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Why and How UK Visitor Attractions Diversify Their Product to Offer Conference and Event Facilities

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Conference and event organizers are becoming increasingly competitive in choosing venues that are designed to make an impression. Visitor attractions are, therefore, no longer as much of an unconventional choice as they once were. In light of this realization, such venues have marketed themselves not only on the provision of cultural/entertainment facilities, but also conference and event facilities. Drawn from a wider survey population undertaken in 2001, this research is based upon a postal questionnaire of 75 visitor attractions from across the UK. The survey results identify that many visitor attractions first entered the market place to diversify their revenue base and did not invest heavily into providing a complete conference and event product. Indeed, the research identifies that cosmetic changes remain the most common refurbishment activities undertaken in order to initially create such facilities offered by many visitor attractions. However, the results highlight that since opening, visitor attractions have changed their strategies and are now willing to invest in their product. Such venues are increasingly aware of the intense competition within the market place and the need for investment to maintain a place in the ever-growing competitive environment and to be able to supply a unique product. As such, the extent of structural changes involving the conversion and/or extension of the physical building increased in popularity once the conference facilities had opened. Exponential smoothing identifies that between the decades 1990–1999 and 2010–2019, there is predicted growth in visitor attraction offering conference facilities of 76%.

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INTRODUCTION

The demand for visitor attractions with conference and event facilities is growing. Organisers of conferences, and events such as product launches, have become more competitive in choosing venues that impress delegates and guests. Organizers look for venues that will fit the theme of their event. As such, visitor attractions are no longer as much of an unconventional choice as they once were; indeed, visitor attractions with conference and event facilities have a unique inspiring selling point (Bond, 2007). "They offer a more creative setting than a standard conference suite . . . attractions are usually the first choice for a themed event" (Wills, 2002, p. 38) and "are often more flexible than hotels in terms of access times, theming and decorating" (Saunders, 2001, p. 41). As more museums, castles, stately homes, and theme parks identify the value of the conference and event market, the more they will respond to conference organizers' needs (Wills, 2002). This article discusses the rationale as to why visitor attractions are diversifying their products to enter this market, identifying the demand and supply factors that promote such diversification. Additionally, the perceived strengths of conference products offered by visitor attractions are identified. Finally, double exponential smoothing is used to provide a prediction of future growth of visitor attractions offering conference facilities.

THE DEMAND AND SUPPLY FOR VISITOR ATTRACTIONS AS CONFERENCE AND EVENT VENUES

The current downturn in the global economic climate and pressure to reduce carbon footprints has both resulted in conference and event organizers demanding venues in the UK rather than Europe or further afield (Conn, 2008). Hotels have traditionally dominated the UK domestic conference market, with 61% of UK conferences in 2006 being held in hotels (British Association of Conference Destinations, 2008). However, the conference and event environment is changing. As more UK-based venues are sought and the increased tendency to view not only the hotel conference experience but also purpose built conference venues as homogeneous and sterile, lacking history, decor, attractiveness, and the essential "wow" factor (Spain, 2007; Whitfield, 2005), there is a demand for new ideas.

New ideas that permit venues for special meetings, product launches, and celebrations to be different, exciting, and extraordinary motivates and incentivizes delegates, thus ensuring repeat visitation (Roythorne, 2007). After all, the attraction is not the room, but the venue itself. "There has been a drive to produce something different, something exciting and original to add value to an event . . . to ensure their company, brand or corporate message stands out from the crowd" (Gosling, 2002, p. 23). Delegates prefer an "unusual or exciting conference venue" over a city center hotel or academic venue (Whiteling, 2007).

Associated with this rise in demand has been the increase in the supply of visitor attractions with conference and event facilities. Many visitor attractions enter the conference and event market based on perceived demand rather than actual evidence of real demand (Leask & Hood, 2000). Little research is carried out before the visitor attraction diversifies its product to supply such facilities. Visitor attractions enter the conference and event market with the aim to increase revenue sources and to use their resources to their maximum capacity. Changing funding systems and increased competition for leisure spending within the UK industry has resulted in many properties having to generate additional revenue or look to alternative business mixes (Leask & Hood, 2000). In particular, museums and galleries have been hit by decreased central and local government funding (Leask, Fyall, & Goulding, 2000). Moreover, the National Lottery frequently provides development grants that often contain conditional clauses that state such venues must seek income from new sources (Shallcross, 1998). In addition to this desire to increase revenue sources is the fact that there are few barriers to entry into the conference and event market. Venues with the necessary facilities (room, table, chairs, and basic equipment) can supply an area for such activity and thus enter the conference and event market (Leask & Hood, 2000). Many visitor attractions start by offering the most basic facilities (Whitfield, 2005). Additionally, they are able to assess the market before investing heavily. To those outside the sector, offering conference and event facilities is considered very attractive, as it is viewed as simply using otherwise empty space (Davidson & Cope, 2003). As such, today there is a wide variety of visitor attractions that supply such facilities, which is shown in Table 1.

