Tourism and Hospitality Management

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE

CONFERENCE PRODUCT

CURRENT AND FUTURE TRENDS

Tamara Bubalo & Anna Nilsson

ABSTRACT

Today, a conference product is described as a package of goods and services, but what are the actual elements of a conference product? What purpose do they fulfill and how can these be developed in the future? The conference business is relatively young. However, some studies have shown that the conference market is passing by the maturity stage, which has resulted in a saturated demand and thereby increased the need for suppliers to change, innovate and bring out the uniqueness of the product. Hence, this study aims to enlarge the understanding of a Swedish conference product, today and in the future. The study follows an explorative and qualitative research design, mainly since there were no recognized theories found particularly describing the conference product. With the help of related theories a research model was formed, which contributed with only a certain level of structure that did not restrict the researchers to go into areas that have not yet been considered but were significant for the understanding of this topic. Based on thirteen interviews with carefully selected industry experts, this study reports that the room, the meeting, the food and beverage, the social activities, the atmosphere, the security, and the image are the most important elements.

However, the future will require some modifications of a conference product since three overarching forthcoming trends have been identified. These are; enhanced efficiency and effectiveness, a more enthusiastic experience offering and intensified personalization. In general, the focus will be more on the conference's contribution to a company's success, which will put more pressure on the conference supplier to provide not only an efficient but an effective conference. Besides the effectiveness in terms of numbers, the conference suppliers should also see advantages gained by creating a more personal offer and at the same time delivering a memorable experience. The role of a supplier will be characterized as a producer rather than a provider of a conference, and a conference will be seen as a result of a more organized and purposeful production, which will heighten the standards of the conference procurements and level of business professionalism. Hence, "the outcome of the conference" needs to be added as a core element of the conference product. The already identified elements will be seen as only supporting ones that will be more synchronized in the future in order to achieve a certain outcome.

Key words: travel and tourism product, service design, conference, conference product, conference market, packaging, experience delivering, future trends

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1. BACKGROUND AND PROBLEM ANALYSIS

This chapter is fundamental for the forthcoming parts of the study and will provide a clear vision of why this research was conducted and what it is trying to achieve. It begins with a general introduction, where the background of the problem is discussed. This part is followed by the problem analysis that focuses on the actual problem that is being explored, which further emerges into the purpose of the thesis and its research questions. In order to further clarify the area of this research, the limitations are presented, which explains what has not been researched but have been assumed as relevant. Finally, the chapter ends with the disposition of the study, which is also visualized in a model.

1.1 GENERAL INTRODUCTION

As long as there have been people, there have been meetings (Montgomery and Strick, 1995) and the human desire to exchange ideas is as old as humankind (Weber and Chon, 2002). In ancient Rome, several buildings were especially used for holding meetings where people met to discuss subjects such as hunting plans, wartime activities, and negotiations for peace (Spiller, 2002). Many terms used in the meeting industry today have their origin in Latin terms, for example "conference", which has its origin in the medieval *conferential* ("to bring together") (Thompson, 1995). During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, industrialization took place in the United States as well as in Western Europe, and due to the growth of industry and commerce the need for meetings between businessmen became more apparent. The growth of the convention and meeting industry since the 1950's is explained by a number of factors such as, the increase in disposable income, the greater propensity to travel, and improvements in transportation and technology (Spiller, 2002). Moreover, trade, politics and social interactions are becoming more apparent in

our modern society and as a result the number of meetings is increasing. Also, the need for research, information and development is increasing the number of meetings (Kellerman et al., 2001).

Conventions and meetings are part of the MICE industry, encompassing Meetings, Incentives, Conventions, and Exhibitions (Weber and Chon, 2002), which today represents one of the fastest growing segments of the tourism industry (Opperman and Chon, 1997; Weber, 2000). According to MPI (Meeting Professionals International), the turnover for the global MICE-industry is approximately $6, 400$ million SEK (Kellerman et al., 2001). Furthermore, this indicates that there is a wide variety of definitions used in the MICE industry. This is particularly true for definitions associated with meetings, conventions, and conferences, since these are often used interchangeably (Weber and Chon, 2002). In order to limit the area and size of this study, the term "conference" is mainly employed. A conference has several different definitions but it is often used to "*describe almost any type of meetings whose purpose is the interchange of ideas*" (Shone, 1998). However, a narrower and clearer definition has been given by the British Tourist Authority, which is found to be more appropriate in this study. It describes a conference as "*an out-of-office meeting of at least six hours duration, involving a minimum of eight people* (BTA, 1999). Compared to a convention, a conference is described as a meeting that does not have to be a tradition or involve any periodicity. Also, a conference generally involves fewer participants than a convention (Kellerman et al., 2001).

Moreover, the term "conference participant" is used throughout the study to refer to the conference attendees. Additionally, the "conference suppliers" are defined as those involved within the provision of the conference market product to the buyers. It should be clarified that generally, most of the suppliers

are not purely dedicated conference facilities. There are many venues operating as part of the revenue mix within the larger business such as hotels, academic establishments and unusual venues. This can be explained as a result of the fact that the barriers to enter the conference market are relatively low since it can be assumed that many organizations have the necessary facilities such as rooms, tables, chairs, and basic equipment in order to provide an area for the interchange of ideas (Leask and Hood, 2001). According to Cohen (1989), many less traditional venues have been encouraged to enter the market, especially after the increased demand for something out of the ordinary. These kinds of venues have been identified and described by the BTA (Tourism Research and Marketing, 1997) as *"facilities that are used for conferences, including hotels, museums, historic houses, art galleries, and a number of other buildings normally used for quite different purposes."*

1.1.1 Introduction to the Swedish Conference Market

In an article written by Soenarso (2004), Kjell A. Nordström, who is an appreciated researcher at the Stockholm School of Economics, believes that the history of meetings in Sweden goes back as far as 1860. He explained that it is after this decade that a couple of labor unions were formed and the Swedish population started to organize themselves. Different kinds of national movements were founded, such as sport, scouts, accommodation, etc., which resulted in improved civilian cooperation and an increase in the number of meetings. During this time, the meetings were mainly held in the facilities owned by the universities and communities around the country. Shortly after, arranging meetings became an obvious practice in the Swedish society and has remained quite the same ever since. Today, according to Nordström, there is no other country in the world besides Sweden that has as developed and complex meeting tradition. According to Kellerman et al. (2001), Sweden has built up a

good reputation and possesses all the essential resources for holding meetings, such as venues and competences, which has made Sweden highly competitive in the business tourism market and probably more competitive than on the leisure tourism market. Moreover, he explains that the MICE-industry is one of the areas within the travel and tourism industry where Sweden has great potential to expand and gain market share even on the international market.

According to Leask and Hood (2001), despite the MICE-industry's obvious significance there is generally limited academic research within this field. According to them, the industry is often unable to speak with a united voice since its fragmented nature can create a problem for the focus of research. The MICE industry contains many different actors (Leask and Hood, 2001), including meeting venues, hotel accommodations, catering, entertainment, technology support and so forth. This indicates that it is difficult to cover the entire industry with one research, and a lot of times only one aspect is considered, e.g. catering, which in turn simplifies the complex nature of the industry (Ladkin, 2002). However, according to Andersson (2004), the Swedish meeting industry has started to gain attention in the last few years. She states that there are some newly organized and some completed projects by Swedish universities, analytical institutes, and organizations such as Svenska Möten, Skånska Möten, The Swedish Tourist Authority, Meeting Professionals International (MPI), and so forth.

Kellerman et al. (2001) explains that the conference market in Sweden is rapidly expanding, where new and old actors are constantly introduced to the market with new names and concepts in order to attract customers. According to him, in Sweden there are approximately 2,000 conference possibilities, including day conference facilities, other conference facilities, hotels, restaurants, sport venues, cinemas, airports, universities, boats, trains and

busses. The turnover of the Swedish conference segment was estimated at approximately fifteen billion SEK per year in 2001, and it has been growing continuously ever since the second half of the 1990's (Kellerman et al., 2001). According to an article found in Svenska Dagbladet (March 1, 1999), the most remarkable growth was experienced during 1998 when the bookings increased 60% compared to the previous year.

