

University-Based Hospitality Centers: Popularity and Effective Advertising Models

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Abstract: Hospitality-based centres are not common units within the university's structures. Nowadays, successful universities must offer a variety of both new educational visions and opportunities for a rich campus life and university's public value (Sternberg, 2014). In this context, the challenge to combine more attractive possibilities for events hosting is focusing on special appeals. On the other side, and within the academic life, a cultivation of academic imagination (Lugosi, 2016) could be a competitive tool. Hospitality products show significant levels of importance of what an inspiring university should be. It can be so due to the meetings, events, exhibitions and conference tourism. When mixed up with the academic scene, this can become of exceptional advantage. University's increased popularity can be viewed in regard to the opportunities for rich academic and social experiences along with relaxation in such a form that breaks down walls (López, 2019). For its commercial hospitality space, *university-based hospitality centers* or university campus hotels (Hay, 2020) should be considered in the overall marketing strategy of the academic organization (Gibbs and Knapp, 2002). Developing *effective models of advertising* aimed at integrating tourism, events and social being into the university life can extensively contribute to the sense of community (Henry, 2012), thus to the popularity of the university itself. Networking could be easier to achieve, literacies on more different levels can be gained (Spasov, 2021) or secondary profits for academicians, students, guests, and visitors of the university with additional recreational benefits might arise. In this research, the authors show the results of an exploratory survey of the university-based hospitality center of the South-West University "Neofit Rilski" in Bulgaria and discuss possible implications on planning and management through effective advertising models. The emphasis lies on the unique combination between *tourism product* and *university organizational academic culture*. Results were utilized for the development of a more *holistic understanding* of the university activities' offer under the realm of hospitality.

Keywords: university-based center, hospitality, effective advertising models, education, nexus

1. Introduction

The last three years have marked an unprecedented change in the behaviour of humanity at all levels. As difficult as pandemics times, crises and unpredictability proceed to be valid nowadays. Against the background of this uncertainty, new and even stronger challenges are still emerging, especially regarding the ongoing changes in the socio-economic and political sphere. These happen in healthcare as the most affected area, but there are no fewer negative consequences in tourism, hospitality, and travel. This is the case in education as well. The situation is a little different as related to the university hotel camps. The subject of research is such - one Bulgarian structure, the Bachinovo University Center. As a unit, it serves as a hotel organizational unit for academic purposes, on the one hand, and - operates thanks to the good traditions established at the university, on the other one. This raises many questions, but the first one is about the type of relationships on the level of society, organizations and individuals, and the extent to which they depend on each other. Against the background of these issues, this more specific type of structure is presented here, namely the university hospitality center, and the specific issues of interest concern, of course, the question of how the center survives in times of the COVID-19 crises and how this could happen. According to the authors, there is one leading reason for this survival, namely the type of organizational culture of the university hospitality center itself. It was first established for the purposes of accommodating students, teachers, guests of the universities. Secondary to the university needs were the activities for events organizations and conferences. A good opportunity that could not be left unnoticed was the opportunity to expand the hospitality center and open it to guests outside the academic life such as pupils' sporting events and holidays.

The Bachinovo hospitality university center is located 3 km away from the town of Blagoevgrad, near the green area Bachinovo Park. The center, which was built in the last quarter of the last century, joined the structure of SWU "Neofit Rilski" in 2004. In its hotel part, Bachinovo University Center has a capacity for about 150 guests, including dining areas for visitors. Conference halls with a total capacity of 270 seats and a hall with 150 seats and of course a coffee bar are available and well equipped. In addition to the center, there is a modern Sports and Rehabilitation Spa area.

Obviously, Bachinovo University Center is an important part of the South-West University, which hosts many important conferences, team buildings, training courses, symposiums, camps of sports clubs and private events, including celebrations, personal celebrations such as gatherings, birthdays, weddings, bigger and smaller cocktails. The symbiosis between the center and the university is found mainly against the background of the main role of the center in the practical training of students majoring in Tourism (for the hotel part) and students of kinesitherapy (for the sports and recreation center). Students follow a schedule and have the opportunity to enter a real practical environment not only at the reception positions, but they have direct access to the entire production cycle of the hotel. Students gain practical skills in the field of hospitality, but also learn how to properly communicate with guests, how to react in a real environment and make their own decisions to avoid conflicts. Last but not least, the students get acquainted directly with the organizational culture of the center and the university, moreover - they become part of it. The Bachinovo University Center is part of all major events in the city, especially when these events are covered on a large scale by all media. Most of all, these are emblematic events that have gained regularity within the Cultural Calendar of the municipality and in cooperation with other centres of the municipality (Kyurova and Koyundzhiyska-Davidkova, 2021), and which contribute greatly to the economic development of marketing planning (Yaneva, 2020; Stoykova, 2015) for business areas operating in the city, including the hotel industry.

