

Athens as a Major Congress Destination and the Role of Professional Congress Organizers (PCOs)

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate the factors that contribute to the attraction of major congress events in Athens, Greece and the role of professional congress organizers (PCOs) in this process.

To meet this aim we used a questionnaire distributed through Google Forms to 30 PCO executives in the major Athens area. The questionnaire used qualitative and quantitative methods and contained both open and closed answer questions.

Result showed that most PCOs organize local events with medical congresses being the main activity (96.7%). The vast majority of PCO's use the social media or digital marketing to approach clients (with Facebook being the principal tool, 89.7%), as only 33.3% of the Greek PCOs can afford to participate as exponents to major congress tourism exhibitions worldwide because of their small size and limited resources. This means that the role of PCOs in the attraction of major congress events in Athens is limited. Additionally, PCOs revealed that most congresses organized in Athens last only 1-2 days (74%), with a mean number of participants on average about 300 people. Respondents also think that Athens can become a major congress tourism destination as it has certain advantages (good congress infrastructure, excellent weather, priceless archaeological sites, a unique sea front, night life, good shopping places and opportunities for short excursions) that need to be exploited, as well as the Athens Visitor & Conventions Bureau of which they share a positive view.

The current study shows that conjoint efforts of the state, the private sector and certain congress tourism stakeholders are needed (adopting advanced development strategies and using intensive marketing tools, including ambassador programs and adequate bidding processes) in order for Athens to attract international congress events and be established as a major congress tourism destination.

Keywords: Athens, congresses, professional congress organizers (PCOs), events

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Introduction

Conference tourism represents one of the most profitable forms of alternative tourism in the world today. This means that countries like Greece, especially during an economic crisis, urgently need to become a major conference tourism destination, using its infrastructure and comparative advantages to attract major events and gain important financial benefits.

The aim of this study is to investigate the factors that contribute to the attraction of major congress events in Athens, Greece and the role of professional conference organizers (PCOs) in this process.

Here we have the main questions we asked the PCOs:

- What are the principle characteristics and major advantages of congress tourism in Athens?
- How do PCOs evaluate current congress tourism status of Athens?
- How do PCOs run their business, contact clients and do business?
- What is their view on the actions needed in order to further develop congress tourism in Athens?

To meet the purposes of this study and investigate the role of PCOs in the process we used a well structured questionnaire distributed through Google Forms to PCO executives in the major Athens area. This questionnaire was designed with qualitative and quantitative methods (Creswell, 2014) in mind and contains both open and closed-answer questions.

The questionnaire

Question one refers to personal data, while questions 2-7 obtain data from previous congresses organized by each PCO. The clients' country of origin and the ways that the clients were approached are recorded using questions 8-13, while the PCOs' participation to major congress tourism exhibitions and international organizations is stated in questions 14-18.

The PCOs' opinion about the Athens CVB is obtained from their answers to questions 19 and 20 and their opinion regarding the current status and further development of congress tourism in Athens is recorded in questions 21-26. PCOs were also asked to evaluate how the major advantages of Athens contribute to the development of congress tourism in the city through questions 27-30. Difficulties in client approach due to the current economic crisis are investigated in questions 31 and 32 while question 33 is optional and refers to each PCO's competitive advantage (see appendix 1).

Overall 30 completed questionnaires were obtained. Data were analyzed using Google Forms and MS Excel.

