

A Supply Chain Analysis of Incentive Travels: A Case of Thailand

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Abstract — In this paper, we explored supply chain structures and characteristics of the incentive travel industry, which is a special sector of the tourism and hospitality industry. Since the conceptual framework tailor-made for this sector cannot be found, we developed a generic model to outline key players and main operations such as collaborations and relationships between players in the supply chain. Then we verified the model with empirical data collected from the incentive travel industry in Thailand. A focus group discussion was organised to validate and contextualise the proposed framework. Four followed up in-depth interviews with incentive supply chain players in Thailand were conducted. Data were cross-validated using various data sources including private sector, public sector and educational institutes. Findings show that the main players in incentive supply chain are the incentive houses, who plan and design the incentive programme for the corporate considering the return-on-investment (ROI), and destination management companies (DMC), who execute the programme at the destination. Relationships and collaboration between players are vital to the success of incentive program delivery since the incentive travel programmes are considered special events that required tailored made supplies and operations. Finally, potential research arena also discussed with suggested methods.

Keywords— Incentive Travels, MICE, Business Travels, Supply chain, Thailand

1. Introduction

In the current global business and economy, supply chain concept has been a compulsory idea for the professional and policy makers. Manufacturing developed a supply chain concept from logistics and operations management to improve performance. Retailers adapted the supply management and further moved to supply chain management to ensured availability and total supply chain cost reduction. Service industry such as healthcare and tourism industry have attempted to apply the supply chain concept to understand their supply chain and improve its performance.

The concept of tourism supply chain management has been proposed around a decade [24]. Several applications including analysis of transaction cost economics [17] and price interaction [19]. Since then tourism supply chain management has been one of the established themes in the tourism management. Therefore, there are several attempts to study special tourism sectors such as cruise tourism or cross-border tourism. Although, on average, incentive travelers spend more than double of those who travel for leisure purpose, research related to incentive travel are much less than those of leisure.

As such Incentive travels have gain more popularity in the travel industry, thanks to the globalization and international business expansion. According to the Society for Incentive Travel Excellence (SITE), incentive travel is recognized as a management technique used to push the performance of the employee. Corporates that employed incentive travels will design the system to select the qualifiers and then awardees. Also, the criteria the awarded travel programme are designed. The ultimate aim is to satisfy with the required Return-On-Investment (ROI) of the incentive travel programme [18].

Incentive travels usually popular in the destination for leisure. Thailand, which is one of the top global tourism and incentive travel destination, also prioritise incentive travel as one of its economic engine. Thailand had become one of most popular destinations for incentive travels; particularly for Asian countries such as China, South Korea and Japan. Thailand has been perceived as a high-value-for-money destination internationally. Many foreign companies have selected Thailand as their incentive travel destination. Thailand is perfect destination, since there are many kinds of attractions, and tourism services. Thai government also encourage the private and public sector to develop the supply chain of the incentive travel to raise its competitiveness in the global market. Therefore, it is vital to develop a supply chain framework and understand how it works in the incentive travel industry.

Incentive travel is one of the MICE industry; Meeting, Incentives, Conventions, and Exhibitions. Thailand is the one of popular destination for incentive traveler. Most Asians are dealer, employees and other award incentive travel. Incentive travel is a global management tool that uses an exceptional travel experience to motivate and/or recognize participants for increased levels of performance to support organizational goals. It consists of a variety of activities, such as accommodation, transportation, dining, meeting, CSR, team building, tourist attractions, etc. These activities indeed form complex supply chain in organised incentive travel.

Supply chain of incentive travel includes the suppliers of all the goods and services which has three main actors: producers, intermediaries and suppliers. Each actor has different role for

organised incentive travel. The downstream players include the producers and end customers. They are coordinators who act as intermediaries between producers and suppliers. Destination Management Companies (DMCs) are responsible for the management and coordination at the destination. DMCs officiate communicate with players in upstream such as hotel, airlines, restaurants, team building, ground transportation and other service providers at the destination. DMCs are responsible for program of incentive travel, deliver choice of destination and sale at appropriate prices to produces. Each of these DMCs may create a variety of incentive travel programme and their quoted price. Corporates or incentive houses may select the DMC considering various factors such as price, quality of the programme or experience of each DMC.

