Distribution channels for events: Supply and demand-side perspectives

Karen A. Smith

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Victoria Management School, Victoria University of Wellington, PO Box 600, Wellington 6140, New Zealand
Tel: 00 64 4463 5721; Fax: 00 64 4463 5180; E-mail: karen.smith@vuw.ac.nz

***Karen A. Smith** is a senior lecturer in tourism management at Victoria University of Wellington. She is a member of the 'Innovations in New Zealand Tourism through Improved Distribution Channels' research project and her other academic interests include the management of tourism and event volunteers, literary and film tourism, and tourism education.*

ABSTRACT

KEYWORDS: distribution channels, information, package, special event tourism

Distribution involves the dissemination of information, the means of booking and purchase, and product bundling or packaging. In an increasingly competitive market place, special events, like other tourism products, require an effective distribution strategy to reach their target tourist and local markets. This article systematically integrates data from interviews with events organizers and a survey of attendees at four events in Wellington, one of New Zealand's main event tourism destinations. The complexity of event distribution channels is influenced by the event's target market, capacity, partnership relationships, and other factors. Free events have simple distribution channels focused on disseminating information; channels for ticketed events are more complex. There is limited bundling of event tourism packages and a number of barriers exist to their further development in this destination.

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing recognition that distribution is a crucial element of tourism marketing. Most research has focused on packaged leisure travel;[1] however, more recently, researchers have recognized that different types of tourism and tourists generate different distribution channel structures, behaviours and issues.[2] Special events form part of the tourism product of many destinations and while promotion of an event can raise awareness among potential audiences, like other products and services, events need a strategy to be effectively distributed in an increasingly crowded market place.

Distribution is 'what makes the product available';[3] it creates the link between supplier and consumer. Distribution makes 'an organization's offering available to the customer when and where it is required'.[4] For events, 'place' in the marketing mix can have a dual meaning:[5] first, it can refer to the locational aspects of choosing a venue and ensuring access to that site for visitors; second, and its use here, it can refer to the distribution of tickets. Marketing has been a major theme of events research,[6] but issues of distribution have received little attention. This is despite the important role distribution has in ensuring the efficient and effective use of marketing resources.[7]

The operation of an event's distribution channels, particularly the ticketing process, can be an integral part of the attendee's

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decision-making process;[8] it plays a role in the consumer's evaluation of the event experience; and is important for building strong customer relationships.[9] While event evaluation studies rarely include distribution as a factor, case studies[10] make it evident that aspects of distribution, even if not labelled as such, can influence the outcomes and success of an event.

Buhalis[11] identifies three functions of tourism distribution channels: to provide information; bundle or combine products together; and establish the means whereby consumers can make and pay for reservations. This article uses these functions as a framework to analyse the structure and operation of event distribution channels in one tourism destination: Wellington, New Zealand. It integrates the factors that influence an event organization's distribution strategy decisions with data from visitors at four events on their distribution behaviour and preferences for particular channel structures. Understanding how these elements interact is crucial for advancing knowledge of both visitor behaviour and event operations and marketing. In addition, a better understanding of distribution systems and of visitors' purchasing behaviours should enable event organizers and their tourism partners to select and use an appropriate range of distribution channels more effectively.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Each of the three functions of distribution has individually received some attention within the event tourism literature; however, there has been little attempt to draw the elements together and consider distribution more holistically. Case studies of information search behaviour focus on individual events and have identified differences between repeat and first-time visitors,[12] different age groups,[13] and local and tourist audiences.[14] Pearce et al.[15] established that tourists' information search for attractions often occurs 'at destination', and this may also apply to events as McKercher et al.[16] found that most international tourists at cultural festivals in Hong Kong were unaware of the event prior their arrival in the destination. However, a limitation of these event-related studies are their focus on the demand-side and the dominance of single case studies means it is hard to generalize the findings more widely.[17]

In the events literature, distribution is usually equated with ticketing: the means of reservation and payment. While a number of authors discuss elements of ticketing,[18] there is a lack of empirical data on the structure of ticket distribution systems or event attendees' purchasing behaviours. Thamnopoulos and Gargalianos' case study of the ticketing processes at the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games,[19] and a consumer report by the British Office of Fair Trading[20] are notable exceptions. Event organizers have a range of options for distributing tickets: direct to the consumer, or via primary or secondary distribution channels. By using a primary intermediary such as a ticketing agent, consumers can choose to purchase their event ticket using a range of technologies (commonly the telephone, the internet, or face-to-face at a box office or retail outlet). Beaven and Laws[21] suggest that an organization's choice of ticket distribution system will depend on a range of factors including the size and type of event and the nature of the audience. Ticket sales are a source of income for event organizers and ticket-scaling strategies (for example, varying price by seat position, the time of sale, or category of attendee) can be used to obtain the best value from sales.[22] Using a ticketing agency can bring additional costs: potentially a booking fee for consumers and a commission on ticket sales, which can reduce the event's income and yield per ticket.

