

The Role of Event Planner in Event Management: Perspectives of Trail of The King's Event Participants in Lake Toba

Hesty Nur Fitriyah¹

¹ Department of Tourism Travel Business, Universitas Negeri Jakarta, Indonesia

Correspondence: E-mail: hestyfitriyah21@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study examines the strategic role of event planners in the planning and implementation of the “Trail of The King's” event, an international trail running competition held in Lake Toba, North Sumatra, Indonesia. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation involving six informants, including event organisers and participants. The findings reveal that event planners contribute significantly across all stages of event management—research, design, planning, coordination, and evaluation—by ensuring effective communication, technical preparedness, and logistical efficiency. Participant feedback highlighted high satisfaction levels, particularly in relation to the coordination, information systems, and experiential design of the event. The study concludes by emphasizing the importance of professional competencies in event planning and provides practical implications for enhancing the quality of MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conventions, and Exhibitions) event management in Indonesia.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The growth of the MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conventions, and Exhibitions) industry has positioned event planning as a vital component of tourism development. In Indonesia, event planners play a critical role in shaping the visitor experience and ensuring operational success, especially in large-scale events that blend tourism, culture, and sports. This research focuses on the “Trail of The King's” event to explore how event planners navigate the challenges of conceptualising, coordinating, and delivering successful events.

The study aims to analyse the roles, responsibilities, and strategic contributions of event planners in managing MICE events. Using Goldblatt’s (2013) five-stage event planning model and Amalia & Herawati’s (2020) framework of event implementation, this study evaluates both planner and participant perspectives on event execution, satisfaction, and areas for improvement.

The framework in this research acts as a conceptual foundation that links theory with research issues in a structured and logical manner. In the context of event management, the role of event planners becomes very strategic—not only in the creative and logistical design of the event but also in ensuring that the entire process is coordinated and aligned with the client’s goals. Goldblatt (2013) asserts that the success of an event is greatly influenced by five interconnected stages: research, design, planning, coordination, and evaluation. These stages range from data collection and needs assessment to on-site implementation and post-event evaluation. Meanwhile, Amalia and Herawati (2020) emphasize the importance of technical readiness during implementation, including human resource preparation, site arrangements, and real-time problem-solving. Their findings suggest that structured planning and technical execution can significantly reduce field-level obstacles, improving the overall effectiveness of the event.

This framework provides the basis for analysing the strategic contribution of event planners throughout the event lifecycle. By focusing on the Trail of The King's event, this study aims to identify key success factors and common challenges faced by planners, offering practical insights for improving the management of MICE events in Indonesia.

2. METHODS

A qualitative case study method was employed to explore the experiences and perceptions of both event planners and participants. This approach allows for an in-depth investigation of the planning and execution processes within a real-life event context. Data analysis followed the interactive model by Miles and Huberman (1994), involving data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing.

The study involved six informants: three from the event planner organisation, including the company owner, business director, and account executive and three participants from the 27K and 50K race categories. Informants were selected using snowball sampling, based on their involvement in and knowledge of the event planning and execution process.

Data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Interviews focused on the five event planning stages—research, design, planning, coordination, and evaluation—and explored informants’ insights on logistical preparation, team coordination, participant engagement, and risk management.

Data were analysed using a thematic approach based on Goldblatt’s (2013) event planning cycle and Amalia & Herawati’s (2020) implementation framework. Emerging themes were validated across multiple data sources to ensure triangulation and reliability.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Event Planning Stages (Goldblatt, 2013)

Goldblatt (2013) emphasises five stages of event planning, including research, design, planning, coordination, and evaluation.

A. Research stage

First, in the research stage, planners conducted feasibility studies and market segmentation to tailor the event concept. As explained by the K3, CEO of the organiser, that “Preliminary research is needed to ensure the event has a significant impact, both socially and economically”. In general, the findings suggest that effective event planning should incorporate careful financial management, strategic site selection aligned with the event’s concept, organized logistics, and accurate, timely communication. These components are highly interrelated and contribute significantly to the event’s overall success and the quality of the participant experience. However, some challenges were noted—for example, crowd congestion around the finish line occasionally disrupted runner focus. While most participants considered the announcements adequate and timely, these findings underscore the importance of strong collaboration between the event planner, the client, and all supporting teams to ensure that each aspect of planning is well-coordinated and effectively executed.