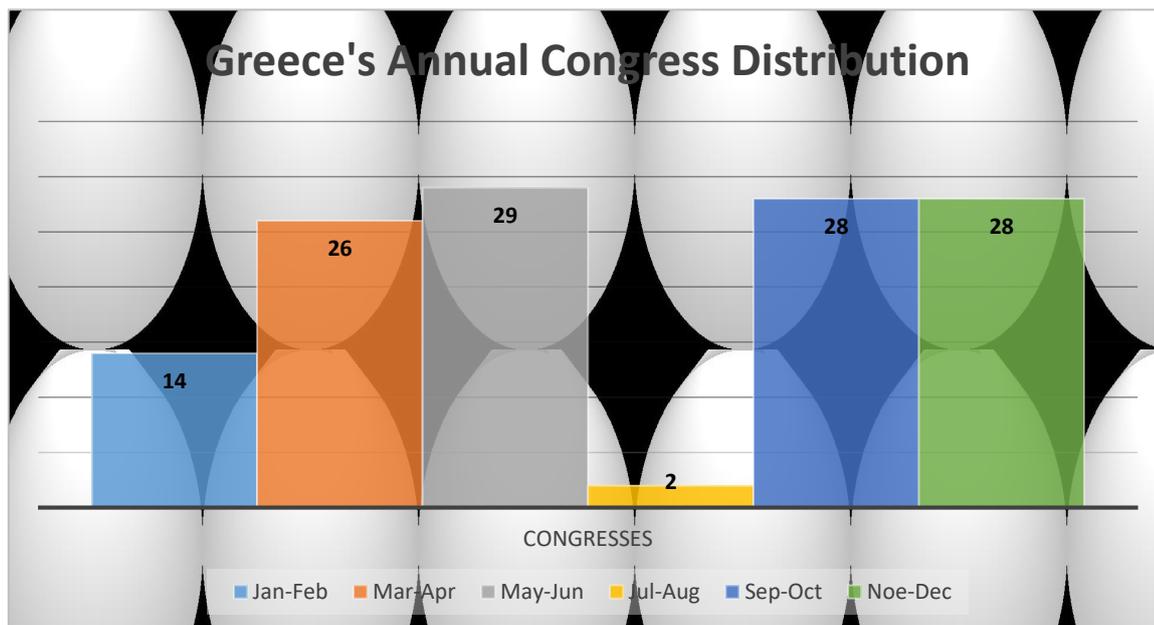
Data analysis

It is important to notice that most PCOs (63.3%) have been active for more than 15 years, while 20% for 11 to 15 years and 10% for 6 to 10 years, reflecting good knowledge and adequate experience on the subject. Regarding the number of conferences organized annually, 33.3% of the PCOs organize a maximum of 10 conferences per year, 43.3% organize 11 to 30 conferences and 23.3% organize more than 30 conferences per year. This means that the congress market is quite underdeveloped, as the overall number of congresses that these PCOs organized was only 127. Most of these congresses lasted 1-2 days (74%), while only 21% lasted 3-4 days: the mean number of participants however is satisfactory, as it seems to be around 300 persons. Time distribution of the congresses organized in Greece is shown in Table 1.

Although they organize various events, the main activity of most PCOs (96.7%) involves medical congresses, as this type is the most profitable and frequent: all other types of congresses represent only a small part of the Greek PCOs' activities.

Most PCOs (76.6%) have both domestic and foreign clients, mostly from European countries. In answering how they contact foreign clients, 65.2% of responders stated that they use a PCO operating in the country in question, who acts as a mediator between the two parties. Direct contact, through e-mail or during an exhibition is also used in 30.4 % and 26.1% of cases respectively, while Greek PCOs only rarely use ambassadors. On the contrary, for the approach of domestic clients, congress organizers mostly use their public relations department and personal contact during an ongoing congress (76.77% and 73.3% respectively). These were multiple-answer questions.