However, a dilemma that has dominated the Swedish conference segment for several years is the strong competition caused by the large number of actors on the market (Affärsvärlden, April 7, 2004). A study by Reality Check (2004) explained the competitiveness by referring to today's Swedish conference market as the one that is passing the fast-growing maturity stage. The demand is stabilizing and the supply is gradually becoming bigger than the demand, which besides the overcapacity highlights that the buyer is becoming more aware of the perceived value and is gaining more power on the market. The buyer's meeting planning process is becoming better thought out, which in other words means that their requirements are becoming higher and priorities much clearer. Another factor contributing to the tough competition in the Swedish conference market is the economic recession that the Swedish, as well as the international economy, has been suffering since 2000. Conference buyers experienced a lack of both time and money, which has restricted them from offering their employees a conference outside the company (Affärsvärlden, April 7, 2004). Companies have been encouraging their employees to use their own conference facilities and other IT-solutions, such as "video- and phone conferences", since they enable employees to have meetings without leaving their headquarters (Personal & Ledarskap, May 23, 2003).

Additionally, it has been recognized that the Swedish conference market is characterized by the constant change in trends. According to Wildhuss (2004),

the meeting industry is easily affected by different trends, which means that it does not take that long for a market to adapt new ideas. It is a relatively new industry that possesses many young and creative people that are curious and willing to test new ideas; hence new trends can easily take hold of the market. By looking back in time, the different trends have been replacing each other approximately every decade. During the 1970's, the major trend was "finding yourself" at a conference. Ten years later, luxury and vanity were the key words for a successful conference. The 1990's economic boom brought up the interest for adventure and the conference segment was characterized by offers that were focused on the physical involvement of the participants, i.e. wilderness safari, whitewater rafting and travels to exotic places.

During the latest years, the focus seems to have switched from involving the participants physically to inspiring them intrinsically (Dagens Industri, April16, 2004). According to Wildhuss, (2004) the trends during the 1970' seem to have returned, however this time with a certain streak of luxury. These kinds of conferences are also called feel-good conferences, where the basic product is combined with activities such as spa treatments or inspiring speeches about health and stress. In other words, the dominating trend is about companies "taking care" of their employees. The niche focused on the spa treatments has already reached a turnover of one billion SEK, which indicates an enormous growth in the last couple of years. One factor that has supported the development of this trend is the companies' continuous strive for increased efficiency, which encourages employees to escape the stressful working environment and to seek a more relaxed and comfortable ambiance (Personal & Ledarskap, May 23, 2003).

Besides spa treatments, the demand for activities that bring employees closer to each other has also gained more attention, i.e. cooking and wine tasting

(Affärsdata, May 23, 2003). Moreover, the development within the IT industry has had a great impact on the conference sector (Svenska Dagbladet, March 1, 1999). The transmission of information and the every-day meetings are mainly done via companies' internal net and the internet. Therefore, the main objective of conferences has become to reinforce the relationships between managers and the co-workers and thereby strengthen the sense of community within a working group or a department, rather than transmitting the information. Besides the IT development, the increased number of fusions and affiliations between companies has enhanced the significance of personal meetings. A conference is seen as an opportunity for "new" team members to get to know each other and reconsider and determine their roles within the "new-build" company.

1.2 PROBLEM ANALYSIS

As already explained, the Swedish conference industry has gained a lot of attention in the last few years mainly due to its rapid expansion. However, as it has also already been explained, in the past few years it has been characterized by the large number of actors on the market and a gradually increasing supply. Leask and Hood (2001) explain that when a market becomes more competitive it results in a production of more unique and unusual service products, since the conference suppliers are constantly forced to seek competitive advantages in terms of efficiency and profitable ways to differentiate themselves. Likewise, Kotler (1999) explains that it is not enough to only focus on price battles and heavy advertising, since the suppliers should not simply defend the product but they should also consider modifying the product in terms of its characteristics, quality, features, or style. Hence, this indicates that there is need for suppliers to modify the conference product.

1.2.1 The Complexity of the Conference Product

However, in order to be able to develop a product in general, Grönroos (1990) explains that it is necessary for a supplier to possess a proper description of a product that presents all the central elements. A study by Future Watch (2004) explains that technology will affect the way conference suppliers and their customers are communicating. The increased use of the Internet for marketing, sales, contracting, and communications will make the procedures more efficient, but it will decline face-to-face contacts among meeting professionals and cause mutual confusion about each others needs. This will create a great challenge since the conference buyers seek suppliers with value added offerings where the sales and proposal process must more readily meet renewed demand for quality services. More standardized procurement and fulfillment policies could inferior the confusion, which will allow the meeting industry to operate more efficiently. In other words, according to this study a conceptualization of the conference product could be of great advantage.

This might generate a problem for conference suppliers since a conference product is difficult to grasp and there is a lack of research within this field. It is difficult to understand and deal with the conference market as one market since the MICE industry in itself is fragmented in nature, which in turn contributes to the complexity of the conference product. This indicates that it is vital to conduct a study that will contribute with a proper description of a conference product that presents tangible elements as well as intangible elements.

1.2.2 Different Conference Purposes

The different elements of the conference product are likely to be more or less important considering the purpose of the conference, which implies that the

research needs to define different purposes and their affect on the elements of a conference (Kotler et al., 1999). According to research by Reality Check (2004) there are two main purposes when choosing what kind of conference facility to use; *the process-oriented* and *the experience-oriented.* If a buyer has a process-oriented purpose the focus is put on logistics and other rational factors for meetings with relatively standardized content. On the other hand, with an experience-oriented purpose, the supplier is focusing on generating a creative and unique experience, which encompasses both motivation and surprise. However, it should be acknowledged that these two purposes can be explained as extremes and thus, it can be assumed that there are purposes that could be seen as a mix of them both.

1.2.3 The Uncertain Future

Besides the lack of proper description of the conference product, it can be assumed that the turbulent environment of the conference market makes it even more complicated for the conference supplier to ascertain how the product should be improved and developed in order to meet the customers' needs in the future. Considering the past, it can be acknowledged that the conference product has been constantly changing in accordance to the trends and it seems that the product has been combined with different activities, unique environments and different technological solutions in order to satisfy the existing demands.

However, these trends belong to the past and the future development is open for speculations. The Greek philosopher Heraclites was no doubt speaking of event design when he said "*nothing endures but change*". Staying on the cutting edge requires asking not only what is new, but what is next (Rosenbaum, 2004). This implies that there is a need to take a closer look at

the current conference product as well as to explore the forthcoming trends and their impact on the conference product. More specifically, it is of great interest to see how the importance of different elements might change in line with the forthcoming trends.

"The great thing in this world is not so much where we are, but in what direction we are moving".

Oliver Wendell Holmes

1.3 PURPOSE

To conclude, the Swedish conference suppliers are surrounded with a market that constantly forces them to seek competitive advantage, efficiency and profitable ways to differentiate the conference product. In other words, in order to survive, suppliers within the conference market need to be innovative and thereby aware of current and forthcoming trends. Therefore, it is essential for the suppliers to gain further understanding of the existing conference product and how it might be featured in the future. However, the conference market is fragmented in nature, which makes it difficult to conceptualize the conference product and no prior research of this kind have been found within this field.

Hence, the purpose with this study is to develop a theoretical model that describes the conference product. The theoretical model will consider the different sectors of the conference market and thereby, contribute with an overall picture of the conference product, presenting its different elements. Moreover, the model will be put in relation to different purposes with conferences and to forthcoming trends in the market, in order to explore whether these factors have an impact on the conference product and its different elements.