In line with this, K-2 highlighted the importance of early-stage market analysis. He explained, “Firstly, there is observation. Secondly, the big market observation. Then the target audience mapping, like age, hobbies, and others. The third is the segment” (K-2). This layered analysis allows event planners to tailor the event concept to specific characteristics and needs, ensuring higher engagement and relevance.

Supporting informants also stressed the importance of aligning the proposal with current audience trends, particularly when preparing event proposals, as illustrated by K-1

“So, the first thing is to know who the target audience is. For example, if we already know the target audience, we can find out how old they are. Well, the ongoing trends—usually I will do research first. The research aims to find out what is relevant to a certain age range”.

In effective research phase should include a feasibility study, in-depth market analysis, and identification of emerging trends. These three components complement each other and contribute to better event planning by enabling more accurate forecasting and strategic alignment with audience needs.

Additionally, this research explored the motivations behind participant interest in the Trail of The King's event. Findings indicate that participants' decisions were shaped by three key factors: (1) the natural beauty of Lake Toba, (2) a personal passion for trail running, and (3) the unique and novel concept of the event itself. These insights highlight the significance of aesthetic appeal, personal interest, and originality in attracting participants—factors that should be closely considered during the initial research and design stages of similar events.

B. Design stage

Second, in the design stage, cultural storytelling was embedded into branding, as noted by K-1, “The name Trail of The King (TOTK) comes from the client, Local Authority, and refers to the Trail of The King’s history”. Moreover, K-2 added that “The concept is built from the logo, then key visuals and storyboards are created to convey the theme effectively”. K-2 explained that these visual elements not only represented the event's brand identity but were also designed to shape the experience expected by participants.

Furthermore, this research also examined participants' perspectives on the technical aspects of event design, particularly the provision of directional signage along the race route. Interview findings indicate that clear and well-placed directions are essential to the smooth execution of the Trail of The King's event, especially given the challenging mountainous terrain, which differs significantly from standard asphalt paths. One participant (K-4), who was directly involved in trail preparation, emphasized:

“Directional signs are extremely helpful for runners—especially for newcomers—because I was also involved in opening the trail for all race categories. Directions should be placed at critical points, such as sharp turns, because the route isn’t paved but runs through mountain paths. Without clear signage, it would be very difficult for participants unfamiliar with the terrain.”

C. Planning stage

The third stage is about planning where detailed logistics included clear payment systems and communication channels are considered for coordination. K1 stressed, “Clear payment systems and accurate budget management are crucial to avoid disruptions”. A participant observed, “The information system was very on time, so we as runners didn’t have to guess the schedule” (K-4). In general, the findings suggest that effective event planning should incorporate careful financial management, strategic site selection aligned with the event’s concept, organized logistics, and accurate, timely communication.

These components are highly interrelated and contribute to the event’s overall success and the quality of the participant experience. However, some challenges were noted—for example, crowd congestion around the finish line occasionally disrupted runner focus. While most participants considered the announcements adequate and timely, these findings underscore the importance of strong collaboration between the event planner, the client, and all supporting teams to ensure that each aspect of planning is well-coordinated and effectively executed.

D. Coordinating stage

Fourth, the coordinating stage where structured team management and pre-event briefings ensured seamless execution. K-2 explained, “The planner forms the core team and assigns experienced division heads to their tasks”. A supporting informant, from K-5, added, “Before the event, there must be a briefing to clarify obstacles and responsibilities”.

Interviews with supporting informants also highlighted the critical need for continuous monitoring and real-time adjustments to ensure alignment with the original plan. One informant (K-6) elaborated:

“For coordination with related parties, before the event there must be a briefing. In the briefing, there will be a question-and-answer session to find out the obstacles. I can organise this briefing based on previous experience and surveys that have been conducted. Later, I will detail all aspects, for example who is responsible at a certain point”.