The third function of distribution is bundling; this involves the packaging of an event with other tourist products, such as with transport and accommodation, or with other entertainment, food and beverage, and merchandising; these packages may be aimed at both tourist and local markets. Allen et al.[23] see packaging as 'one of the most underdeveloped elements of the [event] marketing mix'. Packaged event tourism products appear to be largely confined to sporting mega events such as the Olympic Games, Soccer World Cup, Grand Prix, and overseas sporting tours such as cricket's Ashes series. Bundling has also largely been ignored by the academic event tourism literature. For the consumer, a package can maximize convenience, lower cost, or provide 'value added' elements;[24] bundling can also minimize the costs of distribution as 'transactions do not need to be bargained on an individual basis'.[25] Packages can be developed by events and/or destinations in conjunction with intermediaries such as travel agents and inbound operators. The ability to package an event is partly dependent on its 'drawing power',[26] but it is unclear to what extent event organizers consider bundling opportunities as a way of increasing an event's appeal to tourist markets.

Distribution and bundling can also play a key role in building relationships with key channel members, such as opportunities for corporate hospitality and sales packages, often as elements of a sponsorship deal.[27] Event sponsors have multiple and varied objectives,[28] which may include using sponsorship to build and reinforce relationships with various audiences. This is predominately identified in relation to present and potential consumers,[29] but the opportunities for sponsors to develop and enhance relationships with other businesses (including their channel members)[30] and internal audiences (such as employees)[31] are also acknowledged. Event organizers may therefore work with the sponsor to distribute event tickets or hospitality packages to these audiences. Brown's research on sponsorship at the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games found that hospitality packages were seen as an important leverage tool by sponsors and were highly rated by their guests.[32] There is less empirical research on the benefits event organizers' seek from sponsorship;[33] but potentially this could include 'in-kind' support in the form of access to the sponsor's customer base in order to distribute event information or tickets.

In summary, while some research has been undertaken on each of the three functions of event distribution, they do not systematically integrate the elements. This article attempts to bridge this gap by investigating the distribution channels utilized by events in the Wellington region of New Zealand and a brief background on the destination provides a context for the study. An integrated research approach is taken with data both from the supply-side – interviews with event organizers – and demand – a survey of attendees at four events. By combining these perspectives, both the design and use of the event distribution strategies can be considered more holistically.

The Wellington region as an event tourism destination

The *New Zealand Tourism Strategy 2010* highlighted the potential of events as a means of growing year-round and regional demand.[34] The North Island region of Wellington includes both the capital city and the rural Wairarapa. As an urban and gateway destination, Wellington attracts a range of leisure and business visitors.[35] The regional tourism organization (RTO) aims to develop its events calendar, particularly targeting the domestic market to address issues of seasonality and to grow weekend leisure travel.[36] However, a constraint on tourism development is that many of the City's attractions, including events, are non-commissionable.[37] To the north of the City is the rural region of the Wairarapa where the environment and wine tourism are the main attractions. Its location 1.5 hours drive from Wellington results in tourism with a strong day trip and domestic focus. Attracting visitors is one of the region's strategic economic aims, and events are identified as the key driver for generating visitor numbers.[38]

Pearce et al.[39] have established that the tourism distribution channels for Wellington are complex and vary by market segment, as well as by type of accommodation and attraction. Their research considered business event travellers to Wellington but those attending leisure events did not feature prominently. Non-event attractions in the city, many of which are culturally-based, are focused on distribution to independent rather than packaged travellers. This is a consequence of the breadth of product appeal, limited capacities, a lack of commissionable product, and the short length of stay of most packaged tour itineraries.[40] There is almost no pre-booking of attractions and the distribution strategy for tourists is an 'at destination' approach, targeting visitors once they arrive in Wellington.[41] By focusing on event visitors, the current article is a valuable addition to our understanding of distribution both in this urban destination and for events more generally.

METHODOLOGY

The research on which this article is based forms part of a larger five-year project, *Innovation in New Zealand Tourism through Improved Distribution Channels*, funded by the Foundation for Research Science & Technology. The wider project aims to develop a more systematic understanding of the diverse distribution channels for New Zealand tourism and to examine ways of increasing their effectiveness with regard to particular key markets, regions, and forms of tourism. The study has adopted a systematic, integrated approach to distribution channels;[42] this involves the triangulation of different channel members' perspectives. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with event organizers in the Wellington region; in addition, a survey was conducted with attendees at four events in Wellington during summer 2004.

The supply-side perspective

In-depth semi-structured interviews are the most common method for collecting data on the supply-side of tourism distribution channels,[43] particularly in sectors where there is a scarcity of previous research.[44] Interviews were conducted with eight special event organizers in the Wellington region: six managers of individual events and two professional event organizers (Table 1). The events were all leisure-based and reoccurring; they were chosen on the basis of their importance to the destination and their ability to attract at least a regional audience. The events cover a diverse range of types, sizes, and organizational structures. In addition, two public-sector organizations running multiple events were included: the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, who curate and host a range of temporary exhibitions and events, and the Wellington City Council, whose focus is mainly community events but they also support larger scale events. The two Regional Tourism Organizations (RTOs) – Positively Wellington Tourism and Go Wairarapa – were interviewed to give a destination perspective.

A single researcher conducted all the interviews using a schedule of questions. On average the interviews lasted one hour and covered the nature of the event, the markets targeted, the distribution channels used and factors influencing these, relationships established and partnerships developed. Notes were taken at each interview and all were taped and later transcribed. These were analysed by identification of key themes which were developed from the research questions, with additional themes emerging from the data. In some cases respondents did not allow the attribution of quotes or details, thus not all points in the text are referenced to specific examples.