Evidently, this research is useful for the conference suppliers but also for the other actors on the conference market. Conference buyers will become more aware of what they are actually buying, which will make it easier for them to compare and select different offers. Organizations and their members, such as MPI can also take advantage of this study since it contributes to future research due to the choice of a rather unexplored area.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As stated earlier, it is important for conference suppliers to gain insight in the conference product as well as its future development. Hence, the two key research questions for this study are:

- ➢ **What are the features of a conference product?**
  - What are the elements of a basic conference product?
  - What importance do different elements have?
  - What impact do different conference purposes have on the elements included in the conference product?

- ➢ **What are the future features of a conference product?**
  - What are the future trends of the conference market?
  - What impact do the future trends have on the type of elements of a conference product and on their level of importance?

1.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Product design has two sides, one that reflects the demand and the other that reflects the supply. This study analyzes the components of the conference product from the conference suppliers' point of view and identifies existing and

potential components that could be improved or developed in order to meet customer needs in the future. It does not intend to focus on the demand, i.e. customer needs, behavior, and perceptions, to identify strength and weaknesses of the product design. Moreover, this study does not discuss a total new service development process from idea generation to launching. Instead, it focuses on the core of such a process, which is how to understand and manage the object of the development itself that is the service as a product. Furthermore, the study only considers those product elements that have a direct effect on the service delivery. Thereby, the back-office such as the management control system will not be considered.

It also has to be pointed out that this study only explores the internal dimensions of a product, which means that the focus is put on the conference suppliers own goods and services. This is a narrower view compared to the view from the standpoint of the tourist where the product covers the complete experience from the time he leaves home to the time he or she returns to it. Finally, when considering the future expansion of the conference market today, the international market is of great significance. However, when entering a market outside of national borders, there are several additional aspects that have to be considered such as cultural difficulties, legal issues, etc. This would require a bigger and more complex research, which has restricted this study to only include the Sweden conference market.

1.6 DISPOSITION OF THE STUDY

In order to facilitate the reading, a disposition of the study is presented. It shows the reader what position each part has in regards to others and how they together create an entirety. The theoretical framework is the chapter where apposite theories are presented in order to create an understanding for the

theoretical foundation of the study's problem area. Due to the lack of prior research, specifically concerning the identification and description of a conference product, a theoretical framework and a research model are developed. Additionally, these function as a structure for the data collection and analysis.

The methodology describes how the research is carried out so that the research questions are answered and the purpose of the study is achieved. It describes the choice of research philosophy and the research design, which indicate the way the problem area is approached and further guides the data collection and analysis phase of the research project. Moreover, this chapter ensures the quality of the research by explaining the way the validity and the reliability of this study are accomplished. The methodology part is followed by the result analysis where the results of the study are presented and analyzed. The analytical discussion is carried through by comparing the theoretical framework with the empirical data. This chapter results in a conclusion that answers the research questions presented in the introduction part of the study and clarifies its theoretical and practical implications. Finally, the study ends with reflections and suggestions to further research.
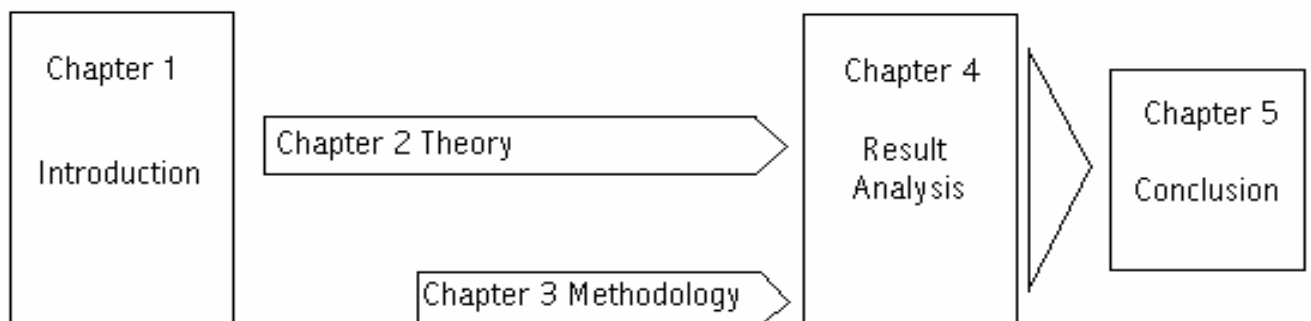
Figure 1. Disposition Model

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter starts with a chronological presentation of theories describing how to design and manage services as well as tourism and hospitality products. Since there are no recognized theories particularly describing the conference product, related theories are put in a conference context and a framework of the conference product is described. This section is structured in line with the six elements that have been distinguished to create the fundamental of a conference. As a result of the framework of the conference product a research model is presented, which is later used as a foundation for the empirical study.

2.1 INTRODUCTION TO DESIGNING AND MANAGING PRODUCTS

Developing a successful product is one of the main areas of the marketing function and the marketing managers' main task is to design a product-service combination that provides real value to targeted customers, motivates purchase, and fulfils genuine consumer needs (Kotler et al., 1999). According to Middleton (2001), product decisions are of great importance since they, with all their implications for the management of service operations, not only influence the marketing mix but also a firm's long-term growth strategy and policies for investment and human resources. Concerning the travel and tourism industry, companies operates within a dynamic, global environment where every decade brings new marketing objectives, where practices and rapid changes can quickly make yesterday's winning strategies out of date (Kotler et al., 1999). Hence, being aware of product design and being innovative is of great competitive advantage.

2.1.1 Packaging

A major difficulty in understanding the travel and tourism product is, according to Middleton (2001), due to the fact that the industry in itself is fragmented in nature, containing different sectors such as accommodations, attractions, restaurants, and transport as well as other facilities. Hence, the concept of product also includes people, process and physical evidence. These three P's, which are particularly useful for tourism (Middleton, 2001), were added to the traditional marketing mix by Booms and Bitner in the early 1980's. Because of the particular nature and characteristics of travel and tourism services, Middleton (2001) implies that product design is rather complex and in what ways the product elements are put together (product formulation/design) are crucial decisions for marketing managers. In general, within service marketing there have been extensive consideration of the meaning of the "product" and how the concept should be developed to reflect the modern, post-industrial context of service/experience industries.

According to Sasser, Olsen, and Wyckoff (1978), in designing a service product, the concept must be defined in terms of the bundle of goods and services sold to the consumer where the relative importance of each component and the customer has to be identified. Middleton (2001) refers to product packages within travel and tourism as:

"Quality assured, repeatable offers comprising two or more elements of transport, accommodation, food, destination attractions, other facilities and related services" (Middleton, 2001, p. 412).

In other words, considering any form of tourist visit, the product may be defined as a bundle or package of tangible and intangible components, based on

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activity at a destination, where all components of a package are marketed under a particular product or brand label (Middleton, 2001). Moreover, according to Kotler et al. (1999), in travel and tourism there are endless possibilities for how hospitality products can be packaged.

Furthermore, Middleton (2001, p. 89) has divided the tourism product into different components:

- Basic design of all the components that are put together as an offer to customers. For example, a short-break package marketed by a hotel.

- Style and ambience of the offer. For service products dealing with customers on the premises where products are delivered, this is mainly a function of design decisions creating the physical environment and ambience (the physical evidence,) judged appropriate to the product's image and price.

- The service element, including number, training, attitudes and appearance of all staff engaged in the processes that deliver the product to the consumer, especially the front-of-house staff.

- Branding, the focus for communication, which identifies particular products with a particular set of values, a unique name, image and expectation of the experience to be delivered.