In general, all informants shared similar views on the importance of coordination as a core pillar of event success. Key informants emphasized the need for continuous and focused communication through platforms like WhatsApp and email, supported by regular meetings to monitor and adjust progress. Establishing a well-organized team with clearly defined roles was seen as essential. Pre-event briefings served as a mechanism for identifying potential barriers, distributing responsibilities, and aligning operational expectations. In conclusion, good collaboration, intense communication, role clarity, and structured progress monitoring emerged as the foundation of successful coordination in event planning.

E. Evaluating stage

At this stage, the post-event reviews are considered to identify strengths and areas for improvement. “There must be an evaluation to maintain what’s good and improve what’s not,” as noted by K-1. moreover, a participant (K-4) noted, “The committee provided clear information, but the crowd at the finish line sometimes covered the directional signs”.

Importantly, supporting informants stressed the need for continuous monitoring and real-time adjustments, not only during but also after the event, to ensure alignment with the original plan and to inform future improvements. As one informant noted:

“For coordination with related parties, before the event there must be a briefing. In the briefing, there will be a question-and-answer session to find out the obstacles. I can organise this briefing based on previous experience and surveys that have been conducted. Later, I will detail all aspects, for example who is responsible at a certain point” (K-5).

Evaluation was understood as both a reflection and a learning process. Key informants emphasized that post-event debriefings and participant feedback collection were essential to refine communication systems, logistical execution, and role assignments. As a result, evaluation in this context was not a one-off task but a continuous process integrated throughout the event cycle, reinforcing the importance of documentation, adaptive planning, and structured improvement loops.

3.2 Event Implementation (Amalia & Herawati, 2020)

In addition to the event planning stages, this study also analysed event implementation through the framework proposed by Amalia and Herawati (2020), which includes human resources, set-up arrangements, event execution, and post-event evaluation. This holistic view enables a detailed understanding of the operational dynamics and managerial strategies employed throughout the event lifecycle. The implementation process did not only focus on on-site activities but also involved the preparation, execution, and improvement cycle to ensure that the event ran effectively and aligned with its objectives. Through interviews and observations, the study assessed how these aspects were coordinated in the field and what improvements could be made for future iterations.

A. Human resources management

The human resource (HR) aspect played a pivotal role from planning to execution. HR management included assigning individuals based on their areas of expertise, providing training to anticipate possible contingencies, and implementing a supervision system to ensure adherence to standards.

Supporting informants highlighted the importance of intensive briefings for the core team to clarify roles and boost motivation. These briefings were intended to strengthen team cohesion and ensure smooth coordination during execution.

Participant feedback also emphasized the interpersonal qualities of the organising team. K-4 stated that: "During the activity, the entire committee was very friendly and helped the participants when they experienced difficulties. Some of the people who are racing are also very friendly to welcome runners who have completed the route." This suggests that the committee's friendliness and responsiveness were significant factors influencing participants' positive perceptions of the event's overall organisation.

B. Set-up arrangements

Effective set-up arrangements were critical in ensuring the operational success of the event. These arrangements covered layout design, participant flow, logistics coordination, and strategic placement of support facilities. Interviewees acknowledged the importance of well-designed infrastructure, which was evident in the positioning of hydration stations and medical posts that were easily accessible and met participants' needs efficiently. The findings show that the organisers successfully translated planning into action, creating a safe and comfortable environment for runners. Solid coordination and anticipatory planning were instrumental in optimising logistics and movement, particularly in an outdoor and mountainous setting where accessibility is crucial.

C. Event Execution

The execution stage required not only strong coordination but also adaptive planning and risk management. K-1 pointed out the inclusion of participant insurance as a preventive measure to mitigate risks. However, significant challenges arose due to a compressed timeline—preparation that ideally required six months was completed in just two. This led to overlapping responsibilities and increased workload among team members.

Despite these constraints, the event proceeded successfully due to efficient role allocation and flexibility in planning. Participants generally had a positive experience, particularly appreciating the scenic landscape and physical challenge. Many noted that the event was enjoyable, even for first-time trail runners. These findings underscore the necessity of having a realistic timeline, robust planning, and contingency strategies to maintain execution quality under pressure.