To fill the gaps in incentive supply chain literature, this paper aims to explore the characteristics of incentive travel supply chains and key members as well as their relationships. This paper also describes the main processes and key activities in the incentive supply chain. A case of Thailand was selected to illustrate example of incentive supply chain in the real world.

2. Literature Review

Since the concept of supply chain is relatively new to the incentive travel sector, he existing literature related to a supply chain concept of incentive travel is limited. However, there is a conceptual framework of the tourism supply chain [14] that can be applied to the incentive travel industry because both industry share a similar group of suppliers such as hotels, airlines and ground transport providers. The tourism supply chain presents a structural network of key players and their operations in order to deliver services to tourists.

In the tourism supply chain, main players include hotel, tour operators and suppliers. Such players may share information, set up joint team to cooperate. Previous studies of supply chain model in the tourism industry, stakeholders in tourism supply chain are classified into six groups consisting of hotel, travel agents, governmental tourism organisation, recreational activity providers, foods, beverages, and transportation companies [25]. Tourism supply chains are considered to include with several issues including ethics [11]. Considering sustainability issues, the

main focus are environmental issues. The concept of sustainable supply chain management concerns the roles of stakeholder to minimize environmental importance [1, 7]. Moreover, SCM also emphasize on collaboration in order to implement competitive strategy [6, 7]

Supply chain analysis framework can be applied to analyse business opportunities and logistics management, which consider empirically the pattern of the Thai fruit supply chain management and restricting in India market [22]. Moreover, there is some study of the application of Data Envelopment Analysis (DEA) in Supply Chain Management (SCM) that use to analysis some part of chain [4, 5]. In Thailand, there are more studies on tourism than incentive travel. However, there are source studies related to incentive travel market [20].

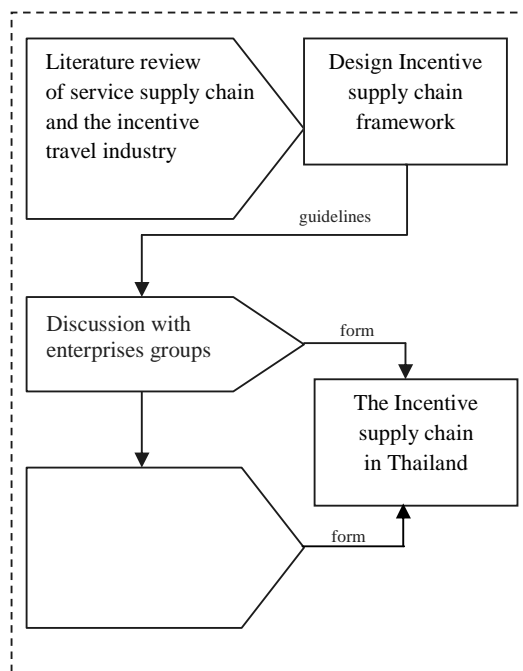


Figure 1. Research Framework

3. Research Methodology

This research is qualitative research by employing in-depth interviews with stakeholders related to incentive travel supply chain. A research framework as in Figure 1 will be framed in order to firm the research objective. First, we review literature related to incentive travel and service supply chain. Then we conducted interviews with incentive travel to set the scope of incentive travels in this study. Also, we had discussions with stakeholders to contextualise the incentive supply

chain system. In-depth interviews were also conducted with Destination Management Companies (DMCs) to form diagram of incentive travel and analysis the cooperative relationship of enterprise.

Semi-structure interview protocol was produced to collect insights from practitioners. Samples were asked about general information about their company, and were asked about the relationship between stakeholders in incentive travel industry to find supply chain of incentive travel.

4. Research Results

4.1 Incentive Supply Chain

From the literature review and in-depth interviews with enterprise in the real estate service business profession, the researchers show key players as Table 1 and process for incentive travel including three processes: Planning, Coordinating and Operating (or delivery the products and serviced) as in Figure 2 and 3.

The key players in incentive supply chain are owners, intermediaries and providers (Table 1). The researchers then adapted these key players as a sample of this study.