In this study, the focus is put on explaining the conference products from the individual tourism business. Most producer organizations in the industry take a narrow view since they primarily focus on their own goods and services. For example, airline seats, hotel beds, and entertainment are all components of an overall tourism product while the airlines themselves and other producer organizations generally focus on the specific products they sell. However, it is important to clarify that these components of a tourism product can be viewed

from the standpoint of a tourist where the product covers the complete experience from the time he leaves home to the time he returns to it. The overall view of a tourism product is highly relevant to the marketing managers since it determines the interrelationship scope for co-operation and partnership between suppliers in different sectors of the industry. From the individual tourism business, a components view of products still holds good. However, since it is in the nature of services, they can still be divided into a series of specific operations or processes. In other words, the product is still seen as a package of tangibles and intangibles but with a much narrower standpoint.

2.2 THE SERVICE AS A PRODUCT

To begin, allow us to go back in time and look into Grönroos's description of the service as a product. According to Grönroos (1990), any attempt to conceptualize a service has to be customer oriented so that a service can be described as a product that can be developed, produced, and marketed. All aspects of a service that customers perceive must be taken into account. This includes both what the customer receives (technical quality) as well as how the customer perceives the interactions with the service provider (functional quality). Thus, what has to be planned and marketed to customers is not only a package of different services, including tangibles and intangibles, but a total, more comprehensive, service offering. Thereby, according to Grönroos (1990), managing a service offering requires four steps:

- developing the service concept
- developing a basic service package
- developing an augmented service offering
- managing image and communication

First, the service concept describes the intentions of the organizations, which is further used for the development of the service offer. Moreover, the basic service package includes and expresses the bundle of services that are essential for the fulfillment of customers needs. However, a complete service package cannot ensure that the service is properly delivered since it does not say anything about the way the interactions with the customers are taken care of. Thereby, an augmented service offering is added and includes the service processes and the interactions between the organization and its customers, which are also described as the service production process. This is the reason for why the basic service package has to be expanded into an augmented service offering before it can be stated that a service could be described as a product. Additionally, the impact of the image and communication on the service has to be recognized as well.

2.3 SERVICE AS A PROCESS

Grönroos (1997) redeveloped the augmented service offering concept and stated that one should not strive for describing a service as a product but rather as a process. Service firms do not have products in the form of pre-produced bundles of resources and features that are consumed by customers in order to satisfy their needs. Instead, the service process, with the outcome of the process as an integral part of it, is consumed by customers as solutions to their problems; hence the product is missing. In other words, physical goods are pre-produced in a factory, unlike services that are produced in a process where the consumers interact with production resources of the service firm. There are some parts of the service that might be prepared before the customers enter the process; however the vital part of the service production process takes place in interaction with customers and in their presence. This is called process consumption as opposed to the outcome consumption. Due to the process

nature of services, the fulfillment of promises given through external marketing requires support of a large number of part-time marketers as well as the development of service-oriented operational systems and investments in service-oriented physical resources in the service system.

In process consumption, the product as a pre-produced package of resources is broken down into its parts, a set of resources needed to create a good customer perceived value. The resources of a service firm are divided into five groups: personnel, technology, knowledge and information, customers' time and the customer. Thereby, promises given by sales and external marketing are fulfilled through the process of managing the various types of resources. In Figure 2 the service system model by Grönroos (1997) visualizes the resources interacting in the company/customer interface. These are:

- Contact persons with certain knowledge about how to perform their tasks and how to interact with customers
- Systems and operational resources as well as physical resources and equipment based on the technology
- Customers themselves with their knowledge how to perform in the system and with the given amount of time to their disposal
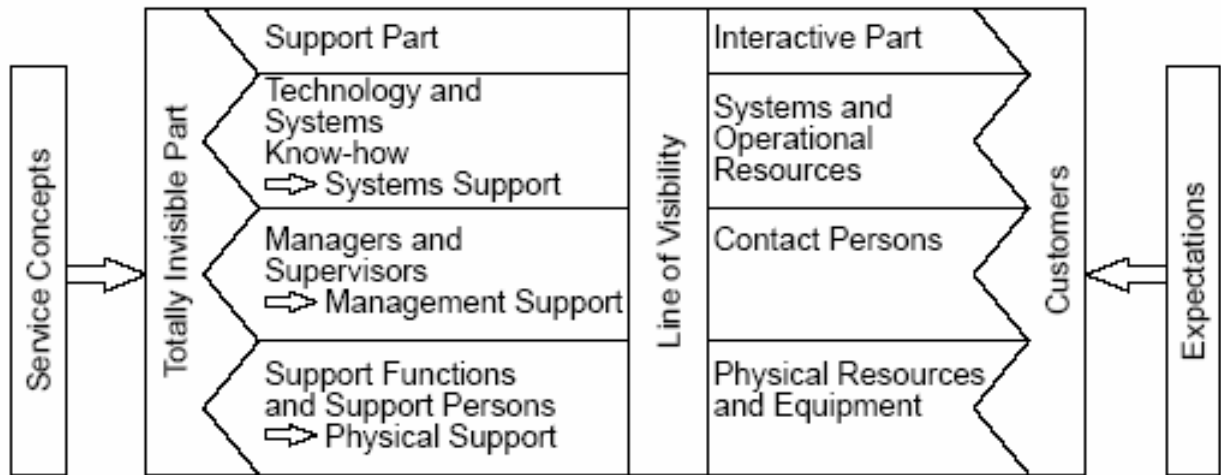
Figure 2. The Service System
Source: Grönroos, 1990 p. 208

The interactive part of the service system is of great importance; however it cannot function well without support from the back-office, including systems support, management support and physical support. Customers seldom see what is going on in the back-office since it is hidden beyond a line of visibility and therefore it does not have a direct effect on the customers' perception of the service process. Furthermore, system support concerns knowledge about technology and systems required to produce supportive pieces of information, which must exist in the firm. Appropriate investments in such resources and competencies must therefore be made. Management support is about managers and supervisors supporting and encouraging the contact personnel to perform well. Physical support is described as accurately and timely input for the interactive system that must be produced by information system and people running such systems. Finally, behind the support part is a totally invisible part of the service system; however it does not have an effect on the perceived service process.

2.4 THE TRAVEL AND TOURISM PRODUCT FROM A BUSINESS PERSPECTIVE

Kotler et al. (1999), among several other researchers, referred to Grönroos's theory in his description of how to design and manage a product within the travel and tourism industry. He defines the term "product" as follows:

*"A product is anything that can be offered to a market for attention, acquisition, use, or consumption that might satisfy a want or a need. It includes physical objects, services, places, organizations, and idea*s" (Kotler et al., 1999, p. 274).