Table 1. Annual congress distribution in Greece



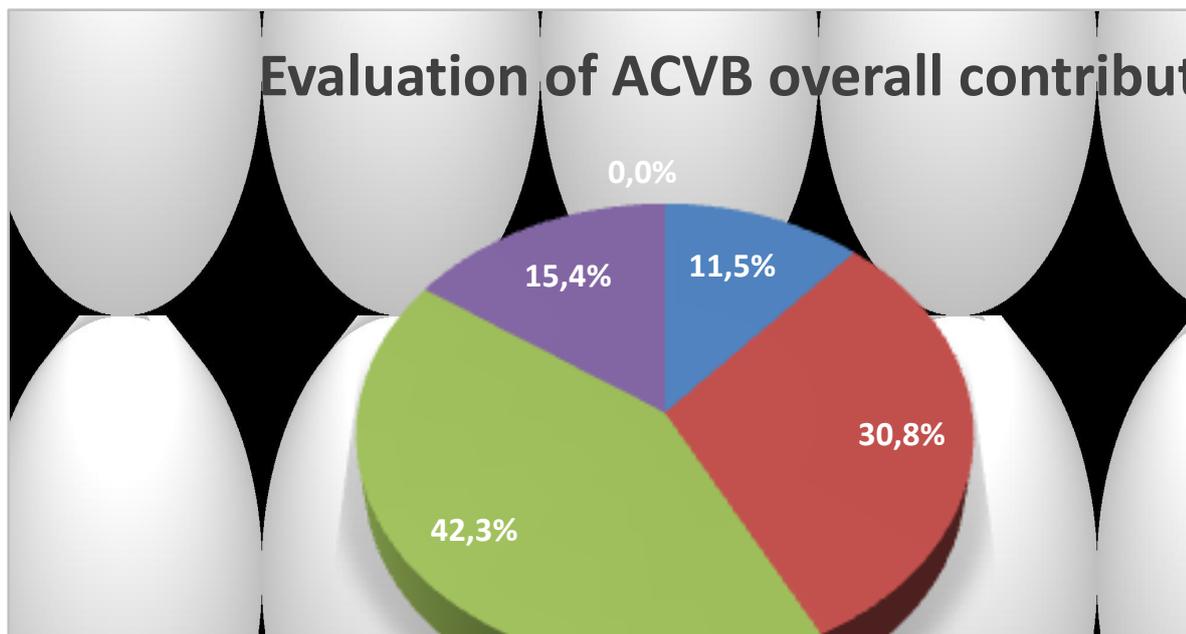
All but one PCO use social media or digital marketing to approach clients, as the internet is nowadays the main marketing tool. Facebook is used by 89.7% of the PCOs, followed by digital marketing (65.5%), Twitter (55.2%), LinkedIn (51.7%) and Instagram (3.4%). This again was a multiple-answer question.

Respondents were then asked about participating in domestic or international congress tourism exhibitions. It seems that only 33.3% of Greek PCOs can afford to participate as exponents; preferred exhibitions are TMS, HBAA, IMEX, Meeting Show, IBTM, ICCA, World Travel Market, Travel Trade Athens and IMEX America. Their decision is based on the client list attending the event and the profile of other PCOs participating in a certain exhibition.

Furthermore only 65.5% of the Greek PCOs are members of a national or an international congress tourism organization, as it is not obligatory by law and the annual fees are high. Preferred organizations are HATTA, HAPCO, EFAPCO, AVCB, DSA, SELDIA, ICCA, IAPCO, ASCONET, ASTA, SITE, Industrial Chamber of Thessaloniki, IMN and GLOBAL DMC PARTNERS. Their participation aims to gain information on major forthcoming events and new developments on congress technology.

Through the next question we aimed to investigate the PCOs' view on the overall performance of the Athens Convention & Visitors Bureau (ACVB). Their view is definitely positive, as shown in Table 2.

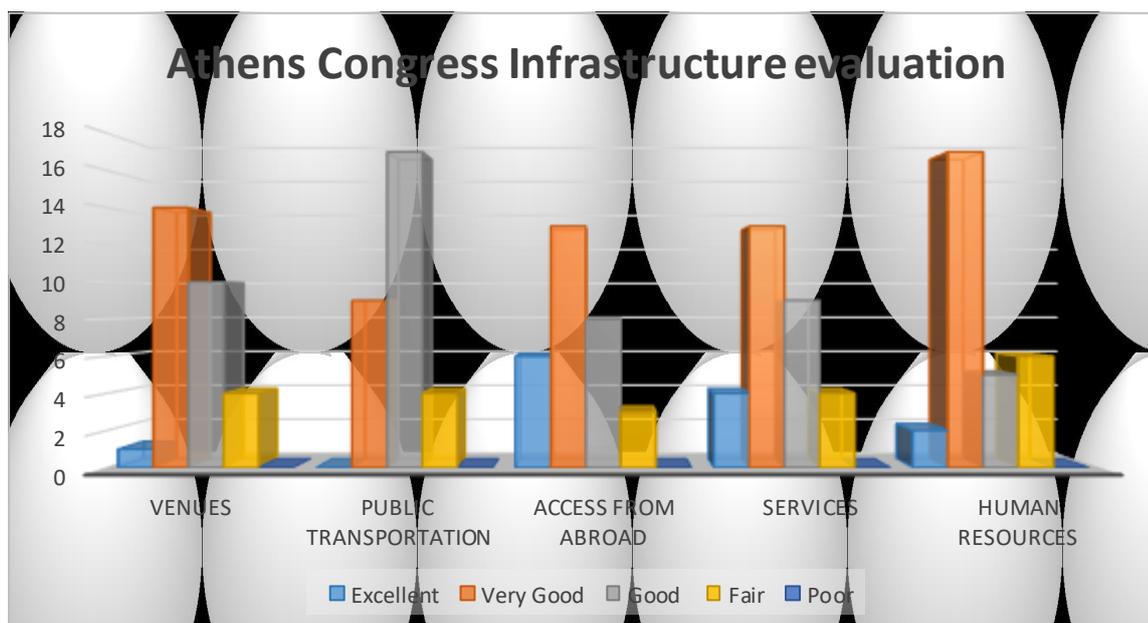
Table 2. Evaluation of the Athens Convention & Visitors Bureau