These visitor attractions range from castles, country houses, historic buildings (with or without accommodations), museums, galleries, fun parks, boat trains, sport and leisure centers, theaters, and concert facilities. Examples are seen in Madame Tussaud's in London, Haynes Motor Museum in Yeovil, Legoland in Ascot, the Eden Project in Cornwall, the Globe Theatre in London, and Alton Towers in Staffordshire (Gosling, 2002; Nicholson, 2000; Pemble, 2000; Saunders, 2001; Wills, 2002). Indeed, Alton Towers achieved the Gold Award for "Best Unusual Venue" for the second year running at the Meetings and Incentive Travel Awards 2008 (Alton Towers, 2008). There are numerous case studies highlighting the use of visitor attractions as conference and event venues, and two such case studies follow.

Case Study 1

The international car company Renault required an event for the media launch of the Renault Modus. The chosen location was the Concorde

TABLE 1 Examples of Visitor Attractions with Conference Facilities Within the UK

Attraction type	Examples
Racecourses	Ascot, Chepstow, Sandown, Newmarket, Brighton.
Theme parks	Alton Towers, Thorpe Park, Legoland, Diggerland,
Motor racing	Brands Hatch, Donington Park, and Silverstone
Castles	Amberley, Caernarfon, Edinburgh, Leeds, Shieldhall, Warwick
Museums	The Cabinet War Rooms, The Natural History Museum, Imperial War Museum, National Museums of Scotland, National Museum and Gallery in Cardiff, Beaulieu Motor Museum.
Stadia	Old Trafford (Manchester), Celtic Park (Glasgow), The Millennium Stadium (Cardiff)
Houses	Spencer House, Highgate House (near Northampton), The Chartered Institute of Marketing (Cookham), Hill House, Somerton (Oxfordshire), Coopers & Lybrand's Latimer House in Buckinghamshire and Elvetham Hall (Hartley Wintney)
Cruise ships	Radisson Seven Seas Cruises, Carnival Cruise Lines, Golden Princess Royal Caribbean International, Radiance of the Seas, Celebrity Cruises, Norwegian Cruise lines, Silversea Cruises, Royal Olympic Cruises, The QE2, Stena Sealink,
Miscellaneous	The Eden Project, London Zoo, British Airways London Eye, The Lowry Centre in Manchester

Sources: Venuefinder (2004) and Venue Directory (2004).

Experience at Manchester Airport. Prior to the event, UK journalists were mailed a personally named Concorde Experience boarding pass with the Renault logo overprinted on it. This acted as the entrance ticket to the event. On the morning of arrival, individuals were "checked-in" and provided canapé breakfast and coffee in a marquee adjoining the Concorde airplane. The marquee was dressed to emulate a VIP departure lounge, which also contained an array of Renault Modus cars. Journalists were permitted to drive these cars using the roads around Manchester Airport.

Midway through the morning, journalists were invited to the DC-10 seminar suite. Greeted by Concorde Experience stewardesses and a glass of champagne, two short nostalgic video presentations were shown highlighting the Concordes' history. Following this, the journalists were escorted to Concorde and given a "facts and figures" external tour before boarding and being given an internal tour and further presentation. Lunch, which was a re-creation of that served on the Concorde, was held in a nearby hotel, and transport to and from the hotel was provided with a fleet of Renault Espaces. Finally, the journalists were returned to Concorde and enjoyed additional test driving of Renault cars.

Renault measured the success of this event in terms of both achieving a 98% attendance from invited journalists, as well as extensive press coverage.

Feedback from journalists included comments such as "one of the most pleasurable, memorable and quite moving experiences of my career" (Concorde Experience, 2008, online).

