

Developing a Convention and Event Management Curriculum in Asia: Using Blue Ocean Strategy and Co-Creation with Industry

The growth of the convention and event management industry in Asia is well documented, but few degree programs in field are offered by Asian universities. This void was also recognized by the Tourism Commission of Hong Kong. In fact, while Hong Kong is considered one of the leading destinations for meeting, incentive, convention and event (MICE) business in Asia, until the recent approval of the Bachelor of Science two-year conversion degree at Hong Kong Polytechnic University's School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM), there was no degree program in the field in the city. This paper will address how the first degree program in this field in Hong Kong was developed.

There are established degree programs and/or majors in the field in the United States at a number of universities. So, one approach to developing a new program and its curriculum would be to use the subjects that have already been created elsewhere. However, differences do exist in the nature of the convention and event business between North American and Asia, so simply mirroring the curriculum developed there is not necessarily the best way to proceed in developing a new degree here in Asia. Additionally, in order to create a niche in the market, it is necessary to differentiate your product for the competition; a concept that applies to an academic degree program as well. So, when the decision was made to develop a degree in convention and event management in Hong Kong, it was decided to develop the curriculum from scratch. The following sections will detail how the curriculum was developed and how the concept Blue Ocean Strategy through co-creation sessions was utilized.

Blue Ocean Strategy and Co-creation Sessions

Blue Ocean Strategy is a marketing concept used to develop a positioning strategy for a product that will separate it from the competition (Kim & Marborgne, 2005). The idea is to determine new areas or markets where a product can be developed that the competition hasn't yet addressed. More specifically, Kim and Marborgne (2005) argued:

“tomorrow’s leading companies will succeed not by battling competitors, but by creating ‘blue oceans’ of uncontested market space ripe for growth. Such strategic moves—termed ‘value innovation,—create powerful leaps in value for both the firm and its buyers, rendering rivals obsolete and unleashing new demand.” (blueoceanstrategy.com, 2010)

Therefore, in this situation of developing a curriculum for a new degree program in convention and event management, this strategy made good sense. Instead of duplicating another university’s program that has been successful in another part of the world and then trying to compete directly with it on a global basis, utilizing this strategy helps to determine where the new degree might be differentiated to make it unique. In other words, find the blue ocean versus the red ocean where the competition is fierce. This was the overriding theme of the strategy employed to create the new curriculum at SHTM.

Co-creation is a method of developing value in the product offered by connecting the firm and the customer in the process (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000). In this case, it meant involving all of the stakeholders from the industry who ultimately are the customer for the product we produce at the university, future industry leaders. More specifically in this co-creation process, we started by creating a task force we called the Convention and Event Management Task Force made up of industry professionals. The Task Force was comprised of

12 members that included representatives from corporate meetings, exhibition organizers, exhibition service contractors, incentive companies, tourism commission and bureau officials, convention and exhibition venue operations and sales, hotel sales, hotel convention service, and the related media.

Developing the Curriculum

The process of developing the new curriculum began with a scheduled co-creation session of the Convention and Event Management Task Force and the faculty at SHTM teaching in the field (5 faculty in total). The session began with an introduction to the concept of Blue Ocean Strategy to establish the foundation for developing a program. The Task Force was briefed on the need to differentiate the potential degree program from the competition and establish a program to fill a need in the global market of convention and event education that wasn't currently being addressed. Therefore, rather than begin the session by detailing subjects currently offered at SHTM, subjects offered in North American universities, or suggesting various subjects that might be offered; an expectation some had when preparing for the session, it was explained to the group that knowing the competencies industry expected for an entry level graduate was the focus of the co-creation session.

The question that was asked at the co-creation session specifically directed at the degree program was *“What Should an Entry Level Manager Know to be Successful in the Industry?”*. The ensuing discussion of what that meant to the Task Force members shaped the core of how the competencies desired from the curriculum would be determined. The result of the brainstorming and qualifying of the importance of each competency expressed led to a final list of 14 competencies, not in any particular order, as follows:

1. Communication skills
2. Marketing
3. Upselling
4. Terminology
5. Creativity
6. Revenue Management
7. Industry knowledge
8. Basic skills for managers
9. Product design/development
10. Negotiation skill
11. Language skills
12. Project Management
13. Willingness to listen from customers
14. Appreciation of different cultures

The next step in process of developing the curriculum was to gather the faculty teaching in the convention and event management area to discuss the competencies and match them up with the outcomes and content of subjects currently offered in the field at SHTM, as well as determine new subjects to meet the needs expressed by the competencies above. That session determine 10 possible subjects, but based on the credit structure at the university, there was a limit of only 8 subjects that could be offered, so the Task Force needed to be consulted again.

Instead of bringing the Task Force together physically another time, a list of all 10 subjects the faculty determined along with bullet points of each indicating how each addressed the competencies and content needed was sent to the Task Force members via e-mail. A separate

sheet was also attached and the members were asked to rank each of the subjects in importance. This actually resulted in responses from 8 of the 12 panel members, which was gratifying as it indicated a strong industry interest in this program. Some not only gave rankings, but also made suggestions of subjects that might not have been address by those presented from the faculty.

After getting the Task Force's ranking, once again the faculty met to consider those rankings and additional suggestions. In fact, there was a wide variety of opinions amongst the Task Force members responding, but the faculty was able interpret those ranking in order to reach an agreement on which of the 10 subjects should be proposed for the new curriculum. They also determined how to incorporate the other competencies and content areas suggested that were initially part of other subjects proposed in to the new subjects proposed for the program.

The final subjects were as follows (*=subject offered previously):

- Convention Sales and Service
- Catering and Banquet Service Management
- Events Tourism and Management*
- Meeting Management*
- Special Topics in Convention and Events
- Convention Venue Management*
- Exhibition Management*
- Special Event Project I & II (a two semester subject)

The Task Force was assembled again for a follow-up meeting to introduce the final curriculum and gain their support. Additionally, one of the Task Force members was selected

for the validation panel assembled. It was very helpful to have someone who was involved through the entire process to help support what was proposed as the final curriculum.

The final approval of the new degree was given by the academic body at Hong Kong Polytechnic University and the degree was launched in August 2009. It took approximately a year and half from the first co-creation session to the launch of the degree. The demand for the new degree exceeded those for the other two Bachelor of Science two-year conversion degrees SHTM already offered.

Conclusions and Recommendations

By taking the approach that the creation of a new program curriculum had to address the need to find a “Blue Ocean” and then using the co-creation sessions to truly connect the academic side with the industry side, a new program was developed with strong industry support. This proved to be critical in the university process of approving the program as the question asked by other faculties and departments representatives was whether this degree would serve the industry needs and fill a gap not addressed by other degree programs.

While it might be argued that some of the subjects would have been comparable to those at other universities and some were already existing subjects, the most important result was a matching of competencies with subject content for all subjects offered. Additionally, one outcome that serves to differentiate the SHTM program is a dual focus on the meeting planning side of the business and the venue management side of the business servicing the meetings. This was particularly important in a market like Hong Kong, as well as the rest of Asia, as the meeting professional is still a very new concept and there are few of them doing it full time in the region. Therefore, many graduates will enter the field on the venue management side.

Ultimately, the proof of the results will be with the first graduates, which is yet to come. However, the Task Force has also met yet again to brainstorm how to employ these graduates.

References

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