

# Family-friendly business events – A “mule” within the industry?

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## **Family-friendly business events – A “mule” within the industry?**

### **Abstract**

Business events play an essential role in sharing knowledge and professional practices. The organisation of such events has seen a shift in client demand and focus in the past years with family-friendliness as one of the key market trends. The main research question of the present study is: Can a family-friendliness approach be implemented by event organisers in the planning and management phases of business events in Hungary? 20 in-depth expert interviews were conducted with event organisers and representatives of event venues. Based on the research results, the market of family-friendly events still has a lot to evolve. We investigate the corporate levels of family-friendly business events and the related B2B business opportunities and explore the possible catalysts to the development of the niche market. The empirical findings of this research contribute to the academic discourse of the business events market and the managerial implications are of practical use.

### **Keywords**

*family-friendly corporate events; supply side analysis; corporate culture*

## **1. Introduction**

Organisations have been progressively adopting family-friendly business events in recent years due to their recognition of the significance of accommodating the requirements of attendees' families while still promoting professional engagement and networking opportunities. Customer awareness is of higher importance in the realm of event management, specifically business events. The present study investigates the implementation of a family-friendly approach in the preparation and organisation process of business events utilising expert interviews. Our research focuses on organisers' comprehension of family-friendly business events, taking into account the specific requirements and expectations of their clientele. The "family-friendly" indication for events may also manifest itself in the event's type, topic, and the tasks involved in its planning and organisation. Among the various types of events, festivals and family days are the most common. In this context, we can discuss the implementation of the family-friendly approach.

## **2. Literature review**

Business tourism is a substantial part of the worldwide tourism industry, involving a wide variety of activities that aim to facilitate business encounters, professional networking, and the exchange of knowledge. The topic of business tourism is experiencing a growing interest in academic research. The studies primarily examine various aspects related to business travel, such as the experiences of business travellers (Unger, Uriely, & Fuchs, 2016), the activities undertaken during business trips (Smith & Carmichael, 2007), the factors influencing the choice of accommodation for business tourists (Dolnicar, 2002; Greenberg & Rogerson, 2018), and the impact of work-family balance on business travellers (Westman, Etzion, & Gattenio, 2008). Business tourism is crucial for stimulating economic growth, promoting innovation, and enhancing international collaborations. It encompasses a wide range of activities, including corporate meetings, incentive trips, conferences and conventions, and exhibitions (also known as MICE events). Business events play a crucial role in the tourism industry and are of great significance to governments. They have a positive impact on the local economy by stimulating economic growth (Bauer, Law, Tse, & Weber, 2008). Additionally, they enhance the reputation and visibility of destinations and serve as a platform for promoting cross-cultural understanding. Moreover, these events have a crucial impact on the dissemination of knowledge and traditions, as well as fostering tighter connections across diverse locations and cultures. These events provide a strong connection between the field of event management and business tourism.

The meetings industry plays a crucial role in driving the knowledge-based economy since its main objective is to facilitate connections among professionals, businesses, and academic groups to exchange professional information. Individuals participate in events to gain knowledge, advance professionally, and develop themselves, while also aiming to expand their network of connections. However, this might pose challenges when it comes to balancing these commitments with one's responsibilities within the family. Event organisers encounter evolving customer expectations as a result of the mobility between business and personal life. Customers are growing more worried about the work-life balance of their employees. Event planners face the problem of effectively coordinating various target groups while adhering to a family-friendly approach during the design and execution of business events.

Family-friendly business events not only foster bonding and enjoyment among employees and their families but also enhance work-life balance and may improve employee

morale and satisfaction. To accomplish these event organisation tasks, the organiser needs to provide the following items, taking into consideration the specific demands of the customer:

*Venue selection and accessibility.* One key aspect of family-friendly business events is to ensure that the event venue is safe and convenient for families. Rashwan (2022) underscores the importance of selecting venues with adequate facilities and amenities for attendees. The ideal venue for families includes spacious indoor and outdoor areas, accessible restrooms, and nursing rooms. By providing a comfortable and accommodating environment, families can fully enjoy the event without any concerns (Csordás, Markos-Kujbus, & Boros, 2019). At the same time, non-tangible aspects of the provision of services are also determining, especially the quality of interactions between staff and children is important for parents (Khoo-Lattimore, Prayag, & Cheah, 2015).