The next questions examined the prospects of congress tourism development in Athens. Most PCOs (60%) think they are good, 16.7% very good and 3.3% excellent, while only 20% of the responders share the rather pessimistic view that the prospects are average. The reasons for this are the insufficient infrastructure, the small number of large congress centers and the lack of a common strategy involving both the public and the private sector.

When asked about certain aspects of the infrastructure, respondents evaluated it from 1-5 (poor to excellent), as listed in Table 3. Certain advantages like the venues, the access, the congress services and the professional personnel, as well as Athens position and climate, the hospitality, the history and the culture made 90% of PCOs think that Athens has the ability to become a major international congress destination.

Table 3. Athens congress infrastructure evaluation



All respondents stated that certain activities contribute to congress success: 93.1% of the PCOs offer a gala dinner at a high profile place, 89.7% organize a guided visit to archaeological sites and museums, 65.5% provide activities designed to satisfy accompanying persons and 55.2% organize short excursions to nearby sites. Interestingly, 3.4% of the PCOs also organize team building activities and events. As for thematic experiences offered in Athens, 58.6% of the PCOs think that they are interesting and should be included in the program.

Participants who gave a positive answer to the last question were asked if further development of thematic experiences in Athens was a matter of the public sector, the private sector or a collaboration of both of them. It seems that 78.3% of PCOs think that the state and the private sector should collaborate in producing novel thematic experiences for tourists and congress participants.

The next question examined the relationship between the current crisis and the PCOs' relations to foreign clients. Most PCOs (58.6%) think that they have experienced no difficulties, whilst some stated that they have faced several problems working with foreign clients, related to the economic instability, the lack of confidence, the level of the service provided and various deficiencies, mainly on technical support. Other factors were doubts on the interest of Greek participants, inadequate funding from the government and the capital controls.

Finally, there was an open question on how the participants' firm differentiates within competition. Only nine PCOs answered this question, stating that they have adequate experience and high standards of performance, deep knowledge of the congress industry, effective communication with their clients, competitive prices, flexibility in collaborating with clients and suppliers, good financial status, new ideas and an excellent partner network.

Discussion

Professional tourism is a unique form of alternative tourism where individuals travel for business purposes but still maintain the main characteristics of the tourists who stay at a destination for at least one night, as opposed to business trips where individuals travel for business purposes but do not necessarily stay overnight. These travelers attend both public and private events organized by professional congress organizers and are considered to be extremely important for a destination. Therefore they have a prominent place in destination development and marketing planning, as well as in the competition between different destinations because they greatly affect local societies, both socioeconomically and culturally. Tourism that is associated with these events is called event tourism and has been impressively developed in recent years (Getz, 2008). The organization of these events is a rapidly growing professional tourism sector and uses several resources from various aspects of the tourism industry to achieve its goals.