The Francofolie Music Festival, which was held annually in the city of Blagoevgrad, was of great importance for the city and business because thanks to it the influx of tourists was huge. During this event, the employment in the Bachinovo University Center is 100%. The World Championship in wrestling held in 2016 in Blagoevgrad also provided 100% occupation at the Bachinovo University Center. The events that the center hosts are interesting, especially during the crisis with COVID-19 they were more than vital. Hence, the Bachinovo University Center, along with the Sports and Rehabilitation Center is a very special university unit. It has a specific structure and a hybrid organizational culture. The present study aims to discuss this very specific kind of a mixture of two bodies: of the university and of the hospitality. The analysis used steps on an analytical approach applies a descriptive technique and uses primary data for the synthesis of the events organised by the university-based hospitality center. Finally, the potential for the implementation of better advertising models and strategic marketing decisions (Kotler, 1995; Yaneva, 2020) for the promotion of both the center and the university is provided.

2. The nexus education, university, university hospitality center and the need of advertising models for times of uncertainties

Education does not have the character of economic activity, and the market segment in it is difficult to determine. The economy is very different from the economy of education. There is very little research that works on the problem of education in terms of exchange of services, in the narrowest sense we can talk about knowledge transfer. However, there is one important point that is invariably present in the field of education in general. This is advertising, regardless of its exact form, whether word of mouth or recommendations for one or another educational institution. In more recent times, advertising for education is even present on Facebook. However, there are studies that address this issue and identify some important features for both public relations and advertising. They are generally aimed at promoting educational institutions and attracting more students, more resources and forms of incentives. Some authors point out (Marima 2015) that higher education institutions cannot solve all their problems with a sufficient number of enrolments. It is particularly important to attract the attention of other organizations through which joint projects are developed and with which they have a mutual interest, such as public-private partnerships, non-profit organizations, financial investments or donations.

An important element here is also the internationalization and development of these relations internationally. Other authors, Sikošek (2011), found that awareness of the importance of communication with organizations is also growing in higher education, as educational institutions are no longer an isolated system. Through marketing communications, including through public relations and advertising, education can boldly communicate its achievements and reach a larger group of students and learners. The main purpose of the information here is to create interest in the institution and in certain programs, then it can be said that the market element is almost absent.

The majority of literary sources attribute to marketing communications in education mainly informative character (Barnes, 1993; Kotler and Fox, 1995) or describe them as a tool for public relations (Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion, 2011). Marketing communication is related to the greatest extent to the waves of culture

(Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 2011) and thus has to operate with symbols, signs, with different register of languages (Lockhart, 2010); many hidden persuaders or other barriers can occur, especially in view of the pandemic language (Belova and Georgieva, 2021). Some others are those scholars that point to the benefits and role of hidden advertising (Packard, 2007; Frank-Nielsen, 2012; Reventlow, 2013). Otherwise, both the international scientific literature and the Bulgarian literature in this field is very scarce. However, this line of analysis can outline some perspectives and means of realization (Trencheva, 2021; Dimitrova, 2019) and link them to the specific contexts as politics (Stoykova, 2021), entrepreneurship (Madgerova and Atanasova, 2021) and even social responsibility (Vasenska et. al., 2021) that arises against the functionality of a university hotel campus.

However, looking at the activities of the University Center for Hospitality Bachinovo, we were able to identify some important features that need special attention and give reason for future measures. This can be schematically presented by four components in a common nexus, as indicated by figure 1:

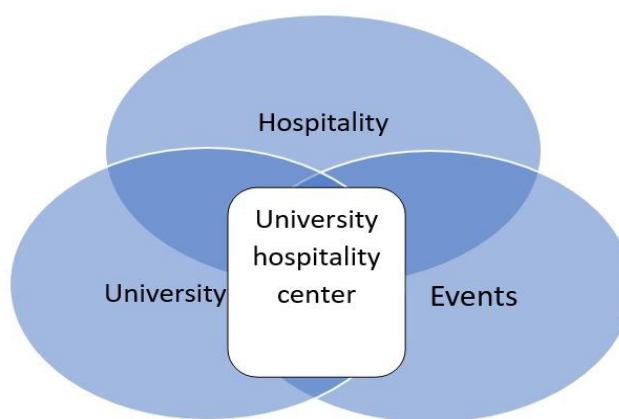


Figure 1: The university-based hospitality center nexus

The schematic representation of this nexus has three main acting sources, namely the university, the hospitality and events, whose interaction has, as a result, the establishment of the university-based center. We name this type of relations a nexus due to the fact that the relations between its components are strong, non-arbitrary but causal. Or in other words, education gives students and educators the tools they need for success; higher education proceeds to the university, but the university needs a stage and event to celebrate the education. In this regard, the university-based center exists due to a special kind of synergy. This synergy is revealed by the plethora of the various events thus ensuring knowledge sharing, knowledge transfer, networking and conferencing in the meantime. And this is the indirect cause of the hospitality services performed by the center. Following the perspective of the indirect causality, it can be assumed that the communication marketing tool of advertising can become a very successful and useful tool. For this reason, we suggest indicating these relations as a nexus of reciprocal relations *hospitality - events – university-based hospitality center - university*. Behind every successful business, including the hospitality industry, is a huge pile of sales. Good advertising, or also good promotion, can make this cup bigger. Advertising is a tool that has a universal character, and if done well, the effort and cost of it are never superfluous. In the hotel industry, advertising is open, in the sense that the organization pays an advertising price to the creator of the advertisement when creating the advertising message. Mostly real photos, beautiful images, advertising techniques of visual metaphors, advertising design are used. The marketing activities of Bachinovo Center are traditionally based on printed brochures. A small impression of it can be received by the picture (Figure 2) below:

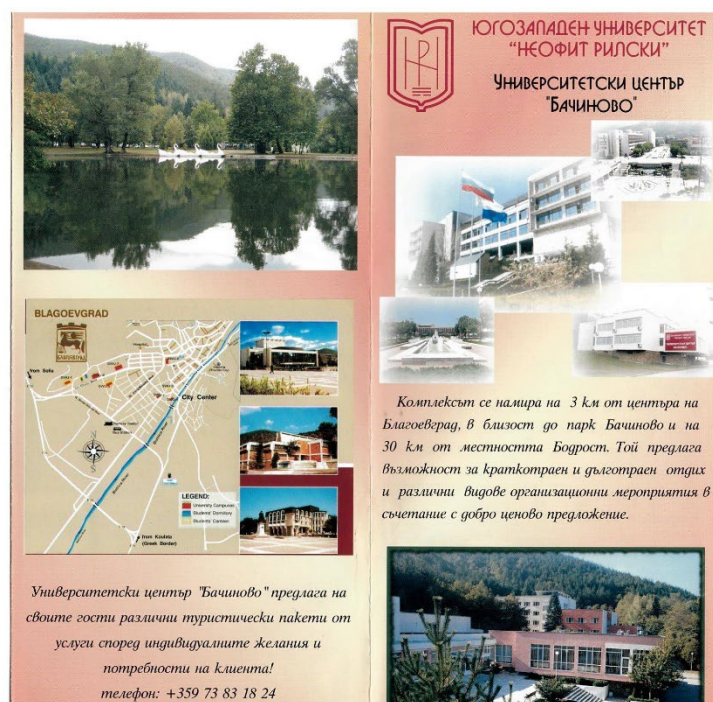


Figure 2: University center Bachinovo of the South-West University located in Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria

There are no convincing sentences and slogans, the advertisement is completely informative. This feature is undoubtedly related to the connection of the center with the organizational structure of the university. And a targeted advertisement of a higher education institution is a double-edged sword because it can have the opposite effect. It is difficult to talk about advertising an educational institution, a new curriculum or a faculty. But along with the so-called open advertising, marketers have not yet set the boundaries of hidden persuaders within the meaning of W. Packard and have not discovered the secret moves of masked (advertising) messages. Certainly, the model of hidden advertising has its place in marketing communications. Here, the activities of the Bachinovo Hospitality Center will implicitly refer to the educational institution. The possibilities for using such an interconnection are possible thanks to the established nexus between the university, events, hospitality and the center. Numerous visitors to the center could be the subject of hidden advertising at the university. As far as the media is concerned, it is a matter of future research to determine whether a traditional newsletter or new social media would be more appropriate. Of course, it is possible to find other decent ways to promote the center and the higher education institution. A justification for the use of the events organized in the university-based hospitality center can be additionally conceived as an opportunity to utilize hidden advertising and reach a wider audience can be followed in the next section.

3. Types of organized events 2019-2021 in the university-based center Bachinovo

The analysis of the hospitality activity of the Bachinovo University Center is made upon the description and synthesizing of the primary research data. After summarizing the results some main features that better characterize the activities of the university-hospitality center will be presented. Not explicitly included in the analysis is the fact that actually, the center operates as a hotel structure, which provides housekeeping and accommodation activities for various guests, but mostly academicians or guests visiting the center or the city with educational purposes. The figurative representation allows a good look at the type of events held in the center:

After the synthesis of the events organized in the Bachinovo University Center was made, some main features that characterize the activities for the last three years 2019, 2020 and 2021 can be presented. First place in the number of events is occupied by symposiums and conferences which are the most popular event type organized by the center. Although the center usually hosts a larger number of scientific events every year, for the given period and due to the pandemic and post-pandemic crises, their number is significantly reduced. However, it should be noted that the Bachinovo Center was one of the few places in the town of Blagoevgrad where scientific events were held for these three years. Both the large halls and the ability to comply with the distance requirement seemed to be a determining factor for the organizers to choose Bachinovo. Non-academic events,

which include all types of celebrations for individuals and organizations, as well as the celebration of special events were ranked in second place among the types of events held. Such gatherings are a valid trend that surprisingly was continuing even during the public health crisis caused by the global COVID pandemic.