Table 1. Incentive travel players

| Producers | Intermediaries | Providers |
|-----------------|--|---------------------------|
| - Corporates | - Incentive fulfillment house | - Hotel |
| - Organisations | - Incentive planner | - Airline |
| | - Travel management company (TMC) | - Restaurant |
| | - Destination Management Company (DMC) | - Production company |
| | | - Ground transportation |
| | | - Tech provider |
| | | - Awards |
| | | - Team building |
| | | - Motivational speakers |
| | | - Giveaways |
| | | - Other service providers |

Source: Adapted from [4]

Producers: The corporate which award the incentive program to awardees.

Intermediary or third party: the intermediaries who design and plan the incentive program. Intermediary includes incentive organisations,

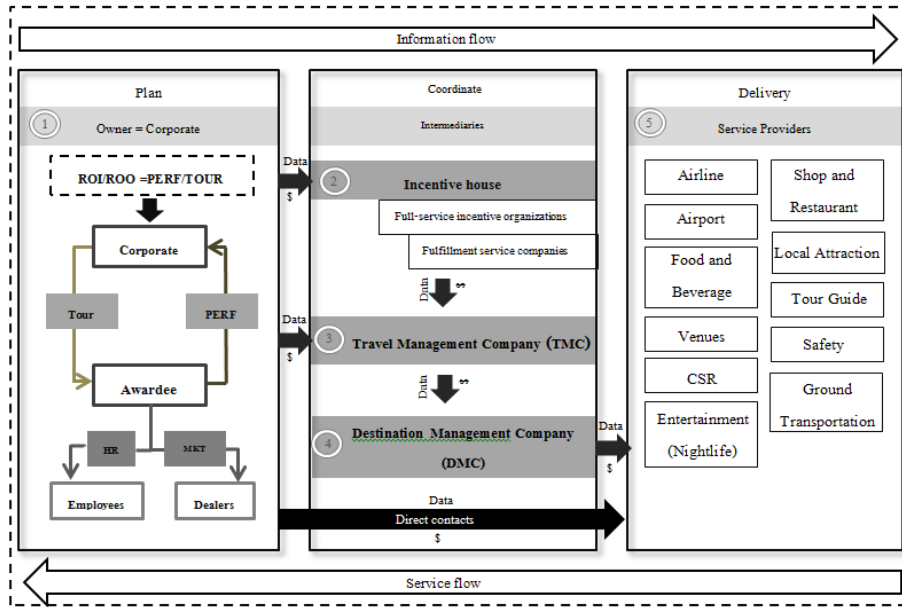


Figure 2. A Generic Value Chain of Incentive Travel

Incentive house, Travel Management Company (TMC), Destination Management Company (DMC).

Supplier: the player who provides services in the incentive program, also known as service providers.

In addition, there are organisations which support main players in the incentive industry, e.g. Society for Incentive Travel Excellence (SITE), Incentive Research Foundation (IRF). In case of Thailand, such main players are Thailand Incentive and Convention Association (TICA), Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB), Thai Hotels Association (THA), and Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT).

In the planning process, corporates will reward to their employees (from the selection of HR division) or dealer (from the selection of marketing division) who achieve the targeted performance. Corporates organise the incentive travel program for quality improvement of personnel in company. The main activity of this process is to plan the incentive trip for the company. The objective of the incentive trip is not only for travelling, but also for recognizing achievement of employees and for employee motivation to improve their performance. Corporates may plan and organise the incentive programme themselves or outsource to incentive houses.

In coordination process, the corporate will give the information about their needs and also basic information about the company to the intermediaries who create the packages. There are intermediary between corporate (customer) and supplier in each destination. TMCs or DMCs are the main keys to create program or package for incentive travel, after that they offer price to customer. The relationship between first process and second process occur from the origin, may be either domestic corporate or international corporate. The coordination can be divided into two types: direct and indirect contacts.