However, it has to be noted that this definition refers only to the planned components of the product. Therefore, it does not take into consideration the fact that unplanned incidents occur as well, which affects the service encounter and customer satisfaction. According to Kotler (1999), tourism and hospitality managers should think about the product on four different levels; the core product, the facilitating product, the supporting product and the augmented product.
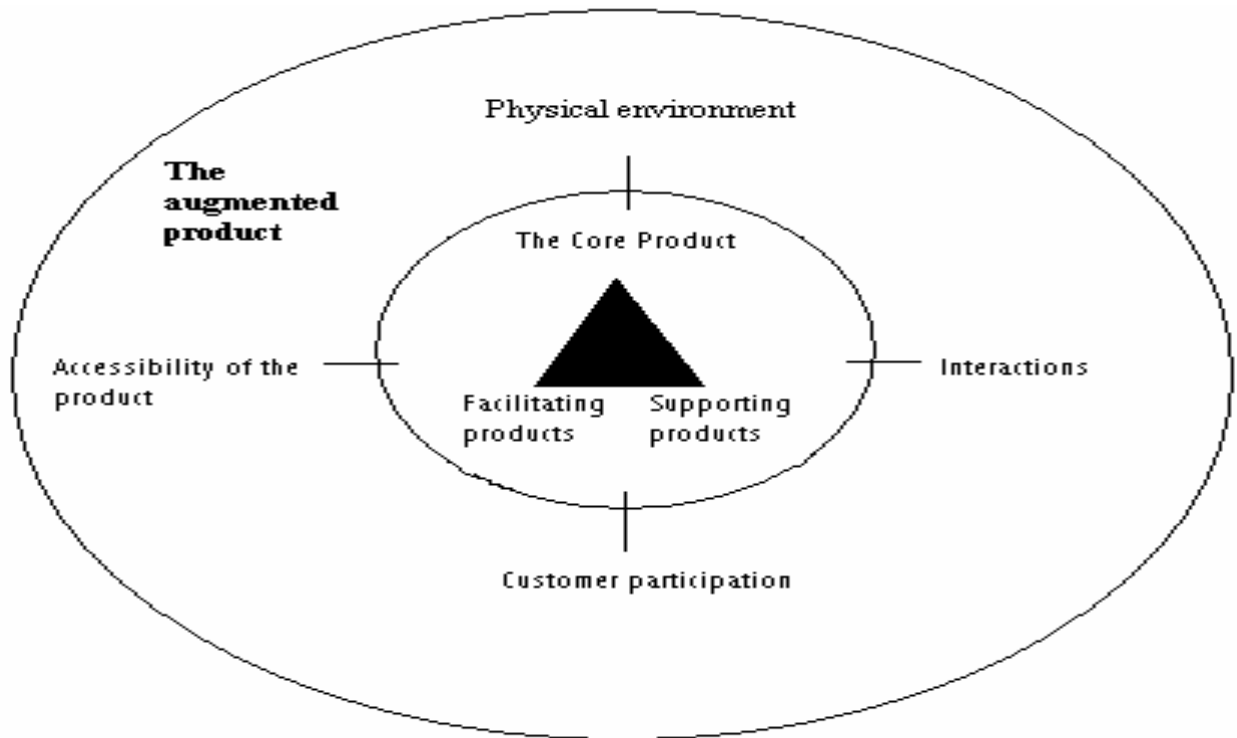
Figure 3. Product Levels
Source: Kotler et al., 1999, p. 276.

2.4.1 Core Product

The most basic level of a product is the core product, which includes the components that the buyer is actually buying. It is important that managers are able to identify the core benefits of the product and sell those benefits rather than only focusing on merely selling features (Kotler et al., 1999). In other words, according to Middleton (2001), the core product is intangible, it is an idea.

2.4.2 Facilitating Product

Facilitating products are featured in the form of services or goods and are essential in enabling utilization of the core product. For example, a first–class corporate hotel must, together with the core product, offer check-in and

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checkout services, telephones, a restaurant, and valet service. It is also necessary to understand the target market and its needs in order to identify the facilitating goods and service that they require (Kotler et al., 1999).

2.4.3 Supporting Product

As already explained, core products need to be combined with the facilitating products; however it is not necessary to include the supporting products. These kinds of products are used in order to add value to the core product and to emphasize uniqueness, which enables companies to differentiate themselves from the competitors. Yet, they are not expected by the customers. A good example is a full-service health spa, which can be used as a supporting product for a hotel. Whether a product is defined as facilitating or supporting is determined by the target market, i.e. families may not require valet service when staying at a hotel while business travelers may depend on it. Additionally, supporting products might turn into facilitating products after they have been offered for a certain period of time. For example, amenity packages were introduced by the Hyatt hotel chain and after some time they became one of the customers' most expected amenities in the same type of hotels. Today, the amenity packages are seen as facilitating products. Thereby, the ideal is that firms offer supporting products that are not easily duplicated by competition. Supporting products do not offer a competitive advantage if they are not properly planned and implemented. Moreover, they must meet or exceed customer expectations in order to have a positive effect.

2.4.4 Augmented Product

As mentioned before, Grönroos (1990) states that the core, facilitating, and supporting product determines what the customers receive but not how they

receive it. However, the augmented service offering combines what is offered with how it is delivered. According to Middleton (2001), the augmented service offering expresses the idea of value added over and above the formal offer; however it must have a purpose. At the same time they enable organizations to differentiate their products from those of competitors. An augmented service offering could consist of both tangible and intangible elements. A tangible element might be a glass of wine upon the arrival to a hotel or free tickets to local attractions, while intangible benefits could be expressed as quality of service provided, friendliness of the staff and ambience created. Furthermore, Kotler et al. (1999), argue that core- , facilitating-, and supporting products are combined with augmented elements such as *accessibility, atmosphere, interaction,* and *customer participation.*

Accessibility

When it comes to the travel and tourism industry the customer usually comes to the service system, e.g. a hotel or a restaurant, where employees and customers interact with the service delivery system. Hence, accessibility in terms of both location and opening hours is of great importance (Kotler et al., 1999). According to Grönroos (1990), accessibility issues can be broken down into four parts; site accessibility, customer ease of use of the physical resources, frontline employees' contribution to accessibility, and ease of customer participation.

Atmosphere: The Physical Environment

The physical environment is a critical element in services (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003; Bitner, 1992; Booms and Bitner, 1982). Since services are characterized by inseparability, the customers are present in the production premises and therefore the physical environment is a vital part of the product (Wakefield and

Blodgett, 1996). Due to this fact, the atmosphere could be the customer's reason for choosing an establishment (Kotler et al., 1999).

During the 1970's, the physical environment emerged as an important concept for understanding customers' consumption behavior in the service industry. Kotler (1973-1974) used the term *atmospherics* to describe the conscious designing of space to create specific emotional effects in the buyer that enhances his/her purchase probability. In this case, the atmosphere of particular surroundings is described in sensory terms, including physical attributes such as; color, size, shape, brightness, temperature, volume, and so forth. Similar to Kotler (1973-1974), Belk (1975) describes the physical environment in terms of *physical surrounding,* including the most readily apparent features of an environment, such as décor, sound, aromas, lightning and so forth. However, Belk (1975) also points out the *social surroundings,* including other people's presence, their characteristics, and interpersonal interactions as factors that provide additional depth to a description of the environment.

According to Baker (1987), the physical environment can be explained taking into account three different dimensions: ambient, design, and social. The *ambient factors,* such as lightning, music, cleanliness, scent, and so forth are predisposed to have an affect on the non-visual senses and they also tend to be processed at a subconscious level. The *design factors* are more visual in nature compared to the ambient factors and are therefore more likely to have a greater impact on the customer. The design factors can be classified into two groups: *esthetic* and *functional.* The esthetic elements include architecture, style, color, and shape on the interior and exterior, while the functional elements involves layout and comfort. Finally, the *social factors* incorporate how the amount of personnel and other customers, and their behavior and characteristics have an impact on the customers' apprehension on the physical environment.

The three dimensions discussed by Baker (1987) are similar to the ones Bitner (1992) uses in describing the *servicescape.* She identified three main dimensions of the servicescape, which influence the holistic perception of the customers' perception. First, the *ambient condition* affects the five senses. Second, the *spatial layout and functionality*, which refer to how equipment and furnishings are arranged, but also to how these items are able to facilitate customers. Finally, *signs, symbols and artifacts,* which include labels for directional purposes and to communicate behavior and rules, but also style and décor that communicate and enhance a certain image.

In accordance to Bitner (1992), Middleton (2001) explains that the power that the internal and external design of buildings and other facilities have over customers is increasingly recognized in all sectors of travel and tourism. Design features can influence customers in four different ways. Design influences the beliefs that a customer holds about an organization (the cognitive element), the emotions aroused in customers (the affective element), the behavior and actions of customers (the behavioral element), and finally, the physical comfort of the customers (the physiological element).

Interaction

In designing products, it is necessary to make it easy for the customers to learn about the product since the customers participate in the delivery of most tourism products. There are three different stages of customer interaction (Kotler et al., 1999): *joining, consumption* and *detachment*. The joining stage often includes sampling in order to catch potential customers' attention and to make them familiar with the product. However, designers of the products need to be aware of not only how to attract a customer but also how the customer will interact with the product after the purchase. The consumption stage takes place when the service is consumed, and during this phase *employees, physical*

facilities, and *customers* are all part of the product. Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) have the belief that employees *"physically embody the product and are walking billboards from a promotional standpoint."* In other words, the employees are the organization in the eyes of the consumer. Physical features, layout and signage can also be used in order to simplify customer's interaction with the product. Signage is also used in order to make customers aware of the existence of supporting products. Moreover, in most service encounters, interaction between customers are present as well (Grove and Fisk, 1997), and therefore hospitality firms must not only manage the interaction between customer and employees but also the interaction between different customers. As stated by Lovelock (2001):

"For good or ill, other customers become part of the product in many services."