Case Study 2

Asda, the UK subsidiary of US-based retailer Wal-Mart, required a daytime conference for 250 staff, including staff from chilled food suppliers in March 2008. This was to be followed by an evening gala dinner for 600 delegates with a Hawaiian theme, Elvis impersonator, a beach area, and a dedicated Hawaiian menu, all raising funds for two charities. With only a five-week lead-time, a venue was required that possessed a combination of sufficient parking, delegate capacity, the flexibility to accommodate the various strands of the daytime conference and evening events, and within an hour of Leeds. Doncaster Racecourse, which had reopened in September 2007 after a £34 million refurbishment, was selected, as it met all the criteria while being a "fresh and new venue." Asda measured the success of this event both in terms of conveying to staff its plans for the forthcoming year, while raising £100,000 for the two nominated charities (Atkinson, 2008).

PROBLEMS FACED BY VISITOR ATTRACTIONS OFFERING CONFERENCE AND EVENT FACILITIES

For visitor attractions, there are drawbacks that blight such venues when offering conference and event facilities. This includes licence and use restrictions, such as limited evening entertainment with no amplified music, in some venues such as museums (Wills, 2002). There are other issues associated with the problem of dual purpose. For instance, museums can make an ideal venue for a corporate event such as a banquet, but during the day, the venue is open to the public as a visitor attraction. The event organizers are faced with a tight turn-around from the time the museum closes to the public to the time the corporate guests arrive; in some instances, the venue needs to be transformed, tables set, kitchens set up, and audio-visual equipment wired up and balanced in less than 2 hours (Gosling, 1998; Sewell, 2007; Shallcross, 1998). Associated with this limited turn-around time for setting up the venue are the logistics of moving the required equipment into and around a venue.

Often parking is not available; parking that is available is for cars only, and as such at many venues, there is limited space for lorries to arrive in order to deliver equipment. The venues infrastructure may also present issues. If equipment is required over several floors, the availability of a lift should be identified. Also, provision of both ample electrical sockets and sufficient electrical supply for operating the required equipment are essential. The same applies to the provision of potable water, in particular to catering facilities; however, due to the venues original function, catering facilities may not be present, and these will need to be supplied. Visitor attractions may lack technical facilities, as conferences and events are not their core business. Technical facilities are not seen as a priority in comparison to a purpose-built conference venue, which would pride itself with all the latest technical facilities (ConferenceVenuesUK, 2007; Spain, 2007).

Very few delegates stay overnight due to the lack of accommodation offered by the majority of visitor attractions (Leask & Hood, 2000). This, however, is changing, as many of the larger visitor attractions have identified this concern and have incorporated accommodation into their visitor attractions. Football stadiums are one of the first venues to offer accommodation facilities to their conference delegates to attract conferences from further afield and from overseas. For example, in the grounds of Bolton Wanderers' Reebok Stadium, De Vere Whites hotel has been built, which has 125-rooms, 19 with football pitch views (De Vere, 2008).

Finally, the uniqueness that attracts delegates may also create issues of diminishing returns (Davidson & Cope, 2003), where delegates do not return on an annual basis as the original conference or event has reduced the uniqueness of the venue. As such, organizers seek new venues with their own unique characteristics. This is why it is important for the venue to continually update/improve its conference product to gain repeat visitation.

UK RESEARCH—METHODOLOGY

The empirical data utilized within this article was collected as part of a wider research program in 2001 from a postal questionnaire survey of 552 UK visitor attractions. A total of 75 replies were deemed valid, giving a response rate of 13.6%. The addresses for these venues were obtained from a number of publications including *The Venue: The World-wide Guide to Conference and Incentive Travel Facilities 2000/01* (The Venue, 2000) and the Green and Blue Book publications (VenueFinder, 2000). In order to establish the widest possible survey population, secondary sources, including UK conference bureaus and local authorities, along with journals, trade magazines, and British Tourism Association publications, were referernced.

FINDINGS

The Nature of Visitor Attractions Surveyed

The literature review above identifies that visitor attractions offer the greatest diversity within venue classifications (Venuefinder, 2008; Venue Directory, 2008). This research supports this view, which is shown in Figure 1.