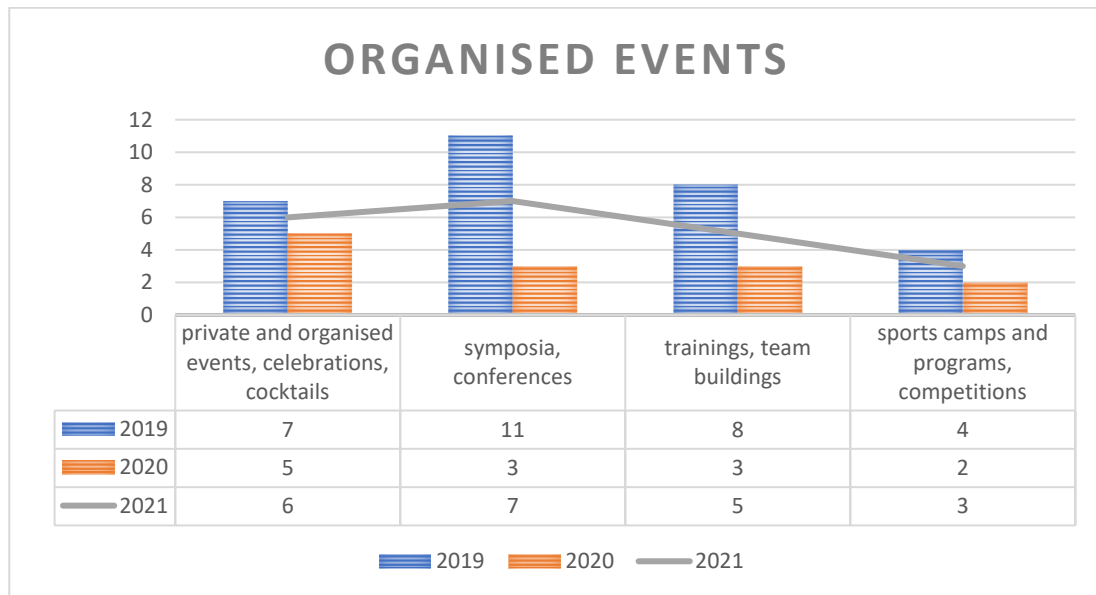


Figure 3: Types and number of organized events for the period 2019-2022

The next most important type of events, again for the given period, and again in times of uncertainty, were training courses and team building. These are again activities related to education. Sports camps, sports schools and tournaments came in fourth place, but this is a very important group of young people because they represent a potential candidate for enrolment in the university. Unfortunately, and as it was valid for the entire tourism sector, the housing activities and attendance at the university-based center have been in a recession and tourism decline is so far unknown. On the positive side, however, this drop could not reach zero values, which was a case for lots of the hospitality establishments in the region. So the center gained some popularity of this, and at the end, what happened was the lesser evil.

4. Conclusion

Following the recent trends for the MICE and MEEC industry related to the conditions of uncertainties and coronavirus pandemic, amid the political crisis on Europe’s eastern borders, it is now more than ever clear that tourism is one of the first sectors to undergo radical change. However, the number of tourism service providers, including hotels and accommodations, are in a condition of constant severe competition. However, profiting from the instruments of advertising, potential tourists are reached by persuading messages and appeals, getting inspiring ideas for new destinations. For tourists, travellers, customers more doors are being opened and roads are being offered. In view of the wide tourism, economy, and education supply, even in a relatively small town, a market saturation can be reached, including in several ways. One of them is when the client (guest) chooses these places that have already been tested and those with a positive experience. The choice may be influenced by the impressions he or she has personally acquired. In this sense, the importance of former experiences plus the advantages of hidden advertising is growing, which following the mechanisms of rational persuasion as suggested by McKeivitt (2018) can fulfil the role of a persuader who wins approval. The presented research discussed the nexus events, hospitality and university, and just as the battle for every tourist for travel and accommodation is, so is the battle between universities for every student. But for the latter type of competition the arsenal of advertising is not as usual, educational institutions are not market organizations. However, educational institutions can profit from different approaches and operate flexibly on several levels for networking and creating added educational stimulus, use their organizational structure and organizational culture in many different ways. The path to shared knowledge, a nice event and great team building can become a part of the learning experience. Thus, more value for organizations and individuals can be added, a hybrid educational and sociable environment can be created, and as a result university-based hospitality centers as a perspective part of the educational scene can be recognized.

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