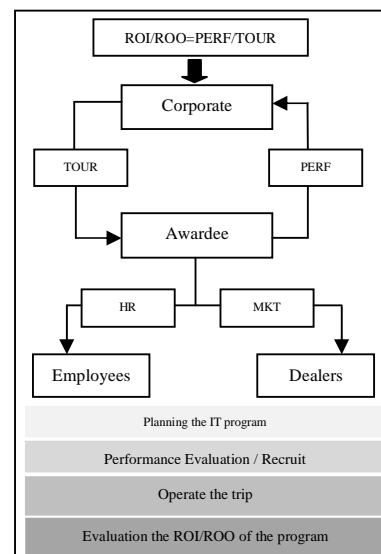


Figure 3. Plan process

Table 2. Process of the Incentive Travel Supply Chain

| Phrase | Plan | Coordinate | Operate |
|------------------|--|--|--|
| Players | Corporate / Incentive houses | Incentive organization / Incentive house, Travel Management Company (TMC) / Destination Management Company (DMC) | Destination management company, Service providers |
| Main activities: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Target group will be awarded: employees or customers • Objectives for award (incentive travel) • Budget for incentive travel | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • coordinator with service provider in destination • create incentive programs for incentive travel | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hotel and accommodation Food and Beverage, Shopping venues, Guide • Activity: Team building, CSR • Transportation: VISA, Ground transportation |

At last process called delivery, the main activity is to serve the products and/or services to the corporate (customer). The service providers, such as airline, hotel, food and beverage, venues, will offer their services to intermediaries to create the whole incentive package to the target group.

The table 2 shows the main key players and main activity in each process of incentive travel supply chain. The researchers found that the main issue is that each player has to make a relationship together for exchange the information smoothly.

Then, we developed an incentive travel supply chain model as in Figure 4. This model shows starting point of information flow from customer to destination. The flow of service for customer by across intermediary: Destination Management Companies (DMCs).

DMCs have three options: contacted with customers from the government units, foreign companies and direct contact from customer. Almost the government units and foreign companies will choose the company that offers the lowest price for them. Some customers are walked-in to contact DMCs directly. After that, DMCs normally plan the program for incentive travel trip with customer need. They then go to survey and book each service in destination includes: airline, airport, hotel, food and beverage, venues, meeting room, ground transportation, and etc. In addition, they usually organise amazing entertainment and activities for their customers.

The cooperative relationship between DMCs and service providers within incentive supply chain Like sellers and buyers have a few agreements for their business. They further can get offer price of each service that lower than normal price. As such, the operate cost of DMCs are lower. When they choose the service to customers, they underline good, luxury, better quality service, and etc because almost customers are better off than the normal one. In addition, a security is the one thing that DMCs pay attention for their incentive travellers, especially, those protocol for the important person.

With delivery process, DMCs are the main person that have duties with each suppliers to serve customers. When incentive travelers arrive at airport's destination, DMCs would make nice welcome and take them to the hotel or accommodation by bus or van. Sometimes, customers request the welcome reception for their group at the airport, DMCs have to coordinate with airport officials for space using to perform their shows. DMCs will take care of incentive traveler since the first arrival of the travellers and finish when the last traveler departs. Now, there are many DMCs in Thailand and more competition between DMCs in the incentive industry. Thus, DMCs have to develop their own operation and create incentive travel program to impress the customers as much as they can.

Additionally, the incentive industry has complex operation. Each process should have planned. All information from all players have to flow through