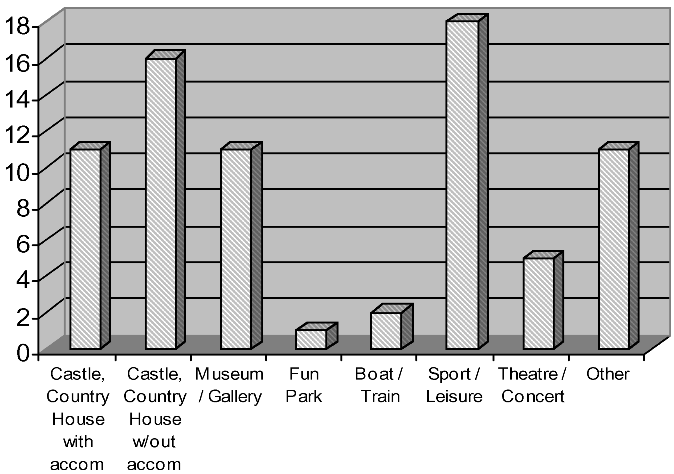

FIGURE 1 The sub-division of visitor attractions with conference facilities ($N = 75$).

Figure 1 shows that "sports and leisure" venues, including large sports stadiums, golf courses, and horse racing tracks, were the most common, being responsible for 18 (24%) responses. Castles, country houses, and historic buildings without accommodation closely followed this, accounting for 16 (21.3%) venues. Three separate categories each accounted for 11 (14.7%) venues—that of castles, country houses, and historic buildings with accommodation, as well as museums and galleries along with other venues. The term "other venues" includes a diverse range of visitor attractions such as a vineyard, a media center, and an arts center. Theaters and concert halls each received five (6.7%) responses. Finally, two (2.7%) boat and train venues responded, along with one (1.3%) fun park.

Reasons for Entering the Conference and Event Market

In order to identify the rationale for establishing conference and event facilities, respondents were provided with a list of key reasons for supplying such facilities. Each reason was graded by respondents from 1 (highly significant in the decision) to 5 (not significant in the decision). The results for visitor attractions can be seen in Table 2.

The findings show that visitor attractions have come into existence in order to generate an additional revenue source, with an average ranking of 1.5. In terms of the number of respondents citing this factor as highly significant, there are 46 (64.8%) visitor attractions doing so. Economic-based factors are ranked second and third. The reason "To subsidize income for the upkeep of the buildings" was ranked second with an average ranking of 2.5. In total, 28 (39.4%) venues stated that this was the case. Many respondents citing this factor were from historical buildings that require constant

TABLE 2 Reasons for Creating/Supplying Visitor Attraction Conference Venues

	Mean	Count $N =$
Generate an additional revenue source	1.5	71
Subsidize income for the upkeep of building	2.5	71
Single revenue stream to multiple revenue streams	2.6	71
Response to market demand	2.7	71
Attract repeat visitation	2.8	71
Estimated demand	2.9	71
Attract business in off-peak times	3.0	71
Increase in competition for leisure spending	3.7	71
Other attractions have added conference facilities	3.8	71
Due to changes in funding systems	4.0	71
Due to consecutive poor tourist seasons	4.2	71

upkeep and expense or large stadiums that are expensive to maintain. The category based on spreading the risk, "Single revenue stream to multiple revenue streams," was ranked third for visitor attractions with a mean value of 2.6. Overall, 29 (41.4%) visitor attractions cited this factor as being significant. Visitor attractions are reliant on the general public as their principle revenue stream. This clearly shows that the majority of UK visitor attractions established conference and event facilities in order to generate additional revenue and, thus, were economically driven.

Improvements Undertaken to Create Visitor Attraction Conference and Event Facilities

Respondents were questioned whether conference and event facilities were added through the utilization of unused space or the conversion of existing rooms. A total of 41 of 68 (60.2%) responding visitor attractions created such facilities through the use of unused space. In addition, respondents were asked if any refurbishments had been undertaken to create their facilities. A total of 38 (55.9%) visitor attractions carried out refurbishments to create their facilities. Figure 2 details the results concerning six refurbishment activities.