The demand-side perspective

The demand-side perspective has been under-explored within the distribution channels literature.[45] Taking a comparative approach, the supply data was complemented with a survey of visitors at four events in Wellington city (see Table 2): the New Zealand International Sevens (the 'Sevens'), the New Zealand International Arts Festival (the 'Arts Festival'), the Wellington Dragon Boat Festival, and the Writers & Readers Week. These were selected because they represented different scales and types, including both sporting and cultural events. In addition, the interviews had identified that these events face different management and distribution challenges: for example, there is high demand for Sevens tickets and it sells out very quickly; the Arts Festival sells tickets for multiple-

Table 1: Event organizations interviewed

Events	*Background information*
Cuba Street Carnival	Bi-annual one-day street carnival in Wellington city (free entry)
Martinborough Fair	One-day open-air art and craft market held twice a year in Wairarapa town (free entry)
New Zealand International Arts Festival*	Bi-annual three-week cultural festival. Incorporates the Writers & Readers Week* (ticketed and free entry)
New Zealand International Sevens*	Annual two-day professional rugby tournament held in Wellington's Westpac Stadium (ticketed)
Toast Martinborough	Annual one-day wine festival held in Wairarapa town (ticketed)
Wellington Dragon Boat Festival*	Annual two-day sporting tournament held on Wellington harbour (free entry for spectators)
Professional event organizers	
Avenue Events	Range of events (including Wairarapa Balloon Fiesta)
Capital C	Range of events
Multiple event organizations	
Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa ('Te Papa')	New Zealand's national museum – hosts a range of small and large scale temporary exhibitions and events throughout the year (both ticketed and free entry)
Wellington City Council	Local council – hosts a range of small and large scale events, with most community events having free entry
Regional tourism organizations (RTO)	
Go Wairarapa	
Positively Wellington Tourism	

* Events included in visitor survey – see Table 2 for more details.

Table 2: Background details on the four Wellington events*

New Zealand International Arts Festival (the Arts Festival)

Bi-annual three-week cultural festival incorporating drama, music, dance, comedy, and the visual arts. 2004 was the 10th festival.

Over 180 ticketed closed-door performances and 21 free events held at venues in and around Wellington.

Tickets distributed via ticketing agency and members (including sponsors, corporate and individual patrons, and Friends).

Writers & Readers Week

Forty writers and talks and seminar held in the Embassy Theatre, Wellington. Tickets sold through similar channels but a separate concession pass available for multiple-attendance.

New Zealand International Sevens (the Sevens)

Annual two-day professional sporting tournament. Held at the Westpac Stadium since 2000.

A sell-out event: 34,500 tickets available; the 15,000 on public sale took four hours to sell. Tickets distributed via ticketing agency, members (including stadium season ticket holders, rugby clubs, sponsors and hospitality clients) and tourism channels.

Wellington Dragon Boat Festival (the Dragon Boat Festival)

Annual two-day event held on Wellington harbour, with competitions for corporate, social and school teams. 2004 was its 16th year.

Free event with open access to the waterfront for spectators. Organizers estimate up to 30,000 spectators over a sunny weekend.

* data from the 2004 events.

performances across a three-week programme, including the specialized Writers & Readers Week; and the Dragon Boat Festival is open-access with free entry for spectators.

The timing, layout and atmosphere of events creates challenges for researchers studying attendees;[46] however, surveys are a widely used and accepted data collection tool in these circumstances.[47] As a comparative study of multiple events the aim was to replicate the questionnaire design and administration at each event; however, as found by other researchers,[48] practical issues resulted in some variations in survey administration and sampling procedure.[49]

At three events – the Sevens, Arts Festival, and Dragon Boat Festival – interviewer-administered surveys were conducted. Trained student researchers intercepted visitors arriving at each event, approaching the next passing visitor once their previous survey had been completed. At closed-door venues (Sevens and Arts Festival) respondents were recruited on arrival; at the Dragon Boat Festival researchers were located at high-traffic points around the open-access site. At the Arts Festival, eleven sub-events (most with repeat performances) were chosen to represent different elements of the Festival programme.[50] The Writers & Readers Week is a literature festival organized as part of the Arts Festival but considered here separately as logistical constraints resulted in the questionnaire being redesigned and administered as a self-completion survey, given to attendees on arrival at selected talks.

While not piloted at a specific event, the questionnaire was based on a survey administered in an earlier stage of the wider research project to collect data from tourists to Wellington.[51] The survey aimed to establish the distribution patterns and behaviours of those attending the events, and the factors influencing these. Minor modifications were made to the questionnaires depending on the nature of each event; for example, as a free open-access event, distribution questions for the Dragon Boat Festival focused solely on information as there were no tickets to book or purchase. For practical purposes, the Writers & Readers Week self-completion questionnaire was significantly shortened; however, the core questions on the distribution channels used by attendees remained.