After the joining and the consumption stage, the detachment stage takes place. From a hospitality firm's point of view it is important to be aware of what happens when the customer is through using the product and departs. Conclusively, thinking through these three stages helps hospitality firms to understand how customers will interact with the service delivery system, which in turn will result in a product designed to fit the needs of the customer (Kotler et al., 1999).

Customer Participation

Middleton (2001) argues that a tourist is more than a purchaser and user of a tourism product. They are also resources, assets and participants in parts of the service delivery. According to Kotler et al. (1999), involving guests in service delivery can increase capacity, improve customer satisfaction and reduce costs. Furthermore, the issue related to customer participation is how much input the

customer will have in the design of the product and this in turn is an issue of standardization versus customization. In standardized offers the customers are less involved in the service delivery and fewer employees and equipment are needed, which reduces cost. Product consistency is also more apparent. On the other hand, when people are willing to pay more for a product they expect more choices, and thereby more customized products where the customers are to a greater extent involved in the service delivery. Consequently, the degree of standardization and customization is a matter of positioning and goals for the product.

2.4.5 Managing Image and Communication

Today's consumer society is more and more image conscious because peoples' lifestyles are increasingly dominated by it. This is one of the characteristics of a postmodern society and according to Urry (1990), it has become a *world of sign and spectacle."* According to Grönroos (1984), image is sometimes of utmost importance for some service firms since image has a great impact on the perceived service. For example, if a customer believes that he/she goes to a good restaurant and the meal, for instance, is not perfect, he/she may still find the perceived service satisfactory. In other words, a favorable image might enhance the experience; however a bad image might destroy it. This indicates that managing image becomes an integral part of managing a service product. According to Middleton (2001) the image, typically communicated by branding, is identified as a vital component within the augmented product since it reflects and guides the development of the core values throughout the product, staff and organization. Because of the inseparable nature of tourism production and delivery, and the intangible characteristic of the product, it is therefore essential to develop and communicate a brand identity.

Kotler et al. (1999) define a brand as a name, term, sign, symbol, design, or a combination of these elements that is intended to identify the goods or services of a seller and differentiate them from those of competitors. In other words, one of the main points with a brand is that it makes it easier for consumers to identify the product or service. Several hotels and restaurants provide examples of easily identifiable features, for example McDonald's with its golden arches and Holiday Inn's green signs that are recognizable to customers. However, the most essential element in developing a brand identity is the development of a brand name. A brand name should be distinctive, easy to pronounce and it should also suggest something about the product's benefits and qualities. Important to mention is that a brand name derives its value from consumer perceptions where brands attract consumers by developing a perception of good quality and value (Kotler et al., 1999).

2.5 PERSONALIZING AND DELIVERING AN EXPERIENCE

According to Wilson (2004), the concept of personalization is evolving at a phenomenal rate in the service industry where the industry recognizes that at the heart of their business is a consumer of their service. There are three main drivers of change that are emerging; mass customization, deregulation, and information communication technology. The mass customization is in response to the continual search for product differentiation and is only limited by the ability to differentiate what people need or desire. Mass customization and deregulation provide more choice and increased self service, but it is as important that the technology for personalization is maturing. Many services today are relying on their technology infrastructures as a key delivering mechanism. For example, as a First Direct customer in the UK, your bank can send you a text message to say that your pay check has reached your bank account. This would not be possible without some form of automated process

enabled by technology. Technology provides a means for business to capture, store, analyze and most importantly use information to provide a more specific level of service. Moreover, the fundamental principles behind personalization support the idea of developing relationships with guests. The nature of pre-visit personalization involves pre-planning and booking in advance. This provides the opportunity for developing longer-term relationships with guests (Me And My Hotel, 2004).

In recent years, the advantages with delivering memorable experiences have been recognized, which in turn has drawn attention to the interactive part of the service system. As Mattilla (2002) explains, service researchers have postulated that for many services, from the customers' point of view, the service experience is the key perceptual event. Pine and Gilmore (1998) state that the economy has gone through several changes over time from agriculture to manufactured goods and eventually services. In order to enter the "experience economy" and to gain competitive advantages, companies have to learn to make use of the interactive, visible part and to create experiences, rather then only delivering products and services.

In order to be able to deliver an extraordinary experience, it is of great importance to engage a customer in "the right way". There are four different types of engagement that depend on the type of experience (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). These are: entertainment, esthetic, educational and escapism. The four characteristics differ in customer participation and environmental relationship. In achieving customer engagement, Mossberg (2003) states that a company or an organization can use personnel and other customers (social dimensions) as well as setting (the context), which she also calls "the experience room". According to Mossberg (2003), these factors have the ability to affect customers' feelings, absorption and control since an experience is a process that

forms during the service encounter where the factors mentioned above are present simultaneously.

2.6 FIVE ASPECTS MEAL MODEL

As already described, there are different ways to define a tourism and hospitality product and its elements. Gustafsson, (2004) uses the *"Five Aspects Meal Model"* when describing a restaurant visit where five perspectives of the meal are considered; *the room, the meeting, the product, the atmosphere and the management control system.* The five-aspect approach is based on the experience from the evaluation of restaurants performed by Guide Rouge, former the Guide Michelin. A restaurant visit starts with the guests entering the room, meeting the personnel, getting a table and thereafter getting food and beverages. Furthermore, the room is surrounded by an atmosphere, which influences the perception of the restaurant visit and a management control system, which stands for the overall planning. The five-aspect approach is a constructive aid for those who plan and produce meals, especially in restaurants, and the aim with the approach is to achieve ultimate satisfaction among the guests (Gustafsson, 2004).
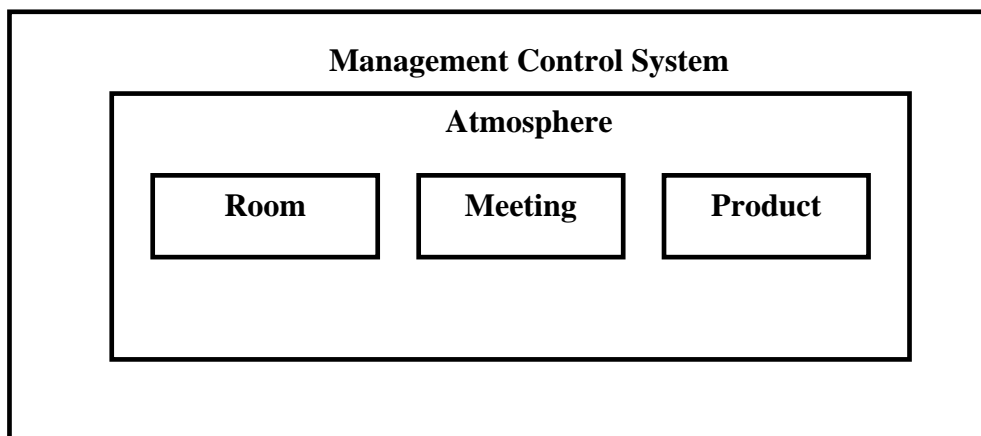
Figure 4. The Five Aspects Meal Model
Source: Gustafsson, 2004, p. 11

The features of the Five Aspects Meal Model are described as follows. First, the room is refereed to as the physical environment where the actual meal is taking place. This encompasses style history, architectural style, design, and how the guests and the personnel are using the room. Second, the meeting involves the personnel's interaction with the guests, including practical training on how to interpret the guest and satisfying their wishes as well as how to handle professional meetings, both back-stage and front-stage. The customers' interactions with each other are also a vital part of the meeting aspect. Third, the product includes the food presented on the plate, including everything from the raw materials to the final dish, as well as the beverage that accompany the food. Fourth, the atmosphere is all about feeling comfortable and at ease, which is created by the combination of the room, the meeting and the product. It is also created by the customers themselves as well as the personnel's creativity. Especially important in order to create a positive atmosphere is the verbal communication between the guests as well as with the staff. Lighting, coloring, music, and floral decoration are also elements that are important in creating a favorable ambience for the customers. The fifth and final perspective of a meal is the management control system which is also necessary in order to create a meal. The management system includes business economy, administration, marketing, organizational work, logistics, rules and regulations, and so forth (Gustafsson and Strömberg, 2004).