For visitor attractions, the most common type of improvement was to update the furniture and decor of rooms, with 30 (78.9%) and 29 (76.1%) venues responding, respectively. The third most common response was that of providing disabled access to the premises, with 18 (47.3%) venues responding. Health and safety improvements were cited by 13 (34.2%) venues. With each of these two factors being cited by over one-third of respondents, this may suggest that some venues still required work to be undertaken in order to achieve and/or maintain compliance with current or impending health, safety, and/or disability legislation. This may be more prevalent to visitor attractions, as many of the venues are of historical origin and, therefore,

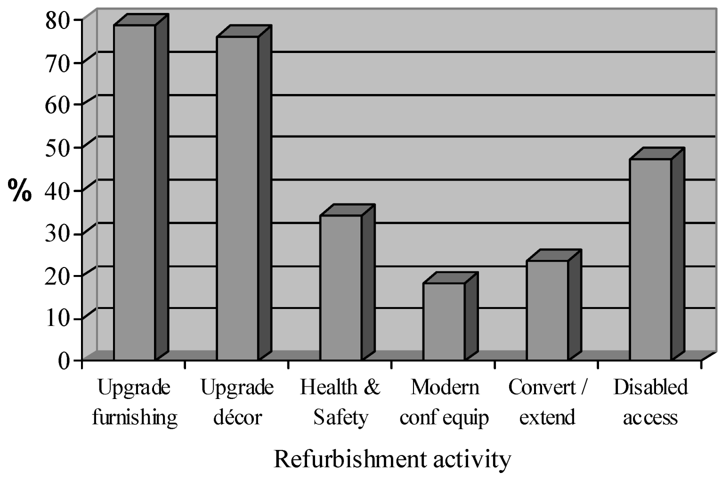

FIGURE 2 Improvements undertaken to create the conference facility within visitor attractions ($N = 38$).

were built before health, safety, and/or disabled legislation was introduced. The lowest levels of refurbishments involved structural changes, with converting/extending the venue being cited by nine (23.6%) visitor attractions, as well as the purchasing of new technology, with seven (18.4%) venues citing this factor.

The Refurbishment of Visitor Attraction Conference and Event Venues Since Opening

Many visitor attractions have subsequently refurbished since they originally created their conference and event facilities, with 39 (52%) visitor attractions doing so. The levels of implementation for the six refurbishment activities can be seen in Figure 3.

For comparative purposes, refurbishments undertaken to create conference facilities identified that improving furnishings and decor are ranked first and second, respectively. This is the case for refurbishments undertaken since opening, with 29 (74.4%) and 28 (71.8%) venues undertaking these activities, respectively. Implementing modern conference equipment ranked last when the facilities were created, but moved up to be tied for third, along with providing disabled access, at the time of refurbishment. Both of these refurbishment activities were cited by 18 (46.2%) visitor attractions. In terms of introducing new technology, this factor has more than doubled its level of implementation from that required to create conference and event facilities. Converting/extending the venue is ranked fifth, with 17 (43.6%) venues undertaking this activity; this refurbishment has almost doubled from that undertaken to create such facilities. The refurbishment

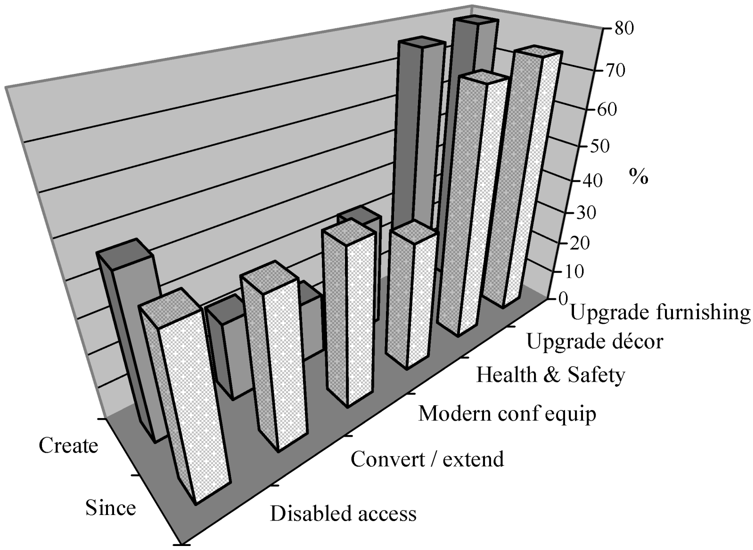

FIGURE 3 Key factors implemented to create and improve visitor attraction conference venues since opening ($N = 39$).

receiving the least support is that of health and safety, cited by 15 (38.5%) venues, although this is still over one-third of responding venues. In summary, although refurbishing furnishing and decor remain the most common activity undertaken since opening, implementing new conference technology as well as structural changes of converting and extending have both experienced considerable growth.

The discussion continues by examining any problems that were encountered by visitor attractions offering conference and event facilities.