*Childcare, youth programs, interactive and educational activities.* Another important aspect of family-friendly business events is the provision of childcare services and youth programs (Nazer, 2008). Anderst and Moffatt (2014) emphasise the importance of offering age-appropriate activities and supervision for children and teenagers, allowing parents to fully engage in event proceedings without worrying about their children's well-being. One way to ensure that business events are family-friendly is to incorporate activities and entertainment suitable for all ages. This can include engaging games, interactive workshops, and even kid-friendly zones with supervision. According to McCabe and Johnson (2013), family-friendly events contribute to higher attendee satisfaction and loyalty by allowing participants to balance professional commitments with family responsibilities. Moreover, such events can enhance organisational reputation and attract a diverse range of attendees, including professionals with caregiving responsibilities. Today's children are tomorrow's adult buyers, and that preferences formed in childhood often persist in adulthood (Chaplin, Lowrey, Ruvio, Shrum, & Vohs, 2020). For participants travelling with their families, the service providers can organise a high-quality event, provided that the preferences of the companions are also taken into account by the organisers. The programmes should take into account cultural differences, the different values embodied in families and the objectives to be achieved with travel, as well as socio-economic aspects (Yen et al., 2020). In addition, the different age groups of children (from infants to young people) should also be taken into account when preparing the offer, both in terms of services and infrastructure (Hamed, 2017). Research by Osterman (1995) highlights the effectiveness of workshops, demonstrations, and entertainment programs that cater to diverse interests and preferences within the family unit. Children have different needs and needs (Shuxia, 2018), to which organisers should pay special attention when planning and organising family-friendly business events. By offering a mix of educational and recreational activities, organisers can create a stimulating and inclusive environment conducive to learning and bonding among attendees.

Family-friendly business events represent a strategic approach to engaging professionals while promoting work-life balance and inclusivity. By incorporating childcare services, youth programs, interactive activities, and accessible venues, organisers can create enriching experiences that cater to attendees of all ages. Moreover, by fostering a family-friendly organisational culture and aligning event policies with broader initiatives, businesses can demonstrate their commitment to supporting employees' personal and professional well-being.

Marais, Du Plessis, and Saayman (2017) identified a customer-centric approach as a key element in business tourism. In the present day, it is crucial to have efficient customer communication and strategic planning in order to arrange events that are customised to meet customers' requirements. This enables the organisers to anticipate customer expectations. Segmentation, precise use of social media, immediate interactive events, and observation of participant behaviour are essential strategies for creating individualised experiences that

convert conventional event planning and organisation into event management processes. Business events serve as experiential services and marketing tools that cater to consumer needs while also providing an opportunity for ongoing enhancement. B2B events have a multifaceted influence as they stimulate companies to enhance their performance and competition through interaction, sharing, and improved decision-making.

### **3. Research method**

The research consisted of in-depth expert interviews with participants holding senior management positions across 20 different organisations within the Hungarian events and hospitality industry. The study is aimed at providing an in-depth qualitative research approach to map the external reality of the marketplace in an extremely dynamic landscape where practitioners are often a cornerstone in terms of topical knowledge and latest developments as they are the closest to being able to assess their business environment (see e.g. Picken, 2018). The main exploratory research questions addressed in the present research is: How do professionals perceive the notion of family-friendliness in their everyday practice, and ultimately, can a family-friendliness approach be implemented by event organisers in the planning and management phases of business events in Hungary?

A convenience sampling method was used for the interviews with the criterion that a business be on the market for at least five years. The interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation (Sandelowski, 2008) was reached. 20 interviews were conducted (henceforth referred to as [A], [B], [C], ..., [T] in the study), 9 online or via phone, 9 at the interviewee's and 2 at the interviewers' workplace, all at the interviewees' convenience. 13 interviewees were female and 7 male. To capture a wide spectrum of insights, participants represented a wide range of stakeholder institutions, including not only narrowly defined event organisers (n=11), but also companies specialized in catering (n=1), location provision (n=3), hotels with event spaces (n=4), and a communication agency. Interviews took place between October and December 2023.

Prior to each interview, participants were briefed via email on the general purpose and main areas of interest of the research. During the interviews, after some introductory questions about the general trends in their practice, the interviewed executives were asked to describe what family-friendly events meant to them in general and then to describe their institution's position within it. In the second part of the interview, they were asked to elaborate on the specific and technical aspects of family-friendly events. Following the recommendations by MacLure (2013), coding of the research data focused on identifying data "hot spots", that is, topics of "greater significance" (i.e., through repetitions, implied meanings, or omissions within and among the interviews).