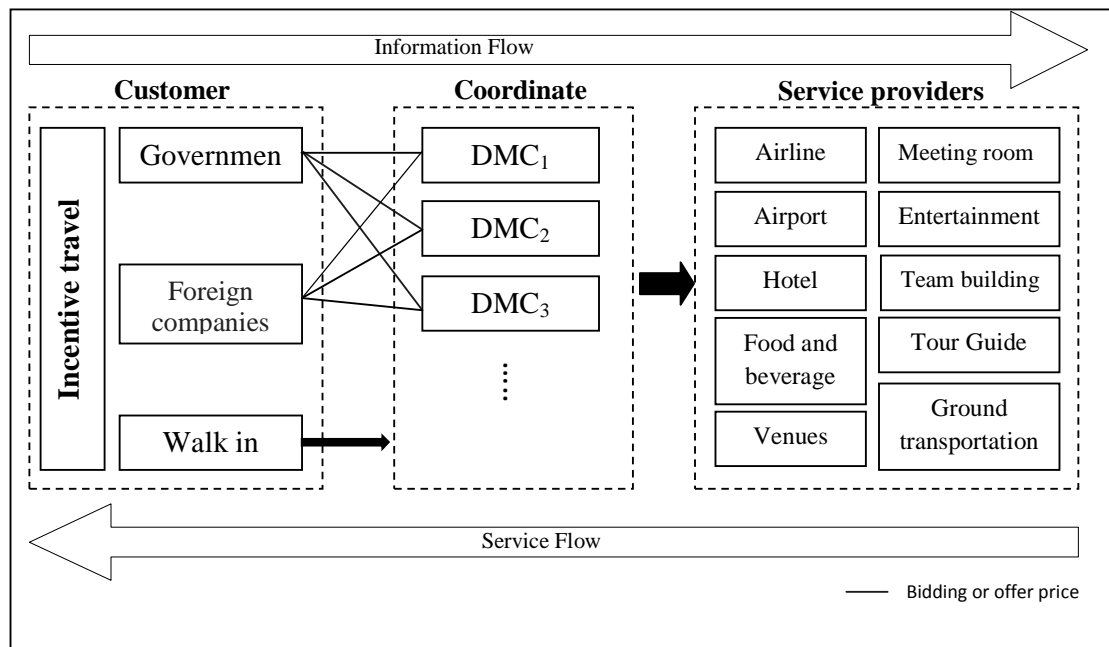


Figure 4. Incentive travel supply chain

step by step accurately. Especially, DMCs, who play important role in this supply chain. They need to work as a teamwork for each incentive travel project. Particularly, all players have to remind that every step has cost, they have to plan carefully for serving their service flow back to customer smoothly.

In addition, researchers found that the incentive supply chain operation can be divided into two types: direct contact and operate through the intermediaries. However, there are pros and cons of each way. With the direct contact, corporates or customers need to contact service providers directly. They then decide the package of the trip themselves. This way is suitable for company/customer who have good connection with service providers whether it be accommodation, restaurant, airline, and etc. In this case, they would get better offered price than operate through the intermediary.

Although this way could make more time to do it and it may be difficult if they do not have strong connection with service providers before.

While customers have indirect contact with intermediary, they could not lose their time, but they may generate some operating cost. Furthermore, if they operate through the intermediary, more contact may have more mistakes rather than using direct contact. The

indirect contact can be separated into three types (Figure 6), which have the same operate. The corporate would create the objectives of the incentive trip, put the information to the intermediaries whether types of accommodation, destination of the trip, theme of the trip, and special needs.

4.2 Playing of service providers in the incentive supply chain

Service providers in the incentive supply chain may consists of hotels, food and beverage, airline, airport, venues, team building, local attraction, shops, restaurants, corporate social responsibility, night life, tour guide, protocols, ground transportation, technology, and etc. Each provider may offer their products and services to DMCs or corporate to create the incentive program. The operation of each provider was shown as Table 3.

The providers in accessibility consists of airline – scheduled flight, airline – non-scheduled flight, Helicopters, Limousines operators, bus & coach operator, rail operators, ferry/boat operators. They have to book the flight for all travellers. Mostly, incentive travellers have to get same quality, some of them want to fly together in only one flight. Thus, service providers may have to manage the flight with their needs for them. The challenge is that some incentive trips may have more than a

thousand travellers, the question is that how service providers Manage it and then provide the fast track for only incentive travellers for moving quicker. In addition, providers should consider in VISA issue for the incentive travellers as well.

In accommodation and venue issue, providers should consider in the term of capacity and suitable for the group. Normally, the incentive group might stay in qualified hotels during the trip, but actually providers can provide resort for the travellers. The providers have to make sure that resort have enough facility to serve the travellers. Moreover, the venue includes restaurant, meeting room, and any space to do team building.

The facility in the incentive trip is the issue that should be considered, because it is the basic things travellers will be facing when they arrive. Mostly, the incentive travellers are foreigners, the smoothly connection is necessary, especially the Internet connection.

Destination selection is the major issue in the incentive travel which may be the first impression to the customers. Especially, the destination which remarkable area like world heritage site, unique area, and etc. Service providers could create the activities with the destination. In case of Thailand,

in reception ceremony, mostly Thai people would welcome the guest with the garlands, or Thai dancing which are the famous show for welcome reception when travellers go to the cultural places. Furthermore, the dining and souvenir during the trip should be the special and looks luxury for getting the “WOW” factor from the incentive travellers.