Problems Encountered by Visitor Attractions Offering Conference and Event Facilities

Respondents were asked to rank factors what were considered to be problems for their venue, with 1 being the most severe and 10 the least severe A list of such factors can be seen for visitor attractions in Table 3.

Increased competition from other conference and event venues (ranking of 4.29) is seen as the most severe problem experienced by visitor attractions offering conference and event facilities. As the literature review highlighted and this research identified, there is a wide variety of visitor attractions now offering such facilities. As such, competition has increased within this market sector. A lack of breakout rooms/facilities (ranking of 4.39) is viewed as the second most severe problem that venues face. Again this research highlights that the majority of responding visitor attractions established their facilities

TABLE 3 Key Factors that May Prohibit Development of Visitor Attractions Conference Venues

	Mean	Count N =
Increased competition from other venues offering conference and event facilities	4.29	31
Lack of break-out rooms/facilities	4.39	31
Insufficient conference lead times	5.17	23
Lack of technical equipment	5.65	26
Reduced demand for conference facilities	6.04	26
Lack of trained staff	6.51	27
Difficulty of attracting repeat meetings/delegates	6.65	23
Increasing costs	6.67	25
Operating problems	6.76	25

through the utilization of unused space, while undertaking refurbishment of furnishing and decor, rather than structural changes to create the required range of breakout rooms offering a variety of delegate capacities. Visitor attractions consider insufficient lead times to be the third most prohibitive factor with an average ranking of 5.71.

Conference Services Ranked: Perceived Strengths Within Visitor Attractions Offering Conference and Event Facilities

It is important to examine such rankings, as this identifies any perceived competitive advantage or disadvantage for visitor attractions. A list of ten services were provided, and a ranking of 1 to 10 applied by respondents, where 1 indicated a highest level of importance and 10 the lowest level. These factors have been cross-tabulated against visitor attractions, and the results are listed in Table 4.

TABLE 4 Conference Services Offered by Visitor Attraction Venues Ranked by Mean Value

	Mean	Count N =
High level of service and customer-oriented staff	2.5	70
Venue has a unique atmosphere	3.1	70
Venue has a unique experience	3.4	68
Venue provides wide range of meeting capacities	3.8	64
Excellent communication links provide easy access	4.7	66
Availability of a tour of the venue	5.3	61
Venue provides high-tech facilities	6.6	58
Sufficient local attractions to entertain delegates	6.8	66
Venue has in-house accommodation	7.2	61
A conference bureau service is provided	8.5	54

This research identifies that for visitor attractions, high levels of service and customer-oriented staff are seen as the most important conference and event-related service offered to delegates with an average ranking of 2.5. Visitor attractions saw their "venue has a unique experience" as being the second most important factor with an average ranking of 3.4. This unique experience offered by visitor attractions is seen as their competitive advantage over the other venue types. This finding supports the view discussed in the literature review, which suggests that the conference and event delegates are demanding a new style or experience at conferences and events, and it is visitor attractions that are satisfying this new demand.

Visitor attractions rank the provision of a wide range of meeting capacities as third with an average ranking of 3.8. The number of delegates that any venue is capable of holding is of fundamental importance in respect to what type of conference or event the venue can hope to attract (Davidson & Cope, 2003). Hence, visitor attractions possessing a wide range of meeting capacities is essential in attracting a wide range of meeting types.

The Future Growth of Visitor Attractions Offering Conference and Event Facilities

For visitor attractions, the 1970s showed little demand for conference and event facilities, with six (8%) respondents stating their attraction adding such facilities. Of these six venues, five opened in the latter part of the decade, between 1975 and 1979. However, through the 1980s and 1990s, there was a rapid rise in the number of conference and event facilities being added to visitor attractions, with 22 (29.4%) and 35 (46.6%) attractions responding, respectively. As stated, the survey took place in August 2001. Between 2000 and August 2001, 12 (16%) visitor attractions within the sample population added such facilities (Whitfield, 2005). Utilizing double exponential smoothing forecasting, as shown in Figure 4, identifies that during the current decade, 48.3 visitor attractions are forecasted to add facilities. Additionally, during 2010–2019, 61.7 venues are predicted to add facilities. The predicted growth rate between 1990–1999 and 2010–2019 is 76%.