A total of 2079 questionnaires were completed: 301 at the Dragon Boat Festival 420 at the Sevens, 955 at the Arts Festival, and 403 at the Writers & Readers Week. Refusal rates data was not complete but of those approached to take part approximately 20 per cent at the Arts Festival, 30 per cent at the Dragon Boats, and 50 per cent at the Sevens declined to participate; these levels are in line with Daniels et al.'s experience of on-site refusals by attendees at a golf tournament.[52] Most non-responses were related to a lack of time, particularly due to closed-door performances at the cultural events and timetabled matches at the sporting tournaments, or a lack of interest in participation.[53] Relating these responses to the overall number of attendees at each event is problematic as organizers either counted attendances rather than attendees (Arts Festival; Writers & Readers Week), or did not collect accurate data (Dragon Boat Festival). An estimation can be made for the Sevens where the venue capacity is 34,500; assuming the same person attended on both days of the tournament, the 420 respondents represent 1.2 per cent of attendees.

Detailed comparative analysis between the profiles and behaviours of attendees at the different events will be considered elsewhere;[54] rather the aim of this article is to discuss the trends identifiable among special event attendees per se. Given the differing samples from each event, respondents from the Arts Festival are over-represented in the aggregated data. Comparisons are made between local residents and domestic and international tourists. All tourists were asked additional questions about their visit to Wellington, including the type of travel arrangements (independent or packaged). The survey data, including open-ended questions, were coded and analysed using SPSS.

FINDINGS

Presented together, the demand and supply data provides a synthesis of the structure and functioning of event distribution channels in Wellington. The three functions of distribution are analysed in turn; this is in line with Pearce and Schott's approach of following the presumed sequence of distribution from the event attendees' perspective.[55] For each stage, the structure of the distribution strategies adopted by the event organizers are detailed, using data from the interviews. This is presented alongside data from the visitor survey that shows how attendees are using these different distribution channels to find information on the event, book and purchase tickets, and the extent to which they use bundled packages. This data is broken down between local residents and tourists to identify the extent to which they have different patterns of behaviour. Local residents dominated the responses (70.8 per cent, see Table 3). Most tourists were domestic visitors (23.4 per cent of all respondents), with only a small number of international visitors (5.7 per cent). The majority of domestic visitors were event tourists (80.0 per cent, see Table 3), with the event being the primary purpose of their visit to Wellington. By contrast, only a quarter of international visitors (25.6 per cent) were event tourists, most being in Wellington primarily for other reasons (mainly holidaying or visiting friends and relatives).

Information search

Information is the first stage of distribution, and for free events (such as the Cuba Street Carnival, Martinborough Fair, Wellington Dragon Boat Festival, and many of the community events run by Wellington City Council), distribution strategies focus exclusively on the effective distribution of information as there are no tickets to sell. The interviews identified that all event organizers use a range of information source channels in an attempt to reach their target markets. These include print and broadcast media, the internet, printed brochure programmes, targeted mailings to members, and a visual presence in the destination. Non-locals are seen as a hard market to reach and tourism-related information channels (such as inbound operators) were not seen as important.

The visitor survey data shows that attendees use multiple information sources to find out about an event. Table 4 summarizes all the sources used by attendees at the four Wellington events and also highlights which source visitors identified as most important in their information search. Event-generated materials dominated, particularly brochures; these printed programmes were produced for the Arts Festival and Writers & Readers Week and distributed on a national basis. Print and broadcast media were also important but the internet less so. A visual presence in the city, such as through posters and banners, may raise awareness of the event but is not important for giving detailed information. Direct mailings to membership groups (such as Festival Friends, and season ticket holders) were also used by attendees. A third of respondents said their own past

Table 3: Origin of attendees and primary purpose of tourist visits of attendees at four Wellington events*

	Origin of attendees %	*Tourists for whom the event was the primary purpose of their trip* %	*n*
Local residents	70.8	–	1472
Domestic tourists	23.4	80.0	487
International tourists	5.7	25.6	119
All tourists	29.1	69.7	606
n =	2078	405	2078

* New Zealand International Arts Festival, New Zealand International Sevens, Wellington Dragon Boat Festival, Writers & Readers Week.

Table 4: Information sources used by event attendees at four Wellington events*

		Local residents		*Domestic tourists*		*International tourists*		*All respondents*		
		Main source n = 1435 %	*% of respondents using source† n = 4087‡ %*	*Main source n = 469 %*	*% of respondents using source† n = 1270‡ %*	*Main source n = 119 %*	*% of respondents using source† n = 223‡ %*	*Main source n = 2023 %*	*%*	*% of respondents using source† n = 5580‡ %*
Event-generated information	Brochure	36.7	68.0	26.2	56.1	15.1	31.1		33.0	63.1
	Newspaper/magazine	7.8	35.6	4.5	26.4	6.7	16.0		7.0	32.3
	Radio/TV	6.5	29.9	9.2	30.9	3.4	10.1		6.9	29.0
	Internet	1.4	9.5	5.3	16.6	5.9	16.0	61.1	2.6	11.6
	Direct mail (inc. membership mailing)	9.4	15.5	6.6	11.9	2.5	3.4		8.4	14.0
	Other event-generated information (inc. posters, banners, being involved in event)	3.3	22.9	3.0	12.4	3.4	11.8		3.2	19.8
Previous experience	Previous knowledge/ experience	17.7	57.9	18.3	58.0	4.2	19.3	32.4	17.1	55.7
	Word of mouth	11.8	36.2	21.3	46.3	32.8	42.9		15.3	39.0
Third parties	Education/work	3.1	4.5	1.5	3.2	2.5	3.4		2.7	4.2
	Tourism-related	0.5	1.7	0.9	5.1	10.1	16.0	3.8	1.1	3.4
By chance	By chance/passing by	1.8	2.9	3.2	3.8	13.4	17.6	2.8	2.8	4.0
Total		100.0		100.0		100.0		100.0	100.0	

Main information source: $x^2 = 275.239$ $df = 20$ $p = 0.000$

* New Zealand International Arts Festival, New Zealand International Sevens, Wellington Dragon Boat Festival, Writers & Readers Week.
† Cell percentages.
‡ Total number of information sources used by respondents.

attendance or knowledge of the event, or word of mouth recommendations, were most important. Third party channels, such as tour operators, visitor information centres, or work/education links were not important.

