

Marketing Communications for Special Events: Analysing Managerial Practice, Consumer Perceptions and Preferences

Abstract

Purpose – Relatively little is known about marketing communications within the context of special communications. The aim of this paper is to begin to address this gap in knowledge by analysing managerial practice, consumer perceptions and preferences in relation to marketing communications for this market offering.

Design/methodology/approach – A case study analysis of Festival Melbourne 2006, was undertaken using marketing communications collateral, ethnographic (participant observations) and interview (in-depth and focus group) data.

Findings – A centralised approach to marketing communications was adopted for this event, but was difficult to implement. In addition, we found that the marketing communications *in situ* did not assist attendees to make the most of their event experiences. We also found that research participants prefer to receive information about special events passively.

Practical implications – With the increasing levels of globalisation and standardisation in the event sector there is a need to attain a balance between centralisation and adaptation in relation to marketing communications strategies and their implementation. Furthermore, it is imperative that marketing communications are integrated across all stages of consumption.

Originality/value - This study adds to the body of knowledge about marketing communications, and more generally within events. It also adds to the debate surrounding the integration of marketing communications.

Keywords - marketing communications, IMC, special events.

Paper type - Empirical, case study

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Marketing Communications for Special Events: Analysing Managerial Practice, Consumer Perceptions and Preferences

1.0 Introduction

The growth of the special event sector over the last few decades has been phenomenal (Jago, 1998). Special events including mega-events, hallmark events, exhibitions and festivals are one-off occurrences and limited in duration (Getz, 2005). All kinds of special events, such as sporting, cultural, political, historical, religious or commercial/business events (Roche, 1994), provide opportunities for attendees to have memorable experiences (Getz 2005), communities to build social capital (Chalip, 2006), and for governments to induce new income into their economies through increased tourism and business activities (Carlsen, Robertson, & Ali-Knight, 2008).

Special events are unique market offerings with characteristics which are different to other market offerings. For example, special events may be offered in one or many sites; variable in terms of lead times and duration; held in permanent and/or temporary infrastructure; owner-operated or franchised; ticketed and/or non- ticketed; have single or multiple sites; or have commercial or non-profit objectives. Marketing communications have been identified as a key factor for the success of special events (Masterman & Wood, 2005 & Getz, 2005). As such, the diversity of this market offering would appear to present challenges for event organisers as they develop marketing communications strategies.

Considerable interest has been directed towards understanding the role of special events as a marketing communications tool particularly in relation to sponsorship (see, for example, Quester & Thompson 2001; Crompton 1994; 1995; McDonald 1991; and Amis, Slack & Berrett, 1999). Very little attention has, however, been directed towards examining marketing communications for special events. The purpose of this paper is to address this gap in knowledge. As the essence of effective marketing communications relies on both the sender and receiver being involved in the process of communication (Kitchen & de Pelsmacker, 2004; Shimp, 1993),

research questions that emerge from this gap are: How do special event organisers approach marketing communications? Do consumers consider the information they receive about special events, and the way they receive that information to be effective? What information would consumers prefer to receive about special events, and how would they prefer to receive this information?

Using a case study approach we examine these research questions within the context of one special event. The paper continues by providing a background to marketing communications in relation to special events, and to the broader body of literature on marketing communications and their integration. A description of the method employed for this research is provided and following this the findings are discussed. With the limitations of our case study acknowledged, we base our conclusions on the information that was gained from this case study analysis. Recommendations are also made for further research on this topic.

2.0 Marketing communications for special events

Traditional marketing communications tools, such as print and broadcast media, have been widely used by organisers of special events to disseminate information about special events. It has been argued, however, that these tools are losing their efficacy. In the case of business events, for example, Pitta, Weisgal and Lynagh (2006) cite industry assumptions that as few as 20-30 percent of brochures distributed at exhibitions are read. In addition to this, Falkheimer (2007, p.830) suggests that the “...increasing speed of production and hybridisation between entertainment and factual journalism” has meant that there is a need to carefully manage the marketing communications process for special events.