## **4. Discussion**

### *4.1 Family-friendly business events – An impossible pair?*

Interestingly, the first data "hot spot" in our sample was the very idea of a family-friendly business event. "Well, these two words – family-friendly and business-friendly – they don't really add up." [C] – stated one of our interviewees. All in all, while identifying family-friendliness as a genuine trend in the sector, mentioned as a current industry buzzword just second behind sustainability by interviewed suppliers, several of our interviewees still found it odd to pair the concept with business events. This led to the paradoxical situation of

admitting the importance of the concept but bending to the seemingly impossible nature of combining the two in organizational practice. This result hinted that family-friendly events, in their current state, are more a hypothetical than a genuine form of business events (Table 1). Among the main reasons stated were the perceived incompatibility of informal family time with formally doing business, as well as the perceived lack of demand from business partners. A respondent referred to such an event as a “mule” [D].

Table 1. Family-friendly business events – An impossible pair?. Examples from the sample.

(a)	“There is no question of a business event being family-friendly” [D]
(b)	“those two words, family-friendly and business-friendly, don't really go together”
(c)	“For business-type events, which are organised specifically for business purposes, they want to sell something or introduce a new product. Where it's a professional theme, it's a trade show, it's a distraction for family members. So I think they are two different things” [I]
(d)	“I have not come across a business event that [the organizers] wanted specifically to be family-friendly” [F]
(e)	“it's obviously a good thing if we go in this direction, because it just adds colour to the events, but I think it can also make our job more difficult” [E]
(f)	“Well, I don't think there is such a category. Of course, somebody might want to do it, and then there will be.” [I]

#### 4.2 Levels of family-friendly business events

Having witnessed the conceptual inertia behind family-friendly business events, in a next step we endeavoured to categorize the different levels of family-friendly events as conceived by the interviewed professionals. Four levels of family-friendly business events were identified: (1) pseudo-family-friendly, (2) unintentionally family-friendly, (3) family-friendliness as an option, and (4) complex approach.

Family-friendliness being mentioned as a key trend by most respondents might entail, for some market actors, so-called “pseudo-family-friendly” events in the future. Nevertheless, firms’ motivations for organizing such events can be paralleled to the phenomenon of greenwashing in corporate social responsibility: instead of a genuine inner motivation, these kinds of event can be characterized as rudimentary responses to stakeholder demand. In this goal-motivated corporate approach, family-friendliness remains an empty buzzword or fad, without noteworthy corporate determination even less culture behind it. Concrete manifestations thereto might be the addition of certain physical elements to company gatherings (Table 2/a-c).

The next identified category was that of unintentionally family-friendly events, albeit only mentioned by few respondents. In this category, an event can be considered family-friendly because of the equipment present – e.g. organizing an event at a family-friendly venue, or dealing with a topic that interests not only professionals but also civilians –, even though no express intention was manifested behind it. A key triggering driver behind an event becoming family-friendly might be general societal changes, for instance when “the kid comes because they have no choice” [D] (Table 2/d-e).

In the category of family-friendliness as an option, the offered possibility to bring a plus-one can become a comfort factor, and therefore a satisfier for a participant. The added value lies not only in the comfort, but also in the peace of mind that one’s partner or family is nearby and in safety, which can lead to increased concentration to the actual business task at hand. This category is typical for conferences where, thus way, participants can, for instance, also extend their stay and combine business and pleasure – thereby leading to a bleisure experience (Lichy & McLeay, 2018). This category of family-friendly events is equally related to certain holidays with a traditional link to family (e.g. Easter, Santa Claus Day, Christmas). (Table 2/f-k).

The complex perception of family-friendly events is linked to the client's organisational culture. That is, how does the organisation perceive the balance of work and family times, does it allow for the latter in the context of the former, does it consider organising specific events as contributing to employee loyalty, and more globally, does it take into account the family situation and specific needs of its employees, etc. (Table 2/1-n).

Table 2. Levels of family-friendly events. Examples from the sample.