This research also compared the number of visitor attractions opening with the number of such attractions opening conference and event facilities in order to give an "open:offering" ratio. In the 1970s, for every one visitor attraction opening, one added such facilities; this rose to 1:1.37 in the 1980s, and in the 1990s it stood at 1:2.18. In the current decade, this is predicted to rise further to 1:3.63, which is based upon the forecasted values obtained using exponential smoothing techniques. Finally, for the years 2010 to 2019 the proportion of visitor attractions opening such facilities rises further to 1:3.64. These results show that while there is an increase in the number of visitor attractions opening, there is a greater increase in the number of

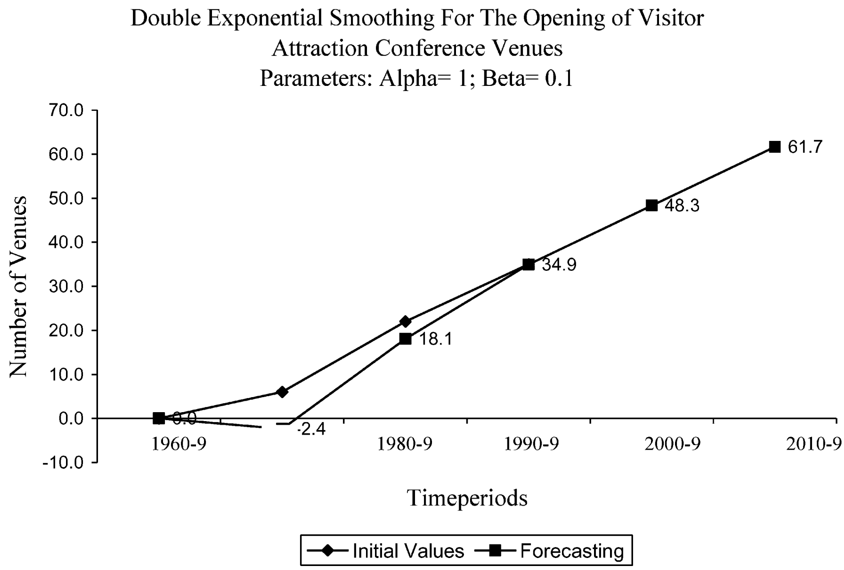

FIGURE 4 Double exponential smoothing forecasting for visitor attractions adding conference facilities ($N = 75$).

attractions adding conference and event facilities, and as such, the open:offering ratio has increased since the 1970s.

Future Plans to Refurbish Visitor Attraction Conference and Event Venues

From the responding visitor attractions, over half (40; 53.3%) of such venues stated that they had plans to refurbish in the future. However, 35 attractions (46.7%) stated that they did not plan future renovations. The refurbishment activities planned for the future can be seen in Figure 5, where those activities undertaken to both create conference and event facilities and since opening are shown for comparative purposes.

Refurbishing decor and furnishings are ranked first and second, with 30 (75%) and 25 (62.5%) venues, respectively, stating that these activities were planned for the future. These two refurbishment activities are consistently rank first and second. Structural changes move from being ranked fifth for those refurbishments undertaken to both create conference and event facilities and those refurbishments undertaken since opening to being ranked third for future planned activities, with 19 (47.5%) venues responding. Improving conference technology is ranked fourth for future activities, with 17 (42.5%) venues stating that they planned to improve technology in the future. The provision of disabled access and improvements to comply with health and safety regulations were ranked third and fourth with regards to

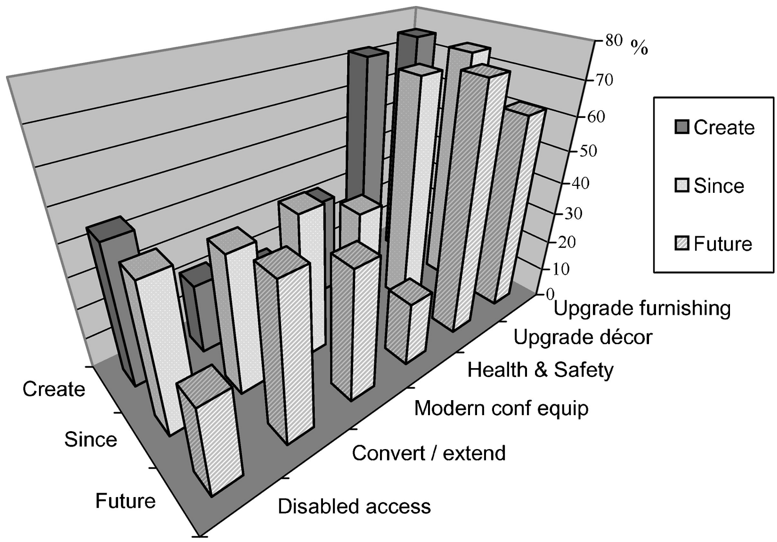

FIGURE 5 Key factors implemented to improve visitor attraction conference venues to create conference facilities since opening and in the future ($N = 40$).

the creation of such facilities, whereas in the future, they are ranked fifth and sixth respectively, with 11 (27.5%) and 8 (20%) respondents stating that they planned on undertaking these activities.