Business events focus on the professional, educational and scientific activity of their delegates by organizing various forms of meetings, events and conferences. Business events therefore have become an important part of the event industry and tourism associated with it is called MICE Tourism, an acronym for

- Meetings,
- Incentives,
- Congresses & Conferences,
- Exhibitions.

MICE tourism is nowadays a highly developed and profitable part of the tourism industry, combining transport, accommodation, food and beverage, leisure, destination infrastructure, commerce and trade, information technology, finance and education (Dwyer & Mistilis, 2000, Campiranon & Arcodia, 2008, Getz, 2008, McCartney, 2008, Haven-Tang et al., 2007, Dwyer & Forsyth, 1997, Hing et al., 1998, Rogerson, 2012, Gibson et al., 2012).

In the conference industry the PCOs' role in organizing a conference event is of paramount importance, as they carry out all the necessary arrangements in order to achieve the desired scientific, social and economic result (APEX, CIC, 2011, www.eventscouncil.org).

The work of the PCO is particularly demanding and requires professionalism, experience and specific skills: it is common therefore for experienced PCOs to create long-lasting and mutually beneficial partnerships with associations and organizations.

When the event is organized in a foreign country, the PCO seeks the assistance of a Destination Managing Company (DMC), which is responsible for carrying out all necessary actions at the destination (Papageorgiou, 2018). DMCs have a deep knowledge of the local market and expertise in designing and implementing events, activities, tours, travels and logistics (APEX, CIC, 2006) and this makes them necessary partners of the PCOs in the organization of successful conferences. This role is often played by Greek PCOs in international conferences organized in Athens, as revealed by this study.

Conference tourism according to the World Tourism Organization is one of the fastest growing tourism sectors. People who share common interests or capacities seek to communicate, discuss and gather information by travelling to a certain destination in order to participate in a certain event. The development of conference tourism usually presents very positive socioeconomic impacts on the destination (WTTC, 2017, Varvaressos, 2013, Archer, Cooper, Ruhanen, 2005, Mason 2003).

The structure of the conference tourism market is complex, requiring adequate destination infrastructure, quality of services, peace and security, political stability, good accessibility and excellent weather. The conference product must cover the needs for education, training, entertainment and value for money (Rogers, 2008). Due to the conference tourism's remarkable financial benefits, many destinations compete hard in order to attract major international congress events, despite the fact that, in recent years, global conference tourism underwent remarkable changes (Sirgi, 2018):

- The main duration of conferences has been gradually reduced to 3.8 days.
- The number of participants declines, although the number of conferences is increased.
- The average cost per participant is increasing.
- Enterprises and conference organizers compress costs (reducing conference duration, eliminating unprofitable activities, etc.) and excessively use technology to fully satisfy the customer.
- Technology use is intense in the conference industry and may in the future reduce the actual conference participation and increase virtual events.

Athens presents certain advantages that could help the city become a major international congress tourism destination (ACVB, 2018). On the other hand, it also presents several inhibiting factors regarding further development of conference tourism that are:

1. The lack of a well structured marketing plan and the absence of an appropriate strategy for creating a branded conference product.
2. The absence of a National Conference and Visitor Bureau, the main tool for developing congress tourism, as well as regional congress offices that might help destinations outside Athens gain profitable events.
3. The absence of collaboration between public and private stakeholders.

As seen in previous studies (Papageorgiou, 2018), another important disadvantage of Athens is the insufficient support that the state provides to the local congress tourism industry, both financial and functional-promotional. Free bus tickets, free entrance to archaeological sites and low rent for state buildings' use could become important factors for the development of the congress industry, as well as the co-use of the official state stands in certain international exhibitions and the provision of a state warranty during a bidding process.

This study explored the current status, as well as the contribution of PCOs to the development of Athens as a major congress destination and also the actions needed in order to accomplish this goal. To start with, although the number of PCOs included in this study appears small, as they organize almost 88.2% of the total number of the congresses organized in Greece (Table 4) makes the findings of this study reliable.