Falkheimer (2007) cites the 1999 World Rugby Cup in Wales and a housing fair in Sweden in 2001 to demonstrate how poor management of marketing communications led to negative publicity for both special events. He concluded that because special events are increasingly diverse and often geographically dispersed, developing and managing the integrity of the brand should be viewed as a complex process. As an example, the 2012 London Olympics has already attracted negative publicity in relation to its global branding strategy. Maguire, Barnard, Butler and Golding (2008) point out that large special events, such as the Olympic Games, have sought to ‘globalise’ their marketing strategies and to “customize product features,

and develop selling techniques tailored to local customs and cultures” (p.71) to address some of the challenges they face.

Small-scale events are also faced with marketing challenges. Mehmetoglu and Ellingsen (2005), among others, have noted that many small-scale public events, such as community festivals, have limited funds to pay employees on an on-going basis for management and marketing activities. As an example, in a study of six different small-scale events in New Zealand, Smith (2006) noted gaps between the marketing communication channels perceived to be important by special event organisers, many of whom were volunteers, and those used by attendees. Thus, developing and then implementing a marketing communications strategy for these types of special events is seemingly difficult as they may not have the skills to identify and respond to consumer needs with regard to marketing communications.

Prior research has, however, garnered information about effective marketing communications for special events. While Getz and Fairley (2004) found that marketing communications are effective in raising awareness of special events, they suggest that special events are successfully marketed via participants (i.e. consumers) through word-of-mouth recommendations. Similarly, Gitelson and Kerstetter (2000) found that 70 per cent of a target market for one special event in the USA relied on their previous experiences to guide their decision-making regarding special event attendance, rather than any of the marketing communications used by event organisers. As event participants are thought to enjoy high levels of involvement in their special event consumption experience (Pitta, Weisgal & Lynagh, 2006), word-of-mouth and viral marketing seem to be very relevant to this market offering.

A number of marketing communications trends overlay the specific challenges and opportunities that special event organisers have with regard to marketing communications. For example, marketing communications have become increasingly dynamic—today, the roles of the senders and the receivers increasingly interchange through the course of their interactions (Vlasic & Kesic, 2007). As such, interest has been directed towards understanding how Web 1.0 is being used as a marketing communications tool by special event organisations. Filo and Funk (2005) and Filo, Funk and Hornby (2009) have focussed on this area of special event marketing and have found that special event organisations tailor their web-based marketing communications in response to what they know about consumer motivations with

regard to attendance at special events (Filo and Funk, 2005). In addition, Filo, Funk and Hornby (2009) concluded that consumers were more satisfied with a special event's website when they participated in directed information retrieval rather than when their information retrieval was more exploratory in nature. These findings provide insights for special event organisations as they plan their web-based marketing communications strategies.

E-communications have emerged as part of the IT-revolution (Holm, 2006), and are now integral to marketing communications strategies. There is, however, understandably very little information available as to how organisers of special events are communicating with target markets and consumers using new media and newer technologies, such as Short Message Services (SMS) or Web 2.0 tools. Notably, the advent of Web 2.0 facilitates e-based community and social networking opportunities via interfaces such as MySpace and Facebook (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Given that the aim of many special events is to create a sense of community, these tools appear to be relevant to the consumption of special events. Thus, there is a need to examine contemporary marketing communications for special events in this context.

Furthermore, it would be remiss of us not to acknowledge the potential of Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) for special event marketing communications given that IMC is viewed as a strategic imperative rather than merely a tactical one (Eagle, Kitchen, & Bulmer 2007). IMC, or 'the notion and the practice of aligning symbols, messages, procedures and behaviours in order for an organisation to communicate with clarity, consistency and continuity within and across formal organisational boundaries' (Christensen, Firat, & Torp 2008, p.426) creates an on-going dialogue between suppliers and consumers (McGrath, 2005).

IMC also promotes consistency among the marketing communications messages and co-ordination of the elements of the marketing mix, all of which are integral to the overall success of marketing communications. While a competitive advantage can be gained when the elements of the marketing mix are combined, integrated and synergised, as part of an IMC strategy (Kitchen, 2005), Eagle, Kitchen and Bulmer (2007) suggest that IMC is situation-dependant and context-specific. This view gives rise to the need to consider the notion of IMC for special events. What has been

highlighted, however, is that the relevance of IMC to special events has not yet been examined to any great extent.

The preceding discussion highlights the increasing interest in, and need for, research on marketing communications for special events. It also highlights that the characteristics of special events means that marketing communications is a complex task. Details regarding the method used to explore these issues are now provided.