All five aspects have a common goal, which is to give the customer the best possible experience. Hence the room, the meeting, the product, the atmosphere and the management control system can be perceived as tools in creating an experience for the restaurant visitor. Further more, being aware of the five perspectives minimizes the risk to overlook the central details in creating the customers experience (Ahlberg, 2004). The five aspects interact and are all important in producing a positive meal experience; however, each aspect might

be perceived as more or less important depending on the situation or the guest (Gustafsson, 2004).

2.7 THE CONFERENCE PRODUCT

Evidently, there are a limited numbers of theories concerning the conference product, and therefore it is of great interest to create a theoretical framework of this topic. The theories described above were put into a conference context, and a theoretical framework of the conference product was conceptualized.

The Five Aspect Meal Model is perceived as not only useful in describing a restaurant visit, but is also seen as an appropriate choice when describing the conference product because it contributes with an idea and a structure on how to approach a tourism product and its different aspects. Moreover, the Five Aspect Meal Model combines different aspects of a product brought up earlier in the literature review, and thereby it contributes with the most complete picture. The model conceptualizes the service product in a similar way as Grönroos (1997; 1990), Kotler et al. (1999), and Middleton (2001). It refers to the service as a process, since it considers all the product elements that support the service delivery. In other words, it not only describes what is delivered but also how it is delivered, which implies that the model considers the augmented elements that are added to the basic package. Moreover, the elements of the Five Aspect Meal Model are also described as tools for creating an experience, which is, according to Pine and Gilmore (1998), also of great importance in designing a service.

However, in order to apply the Five Aspect Meal Model, some modification had to be made. First, concerning a restaurant visit, the food and beverage is seen as a central product but in a conference context it is not that obvious what

the actual "product" is. Therefore, the product element is eliminated and replaced with food and beverage and social activities, which are the prominent elements of a conference. Second, the management control system is also eliminated due to the fact that it is not considered to have a direct affect on the service delivery process of the conference product. Finally, the image is added to the original model since it is considered to have an impact on the service experience. Consequently, the conference product's six different elements are; the room, the meeting, the food and beverage, the social activities, the atmosphere and the image, which are illustrated in the Figure 5.
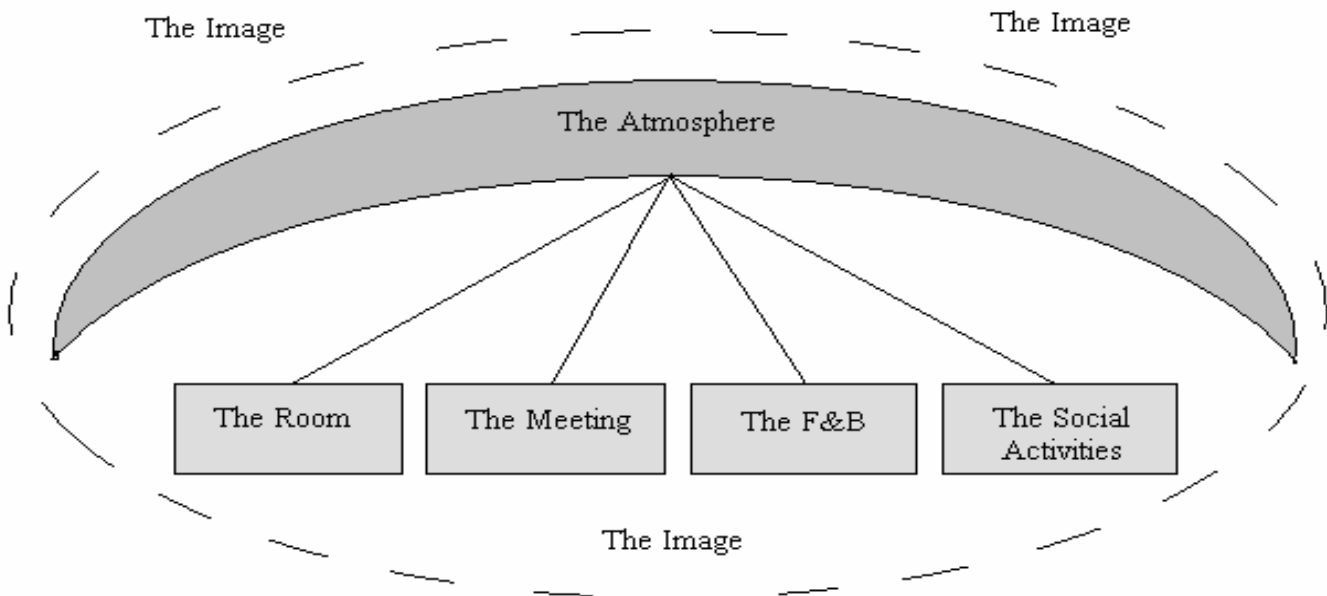
Figure 5. The Research Model of the Conference Product

2.7.1 The Room

The physical environment is of great importance in services since production and consumption is taking place simultaneously, which in turn means that the customer is present in the production premises. Likewise, when concerning a conference, these two processes are inseparable and the conference participants are present in the conference premises for a longer period of time. Thereby, it

can be assumed that the physical environment is of great importance even for a conference. In the research model of the conference product, the physical environment is referred to as the room where the conference is taking place. However, unlike some definitions of the physical environment, the term "room" does not include the social factors such as the interaction with personnel and other customers. On the other hand, it includes cues such as lighting, music, architecture, style, color, and shape on the exterior and interior.

In research conducted by Opperman (1996), meeting planners were asked to rate the importance of 15 pre-selected conference attributes in their planning decision process for meeting and conventions. In planning a conference, the respondents placed the most importance on meeting room facilities. Since companies' main tasks are to ensure that meetings are productive and that the corporation gets good value for money, a supplier must make sure that meeting rooms are adequate and set up properly (Kotler et al., 1999). According to Westling (2002), the physical layout may also have symbolic importance for many meetings in that they express order, creativity, or equality. Moreover, the physical design and layout of the conference facilities also have a vital importance in the creation of the conference experience.

Besides these aspects, technology is another important component of the room that facilitates the realization of a conference. Considering the research made by Successful Meetings (2001) on the USA market, it can be stated that technology has become a huge element of a meeting budget in a very short period of time. Only two years earlier, technology costs were not even included in the meeting budget. In 2001, it accounted for 18% of total meeting spending, second after food and beverage's 19%. This indicates that technology in meetings is growing in importance. Moreover, the research showed that meeting planners ranked data ports and high-speed internet access as the top

amenities they look for at a hotel or meeting site. In an article written by Scofidio (2004), he explains that several trends have emerged within the conference market; one of them is "wireless is a must." Big money has pored into adding wireless access to all guestrooms, meeting-rooms, and public spaces. According to Kellerman et al. (2001), the technology has become an interesting area within the Swedish industry as well as within the meeting industry. Due to the success with the meeting industry, Sweden is also known to be one of the driving forces in developing technological solutions for conferences. According to Successful Meetings (2001), the advancing technology, such as video-conferences, might be perceived as a threat but as some explain, "the-face-to-face meetings are necessary to achieve a group dynamic." It has not been noticed that this kind of technology is eliminating the importance of the physical events because there is no "real" interaction in virtuality.

