

# Conventions, Festivals, and Tourism: Exploring the Network that Binds

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**ABSTRACT.** The link between conventions and tourism has often been assumed, and to some extent has been researched, and yet little research has been undertaken to study the relationships between organizations staging an event. The aim of this paper is to highlight the links between convention, festival, and tourism organizations using a case study in Lismore, Australia. The Lismore Chamber of Commerce has used an agricultural convention in conjunction with a community festival to share resources and attract wider audiences. This paper demonstrates the outcomes of this relationship in terms of innovation, cooperation, and regional development. Where previous attempts to coordinate the herb industry had failed, the case shows how coordinated events can serve an important purpose. The case also demonstrates the use of a network analysis methodology as a potential tool for researchers and managers in identifying and understanding industry relationships. The results demonstrate the success of this event and highlight the importance of developing and maintaining network relations. doi:10.1300/J452v08n02\_03 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Conventions, festivals, tourism organizations, resources, network analysis methodology, network relations

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## ***INTRODUCTION***

The links between tourism and convention organizations are integral to the successful operation of an event. However, relationships in the network of organizations surrounding a convention can be of equal importance to the convention manager. The aim of this paper is to study the relationships that emerge between organizations when staging an event and to examine some of the outcomes of those relationships. This paper highlights the links between convention, industry, and tourism organizations using a case study in Lismore, Australia, where the chamber of commerce staged an agricultural convention in conjunction with a community festival. To achieve this, the study utilizes network analysis to review both the structure and relations of the inter-organizational network.

## ***BACKGROUND***

In 2003, the Northern Rivers Herb Festival (NRHF) incorporated an agricultural convention (the Herbs, Native Foods, and Essential Oils Convention) into its program to be run during the week of the festival and at a venue that was adjacent to the festival site. The purpose of the strategy was to add depth to the festival, providing educational and academic elements to the program. It was proposed that a symbiotic relationship could be formed between the festival and the convention, whereby convention visitors would utilize the festival's program and facilities, and the community would gain more awareness of the local herb and oils industries. The processes and results of this plan were the subject of a Masters by Research study that examined the network relations between the festival organizers, the convention organizers, and the many other stakeholders such as government departments, tourism organizations, and the local herb and oils industries. This paper presents results from a portion of that thesis.

## ***LITERATURE***

Studies on the value of convention tourism and destinations have primarily focused on issues of direct economic impact (Braun, 1992; Braun & Rungeling, 1992; Dwyer et al., 2000). This corresponds with a similar focus in other areas of event research at festivals and sporting events where there has been a predominance of academic research in the

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area of economic impact (Burgan & Mules, 2000; Crompton et al., 2001; Getz, 1997; Crompton & McKay, 1994). While there are proposals for an integrated approach to assessing the value of events (Getz, 2000, p. 13), the value of the dollar is often an easier and more tangible thing to trace than other impacts such as regional development, social innovation, or destination attractiveness. Thankfully, studies such as those by Dwyer and Forsyth (1997) and Weber and Chon (2002) suggest that the value of conventions extends to intangible benefits such as business networking, exchange of ideas, and improving destination attractiveness; yet, there is little evidence to show how these occur.

Similarly, there have been some useful studies documenting the use of convention and exhibition industries as catalysts for urban re-development (Law, 1992; Litvin, 2003; [www.culture.gov.uk/pdf/tomorrows\\_tourism.pdf](http://www.culture.gov.uk/pdf/tomorrows_tourism.pdf)) and studies of regional development (Dwyer, 2001; Chen & Lalopa, 1999), which often focus on outputs of the region, as opposed to outcomes.

In examining the reasons behind the direct and indirect outcomes of staging conventions, some studies suggest that single organizations such as CVBs may hold much responsibility (Getz et al., 1998) for the development of convention tourism products, while others suggest a dichotic relationship between tourist elements such as casinos with conventions (Fenich & Hashimoto, 2004). Others suggest that a number of tourism organizations can be involved in a more strategic approach (Gartrell, 1991; Davidson, 2003). A network approach such as that suggested by Pavlovich (2000) in her study of tourism in Waitomo, New Zealand, offers a multi-relational approach that may be more reflective of the multiplicity of relationships occurring in a convention-based destination.