These findings suggest that some degree of non-compliance with health and safety existed within visitor attractions and that work was required to correct this rather than installing modern conference facilities. Now that this work has been completed, development to comply with health and safety regulations receives the lowest level of implementation, and the proportion of venues installing modern conference equipment has doubled. Improvements in their decor, improving conference technology, along with converting and/or extending the venue, are all activities that have a greater level of implementation in the future than does the creation of conference facilities. This suggests that many visitor attractions entered the market by undertaking limited development activities and, as such, offer only basic facilities. It is at a later date that visitor attractions have started to invest money to improve their conference and event facilities.

CONCLUSION

The literature review has highlighted that conference and event organizers are increasingly choosing venues that impress delegates and guests. As such, visitor attractions are increasingly marketing themselves not only on their cultural/entertainment value, but also their conference and event facilities.

Today, there is a wide variety of visitor attractions supplying such facilities. There are problems faced by visitor attractions in relation to supplying these facilities, and the principle concern is that of its dual purpose—functioning as a visitor attraction by day, while offering conference and event facilities by night; in some instances, there is a requirement to transform the venue in under two hours (Gosling, 1998; Sewell, 2007; Shallcross, 1998). Additional problems are concerned with the logistics of moving the required equipment into and around a venue; this includes vehicular access, distribution of equipment over multiple floors, electrical and water supply, as well as catering facilities (ConferenceVenuesUK, 2007; Spain, 2007). Furthermore, many visitor attractions lack the provision of overnight accommodation (Leask & Hood, 2000), and finally, the uniqueness that attracted delegates initially may also create issues of diminishing returns (Davidson & Cope, 2003).

The findings of this research support the literature review, establishing that a wide variety of visitor attraction types now offers conference and event facilities. This research gained responses from 11 differing venue types. The majority of these venues was economically motivated to enter the conference market by utilizing unused space. In doing so, refurbishing furnishings and decor were the two most common refurbishment activities undertaken to create conference and event facilities. These factors are likely to be the cheapest means of offering such facilities. These refurbishments were followed by the provision of disabled access as well as health and safety improvement. Such activities are likely to be undertaken due to the age and/or condition of the visitor attractions structure. The lowest levels of refurbishment undertaken to create conference and event facilities was that of structural changes and the purchasing of technology.

In terms of refurbishments undertaken by visitor attractions since initially offering conference and event facilities, this research identifies that although refurbishing furnishings and decor remain the most common activities undertaken, implementing new conference technology and structural changes of converting and extending have both experienced considerable growth. For refurbishments planned in the future, this research identifies that "to comply with health and safety regulations" now receives the least support, while the proportion of venues planning to install modern conference equipment has doubled. Refurbishing decor, improving conference technology, as well as converting and/or extending the venue all have greater levels of planned future implementation than did creating conference and event facilities. Overall, this research suggests that visitor attractions entered the market by initially undertaking limited refurbishments, thus, offering basic conference and event facilities. It is at a later date that visitor attractions have invested in improvements to their facilities.

This research identifies that visitor attractions perceive their strengths to be the fact that they offer "high levels of service and customer-oriented staff," as well as the "venue has a unique experience." This finding supports the view discussed in the literature review, that visitor attractions are satisfying the demand for venues that impress delegates and guests. Concerns were expressed that increased competition from other conference and event venues and a lack of breakout rooms/facilities are viewed as the most severe problems that such visitor attractions face.

Finally, based upon historical data and utilizing double exponential smoothing forecasting, this research predicts that during the current decade, 48.3 visitor attractions are forecasted to add conference and event facilities. Additionally, during 2010–2019, 61.7 venues are predicted to add such facilities. The predicted growth rate between 1990–1999 and 2010–2019 is 76%. With this increased growth comes increased competition, which in turn, will require visitor attractions to ensure that their conference and event facilities are refurbished in order to maintain a competitive advantage.

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