activities during their trips. A qualitative method using an in-depth interview was conducted with eight key informants who have organized the CSR programs for business travelers. Interviews were held in Bangkok from March to November 2016. Profiles of respondents were presented. The results revealed the characteristics of CSR activities participated by business travelers and their feedbacks. The characteristics of CSR activities included: the length of time of CSR program; the proportion of groups that include CSR activities; duration of CSR activities; destinations for conducting CSR activities; the distance of CSR activities from hotels; the origin of business groups; no. of participants; sources of CSR activity requirement; types of CSR activities; approximated CSR budget; positive or negative feedbacks; and problems and obstacles; and the intention to reuse the service of local service providers. CSR activities which involved local children seems to receive higher appreciation. This research found that CSR activities enabled participants to contribute to social and environmental causes. These CSR experiences created a higher trip satisfaction and made the trip more memorable.

KEYWORDS: Business Travel, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), MICE Industry, Thailand Tourism

Introduction

The Meetings, Incentive Travel, Conventions and Exhibitions or Events (MICE) segment, also called the business event segment, has been an important and growing segment of international tourism in Thailand. In 2017, the number of international MICE travelers was 1.28 million and the revenue from this segment was US$3.1 billion. For 2018, the Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB) has projected 1.34 million MICE travelers to visit Thailand to contribute revenue of US$ 3.4 billion (Thailand MICE basic facts, n.d.). However, the double-digit growth of MICE travelers in Thailand, similar to other leisure travel segments, has not only brought positive economic impacts for host countries, but has also created negative impacts such as carbon emissions, refuse and waste, and the loss of biodiversity (Dodds, Graci, & Holmes, 2010; Miller et al., 2010; Grobois, 2012).

In the last two decades, some multinational corporations have included corporate social responsibility (CSR) features in their corporate policy (Ryan, 2002; Falck & Heblich, 2007; Golja & Nizic, 2010). Some corporations have also considered local community responsibility (Brunk, 2010) as part of their corporate ethics, and thus included this aspect in their CSR policy. The CSR activities often involve either social-oriented programs or environment-oriented programs (Lee & Shin, 2010; Sheldon &

Park, 2011; "NBTA published updated...", 2010). Some multinational corporations have incorporated CSR activities into their overseas business trips, especially in trips to developing or under-developed destinations (Ryan, 2002; "NBTA published updated...", 2010).

A number of tour operators and Destination Management Companies (DMC) in Thailand have been offering various philanthropic activities to business group travelers for two decades. In 2002 Ryan, presented examples of 'social tourism' provided by tour operators who offered short and long-haul holidays that involved visits to community projects in Thailand, Nepal, and China. Charitable funds were set up with local community leaders to establish projects which were monitored and evaluated (Ryan, 2002).

In Thailand, a number of multinational corporations have implemented the trips with CSR activities. For instance, in November 2015, UBS Securities, together with the Education for Development Foundation (EDF), organized a volunteer service day in Thailand, where forty international volunteers participated in activities which were held at Ban Sra Saming School, Ubonratchathani Province. Funds were also donated to help improve the school infrastructure and pipeline water system (The Education for Development Foundation, 2015). UBS Securities has partnered the EDF in

implementing various school development projects in Thailand for almost 10 years. In March 2016, seventy volunteer employees from Deutsche Bank, from nine countries across Asia, refurbished schools in Prachinburi Province, Thailand, under the "My School Project". This was the 10th school that Deutsche Bank volunteers had helped rebuild ("Deutsche Bank...", 2016).

It can be seen that there has been an increased integration of certain aspect of socially and environmentally related CSR activity into conventional tourism.

From the author's literature review, there were only two articles that touched upon the CSR in tourism sector in Thailand. Henderson (2007) wrote about the CSR of hotels in Phuket after the Indian Ocean tsunami while Wuncharoen (2013) studied the relationship between CSR and firm performance of the hotel industry in Samui Island. Hence, there did not seem to be an in-depth study on the CSR characteristics and their effects on business travelers' experience.

As travelers nowadays seek a more meaningful and unique tourism experience (Dwyer, Edwards, Mistilis, Roman, & Scott, 2009), CSR programs offered to business groups have become one of the new interesting tourism products. Thus, this study would like to answer the research questions: what are the characteristics of CSR activities offered during the trips and what would be business travelers' feedbacks on the CSR activities. It would be beneficial to conduct this research to gain a deeper understanding on this topic. Academicians can develop further quantitative study based on the finding. Furthermore, DMCs can use the finding to create more satisfying tourism products.