3.0 Method

3.1 Research Approach and Case Study

Given that marketing communications relies on both senders and receivers being involved in the process of communication, it was important to include the views of both the special event organisers (as the developers and senders of the marketing communications) and the target markets (as recipients of marketing communications) in our study. We developed a case study of one special event, Festival Melbourne 2006 (Festival), and by using a number of data sources, we explore how the organisers approached their marketing communications, how target markets responded to the marketing communications and their preferences for receiving information about special events. As this study focussed on contemporary situations, control over behavioural events was not required and because the form of the research questions were ‘how’ or ‘why’, the case study method was relevant to this study (Yin, 1984).

The Festival was staged in the State of Victoria, Australia, in conjunction with the 2006 Commonwealth Games—a 14-day sports event. While its name indicates that the Festival was only staged in Melbourne, a program of events was simultaneously staged in eight satellite sites around the State of Victoria. Overall, the Festival included theatre and music performances, art exhibitions and installations and LiveSites (a term widely used in the Australian event industry to describe public venues where events are broadcast live on big screens outside of event stadia), and associated activities in public buildings, such as museums and galleries within each of the sites. Given its simultaneous delivery in a number of different geographic locations, we consider the Festival to be a dispersed special event.

Research was undertaken in three sites that hosted the Festival:

- one metropolitan site - the City of Port Philip (CPP); and
- two regional sites - the City of Greater Geelong (CGG) and the City of Greater Bendigo (CGB).

The three research sites were chosen due to the differences between them in terms of consumer characteristics, including their demographics and associated lifestyles. This enabled the researchers to make comparisons within and between research sites in line with the aims of this study. The profile of the research sites and the demographics of residents is provided below in Table 1.

<Insert Table 1 about here>

3.2 Data and data collection

A multi-method approach was adopted and information was collected via document analysis of the Festival's marketing communications collateral, ethnographic data (participant observation at events) and interview data (in-depth with the event organisers and focus groups comprising residents of the three research sites). We collected data at the central organisational (State) and the local (research site) levels. The information derived from these data enabled us to cross-validate our analysis and evaluate the trustworthiness of our findings. All of these components are now discussed in more detail.

3.2.1 Marketing communications collateral

Marketing communications collateral (e.g. newspapers, website data, brochures, pod-casts and radio transcripts) about the Festival at the State (Victoria) and the local levels (CPP, CGB and CPP) were collected in the lead up to, and during, the Festival. We acknowledge that what was collected, catalogued and analysed may not have been exhaustive, however, we collected over 250 different items of marketing collateral which covered a wide cross-section of this material from the three research sites, and from the central organising committee. The analysis of these data provided the researchers with an in-depth understanding of the consistencies, variety and frequency of the marketing communications for the Festival. As such, the researchers became familiar with the various ways in which the Festival was marketed

and which marketing communications tools were employed across the three sites. This information was found to be particularly useful when undertaking the in-depth interviews and focus groups.

3.2.2 Participant observation

We attended a sample of Festival events in the three research sites as participant observers. As participant observers we mingled with the crowds and engaged in activities at the events, and particularly focussed on the way in which attendees responded to the *in situ* marketing communications. For example, we focussed on the way participants navigated around the event venues using the signage and brochures that were available *in situ*. Field notes were taken during the course of the participation. We also discussed our observations at the end of each day's attendance. This aspect of the data collection assisted to gain an understanding of the effectiveness of the marketing communication *in situ* and to enhance the quality of our interviews with Festival organisers and members of the focus groups.

3.2.3 In-depth interviews: Festival organisers

It was imperative that we gathered insights from the senders of the marketing communications. As such, we interviewed two of the key individuals from the Festival's central organising committee who were responsible for developing and integrating the marketing communications strategy for the Festival across the State of Victoria. In addition to this, the key individuals who were responsible for implementing the marketing communications strategies in the three research sites (CPP, CGB and the CGC) were also interviewed. In total, five face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted. Interviewees were asked to discuss the approach, implementation and intended outcomes of marketing communications for the Festival. Full notes were taken during the interviews by a research assistant and these were later analysed by the research team. These data were deemed to be important for our study as part of this research was aimed at exploring how the organisers of the Festival approached their marketing communications strategy.