Table 4. Number of congresses in the world (ICCA, 2018)

	Country	No of Congresses
1	USA	941
2	Germany	682
3	United Kingdom	592
4	Spain	564
5	Italy	515
6	France	506
7	Japan	414
8	China-P.R.	376
9	Canada	360
10	Netherlands	307
11	Portugal	298

28	Ireland	158
29	Finland	156
29	Norway	156
31	Greece	144
32	Colombia	142
33	Chinese Taipei	141

110	Algeria	5
110	Bahamas	5
110	Bangladesh	5
	Other Countries	103
	TOTAL	12.563

The vast majority of the Greek PCOs organizes medical congresses, as they are the most profitable and frequent and with good prospect of further increase of the numbers of international events organized in Athens, if appropriate policies and strategy are adopted (Papageorgiou, 2017, Papageorgiou, 2018). Athens has a good climate and congresses can be organized throughout the year: domestic events traditionally are not organized in August, due to the Greek holiday season, but international events could fill that gap (Papageorgiou, 2017, Kravaritis & Papageorgiou, 2007, Shenon, 1990).

Most PCOs seek to work with clients from abroad; the communication channels however are in our opinion outdated, despite the excessive use of digital marketing. This is mainly due to the fact that most PCOs are relatively small enterprises, as compared to the international ones. This also explains why they tend to work as DMCs for major foreign PCOs who organize international events in Athens, despite the emphasis given on networking with stakeholders, both domestic and international. On the contrary, within Greece PCOs appear to have an excellent marketing plan in claiming domestic congress events.

PCOs believe that ACVB does an excellent work in attracting major international events in Athens, a congress destination that has the potential to become an important international player. There are also many serious disadvantages however, that only the state could help improve: it is important though that the PCOs do not expect everything from the state but promote public-private cooperation as the key to resolve these problems. ACVB actions currently include (www.athensconventionbureau.gr):

- participation to International Tourism Exhibitions, business-to-business events, road shows and fam trips,
- participation to international award events, i.e. the European Best Destination Awards,
- advertisement in the major congress tourism magazines and the media in general,
- social media use,
- participation in international associations of the congress industry, such as the ICCA and the ECM,
- running ambassador programs,
- conducting research studies on the national congress product and
- producing and distributing brochures and videos.

PCOs offer a variety of activities to both participants and accompanying members, as conferences are not strictly professional-training activities for delegates, but also a first-class opportunity for entertainment and networking outside the narrow professional framework (Glynia, 2004). The city of Athens as well as the suburbs provide a wide range of opportunities for cultural (architectural, archaeological, historical and religious), travelling (short cruises to the islands and day excursions to nearby sites) and entertaining activities (shopping, eating, traditional and current music listening etc) that can satisfy most visitors.

Finally, it is rather disappointing that only nine out of the thirty PCOs who filled this questionnaire answered the question about the supremacy of their business against competition. We cannot conclude whether this comes from insecurity, amateurism, small size, occasional involvement, lack of specialized personnel and other factors: the fact, however, that all respondents were major independent PCO enterprises and not congress departments of travel agencies, probably explains this disturbing finding.

Conclusions

From this study it is apparent that the actions needed to improve current situation and establish Athens as a major congress destination are:

- Further exploitation of the current level of medical conference tourism.
- Prolongation of the current conference tourism period, ideally throughout the year.
- Establishment of a major Athens Conference Center.
- Participation of PCOs, along with the ACVB and state government agencies (i.e. Ministry of Tourism, Hellenic Tourism Organization and Regional Tourism Authorities) in international conference tourism exhibitions (with a state stand that houses and promotes PCOs and other interested parties for a fair and affordable price).
- Creation of ambassador programs and participation in bidding processes, since, nowadays, this seems to be the most effective way to earn major congress events.
- Development of an effective congress tourism strategy through the participation of both the public and the private sector stakeholders.
- Provision of incentives to private companies to invest in congress tourism, build infrastructures and develop novel thematic experiences for delegates.

The results of this survey show that Athens has the potential to become an international congress destination; many actions however need to be taken for the city to exceed current competition and many good practices should be adopted by the Greek PCOs and the rest of the congress tourism stakeholders to achieve these goals.

Future research could focus on the examination of the broader context, as this study highlighted the actual situation and needs of congress tourism in Greece. A comparison with other countries and congress destinations would permit a better exploration of results could be compared to regional and global averages.

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