D. Post-Event.

Following the event, the organiser conducted a structured evaluation to assess the achievement of event goals, team performance, and participant satisfaction. The evaluation focused on identifying operational strengths and weaknesses, particularly regarding service delivery and logistical management. This post-event review is intended to serve as a learning mechanism, allowing the organiser to develop corrective measures and strategic improvements for future events. By gathering feedback and examining execution records, the evaluation contributes not only to refining technical processes but also to reinforcing the organisational foundation. The commitment to continuous improvement demonstrates a forward-looking approach that enhances the sustainability and quality of the Trail of The King's event over time.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the strategic role of event planners in ensuring the successful execution of tourism events, particularly through structured planning, technical preparedness, and responsive coordination. Drawing on Goldblatt's (2013) five-stage event planning model and Amalia and Herawati's (2020) implementation framework, the study demonstrates that event planners were instrumental in aligning logistical operations, stakeholder communication, and audience needs throughout the Trail of The King's event.

A key insight from this research is the impact of event experience on participants' satisfaction and their intention to return or recommend the destination. This aligns with the findings of Sorrentino et al. (2020), who emphasize that a positive event experience strongly influences behavioral intentions. In the Trail of the King's case, participants appreciated the clarity of route signage, friendliness of the committee, and the immersive cultural narrative—underscoring how well-managed event experiences can enhance a destination's brand and appeal.

Second, the event demonstrated a thoughtful approach to sustainable marketing activities (SMAs). As noted by Wang and Butkouskaya (2023), SMAs not only increase perceived event value but also promote environmentally conscious behavior. The event integrated eco-friendly elements, such as reusable hydration stations and culturally themed branding, thereby supporting sustainability without compromising participant comfort or event identity.

Third, digital platforms played a pivotal role in communication and brand building. Instagram and WhatsApp were used to disseminate updates, engage participants, and document the event narrative in real time. This supports Kuster Boluda et al.'s (2025) findings, which show that different platforms serve distinct purposes in shaping community engagement and

international branding in sports events. However, the study also raises the need for ethical considerations in managing digital tools, including data privacy and access equity.

Finally, this study reflects on the tension between commercialization and authenticity. As Winell et al. (2023) argue, increasing commercialization can alienate event participants if it dilutes cultural integrity. In this case, however, the Trail of the King's organizers successfully balanced sponsorship involvement with the preservation of Batak cultural identity, resulting in a uniquely authentic yet professionally executed event. This cultural integration enhanced emotional connection and loyalty among participants.

Taken together, these findings suggest that event planners must not only possess technical and managerial skills but also cultural sensitivity and adaptability. Their role extends beyond logistics—they are curators of experience, stewards of sustainability, and mediators of brand identity and authenticity.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that event planners hold a critical and strategic position in the successful management of tourism events, particularly those involving multiple stakeholders and complex logistics, such as the Trail of the King's event in Lake Toba. Using the event planning model by Goldblatt (2013) and the implementation framework by Amalia and Herawati (2020), the study provides evidence of how planning stages—research, design, planning, coordination, and evaluation—can be effectively operationalized when guided by professional expertise.

Participant feedback underscored the value of thoughtful route planning, interpersonal engagement, and technical preparedness in shaping a positive event experience. These findings align with global literature that links participant satisfaction with repeat visitation and destination recommendation (Sorrentino et al., 2020). Furthermore, the study illustrates how sustainable marketing strategies and cultural storytelling can enhance event value and audience connection, supporting trends observed in global event management research.

The responsible use of digital tools and the ability to balance commercial partnerships with authentic cultural presentation were also identified as essential practices for modern event planners. These aspects are crucial for maintaining trust and long-term brand equity in a competitive and rapidly evolving tourism landscape.

In practice, event planners are encouraged to invest in team capacity building, scenario-based planning, and inclusive communication strategies. Future research could explore longitudinal impacts of trail events on destination branding, or compare planning models across different cultural and geographical contexts to develop transferable best practices.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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6. AUTHORS' NOTE

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