Objectives

The objectives of this research are firstly to study the characteristics of CSR activities done by international business travelers to Thailand. Secondly, it seeks to gather perceived feedbacks regarding international business travelers' experience from CSR activities.

Literature Review

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

According to the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD, 1999 as cited in Grobois, 2012), CSR is defined as "the continuing commitment by business to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as the local community and society at large". In addition, Brunk (2010) researched a consumer perspective of consumer corporate ethics (CPE) and its interrelationship with CSR. The study conceptualized the potential sources of

CPE of a company/brand by investigating consumers' perceptions of business ethicality. The study revealed a taxonomy delineating 6 domains and 36 sub domains of CPE origin. The 6 domains were consumers, employees, the environment, the overseas community, the local economy and community, and the business community. Based on the concepts of CSR and CPE, ethical companies are expected to operate in a way that should ensure improvements for the workforce as well as the local and overseas community. As a result, some ethical companies have initiated socially responsible activities on their overseas trips to minimize the negative environmental impacts.

Tour Operators with CSR Activities

In the tourism sector, CSR was first implemented in the late 1990s by international hotel corporations ("Corporate social...", n.d.). CSR activities in the tourism business comprise the responsible use of natural and cultural resources, the minimization of pollution and waste, the conservation of landscapes, biodiversity and cultural heritage, fair and responsible treatment of employees, suppliers and guests, the fair use of local products and services as well as involvement and cooperation with local communities to improve the quality of life of local people ("Corporate social...", n.d.).

Miller (2001); Budeanu (2005); and Frey & George (2010) studied the management of responsible tourism by tourism providers, such as local service providers. Globally, tour operators adopted the CSR concept about two decades ago. Compared with other industries, the study showed that tour operators have been slow to adopt CSR, especially in developing countries (Frey & George, 2010; Sheldon & Park, 2011).

Several studies indicated that travel organizations created both positive as well as negative economic and environmental impacts at the destinations (Miller, 2001; Ryan, 2002; Budeanu, 2005; Frey & George, 2010). As the tourism industry is believed to be continually growing rapidly, many authors have proposed that tour operators or DMCs should be more concerned about the social and economic impacts on host destinations, and hence, should adopt more CSR activities as well as provide more information to educate tourists about responsible tourism (e.g. Miller, 2001; Budeanu, 2005; Miller et al., 2010).

On the tourism demand side, Dwyer et al. (2009) found that many individuals, particularly those in developed countries, have higher social and environmental consciousness, and hence, seek more authentic tourism experiences. Travelers nowadays wish to be participators not spectators, and they seek a variety of new experiences. Affluent consumers are

turning to ethical consumption (Yeoman, 2005 as cited in Dwyer et al., 2009). Dwyer et al. (2009) suggested that tour operators and DMCs need to adapt to the new requirements of tourists. Tour operators that can adjust to the social trends and new tourist requirements are likely to gain more competitive advantage and operate more profitably and sustainably (Inoue & Lee, 2010).

Based on the WBCSD study on CSR and the changing demand of new tourists, it is deemed necessary that, in order to meet current clients' needs, tour operators should incorporate CSR concepts in their products and services.

Ryan (2002) stated that destinations should attempt to configure their product, and to sustain it by adopting a mix of environmentally friendly and economically viable policies. He further proposed that it was necessary to add value to the tourism industry by involving communities in an equitable process.

Lee and Shin (2010) found a link between consumers' awareness of CSR activities and their purchase intentions. A higher level of awareness about the contribution of CSR to the local community had positive effects on consumers' purchase intentions. The research implies that consumers seek "good" CSR activities, and they intend to buy products from good companies. Wigley (2008) studied the impact of a company's

CSR efforts on both attitude and purchase intention. The study found that the increased knowledge of a company's CSR activities leads to more positive attitudes toward the company as well as sales and profit.