3.2.3 Focus groups

Just as it was important to gather data from the senders of the marketing communications, it was equally important to gather data from the receivers of the marketing communications. As such, data were gathered via one focus group in the CPP, CGB and CGG. Each focus group comprised eight to 10 residents. The sampling frame for the focus groups was designed to enhance the comparability of the focus group participants to the profiles of the respective sites (CPP, CGB and CGG) in relation to their demographics (as noted in Table 1).

A standardised interview protocol was used for the focus groups. Following introductions to the research and the participants, the focus group participants were asked to recall any marketing communications that they may have been exposed to in the lead up to, and during the Festival. Second, participants were then provided with a sample of the marketing collateral we collected (e.g.: flyers, event programs, brochures, letterbox drop postcards, and newspaper inserts) that had been distributed in their respective municipalities. Participants were asked if they recalled this material and to provide comments about it in terms of its usefulness and timing of delivery. Finally, a projective technique was used. Participants were asked to play the role of local festival organisers who were planning to stage a festival similar to the Festival. They were asked to identify preferences for receiving information about the proposed festival, and invited to make recommendations for its marketing communications strategy. The focus groups were also audio-recorded and transcribed with the permission of participants. Full notes were taken during the focus groups by a research assistant and these were later analysed by the research team with the transcripts.

3.3 Data Analysis

NVivo software was used to organise the data. For the in-depth interview and the focus group data, initial coding categories and codes were revised until saturation eventuated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss, 1987). Coding categories were verified using the check-coding process (Miles & Huberman, 1994) between the researchers. These categories were further developed by building higher order categories. They

were also set within the context of the marketing collateral and the field notes from the observations of the Festival attendees in the three research sites.

4.0 Results and discussion

The results, and a discussion of them, are now presented. First, background to the approach to marketing communications that was adopted by the Festival is provided; second, the focus group participants' responses to that approach is presented; and third, their preferences for receiving information from organisers of this type of special event are reported upon. At the end of this section, a summary of the key findings are presented.

4.1 Approach to marketing communications

The marketing communications strategy was centralised in an attempt to deliver a consistent message about the Festival across the State of Victoria. The colours used and the design of the Festival's logo, for example, were selected to optimise brand recognition in the various geographical locations where the special event was to be held and to leverage off the associated sporting event's brand. The central organising committee focussed on both publicity and advertising for the event, and a range of marketing communications tools, including a website; print media (e.g. event programs, brochures, newspapers, flyers and postcards); broadcast media (e.g. television and some radio); and direct (e-)mail, were used to raise awareness of the Festival across the State of Victoria. The delivery of a consistent message was communicated to local organisers via an event kit which, as explained by one interviewee, "...cost AU\$2000 per council; we [the organising committee] provided each council [of which there are 79 in Victoria]... with generic posters, postcards, and brochures—to which they could all add their own specific event details". As such, the organising committee felt that a comprehensive portfolio of marketing communications templates were developed to market the Festival across the State of Victoria.

One interviewee from the organising committee reflected on the approach to marketing communications and said making the event "...feel like it was an event for Victorians" was fundamental to the marketing communications strategy. Another interviewee concurred with this and said: "...it was explicit from the beginning that

this was to be an integrated event...and government policies for [the Festival] were to be reflected throughout the entire event, regardless of where it was located in Victoria” and the “...overriding issue [for us] was pushing the vision of an integrated event across the State of Victoria”. Finally she added “... we planned the [marketing communications] for the event within an inch of its life”. The Festival’s central organising committee deemed their approach to be successful. For example, one committee member measured the success of their strategy by stating that around 200 media releases generated over 1700 media articles; he believed the media releases raised awareness of the Festival. In spite of this, another committee member said that they did not have any “...evidence about what was learned about how to engage the community in the Festival or if the [marketing communications] were effective in promoting attendance”.

The approach that was adopted was akin to an IMC strategy when “...the understanding of communication control is concrete” (Eagle et al., 2007, p.429). The various sources of data we collected, and in particular the interview data from the locally-based Festival organisers, suggest that a centralised marketing communications strategy was not entirely successful. One reason we offer for this is because the differences among the marketing skills at the local level were not well understood by the central organising committee. Prior research has found that there is some disparity between the skills sets of those working in special events across regions. For example, while Melbourne is an internationally recognised event destination with an established inventory of event marketing and management expertise, the same depth and breadth of expertise has not been developed across Victoria (Hede and Rentschler, 2007).