Comparisons can be made on the basis of the origin of attendees (main information source: $x^2 = 275.239$, $df = 20$, $p = 0.000$). There were commonalities between the information search behaviours of local residents and domestic tourists. For both, event-generated sources were of most importance, with brochures, print and broadcast medias all being well utilized. These New Zealand-based respondents also had higher levels of previous knowledge or experience of the events than international tourists, and more had received direct mailings. For international tourists, word of mouth was most important, and many more of these respondents found an event simply 'by chance', particularly at the free-access Dragon Boat Festival. Compared to local residents, both domestic and international tourists made more use of the internet and a greater proportion identified it as the most important source.

Ticketing – the means of booking and purchase

For ticketed events charging an admission fee, organizers have to also consider how to best distribute the event tickets. The Arts Festival, Sevens and Toast Martinborough sell most or all of their tickets in advance and mainly use a primary booking agent. Te Papa sell tickets for its special exhibitions direct to the public, largely on a walk-up basis as there is rarely any pre-booking. Events also make use of membership channels for distribution, including friends groups and season ticket holders. However, there was only limited use of tourism distribution channels; these are discussed in more detail in the following section.

Data from attendees at the three events issuing tickets are presented in Table 5. All

Table 5: Distribution channels used for booking and purchasing tickets at three Wellington events*

	Local residents %	*Domestic tourists* %	*International tourists* %	*All respondents* %
Official booking agent				
In person	38.7	26.8	46.3	36.0
Telephone	19.3	22.4	18.5	20.0
Mail	17.0	14.0	1.9	15.6
Internet	12.6	16.5	13.0	13.6
Fax	5.9	7.5	3.7	6.2
Sub-total	93.5	87.2	83.3	91.5
Membership relationship	4.4	5.9	3.7	4.8
Other internet	1.3	1.9	5.6	1.6
Tourism-related	0.4	4.4	1.9	1.5
Other	0.3	0.6	5.6	0.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
$n =$	902	321	54	1277

Does not meet the requirements for chi-squared test
Likelihood Ration = 64.06708
$df = 16$ $p = 0.000$

* New Zealand International Arts Festival, New Zealand International Sevens, Writers & Readers Week.

three events used a booking agent as a distribution intermediary and the majority of respondents (91.5 per cent) used this channel, with a preference for making bookings in person (36.0 per cent), followed by telephone (20.0 per cent), mail (15.6 per cent), internet (13.6 per cent) and fax (6.2 per cent) mechanisms. Membership channels, such as the Friends of the Festival and rugby season ticket holders, were used for 4.8 per cent of ticket purchases. Small numbers used other online channels (for example, auction sites), and only 1.5 per cent used tourism channels such as tour operators and travel agents. Factors influencing attendees' choice of distribution channel included convenience, availability, personal service, location, and a membership relationship. The official booking agent was most popular for all types of attendees, but particularly local residents (93.5 per cent). The ticketing agents have outlets across New Zealand; however, a smaller proportion of domestic tourists purchased face-to-face, preferring to use the telephone and internet. Mail was used by both local residents and domestic tourists. Given the small number of international tourists responding to this question ($n = 54$), caution should be applied to their results; however, they made greatest use of face-to-face purchasing. Only one international tourist used a tourism-related channel, but 4.4 per cent of domestic tourists used these channels.

Packaging – bundling

Organizers made only limited use of tourism distribution channels, which would normally involve the third distribution function: bundling. Of the event organizers interviewed, only two are more proactive in packaging their event with tourism partners. Toast Martinborough wine festival has transport-and-ticket packages, primarily bringing day visitors from Wellington, and also works with accommodation partners of their RTO. At the Sevens tournament, approximately 2500 tickets (from a total stadium capacity of 34,500) are allocated to the travel industry for distribution as packages through tour operators and travel agents. As explained by the tournament director, these tickets are sold to the operators at a premium and they:

> '...go and sell those as they see fit and then they'll obviously build a premium into travel and/or the hotel accommodation, however they can best sell the product.'

These two are also distinct as the only events in the study to regularly sell out. Somewhat contradictorily, they could both probably sell out even without packaged distribution channels; however, these channels enable them to 'widen the base' (Sevens) of the target audience and also get a higher return.

In the visitor survey, tourists were asked additional questions about their visit to Wellington, including their type of travel arrangements: independent or packaged and, for the latter, whether the package included their event ticket (Table 6). The majority of tourists (94.8 per cent) arranged their trip independently, separately purchasing their event ticket, transport, accommodation and any other activities. Analysis of a follow-up open-ended question indicated the most common reasons for organizing the event trip in this way was the freedom and flexibility independent travel offers. Other reasons included ease and simplicity, having friends and relatives in Wellington, and a perception that independent travel was cheaper than package. There was also a behavioural preference for independent over packaged travel.