Research Methodology

Where a field of study has no previous research conducted before, and no information has been gathered, the effective methodology to gain knowledge is to conduct qualitative research using in-depth interviews (Creswell, 2007). Hence, one-to-one interviews were conducted as it is the most appropriate method to obtain insights according to McCracken (1988). The target respondents were directors or founders of local service providers i.e. tour operators, DMCs, and event organizer/team building companies. Most of them have more than 10 years of experience organizing CSR activities for overseas business groups in Thailand. The researcher used a three-page semi-structured questionnaire with 14 open-ended questions. The questions were designed to explore the characteristics and patterns of CSR activities and to illicit travelers' feedback on CSR activities. The questions are as follows: 1. Personal information including position, age, gender, and education 2. How long ago did your company organize CSR activities for overseas groups? 3. In each year, approximately how many of your groups included CSR activities

as part of their programs? 4. What was the approximate duration of the CSR activity? (i.e. how many hours) 5. In which city in Thailand did you organize the CSR activities for the groups? (ranked from the most frequent 6. How far were the locations of the CSR activities from the accommodation? (in terms of driving time) 7. From which region or country did the groups originate? 8. Approximately how many people participated in the CSR activities? 9. Were the CSR activities requested by the company organizers or did you (local suppliers) propose the program to the clients? 10. What were the types of CSR activity that you organized for the groups? (from most often to least) 11. What was the approximate CSR budget for the trip each time? (if you can disclose it) 12. What was the positive or negative feedback on the CSR activities from the groups? 13. What were the problems or obstacles in organizing CSR activities in Thailand? and 14. Did the groups for which you organized CSR activities use your service again?

Data Collection

The targeted respondents were purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2007), which included executives directors, founders, and senior MICE/Event managers of tour operators, DMCs, and event organizers whose companies provide information on the companies' CSR products on their websites.

An introduction letter informing the objectives of this research and interview questions were sent by e-mail and followed by a mail to 12 tour operators and event organizers so that they could consider the questions in advance. These companies are well-known service providers in Thailand. Most of them have worked in the tourism industry for more than 10 years. The interviews were held in Bangkok from March to November 2016. On average, each interview lasted one and a half hours. The answers were recorded on question sheets manually by the author. After the eighth interview, the answers to most questions became repetitive. The interviews were ended as the information was sufficient to explain the concept. The author applied the "constant comparative method" (Creswell, 2007) in the analysis. Answers were categorized into groups of similar responses. When additional answers /comments which did not fit into the existing categories were received, new categories were created. Within each category, common properties or subcategories were listed, and data was dimensionalized.

Research Results

According to the respondents' profiles four respondents were Thai and the other 4 were non-Thai, including a Malaysian, an American, a Dutch person, who worked in Thailand, and a Singaporean who was

an overseas DMC representative based in Singapore but regularly sent and accompanied her MICE groups to Thailand. The four respondents were between 50 and 60 years old, two were 40-50 years old, and the other two were 30-40 years old. Seven out of eight had obtained bachelor degrees. The respondents' demographic profiles are summarized in table 1.

Table 1 Profile of respondents

Respon-dent	Position	Type of Company	Gender	Nationality	Age	Education	Years of Exp. in CSR Org.
No. 1	Managing Director	T/O or DMC	Male	Thai	> 60	Bachelor	> 20
No. 2	Director of MICE	T/O or DMC	Female	Thai	40-50	Bachelor	> 10
No. 3	Director of Events and Operations	T/O or DMC	Male	Malaysian	30-40	Bachelor	3 years
No. 4	Founder and Managing Director	T/O or DMC	Female	Thai	50-60	Bachelor	> 10
No. 5	Managing Director	Event Organizer	Male	American	50-60	Bachelor	11 years
No. 6	Project Manager	Tour Operator	Male	Thai	40-50	Bachelor	> 10
No. 7	Managing Director	Event Organizer	Male	Dutch	50-60	High school	22 years
No. 8	Manager	MICE / DMC	Female	Singaporean	30-40	Diploma	5 years

Four respondents have been organizing CSR activities for overseas business groups for more than 10 years, two respondents have done it for more than 20 years and the other respondents have done it for 3 and 5 years respectively.

Characteristics of CSR Activities

From the interview, two respondents mentioned that CSR activity has been a part of meeting groups, or meeting and incentive groups rather than pure incentive groups.

Five respondents gave approximate number of groups which included CSR activities per year. It ranged from 3-6 groups per year up to 10-20 groups per year depending on the size of the company. Two respondents answered in percentage of the total groups i.e. 30% of their groups included CSR activities in the programs. One respondent said "three to five years ago, there seemed to be more groups with CSR programs. It depends on the economy".

With regard to the duration of CSR activities, six respondents said they spent about 3-4 hours or half a day on the CSR activities and two respondents said about 2 hours.