In addition to this, our research suggests that an understanding of the State of Victoria’s vision for the Festival was not uniformly-shared across the research sites. Indeed, there was a considerable amount of self-promotion (i.e. by the municipalities) occurring in the research sites, perhaps to the detriment of the state-wide festival. Even though the members of the central organising committee we interviewed felt that they successfully communicated the Festival’s vision to local organisers, and that this was embraced by them, we noted how local organisers viewed the Festival as an opportunity to market their own destination. One local organiser said “...we could make the site whatever we wanted it to be for [our city]...we wanted to showcase [our

city]”. This finding indicates that the central organising committee could have more ably guided the local organisers to develop a shared understanding of the Festival’s vision to create a synergistic effect on consumer awareness and interest in the Festival.

The lack of shared understanding of the State of Victoria’s vision for the Festival correlates with our observations of attendance numbers at the Festival in the regional sites. Attendance in the regional sites was noticeably low, particularly when compared with the large number of attendees at the metropolitan-based events. We found limited awareness of, and interest in, the events in the regional sites. In addition to this, the central organising committee did not seem to fully appreciate the differences in the target markets, in terms of lifestyle and demographics, in the metropolitan and regional sites.

We also suggest that the central organising committee could have better leveraged information from the local organisers about their communities. This finding supports the previous work of Shrum, McCarty, and Lowrey (1995), who have suggested that the extent to which lifestyle and demographic factors are considered in marketing communications, impacts the efficacy of marketing communications. This aligns with the approach adopted by the large special events, such as the Olympic Games to ‘glocalise’ their marketing communications is also relevant to smaller events, particular when they are dispersed as was the case of the Festival (see Maguire, Barnard, Butler and Golding (2008).

4.2 Attendee responses to marketing communications

The first part of the focus groups assisted us to identify how target markets responded to the Festival’s marketing communications. Focus group participants were very vocal about the efficacy of the Festival’s marketing communications. The value of the information about Festival which was disseminated via newspapers, radio and the Web 1.0 was also discussed.

In the CPP where there is a large proportion of residents living alone and in apartments, focus group participants indicated that advertising in local newspapers was not very effective as a marketing communications tool. Some of the focus group participants said that at least two different local newspapers are delivered to them each week. Yet, they said that most of the time they do not actually collect the

newspapers; as apartment-dwellers, they said that newspapers are often left as litter in apartment foyers and mailbox areas. Other focus group participants in the CPP said that do not even get these papers delivered. For example, one focus group participant stated “...Normally I would never know [about events] because we don’t get the local paper delivered to our apartment building”.

In contrast, however, in both regional sites (CGB and the CGG) where the majority of residents reside in detached houses local newspapers were thought to be effective as a marketing communications tool. Indeed, focus group participants in these sites viewed newspapers as an important medium in which to disseminate information about events in their communities. For example, one participant from the CGB said “...I’ve seen [information about community events, like this] in the paper loads of times...there is a lot of that”. Another participant from CGG agreed. He said “...I just use the local paper to see what is [going] on”. In regional sites (CGB and CGG), it is likely that there is a greater reliance on local newspapers, as there are fewer alternatives for disseminating information compared with what is available in larger metropolitan sites (such as the CPP). That is, in the regional sites, information about the Festival was not competing with other market offerings in a cluttered marketplace, as was the case with CPP.

Radio was also discussed in the CGB and CGG focus groups. Participants from CPP, however, did not mention radio in the focus groups as a marketing communications channel for special events. The focus group participants in the CGB and the CGG reported that local radio was an effective medium for the dissemination of information about Festival events in their communities. One participant from CGG stated “the [local radio station] is very good. If you listen to the radio for an hour, you hear about what is going on”. Other focus group participants from both CGB and CGG agreed with these sentiments. Even though radio was not a strong element of the centralised marketing communications strategy because radio stations in the regional sites are provincial in their content, they can deliver information in a timely manner suited to target markets for this market offering.