In addition, the activities are the necessary component in the incentive trip. The suitably activities can get more relationship between the participants, particularly they can get more royalty from the employees. The activities in the destination that would occur during the incentive trip should be interesting and can make the participants to get some relaxing from it. It may be better if that activity use the less time but can get more benefit to the locals. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is the popular activities for the participants for getting know the destination and Its culture. The CSR activities may be the social contribution activity.

With awards, Destination Management Organizer (DMO) is the coordinated management of all the elements that make up a destination. Moreover, they promote and support incentive travel sector for attract customer to choose their destination country.

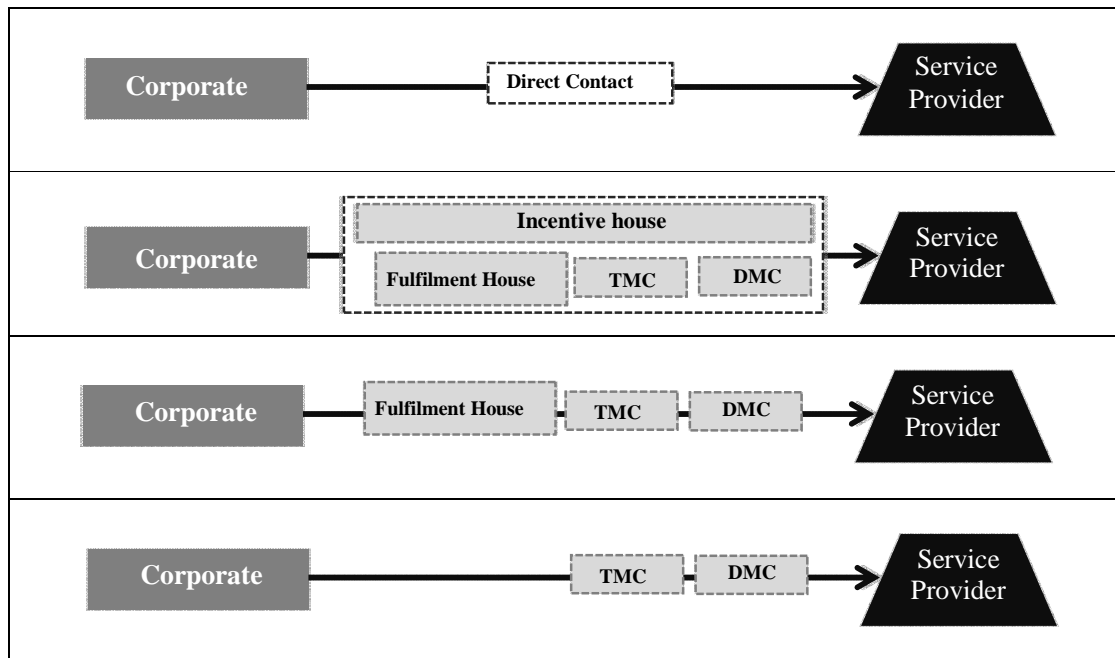


Figure 6. Operation of Incentive Travel Contract

In addition, agencies have role to plan and design incentive travel program, which are important players to operate and coordinate supplier.

For accountabilities, there are sectors to support incentive travel, consisting of local administrative organisations and local residents in which they could facilitate for incentive travellers and present well in their local society. Furthermore, advancement in business has role to support and impel incentive travel project.

Accordingly, the service providers can be the person who play important role in the incentive travel. It can lead the destination to get more competitiveness from other destination. The impression from their services can affect the customer satisfaction on the destination. On the other hand, some dissatisfied services may lead to a dissatisfied corporate and the corporate may not come back to that destination any longer.

4.3 The incentive supply chain in Thailand

MICE industry is one of Thailand's top-growing industries, in which this contribute significantly to its tourism sector. Thailand has been successful to attract MICE events include meeting, incentive, conventions, and exhibition. Thailand's MICE industry has been growing steadily since 2010, with the number of MICE travellers rising from 679,585 to 1,095,995 individuals from 2010-2015, up 61.27 %. MICE revenue grew from THB 50.515 billion in 2010 to THB 95875 billion in 2015, an increase of 79.15 %.