Pseudo-family-friendly business events	
(a)	"In most places you see companies ordering foosball tables and beanbags so that their employees can feel well at the workplace. They think that's an important argument for why someone likes working there, but people are still human beings". [I]
(b)	"[family-friendly events] come up among the big companies, first and foremost. So, those who have to put a tick somewhere on their own little social responsibility page, that 'well, we've done that, that we're looking after the well-being of our employees'." [H]
(c)	"A bit of foosball, table tennis... sometimes outside service providers come in to maybe put in a selfie box as an extra element, or hold a canvas bag painting for participants." [B]
Unintentionally family-friendly business events	
(d)	"The other day there was an agricultural science exhibition at the [expo venue]. The majority of people who were there were not those who have this as a profession, but kids hanging off tractors. Because that was the thrill of having the tractor on display." [J]
(e)	"at a business event, people in perfectly classic suits sitting at a round table talking about something, and one of them brought their kid because the other kid was sick and they didn't want to leave them at home, and there they were. And there was nothing wrong with that, and people there could tolerate that. I think it's a cultural thing" [D]
Family-friendliness as an option	
(f)	"if you advertise a dinner party, you can say it's family-friendly because you can bring your partner... but that still won't make it family-friendly" [A]
(g)	"a company organises an event where the participant can bring the family. A lot of companies organise family days, which may have some business implications, but basically they organise programmes where the family can take part, so they organise programmes for young children, where mothers can talk together" [B]
(h)	"When families really do have special occasions like Easter or Santa Claus or Christmas, it's announced as a family event, but that's rare these days." [C]
(i)	"So we have a lot of families coming to us for conferences. Because if they come to us for a conference, they're more like, and we're talking about a one-day conference, they're more like, if we come, we come for several days, we bring the little family, we bring the kids, and then they spend the time here actually, while the parent is at the conference, and the kid has the opportunity to relax" [F]
(j)	"I consider a family-friendly business event to be one where somewhere the business event aims to reach families and children, and to do that it creates an environment where children are not just tolerated." [D]
(k)	"there should definitely be an opportunity where, let's say, someone who is professionally involved in this business event can go through the programme in a relaxed environment, so they can be there 100%, because they can be sure that everything is fine with the family back home" [P]
Complex perception of family-friendly events as part of organizational culture	
(l)	"it is typical that those workplaces are competitive where privacy is more respected and there is more space for family, fewer constraints that make you compromise, then I think this will come through to event management, too" [K]
(m)	"because there is a greater emphasis on making employees feel as comfortable as possible and an increasing importance is being placed on holding such events for them"; "I think there is definitely a justification for these events, and HR has become incredibly valued today, and it should be an important part of that, not just training and individual motivation, but events of this kind." [L]
(n)	"if a company is already family-friendly, it will organise its events in the same way"; "You can even have a company party that [...] starts at noon, because you know that at five o'clock mothers or fathers have to go and pick up their children." [O]

#### 4.3 B2B Business opportunities in family-friendly events

Following on the paradox of several respondents being unable to link family-friendliness to the concept of business events, and the relative lack of research on the increasingly complex customer journeys in a B2B environment (e.g. Cortez & Johnston, 2017), in the last leg of our research we proceeded to investigating the emerging business opportunities linked to the stages of the traditional B2B sales funnel model (e.g., Neumüller & Bigliel, 2023).

In the awareness- and interest-generating phase, corporate culture and, more importantly, decision-makers' personal involvement were identified as two crucial factors, where family-friendly events can contribute as a value-added function to forging internal corporate identity (Table 3/a-d). In the consideration and intent phases, clients' expressed specific needs come to the fore, both in terms of time and location (Table 3/e-f). Intent stems

from the client’s aforementioned complex approach to event planning and overall corporate culture. According to our informants, a family-friendly event is a definite cost driver, linked to the very specific needs and objectives of the two target groups (“core” participants, families). Corporate culture, therefore, is a key driver as to whether a potential partner will request family-friendly events, i.e. whether they see a long-term business potential in financing additional participants other than strictly necessary in a short-term business focus (i.e. family members). This competence comes back as a value added service and/or unique selling point on the event organiser’s side. This, in turn, can lead to a sustained partnership between the event organiser and the client. In our sample, however, this highest form of B2B-cooperation failed to appear.