The locally-based organisers of the Festival disseminated information about the Festival via their respective municipalities’ websites. The CGB and the CGG focus group participants said that they did not use these websites to access information about the Festival. Participants in all the focus groups indicated that they

did not perceive a municipality's website to be a suitable marketing communications platform for information on events. One CPP participant explained "...We all know that this [council] website exists... I wouldn't look at the website unless I needed to find out a phone number". Other members of this focus group agreed with this comment. Hence, in the case of this Festival, information about special events on municipal websites seems to have had limited value for participants in all three research sites. This finding leads us to think that attendees are not always predisposed to using municipal-based websites as a means of gathering information about special events. This suggests that an independent website, even though the event may be government-managed, is appropriate. In addition, marketing communications theory suggests that consumers are receptive to gaining and exchanging information about special events the web, and increasingly via Web 2.0 tools, such as MySpace, Facebook and Twitter. For special events, there is already evidence of volunteers for the 2000 and 2004 Olympic Games maintaining their connection to the Olympic Movement and their volunteer community through online social networking interfaces (Fairley, Kellett, & Green, 2007). The 2012 London Olympics created a Facebook page in July 2005, and in June 2009 has 36,489 'friends'. Thus greater use of these platforms may develop loyalty to special events and the special event sector.

Some participants were critical of the frequency and timing of the delivery of the marketing communications. In the CPP, in particular, participants voiced their dissatisfaction with being bombarded with marketing collateral about the Festival. Many participants reported that they were not very receptive to this information at the time they received them. One CPP focus group participant explained: "...I think the council sent a leaflet out ...all to do with road closures. It is too much information at that time...". Another CPP participant described her response to receiving the Festival's promotional material at the time that she did: "I remember getting it and thinking 'I can't even look at that'." Some participants evidently experienced information overload, rather than a feeling of being informed about events in their communities. For this special event, marketers may have needed to strategically schedule the release and type of information that was disseminated to target markets.

Our observations of attendees at the events in the three research sites enabled us to examine the effectiveness of the marketing communications during the consumption stage. The approach adopted for this Festival seems to have been to use

marketing communications primarily to raise consumer awareness of the special event, but not necessarily to enhance attendees' consumption experiences. Our field notes highlight that there was a deficiency in the amount and type of information made available for attendees *in situ* that could enhance the quality of their special event experiences. This was particularly the case for the CGB, where we noticed that there was a distinct lack of outdoor signage at the event sites. In the GGB attendees arrived at the event venue and then appeared to be unaware of how they should proceed in the event space. Event sites are not necessarily permanent structures; therefore, event attendees are not always familiar with them. We suggest that a deficiency in sustaining the marketing communications *in situ*, particularly when the sites are temporary and unfamiliar to attendees, likely impacted on the quality of the special event experience. However, our method did not seek to measure this. Prior research about the value of positive word-of-mouth (see Getz and Fairley, 2004) and the influence of prior experiences (Gitelson and Kerstetter, 2000) with special events combined with the information that we garnered from the focus group attendees, prompt us to suggest that effective marketing communications *in situ* is critical to the success of the special event yet under-valued by marketers of special events.

4.3 Marketing communications preferences

The use of the projective technique in the focus groups elicited participants' preferences with regard to what information they receive, how they receive it, and where they receive that information in relation to special events similar to the Festival.

Participants said they do not want to be inundated with detailed information about events. One participant, from the CPP, said: "they [event organisers] don't need to give you a big blurb...they could just say 'between such and such, the following events are on...'" In this instance, information about events must be succinct. In the case of the CPP, however, our research participants were familiar with the numerous events that are staged in their community—suggesting that they do not require detailed event programs and guides as they have considerable personal experience with special events in the CPP. This finding supports the findings of Gitelson and Kerstetter (2000) who suggested that prior experience with this market offering is crucial to repeat attendance, particularly for local residents. Additionally, it may be

that attendance at cultural festivals is perceived to require low levels of involvement in the decision-making process by target markets.

Participants from all three focus groups indicated that they prefer to receive information passively rather than to actively seek out information about this market offering. There were, however, differences between the focus groups with regard to where target markets might passively receive event-related information. These differences seemed to be associated with the demographics, lifestyle, housing styles of the research sites.

For example, one CPP participant said that she would prefer to receive information with her council rate notices (fees which are distributed quarterly to land owners in Victoria). She explained: "...when you receive your rates, you could receive a "what's on" in the next three or four months. I mean they've got to organise it in advance...". Another resident from CPP suggested that it would be useful to receive event-related information from the building management groups (e.g. leasing or rental agencies) for the apartment building in which he lived. This was looked upon favourably by other participants of the CPP focus groups: "...That [body corporate notice board] sounds like a great idea. We don't have anything like that". Given the high proportion of residents who are not rate payers but tenants in the CPP, this strategy would seem to be an effective means of communicating with a large number of residents. From this information, it is clear that the participants from the CPP indicated a preference for marketing communications to be received in their homes.