In summary, the current literature of convention tourism provides a descriptive account of what may be occurring, but lacks some insight into how and why this occurs. A network approach, as demonstrated in this case study, may assist others in examining their own convention destination.

## ***METHOD***

The study used a network approach to examine the relationships between stakeholders at the event. This approach, used by other authors in the field of tourism (Pavlovich, 2003; Long, 2000; Urry, 2003), and more recently in event management (Larson, 2002; Stokes, 2004), allows researchers to examine the dynamics of inter-organizational relationships that lead to specific outcomes such as innovation and regional

development. The network approach is particularly useful where there are many organizations involved in the development of an event.

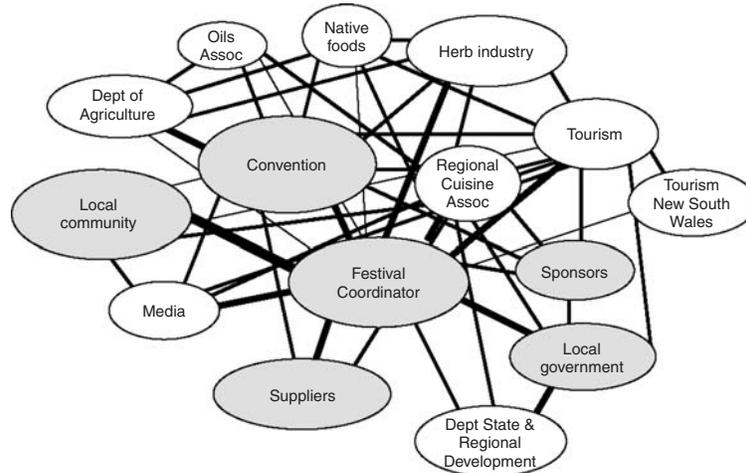
There are many techniques used to assist with network analysis (for a review, see Knoke & Kuklinski, 1988); however, the approach essentially entails identifying the actors in the network (those who are the persons or organizations to be studied), examining the channels or ties that link these actors, and examining the function of the network as a whole. This study used an ethnographic approach where assessment of the nodes and their relationship with the network has been made from the actors—although other data sources have been useful in supporting and adding to their discussion. In particular, reports from the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (Fraser & Whish, 1997) and other local media have focused on the outcomes of the convention and the festival. Other public documents from local council (LCC, 2001, 2003) have provided sound information on the objectives and background to the event. By combining and assessing these various pieces of data, analysis can be carried out of the nodes' contributions to the festival network and to the outcomes occurring from it.

The first step of the network analysis was to identify the organizations that were involved in the development of the convention and the festival. A number of in-depth interviews revealed the key participants to be those involved in festival organization, tourism, government, and the convention, while numerous other actors also emerged as being critical to the network's functioning. Where there were a number of actors working together, this formed a "node" of the network (Knoke & Kuklinski, 1988; Scott, 1991). A sociogram was drawn to illustrate the identified nodes (spheres) and the connections between them (lines between spheres) as shown in Figure 1.

The primary nodes for this study are shaded, and the width of lines varies to indicate the strength of the relationship. It should be noted, for example, that the festival coordinator has stronger relations with the media than the convention organizer. This is due to a number of factors, including past experiences and transactions between these organizations. In other studies, this has also been identified as important to both the formation and functioning of regional networks. In extensive studies of the subject, Ebers (1997) found "pre-existing social relations among the individual in a region foster and support the development of more formal business networking relationships among organizations" (p. 9). As shown in Figure 1, the convention organizer has weaker connections (or ties) with the community, as there has been little activity between them in the past. The festival coordinator, on the other hand,

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FIGURE 1. An Overview of the Festival and Convention Network (NRHF)



has extensive experience coordinating many parts of the community to participate and spectate at previous festivals and community events.