Only 5.1 per cent had purchased packaged travel, although packages were more popular with international travellers (10.1 per cent) than domestic tourists (3.7 per cent). As discussed above, of the surveyed events only at the Sevens tournament were event tickets formally bundled with other tourism elements; 3.1 per cent of all tourist respondents bought these event packages (this represents 9.2 per cent of tourist respondents surveyed at the Sevens). These packages included the ticket with transport and/or accommodation, and respondents chose a package because of ease and convenience, and also cost;

Table 6: Independent and packaged travel arrangements for tourists attending four Wellington events*

		Domestic tourists		*International tourists*		*All tourists*		*N* =
Independent travel		96.3%		89.7%		94.8%		515
Packaged	Event ticket included		3.0%		3.4%		3.1%	17
Travel	Event ticket not included	3.7%	0.7%	10.1%	6.9%	5.1%	2.0%	11
n =		427		116		543		

Does not meet the requirements for chi-squared test
Likelihood Ration = 17.74173 $df = 2$ $p = 0.001$

* New Zealand International Arts Festival, New Zealand International Sevens, Wellington Dragon Boat Festival, Writers & Readers Week.

one respondent saw a package as 'the only way to secure tickets for large group'.

Factors influencing event distribution channels

To summarize, there are a range of channels available to organizers to distribute event information, tickets and packages. Distribution of information is complex and mixed, and both event organizers and attendees use multiple information channels. International tourists are difficult to reach and rely on 'at destination' sources. Events mainly use primary booking agents to facilitate the booking and purchase of tickets, and consumers prefer to buy tickets in person, with telephone, mail and internet channels also popular. Tourism distribution channels are not used frequently and there is a low level of bundling; event and transport packages are primarily aimed at the local market. Where tourism packages have been developed, the visitors survey indicated a low level of interest in these channels among current event attendees.

Free events have the most straightforward channels, focused on the dissemination of information. Events with an admission fee adopt more complex distribution strategies to supply not only information and tickets, but also, potentially, bundled packages. The demand-side data indicates that visitors will make use of the range of channels on offer, although they have clear preferences for independent rather than packaged products, preferences for certain ticket purchase channels, and they place more importance on certain channels in the information mix. The structure of the distribution strategy put in place by the event organizer will therefore direct consumer behaviour. From the supply-side data it is evident that event organizers have choice over the channels they use and different events design different distribution channel structures. It is therefore worthwhile considering the factors that influence event organizers' distribution strategy decisions. The interviews identified that several inter-related factors influence the distribution channel strategies adopted by event organizers: target market, capacity, partnership relationships, and other factors; these are considered in turn.

Target market

The target audience for an event can be varied, including the spectating public but also individual and corporate members, season ticket holders, sponsors and suppliers, and participants. Market segmentation can include types of visitors and lifestyle characteristics; however, a geographical approach dominates. Few of the events conduct market research and consequently much of the audience data is anecdotal; nevertheless, it is clear that most Wellington and Wairarapa events primarily attract a local and regional market. Information channels used to reach the local market include print media and radio, the internet, flyers and brochures, with word of mouth also being important. In Wellington, marketing resources are put into hyping the event in the City, and radio and print media are used for a 'call to action' for local audiences.

The target for domestic audiences is primarily the regional, one-to-five hour drive market: New Zealand's Lower North Island. In the Wairarapa, the target market is primarily Wellingtonians. Depending on the nature and appeal of the event, some will target other population centres, namely Auckland and Christchurch, particularly if a touring act is not visiting those locations or an exhibition has a high profile. In Wellington, the RTO uses events as spike marketing to attract regional audiences during periods of traditional low demand.

International audiences do not appear as a target market for Wellington events. Although there are some iconic events that are used in offshore marketing and for international media and familiarization programmes, the aim is rarely to attract overseas audiences. Most events are seen to have limited international appeal, and international markets are seen as difficult to target and distribute to, particularly as events have limited budgets. Those with year-round event programmes, including Te Papa and the Wellington City Council, promote to international visitors once they are in the destination, for example through 'What's On' tourist guides. The internet is also seen as having the potential to reach international audiences, but this is largely following word of mouth awareness.

The allocation of tickets between different distribution channels is also influenced by the desired target markets. For example, while high demand means Toast Martinborough could sell all its tickets direct to the public, half are allocated to other channels:

> '…we started these things like allowing the inbounders to purchase in advance, allowing corporate members and Friends to book in advance so people can start planning it and book accommodation and to try and make the tickets a bit more accessible for people who are committed.'

Specific target markets can also be rewarded with preferential access to tickets; for example, the Arts Festival use a staggered release, first to sponsors and corporate patrons, then season ticket holders, Festival Friends, and finally public bookings.

Capacity

The capacity of an event can be determined by the venue, the weather, and the atmosphere and experience the organizers are trying to engender. The destination's available infrastructure is also a potential constraint; during certain events, such as the Sevens tournament in February, there is very limited accommodation availability in the City.