In contrast, participants from the CGB and CGG indicated a preference for existing community infrastructure to be better utilised for event-related communications. For example, one participant from the CGG explained how existing in-store radio could be better used to reach residents:

What about in the supermarkets? You know how they have the radio going and they are always telling you about how red hot [the supermarket chain] is? Everyone goes to the supermarket at least once a week...it should be on their in-store radio.

One participant from the CGB mentioned that noticeboards at supermarkets could be utilised more effectively. Others suggested using noticeboards at child care centres, as well as community publications such as newsletters from schools and sports clubs to inform families about forthcoming events. CGG participants also mentioned these as

their preferences. It was thought that if information were made readily available at these venues, greater awareness of events would be raised in their local communities.

The data from the regional focus groups highlighted the ways in which residents could effectively be reached during their routine activities—such as shopping and taking children to kindergarten, school and other activities. Many of the CGG and CGB focus group participants indicated that they would be receptive to receiving information via their leisure/sport groups and clubs. They noted that word-of-mouth could be more effectively used to inform them of forthcoming events. One participant from the CGG identified that parents/carers were an important group within the community who could disseminate information about events. For example, she said “....I think word-of-mouth [is important] because I hear about most of the things through other mothers”. Another participant noted that he often finds out about events through his children. He explained “You hear about [events] at the kids’ schools”. Another participant noted that he finds out about activities through word-of-mouth at other events.

While new media can present opportunities for marketers to engage with their target markets, this study revealed that the research participants would like to see greater use of existing infrastructure, which do not necessarily rely on new media technologies for marketing communications. This may be a function of the demographic of this particular festival, and cultural festivals more generally, which can tend to target middle-aged consumers rather than younger consumers. This is not to suggest that marketers should use new technologies—perhaps new technologies need to be incorporated into existing infrastructure frameworks that match consumer preferences and behaviours. Thus, we suggest that creativity and flexibility, as per Christensen, Firat and Torp’s (2008), may be the key to successful marketing communications for event organisations. The use of social networking facilities may prove to be effective for the dissemination of marketing communications about special events given the relevance of word-of-mouth and personal recommendations in decision-making about event attendance, and a way in which special events can broaden their attendee base.

4.4 Summary

The organisers of this special event adopted a centralised approach to marketing communications. Our study revealed that while a core vision for the Festival was developed, it was difficult to operationalise across the State of Victoria. While a structure was provided to local organisers in relation to marketing collateral, little guidance was offered to these organisers with regard to how they could take advantage of the marketing collateral for synergistic outcomes. In addition, the Festival's marketing communications strategy did not fully acknowledge the fundamental differences in the skill sets of the local organisers, nor did the central organising committee acknowledge the differences among the target markets across the research sites. This was particularly evident in relation to socio-economic profiles.

Consumer responses to the Festival's marketing communications were diverse and there were noticeable differences between the responses from the metropolitan and the regional focus groups. Broadcast and print media were looked upon favourably in the regional sites, however, this was not the case for CPP. In CPP, our focus group participants felt that they were inundated with over-detailed information about the Festival. In addition, we found that the marketing communications *in situ*, particularly in the CGB, did not assist attendees to make the most out of their event experience. We found that across all three research sites, participants of the focus groups were not predisposed to using a local councils 'event' website.

Participants across all three research sites indicated that they would rather receive information passively, within the context of established infrastructure in their communities, than to actively seek out information about this type of leisure opportunity. There were notable differences between the regional and metropolitan focus group participants in terms of where they would prefer to receive event-related information. In the CPP, focus group participants said that they would prefer to receive information in their homes, but CGG and CGB focus group participants said that they would prefer to receive information outside of their homes. For example, when shopping, picking up children from schools and sporting activities. Word-of-mouth recommendations were also looked upon favourably.

5.0 Conclusion

In this paper, we explored the approach of one special event organiser to their marketing communications strategy and how consumers of the event responded to

this. In addition, we explored consumer preferences in relation to marketing communications for this type of event. A case study of Festival Melbourne 2006 was developed. We acknowledge that case study analysis has been recognised for its limitations, namely in relation to the findings to be generalised to a broader population. Nevertheless, there are ways in which case study analyses can be implemented to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. To achieve this, the data were collected from multiple sources using different data collection methods and cross-checking of data analysis was undertaken. There are practical implications arising from these findings that can be considered within the context of festivals and other special events, particularly those that are similar to the Festival. The information gathered here suggests that there is a need to continue to examine marketing communications within the context of this consumption scenario.