The structural design of the network appeared to fit well with the type of inter-organizational network described by Heracleous (2003) that had medium to high levels of dependency between actors and a central “broker” who coordinated many of the network activities. One of the most prominent aspects to the network was the high levels of “density” or completeness of the network—“or the extent to which all possible relations are present” (Mitchell, 1969). Again, this is a common occurrence for networks in regional areas (Ebers, 1997).

From this depiction of the basic structural and relational aspects to the network, further analysis could be carried out of the outcomes of these relations.

## ***RESULTS AND OUTCOMES***

The varying strength of relations within the network produced some interesting results in terms of the outcome for the festival and for the convention. In the example given above, the strong relationship between the festival coordinator and the media facilitated impressive cov-

erage of the convention in local papers, thereby increasing awareness of the local herb industry. Similarly, the trust that the community had developed with the festival over the past few years was in part transferred to the convention, where there was strong attendance from local herb growers and processors. The interviews with stakeholders produced evidence that the connections between the convention and the festival were producing sound outcomes for the events themselves but also for other elements of regional development.

The network showed some very typical results, found in other studies of inter-organizational networks, with regard to the outcomes that can be expected from an optimized network. These included new product development (Cox et al., 2003; Saxenian, 1991), new knowledge of customers' preferences (Cox et al., 2003), access to a larger pool of knowledge and information (Cox et al., 2003; Bower, 1993; Saxenian, 1991), design of new service delivery systems (Kandampully, 2002), and improved entrepreneurial activity (Ruef, 2002). In particular, significant results were demonstrated in the following outcomes from network interaction in the areas of cooperation, resource sharing, regional development, and innovation.

### ***Greater Cooperation***

The literature on networks often discusses cooperation as one of the most prominent outcomes of network interaction (Nohria & Eccles, 1992; Bengtsson & Kock, 1999). Similarly, industry cooperation has been touted as a prominent outcome arising from staging conventions (Dwyer & Forsyth, 1997). Staging a convention within a festival network has amplified this effect. The results from this study clearly identify examples of new and renewed cooperation between members of the herb industry and government departments such as the NSW Department of Agriculture.

Several of the participants stated that the convention brought together growers and suppliers across the diverse collection of herb, native foods, and oils products in the region. Where previous attempts to form herb growers associations had failed, a short-term event such as a convention has been successful in drawing the disparate groups together. Several of the relationships formed at the convention have continued, and while no permanent association has been formed, future conventions may assist in binding the fragmented industries. Participants found that once they were in the convention forum, they could dis-

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discuss common problems such as identifying strategies for pending herb product legislation.

### ***Sharing Resources***

The ability to share resources throughout the network is a fundamental purpose of inter-organizational network participation (Heracleous, 2003; Saxenian, 1991). Accordingly, it was discovered that there were many benefits for the convention organizer in sharing the resources of the network in terms of physical assets, but also in social capital and knowledge capital. For example, the connections and trust that existed between the festival coordinator and the tourism organizations were helpful for the convention organizer in promoting and organizing the event. The visitor information center (VIC) was able to use its established network both within and outside the region to assist in organizing accommodation packages and in promoting the event in other local regions.

The convention organizer was also able to leverage the connection between the festival and the wider community to raise awareness of the herb industry. Similarly, she was able to leverage links to other organizations such as the media, tourism, sponsors, suppliers, and the Regional Cuisine Association.

### ***Regional Development***

Regional development is often promoted as being a positive outcome from inter-organizational network development (Ebers, 1997), and yet the term itself is often difficult to define. The development of a region will be subjective to the region itself, and its levels of sustainability. The Northern Rivers region of NSW, Australia, promotes new horticultural industries and practices to replace traditional industries that are becoming unsustainable (NRRDB, 2003). The production of medicinal and cuisine herbs on small-scale farms for niche markets is seen as one way to achieve this aim. Small-scale production encourages the development of small- and medium-sized enterprises; however, the development of new agricultural products must include the community as both a potential market and an ambassador/a promoter of local goods. The combination of the convention with the festival allowed this interaction to occur, where locals could meet farmers, try their products, and farmers could meet small producers and form new supply contracts.