In the Wellington region, events rarely sell out. Only two events in the study – the Sevens tournament and Toast Martinborough – regularly reach capacity, both selling out within hours of ticket release; and it is worthwhile considering these two cases in more detail. These have the most complex distribution channel structures and also have clear allocations of tickets between different channels. Both events value their investment in marketing, despite their acknowledgment that for events that sell out there is the potential to reduce marketing spend. As the Toast Martinborough organizer reflected rhetorically: 'What's the point? Nobody can get tickets'. For this event, the objective of marketing is developing brand recognition of both the event and destination's reputation as a wine producer. A counter-concern is that marketing the event raises expectations which cannot be accommodated: 'you've got to be careful how much you go out there and market it and then people can't actually access it'. The Sevens organizer also articulated a desire not to be complacent: 'Our primary objective is to sell out … [Tickets] are our biggest revenue stream

[and] we can't take it for granted that tickets are going to sell so that marketing spend is important'.

The expectation of a sell out impacts on distribution channels in a number of ways. The speed at which events can sell out requires a distribution network that can accommodate this peak in demand. Toast Martinborough began using a ticketing agency because 'nobody else at that point could take the demand. As soon as [the tickets] go on sale you've got thousands of people ringing up'. There may be a desire to enable maximum access to tickets for certain markets; for example, using a ticketing agency with nationwide outlets to ensure equal access to tickets. Other channels, for example selling offshore, are ignored or limited because there is no need to widen the market to generate additional sales.

For events that are unlikely to reach capacity, customer behaviour can be an important factor in distribution. Wellingtonians are seen to prefer 'booking at the last minute' (Te Papa), hence 'calls to action' through radio and print media are crucial. For free and non-ticketed events, on-site capacity can be a logistical issue but this did not influence their distribution strategy.

Relationships with partners

Despite the lack of bundled packages, event organizers do work with the tourism sector in a range of ways. Primarily these are joint marketing initiatives, which can include the event, a tourism provider, and potentially the RTO. Other relationships tend to occur on an individual event/provider basis rather than being more strategically coordinated at a destination level. The accommodation sector is the most dominant tourism provider with which event organizers develop relationships. Individual properties may offer discounted rates, either to event participants or more generally. The event can recommend a particular provider, for example through a link from their website; this is usually as a result of a sponsorship relationship, but can occur through other arrangements, such as a fee paid to the event organizers.

Relationships with transport providers were most evident for Wairarapa events where there was an imperative to connect with their main market: Wellington's urban population. The most successful relationships are when the transport providers (either train or coach companies) are also sponsors of the event, for example, at Toast Martinborough. The higher-profile Wellington events, those with the potential to attract tourists, also work with airlines, for example Air New Zealand is a sponsor of the Sevens tournament and Te Papa; however, as with accommodation providers, the relationship is the airline as a recommended supplier rather than offering event and transport packages.

Sponsors are key partners in the distribution channel network. They can provide marketing and distribution through in-kind sponsorship; this was particularly evident with media sponsors, although the extent of market penetration these deals offer was questioned. Sponsors' own distribution networks were used to disseminate event marketing information direct to their customers. For example, the power company Genesis Energy are the naming-right sponsors of the Wairarapa Balloon Fiesta and all regional customers receive an event flyer and discount coupon with their bill; for the organizer these are 'great because it doesn't cost us anything' (Avenue Events). Events also use their sponsors to widen the distribution reach. New Zealand Post are gold sponsors of the Arts Festival and naming-right sponsors of the Writers & Readers Week; this enables the organizer to distribute brochures, the main selling tool, on a national basis through the network of Post Shops: 'so it's reaching every single town'.

Other factors

Interviewees identified a number of other challenges to effective event distribution. There is competition between events for attention and audiences. Access to distribution points and networks can be difficult and achieving cut-through in a crowded market place is particularly difficult at certain times of year; in Wellington this is the summer period where there is a perceived over-concentration of events. There can also be a lack of understanding about the nature of events shown by potential distribution partners. Events have restricted budgets for marketing and distribution so spend must be cost-effective and maximize the return. They often lack comprehensive databases for targeted marketing and the limited capacity of event organizations can also be a barrier, particularly a shortage of human resources or specialist expertise. As a predominately public sector economy, the lack of corporate sponsorship opportunities within Wellington is also a difficulty.

Potential for more bundling of event packages

The findings demonstrated a small take up of bundling opportunities and although both RTOs identified the potential for further event packages, the event organizers themselves saw a number of barriers to their development. Organizers of smaller events had not considered packaging, simply perceiving their event to be unsuitable, generally because their target market is primarily local residents. There was a perception that it is the responsibility of the tourism sector, rather than event organizers, to initiate and develop packaging opportunities and leverage tourism benefits from events. It is felt that the tourism operators will gain most of the financial benefits of packaging as often the event itself is only a small (financial) part of the visit to Wellington:

> 'When you're talking with an accommodation provider which is a couple of hundred dollars or a flight which is a couple of hundred dollars and there's us with $10 [event entry fee] – we're very small.' (Te Papa)