It would seem that benefits can be derived when special events adopt a centralised approach to marketing communications, but in the case of this event it is not clear that all stakeholders were the beneficiaries of such an approach. As Eagle, Kitchen and Bulmer (2007) suggest, the situation and the context must be considered when this strategic imperative is developed. If a centralised approach is to be implemented for special event marketing communications, the characteristics of special events and the differences among target markets and the skills of the event organisers must be recognised and leveraged for success.

As a market offering special events are increasingly popular, and many consumers have sophisticated knowledge and expectations of this market offering. Thus, the type and level of information target markets require about this market offering needs to be carefully constructed and disseminated to ensure that target markets can access information they need, rather than what special event organisers assume they need. In addition, marketing communications for special events seem to be deficient in relation to the *in situ* event experience. Event attendees usually only have one chance to experience special events, and they are often staged in temporary sites, which are generally unfamiliar to attendees. As such, attendees require marketing communications *in situ* that are informative and that enable them to make the most of their event experience.

Our findings, along with those of Gitelson and Kerstetter's (2000), emphasise that target markets for special events rely predominantly on their memories of positive

event experiences and on the recommendation of others to influence their behaviour to attend or not attend events. This supports the view of Getz and Fairley (2005) that word-of-mouth is important for raising the awareness of special events. These issues accentuate the challenges associated with marketing communications for special events, and point to a need for marketers of special events to pay particular attention to sustaining marketing communications across the consumer decision-making process. Indeed, such an approach to marketing communications could potentially offer a special event a competitive advantage. Further research is required to explore how this issue can be addressed for special events.

With regard to participants' preferred marketing communications, and particularly of festivals that are community-based, marketers need to consider their target markets' lifestyles and consumer characteristics when developing their marketing communications. This is particularly the case when special events are dispersed as was the case for this Festival. In this study, the role of community networks and infrastructure in distributing information and promoting special events was highlighted. An understanding of *what* information target markets are seeking, *how* they prefer to receive it, and *when* they require this information is imperative for successful special events. Special events are not regular occurrences, and while a great deal of information has been acquired in relation to the what, how and when questions for other goods and services, there is still more to learn about marketing communications within the context of special events. In addition to this, because special events are normally aimed at bringing together people, Web 2.0 tools for social networking, such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter, seem particularly suitable for technologically-oriented consumers. Further research on this aspect of marketing communications for special events should explore this issue.

The findings of this study add to the body of knowledge on marketing communications for special events, but further research on marketing communications set within the context of this market offering is warranted. As special events are an increasingly popular market offering and new models of special event delivery are being developed around the globe, questions will continue to emerge with regard to their marketing communications. For example, how can the temporal nuances of special events be managed using marketing communications? How can loyalty, in the form of positive word-of-mouth and repeat attendance be developed through the

strategic use of marketing communications? This study provides a platform for further research—international research which is comparative in nature would be highly beneficial given that special events are increasingly a global market offering. In addition to this, it would be well worth undertaking research across the typology of special events to develop models of marketing communications that could be used to assist event organisers to achieve their organisational objectives.

Table 1: Profile of municipalities included in the study

Research site	Location	Size	Housing style	Housing occupancy	Demographics
City of Port Phillip (CPP)	Inner metropolitan municipality located on Port Phillip Bay within five kilometres of Melbourne's CBD.	21 square kilometres.	Almost three-quarters of the residents in the CPP live in units/apartments or semi-detached dwellings.	42% of householders live alone.	Young/single population
City of Greater Geelong (CGG)	Located on Victoria's south-western coastline approximately 70kms from Melbourne's CBD.	1250 square kilometres.	The majority (76%) of residents in the CGC live in detached housing.	The majority (76%) of residents are couples with children	Young families and senior population.
City of Greater Bendigo (CGB).	Inland regional city located approximately 150kms north-west of Melbourne's CBD.	Almost 3000 square kilometres.	The majority (87%) of residents live in detached houses.	Nearly 45% of the residents are couples with children.	Young families (professionals) and senior population.

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