As for the location, CSR activities were mostly organized at destinations where the groups stayed. Six respondents said most of their activities were in Bangkok and its suburb i.e. Pakret District in Nonthaburi Province, the second location was Phuket, and the third location was Chiangmai.

The locations of the activities were mostly about 30 minutes to one hour from the hotels where the groups stayed. Four respondents said it was 30-40 minutes to one hour, two respondents said it was about one hour and one respondent mentioned that it was more than 1 hours. Some respondents commented that the locations of CSR activities were usually on the way to do other activities.

The business groups that had CSR activities were mostly from the Asia-Pacific region but there were some European and American delegates as well. One respondent said there were fewer groups with CSR from Europe and USA due to the long distance (which might be related to higher trip expense) and one respondent mentioned that they might have conducted CSR activities in their countries already.

The majority of the business group size were between 50-100 participants, while there were a few groups of 5-20, and 100-800 participants. The nationality of the participants was mostly from the Asia-Pacific region, with some from European and the US.

The budget for CSR activities allocated by each group ranges from THB 500 – 5,000 per head, which accounted for 5-10% of the total trip expenses.

Four respondents answered that the clients were the ones requesting the agent to arrange CSR activity within the budget available and three respondents said the CSR concept was initiated both from the clients and from the local supplier simultaneously, while one respondent said he proposed to clients more. Some respondents added that DMCs had to be creative. One respondent commented that "CSR activities were tax deductible. This might be applied to countries such as Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. This might be one

of the purposes behind the organizing of a CSR program".

When the respondents were asked about CSR activities, most of them (seven respondents) thought about CSR activities with children first. In summary, seven respondents mentioned that CSR activities was relating to helping poor children. In Bangkok, they went to Klong Toey community or Pakret, suburb of Bangkok. In the north, they went to northern hill-tribe villages. The activities involved hosting meals, donating money, books, and toys, and playing sports with children. Assembling bicycles and donating them to poor school students was one of the more popular CSR activity. The second type of activity was relating to the environment. Environmentally-related CSR activities such as mangrove plantation was often done in Samut Prakarn, Samut Sakorn, and Nakhon Pathom provinces. The third type of activity was animal caring. Animal care activities were such as elephant bathing which were done in Chiangmai, while releasing animals (turtles, fish and crab) into the sea was mostly done at seaside destinations such as Phuket. The fourth type of activities involved helping local communities. In the northern part of Thailand, many CSR activities were held at impoverished hill-tribe villages. The agenda included hosting meals, making donations (money, books and toys), and playing sports with children.

Perceived Feedbacks from CSR Activities

With regard to the feedback of CSR activities, the respondents stated that they received positive feedback from nearly all groups that conducted CSR activities. The majority were very satisfied after doing the CSR activities. Some examples of the answers were "the clients wanted to do it, they felt happy". Several participants expressed strong emotional attachment to the children when departing from the school after the program ended. Some examples of key informants' feedback on programs involving children, were: "the clients were happy", "they liked the activities", "children were cute", "they liked to see the smiles on children face", "they were in tears when they departed". One key informant mentioned that "their clients had attachments with children, children brought them food, cold towels, and drinks". "Old age travelers could do activities with children. Even though the kids could not speak the language, they used body language".

For elephants related activities, and examples of feedback were: "they liked to take care of the elephants" and "they got to learn more about the nature of elephants".

The main obstacle faced by the respondents regarding CSR-related programs was the lack of contact information on the under-privileged children and their schools. In many cases, local service providers had to

do their own research for the necessary information such as the contact details of the school, the principal, as well as the concerned teachers. The second obstacle was the traffic conditions in Bangkok, which made it extremely inconvenient to travel to certain interesting places which were outside of Bangkok. The third obstacle was the lack of cooperation from the local authority in arranging CSR activities. Other difficulties were the distance from the hotel to the activity location, the lack of readiness by recipients, time limitations, limited budget and language barriers.

Regarding the intention to return to the destination and to reuse the local service provider, four respondents answered that their clients were likely to come back and reuse the services. However, clients might select a different destination on their next trip to Thailand, to have variety for the clients. Some clients returned independently. For overseas agents, if they were satisfied with the local agent, they would use the local agent again. When the local service providers were asked why they had proposed CSR activities to their clients, even though some said it was rather complicated, hard work and demanded much time, they said that it was a good cause.