The interviews revealed numerous outcomes from network interaction that will assist in regional development including new supplier-processor

arrangements, new produce for the region (finger limes), and new linkages to researchers, scientists, and farmers outside the region.

### ***Innovation***

A further outcome of network interaction that is well documented is innovation (Powell, 1998; Florida et al., 2002; Tracey & Clark, 2003; Saxenian, 1991; Ruef, 2002). Described in a literal sense, innovation is “the act of introducing something new” or “something newly introduced” (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 2003). In this case, the data have revealed the occurrence of numerous types of different innovation (Trott, 2002), including product, process, service, and social innovations. As previously suggested, new agricultural products, such as finger limes, were introduced as a result of interaction between local growers and inter-state buyers attracted to the convention. Product innovation has been demonstrated in an example recounted by the convention organizer where a local grower met a buyer from Adelaide who has a need for finger limes. The local grower has been immediately able to use his existing resources of land, knowledge, and human capacity to produce a new crop of finger limes for the identified market. This innovation came about through a chance meeting at the convention between a local herb grower and buyer from another state.

Other types of social innovation as described by Florida et al. (2002) were also discovered where the local community was able to acquire new skills and knowledge as a result of the convention, but also as a result of the wider network interaction. Activities at the festival such as recipe competitions and celebrity chef demonstrations allowed local growers and inter-state visitors to see new ways of using raw local ingredients and combining products into a true regional cuisine.

The regional cuisine network was identified as a powerful node in the network that had a role to play in changing the acceptance of regional cuisine produce within the region. This type of social innovation has further implications in encouraging the community to embrace its own regional products and assist in defining the region’s image and culture (Mackellar, 2005).

### ***Audience Development***

This study has shown that the inclusion of a convention in a festival program increases audience numbers from outside the region and enriches their overall experience. The data provided by interview partici-

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pants suggest that convention delegates who were attracted by the convention program would not have normally come to the festival. Inter-state Convention delegates who made the trip to find new suppliers, or to discover new methods of herb production, also made use of the festival site and celebrations, exposing them to other aspects of herb processing, and delivery. For example, they were introduced to new research that was being presented by the local University at the festival, they tasted new herb foods, such as pestos and curry paste, and they were introduced to local music and dance performers. These examples illustrate the benefits of melding the convention and festival programs to maximize audience numbers as well as to extend visitation and enrich visitor experiences.

The results demonstrated the importance of recognizing existing networks in regional communities and maximizing existing ties. The results also suggest that from these existing networks, it is possible for events to leverage opportunities for promotion and marketing, but also leverage opportunities for development and innovation. The results suggest that one-off events can be useful for fragmented industries to draw together people and organizations to solve common problems and find cooperative solutions. In this case, the combination of convention and festival allowed greater access to, and involvement from, the community in product development and industry awareness.

## ***CONCLUSION***

The operation of conventions in regional areas often relies upon developing and maintaining strong relationships with other organizations in the region. The results of this study have shown that the benefits of managing these relationships result from accessing and leveraging the connections between other organizations and harnessing the influence of existing relationships. The study has also shown the potential for combining a convention with a festival to maximize audience numbers as well as to extend visitation and enrich visitor experiences. In doing so, the case also demonstrates the use of a network analysis methodology as a potential tool for researchers and managers in identifying and understanding inter-organizational relationships.

This study has highlighted some of the many outcomes that can be expected from efficient inter-organizational networks. In this case study, outcomes such as cooperation, resource sharing, innovation, and re-

gional development have been identified. Where previous attempts to coordinate the herb industry had failed, the case shows how coordinated events can serve an important purpose in bringing fragmented groups together and presenting their products to the local and wider community.

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