The perceived fragmentation of the tourism industry, particularly within the accommodation sector, means event organizers are reluctant to work with lots of individual providers and their main interaction is through the RTO. Lead-in times can also cause challenges when working with the tourism sector, particularly internationally. For established events such as the Arts Festival, 'we're in a state now where tourist operators from overseas can almost plan to come because they know the quality of what they're going to get here is fine'. However, details on actual performances and artists cannot be confirmed until closer to the event, so, the respondent continued: 'Our timelines don't necessarily fit in with theirs'. Finally, while bundling the product can bring a commission or premium on tickets for the event, there is also a potential problem with the perception of ticket prices when partners, or the event, add a premium.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Previous research has focused on individual aspects of event distribution in isolation, and considered the perspective of a single channel member, usually the event attendee. This research's contribution is to take a more holistic approach, first by considering how information, ticket purchase and bundling are related within an overall event distribution strategy and second by integrating supply and demand-side data. Taking a systematic and comparative approach results in a more comprehensive understanding of how distribution channels operate from both the event and attendees' perspectives. An appreciation of this should enable event organizers, and the tourism sector, to select and use appropriate distribution strategies more effectively.

This article illustrates the range of channels available for distributing the event product. The strategic objectives of an event will be reflected in their distribution strategy, and the degree of distribution complexity is determined by the target market, capacity (of both event and destination), partnership relationships (particularly with sponsors), competition, budget, and the nature and appeal of an individual event. Using the three functions of distribution as a framework, distinct patterns of distribution for events emerge.

Free entry events, often targeted at a local market, focus on the distribution of information and, as with other Wellington attractions,[56] any tourist-related distribution is primarily 'at destination'.

The larger and higher profile events have more developed and complex distribution channel strategies. These events are distributed to the public through ticketing agencies but also use channels linking them to membership groups and may, on a limited basis, work with partners to provide bundled packages. Wellington has only a small number of events that reach capacity and further research on sell-out events would be useful to better understand their distribution strategy operations and decision-making. Nevertheless, from the evidence here it appears that an expectation of capacity has a contradictory influence on distribution. Conceivably these events could use a smaller number of channels to sell their tickets as demand quickly exceeds supply. However, conversely, their distribution strategies are focused on broadening the range of channels so that a wide range of audiences can potentially get access to the (limited) tickets. These events, and others, have loyal audience bases and they reward this support by using membership mechanisms (such as season tickets and friends groups) to give exclusive, and often preferential, access to tickets. In comparison to other types of tourism, in terms of distribution channels, events are unique in having sponsors. This relationship has a direct influence on the distribution strategy with the allocation of tickets to sponsors. However, events also accessed the sponsor's own distribution networks to facilitate the distribution of event information, a form of in-kind capital exchange not fully acknowledged in the event sponsorship literature. There is scope for more research to better understand the role of distribution in managing and enhancing these relationships with key event stakeholders.

Overall this study found that bundling is not widespread in Wellington. Nevertheless, packaged events included both a sporting tournament and a cultural festival, which demonstrates the potential for packaging a range of events. Further research is required to explore why the bundling of cultural events appears to be less widespread than the more typical sporting event packages. Barriers to the further development of event packages in Wellington include the limited size and appeal of events, particularly in terms of their target market. The ability of the events to sell bundled tickets at a premium, and thus increase revenue, contrasts with the arrangements found elsewhere in the New Zealand tourism distribution system. For example, Pearce and Tan[57] found cultural attractions either paid commission (typically 10–20 per cent) to intermediaries for each ticket sale, or sold tickets at special discounted rates, enabling the intermediary to include a mark-up on the package product. In these cases bundling brings additional costs, rather than revenue, to the supplier and the different arrangements discussed here by event organizers may form an additional barrier.

Other challenges for event organizers working with the tourism industry include the long lead in times required and the fragmentation of the sector. There was a perception among event organizers that packaging initiatives should be driven by the tourism sector as they had the most to gain financially from the partnership. Events such as the Sydney Olympic Games[58] and the 1999 Rugby World Cup[59] have experienced problems when the local community perceived unequal access to event tickets, predominantly the distribution of exclusive, and expensive, premium packages. This research also identified that event organizers were aware of the political and image consequences of their chosen distribution strategy, and particularly the balance between 'public' tickets and other channels. So while bundling can bring benefits to the event, its partners and the destination's tourism industry, the visitor behaviour data suggests that overall event attendees have a preference for independent travel, even when event packages are available. Before developing packaged distribution channels further, event organizers need to question the resources that are required to maximize the returns from including these in their distribution strategy. This research has focused on packages for tourists, but corporate hospitality packages also merit further consideration.

Event organizers also have to make decisions within each function of distribution; for example, over the allocation of resources to different information channels. This research suggests that they need to balance promotion to create awareness with a requirement to provide information. The results emphasize the importance of previous experience and word of mouth recommendations; these are harder channels to control and require investment in creating a satisfying event experience rather than marketing. When purchasing tickets, personal service via booking outlets or telephone are preferred. For events with complex ticketing and scheduling (for example, the multiple performances in the Arts Festival), printed booking forms which can be returned by mail or fax are a viable option. The internet was of some importance but investment here should not necessarily be at the expense of maximizing the use and efficiency of other, preferred, channels.

By taking a destination-approach, this study has moved beyond the detailing of a single event and has provided an insight into the range and complexity of distribution channels for events. However, despite Wellington's claims as an event destination, it lacks the larger-scale events where packaging is more widespread and there is scope to extend this holistic approach to study distribution of other events and destinations.

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