Discussions and Conclusions

The groups that requested CSR programs mostly came from the Asia Pacific region. This may be due to the short distance from the Asia Pacific region to Thailand and the increased number of full and low-cost intra-regional flights. As international meeting groups often have tight schedules and very limited available time, most of the CSR activities lasted only about 3-4 hours or half a day and usually required 30 minutes to one hour traveling time from the hotel to the site. The CSR activities were usually conducted in cities in which the groups stay. In this study, the activities were mostly conducted in Bangkok, Phuket and Chiangmai, which were popular MICE destinations in Thailand. The two common types of CSR program offered by local Thai agents were socially-related, particularly helping under-privileged children, and environmentally-related issues, such as tree plantation and animal care. In Bangkok, where the majority of CSR activities are conducted, the activities frequently involve visiting schools with underprivileged children or planting trees in the provinces adjacent to Bangkok. This is due to the time limitation and traffic condition.

It was found that CSR activities were either requested by overseas clients to a local tour operator, or a local tour operator proposed the CSR program to them. This finding supports several CSR literatures which state that some corporations especially from developed countries have adopted CSR policy (Grobois, 2012; Brunk, 2010).

On the supply side, the local operators, who wish to adapt to new corporations' requirements, need to develop new responsible tourism products such as CSR activities to serve these requirements (Dwyer et al., 2009). Local service providers should propose CSR activities as a new experience for international meeting groups to enhance the trip satisfaction.

The feedback of the CSR activities was reported positively by most informants. It proved that business travelers were satisfied with the CSR activities especially with the local children. This finding supported the work of Dwyer et al. (2009) who posited that new tourists seek authentic experiences and wished to be participators not spectators. Business travelers who experienced the good service of the local service providers were also likely to return and reuse the services again. Lee and Shin (2010) and Wigley (2008) found the positive relationship between the awareness of CSR activities and repurchase intention. Thus, new CSR products offered by local service providers can create good company image and can be used as a competitive marketing advantage of tourism operators.

This research presents the characteristics of CSR-related tourism products offered to international business travelers in Thailand. It also provides feedbacks of CSR activities on participants' experience. CSR activities seem to create higher satisfaction because participants can contribute social and environmental benefits first hand, making the experience emotionally and morally memorable.

A CSR activity is a beneficial and rewarding initiative that should be given more support by the public and private sectors. Based on this study, it can be seen that some of the total group expenses were distributed to people outside the tourism industry, mostly to people in need. It was also used for animal care and the improvement of the natural environment. Thus, it supports the 'pro-poor tourism' policy of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal or SDG 2030 (Sustainable Development Goals, n.d.). In developing countries, where there is still poverty and inequality, CSR-related tourism products can be used as a tool to alleviate the situation. Therefore, local service suppliers should be encouraged to design and recommend CSR-related tourism products that match the purposes of the business groups.

Contribution and Managerial Implications

This research has yielded deeper insights into the characteristics of CSR activities during business trips, and the positive feedbacks from participants. The CSR activities are likely to create trip satisfaction and may lead to the intention to return to the destination and reuse the service of local service providers. This knowledge may help destinations and MICE organizers to improve their marketing strategies. The Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB) can use the results from this report to find ways to support DMC's attempts to create CSR-related tourism products.

This research helps academicians in tourism field to understand the significant connection between CSR activities and tourism, and the potential benefits they can derive.

It is recommended that reports on the business groups' CSR activities and the total expenses should be made by tour operators and DMCs to relevant government bodies in order to measure their economic impact. A report of the outcomes of CSR activities to donors should also be provided so that they understand the impact of their contribution, which may lead to the continuation and sustainability. There should be some form of follow up and assessment by DMCs on the CSR project to guide future service and product improvement to meet the expectation of corporate buyers.

Limitations

Due to time and resource limitation, this research consists of only 8 interviewees, who are the experts on the subject and have long experience. McCracken (1988) stated that the number of interviewees may be as few as eight, if they are considered as key informants who are the experts on the subject. The research results may have been more robust if there were more interviewees. Some of the confidential answers such as income and number of groups were not fully disclosed.

Another limitation is the reliability of the information, which was obtained from the service providers, not the participants themselves. However, these service providers are high level executives with several years of experience. Hence, they are believed to be in a position to provide truthful and sincere information.

Recommendations for Further Study

Even though in-depth interview method is trusted to yield substantive results, it would still be beneficial should there be a quantitative research on this topic to verify and reinforce the results.

Acknowledgement

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