In 2015, Business of incentive travel bringing in the number of visitors were 23.18% and generating revenue were 16.38 % of the MICE industry (Table 4). With this reard, Thailand is the one popular destination that another country choose to visit. Thailand now complete to support activity in the incentive sector.

Table 3. Aspects, members and operations of the Incentive travel supply chain

| MICE Aspects | Supply Chain Members | Operations |
|-------------------------|---|---|
| Accessibilities | - Airport - Airline - Public transportation - Limousine | - Provide Fast track lane - Welcome reception - Airline booking - Provide transportation |
| Accommodations | - 4-5 Star hotels - Luxury resort for incentive group | - hotel booking - Welcome reception |
| Avenues | - Venue for team building - Restaurant for incentive group - Venue for CSR | - Select the suitable venue |
| Amenities | - Infrastructure - Safety - Internet - Pollution - Health care centre | - Internet access - Preparing the infrastructure, health care service |
| Attractions | - Destination attraction - F&B - Shopping centre - World heritage site | - Best attraction - F&B - Souvenir |
| Activities | - CSR - Team building - Training - Festival | - Relaxing but beneficial - Learning local culture |
| Awards | - (Destination Management Organizer) DMO | - Coordinate supplier |
| Agencies | - TMC/DMC - Incentive house | - Plan and design incentive travel program |
| Accountabilities | - Local administrative organisation - Local residents | - Facilitate for incentive traveller in local area |
| Advancement in Business | - Department of tend | - Support incentive travel project |

Table 4. Thailand Key MICE Statistics during 2010 - 2015

| | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 |
|--------------------------|---------|---------|---------|-----------|---------|-----------|
| M: Meetings | | | | | | |
| • No. of events | 2354 | 2,641 | 2,751 | 2,952 | 2,674 | 2,764 |
| • No. of visitors | 191,743 | 210,576 | 220,042 | 258,286 | 232,736 | 262,538 |
| • Revenue (million Bath) | 14,803 | 21,702 | 24,412 | 26,891 | 25,173 | 28,397 |
| I: Incentive | | | | | | |
| • No. of events | 1,520 | 1,810 | 1,900 | 2,032 | 1,980 | 2,039 |
| • No. of visitors | 177,631 | 206,014 | 218,808 | 315,961 | 240,546 | 254,125 |
| • Revenue (million Bath) | 10,315 | 13,023 | 14,423 | 15,816 | 15,274 | 16,136 |
| C: Conventions | | | | | | |
| • No. of events | 2,210 | 2,397 | 2,643 | 2,815 | 2,637 | 2,716 |
| • No. of visitors | 248,530 | 276,226 | 292,037 | 315,961 | 287,886 | 294,371 |
| • Revenue (million Bath) | 22,523 | 24,733 | 28,224 | 31,254 | 26,737 | 27,339 |
| E: Exhibitions | | | | | | |
| • No. of events | 70 | 81 | 88 | 97 | 86 | 14 |
| • No. of visitors | 61,681 | 147,238 | 164,336 | 191,319 | 157,996 | 174,652 |
| • Revenue (million Bath) | 5,874 | 11,167 | 12,711 | 14,524 | 13,616 | 15,214 |
| Total MICE | | | | | | |
| • No. of events | 6,204 | 6,909 | 7,382 | 7,866 | 7,377 | 7,622 |
| • No. of visitors | 679,585 | 840,054 | 895,223 | 1,013,502 | 919,164 | 1,095,995 |
| • Revenue (million Bath) | 53,515 | 70,625 | 79,770 | 88,485 | 80,800 | 95,875 |

Source: Adapted from [24]

5. Conclusion

This research found incentive travel supply chain has three main processes which are planning, coordinating and operating. The incentive supply chain has key players include: corporate, incentive house, TMC, DMC and suppliers. The key player has different roles in the supply chain which include two groups; information flow and services flow. Corporate is customer who purpose incentive for their personnel. The corporate has contacted TMC or DMC at destination through government, foreign companies, or direct contact. TMC or DMC are important player who coordinate between upstream and downstream. They plan and design incentive travel programme that unique and cost effective to maximise ROI of the corporate.

To extend the knowledge presented in this paper, future research can apply a concept of value chain thinking [13]. A value chain thinking focus on processes of exploring, designing, delivering customer value along a supply chain [22].

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