**Table 3. B2B business opportunities in family-friendly events. Examples from the sample.**

Awareness, Interest: <i>Cultural determination and/or individual level of involvement</i>	
(a)	“a company’s corporate culture has a very strong influence here, and the place of events within [that corporate culture]” [I]
(b)	“It’s such a hip term, family friendly. Almost as much as ‘employee well-being’, but what it means, what’s behind it, I think we really have to go back to the leaders” [i]
(c)	“who you’re talking to from the client side matters a lot. If I think of one of my biggest clients, who has two children at home, and he’s a man, [...] yet he thinks about an event in a very, very different way, if he knows that there are children coming, or families coming, he pays much more attention to those details” [J]
(d)	“as opposed to corporate family days whose reason for being is exactly to make them feel more comfortable and raise corporate identity [...] this family-friendly approach might also be applied at a conference or a meeting that lasts for a whole day, which was not typical in the past.” [P]
Consideration, Intent: <i>Client’s expressed specific needs – time, location</i>	
(e)	“The company often requests that the team not be taken far away, so that even travel does not take time away from the employee’s private life, for example. So in that way we can pay attention to the family, even if we don’t focus on them specifically” [E]
(f)	“we choose venues for our events that not only offer the perfect backdrop for professional programmes, but also have family entertainment options nearby” [N]
(g)	“companies are building this up more and more consciously. A lot of multinationals are now very, very careful to make it part of their corporate culture to organise family-friendly events” – “it’s an engagement booster” [A]
(h)	“for example to strengthen corporate loyalty, there are no business objectives, but the success of the event indirectly supports the business activity by, for example, achieving that the employees are on good terms with each other” [I]
Purchase: <i>A significant cost driver, linked to specific needs and objectives of two differing target groups</i>	
(i)	“They don’t want to pay unnecessarily for a business event, just for what they absolutely have to. And hosting a relative does not directly support business objectives” [I]
(j)	“it is very, very rare for big companies to pay for the family to stay. Usually, the maximum is that a ‘plus-one’ can come [...] and this already has the significance of a [great] gift” [M]
(k)	“if the financial means of a company allow it, one can do a family day, a partner party. This is a very expensive genre, because you usually have to physically separate the children’s activities from the adult activities” [G]

Lastly, we coded for identifiable customer needs in the sample that may lead to demand generation from the side of event organisers. Proactivity was identified as a key aspect in setting the scene: parallel to pseudo-family-friendly events of clients, we identified passive event organizers who “certainly won’t invite animators for children, unless specifically asked for” [D] by the client. Conversely, organisers can urge clients to set specific objectives to their events thereby elevating these to genuine strategic (internal) communication (PR) channels. With employer branding becoming a primordial corporate tool for employee retention (e.g. Dögl & Holtbrügge, 2014), a family-friendly corporate culture and events as their manifestations can play a similar role as corporate environmental or social responsibility.

Cooperation between the organiser and the client is also paramount in setting the time and location of the event: as our informants mentioned, business events that used to be organised a few years ago during the week-end, would now be moved forward to weekdays, while family-friendly events are placed with consideration to the whole family’s availabilities (e.g. school holidays). Finally, the fundamental demographic variables of expected participants to events can help organisers refine their offering, including age, sex, or profession. Indeed, there do exist cases (professions, business topics, etc.) where one can



expect participants with likely heavier family duties (“in 90 percent of cases, it is the father who attends the event. But there are times when, say, the mother comes, she's the doctor, she attends the conference, she brings her family and they have a good time here.” [H]).

## 5. Conclusions

The objective of this study was to examine how event organisers and representatives of event venues perceive the notion of family-friendliness in their everyday practice, and by that investigate how a family-friendliness approach can be implemented by event organisers in the planning and management phases of business events in Hungary. Our results show that while on the level of declared trends, family-friendliness is in competition with such megatrends as sustainability, in practice, it is a lot less directly applicable notion. Interviewed practitioners were divided on the very concept of family-friendly business events, going from those who couldn't even fathom the relationship between the two notions to those for whom it was a trivial, value-added service offering. In terms of the relationship between the supply and demand sides, while we identified actual areas where event organisers can try to influence the market, still the overall family-friendly approach of the demand side (i.e., clients) as represented by their corporate culture and/or the persons in charge was most mentioned as a catalyst to the niche market of family-friendly business event, with having a clear idea on the long-term goals therewith as key element. The academic value of our study is its theoretical contribution to the literature of business events, as the family-friendly aspect of the business events has only been studied by a few researchers (among others: Beauregard & King 2020; Bos, Sweet-Cushman, & Schneider, 2019; Päßgen, Esters, & Schielicke, 2024) due to the interpretative paradox.

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