2.7.2 The Meeting

Personnel

The personnel are seen as the organization in the eyes of the consumer when considering services, since they are part of the service delivery. Similarly, the meeting element of the conference product involves the personnel's interaction with the conference participants since there are several occasions during a conference when the personnel and the participants are assembling. Moreover, it is important to explain that the personnel's behavior and characteristics are those that have an impact on the customers' comprehension of the conference. Hence, it can be assumed that dedicated personnel should be close at hand, anticipating customers' needs, making sure that the conference runs smoothly from start to finish.

Other Customers

In most service encounters, interaction between customers is present; hence the meeting aspect of the conference research model also involves the participants' interaction with each other. During a conference, meetings between customers are played out continuously, some are formal, which are meetings that are planned and agreed upon. Other meetings are less formal, such as a chat during the lunch break or a private conversation between two conference participants. Additionally, as already mentioned, the customer interaction is crucial when creating a memorable experience, which gives the conference suppliers another reason to take this aspect into consideration.

2.7.3 The Food and Beverage

Food and beverage are seen as central features in meetings and experiences between people, thus it could also be recognized as an important tangible element of a conference. Moreover, if a conference lasts for more than a couple of hours, food and beverage become an obvious element of a conference product. In recent years, food and beverage have gained more attention on the U.S. conference market. For example instead of just serving food in an old-style buffet, conference suppliers have been investing in fresh choices, gourmet food and healthy snacks (Scofidio, 2004).

2.7.4 The Social Activities

For many, business and pleasure do not always mix, but when they do the result can be delightful. That is what successful meetings are all about. In other words, it is about finding the perfect balance between functionality and fun, productivity and play, rigor and relaxation (Successful Meetings, 2004). This indicates that social activities should be considered when describing a

conference; hence this element is part of the conference research model. In today's technical society the interaction of the participants outside the formal meeting is valuable. For example, golf or tennis can be used to encourage participants to interact on a social basis and it helps them to break up the monotony of the classroom sessions. In other words, an enjoyable break for participants is essential (Kotler et al., 1999).

According to Kellerman et al. (2001), social activities are what make a conference a memorable experience. For a supplier who aims to carry through a conference and simultaneously deliver an experience there are numerous activities to choose between, e.g. golf, white-water rafting, kayaking, fishing, teambuilding and so forth. There are also activities with the aim to make the attendees feel good and relaxed, e.g. cooking together with a famous chef, deeper analysis of the individual human being and its way to a holistic existence, etc. However, these days it often takes more than a round of golf to inspire and reward a high-performing team. Top resorts and conference facilities are rising to the challenge with innovative teambuilding activities, superlative services and facilities, dazzling cuisine and luxurious accommodation that make doing business a pleasure (Successful Meetings, 2004).

2.7.5 The Atmosphere

The conference participants are present in the production premises and are thereby affected by the atmosphere. Hence, it can be stated that the atmosphere of a conference facility is created by a combination of the room, the meeting, the food and beverage and the social activities. This indicates that the atmosphere is not only created by the room and its physical evidence but also by the social dimensions (Baker, 1987). The behavior and characteristics of the

personnel and other customers also have an impact on the perceived ambience of the conference.

A good example of the physical cue's affect on the atmosphere is described by Chad Kaydo (2004). The lights can create mood, mystery and context and are thereby crucial for creating a positive ambiance. According to Chad Kaydo in Meetings and Conventions (2004), "You would have to fill a room with an impossible number of flowers to make the same impact you can make with one well-thought-out-light, and people are paying attention (Rosenbaum, 2004).

2.7.6 The Image

Image is a vital part of service since it has an impact on how the customers perceive the service offering. Due to this fact, it can also be taken for granted that conference buyers' expectations on a conference supplier are influenced by a certain image. This indicates that managing image is an essential part of the product design of the conference product and is therefore added to the research model. Moreover, as described earlier, people lifestyles are becoming increasingly dominated by image and it can be assumed that the conference buyers, such as companies, also have followed this trend. Today, companies are more aware of their corporate culture, and therefore they often require a fit with the conference supplier's image.

3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents research methods and processes that have been used throughout this study and the main aim is to clarify why these certain proceedings have been chosen. The main leading factors are the research questions and the purpose that have been stated earlier in the introduction. The chapter starts of with a description of the research philosophy, which lies as a foundation for the remaining parts. This is followed by research design, research method, data collection, data analysis and is complemented by a discussion of the research quality.

3.1 RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY

Research philosophy explains the researchers' approach to knowledge in terms of its creation and development. In this study, the choice of the research philosophy is determined by the purpose and the research questions stated in the introduction part rather than by a specific belief. Either way, it is important to clarify this choice since it affects the way the research is done. The three major philosophies that play an important role in business and management research are: positivism, interpretivism, and realism (Saunders et al., 2003).

Since this study does not aim to deliver a statistical proven truth, it can be stated that the research is better related to interpretivism and realism than positivism. In this study, the related theories to the research object are developed, which indicates that there are no directly given relations to be tested and proved. This leads the researchers to limit the number of respondents, which in turn forces them to base the study on a relatively small number of people. Thus, as the interpretivism and realism explain, this study has to consider the complexity of the world and the fact that people have different

interpretations of it. In other words, it is important for the researchers to seek to understand the subjective reality of those that they study and to keep in mind that the people themselves are not objects to be studied in the style of natural science. Hence, the study recognizes the importance of understanding people's socially constructed interpretations and meanings. For example, when analyzing the collected data, the researchers consider not only the respondents answers but also their backgrounds, experiences, current positions and so forth (Saunders et al., 2003).

3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

A research design is the basic plan that guides the data collection and analysis phases of the research project (Kinnear & Taylor, 1996). A good research design will make sure that the study is conducted effectively and efficiently and according to Yin (1994), there are three different research approaches: *the exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory approach*. This study is of explorative nature mainly due to the established fact that there is a lack of theories and theoretical models that specifically describe the conference product. Consequently, the study's main aim is to seek new insights with help of related theories and ask questions in order to assess the conference product phenomena in a new light.

In order to achieve the purpose, a theoretical framework has been created by integrating different models and concepts concerning service- and tourism and hospitality product design, which resulted in an individual research model for the conference product and its different elements. In other words, this study is not describing a conference product with help of a complete, pre-tested theory; however the related theories that are described in the theoretical framework do contribute with a certain structure for the study.

3.2.1 Research Method

There are two different extremes of research method: qualitative and quantitative, and the choice between these two depends on what is about to be examined (Silverman, 2001). In other words, the choice should be based on how the purpose and the research questions are defined. The general purpose with this study is to provide a deeper understanding and a more complete knowledge of the conference product. Hence, the qualitative method is found to be the most appropriate one. According to Merriam (1998), *"Qualitative research is an umbrella concept covering several forms of inquiry that help us understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible"* (Merriam, 1998, p. 5). In accordance to the qualitative research method, this study is characterized as being focused on understanding, describing, and discovering, where the research design is flexible and the result is mainly describing.

3.3 DATA COLLECTION

3.3.1 Primary Data and Secondary Data

The data collection consists of both primary and secondary data. According to Merriam (1998, p.122), the primary sources should be defined as; *"Those in which the originator of the document is recounting firsthand experience with the phenomenon of interest,"* while secondary sources are data that have been collected earlier for another purpose. According to Silverman (2001), there are four strategies which are involved in collecting qualitative data: observations, analyzing text and documents, interviews and recording, and transcribing; however these methods are often combined. One or two methods are usually directing the data, which in this study are the interviews, while the observations

are referred to as an additional method that has a complementary role in order to make the research more comprehensive. With the help of interviews and observations, the primary data collection is conducted and on the other hand, secondary data such as literature, articles, information booklets, and the Internet are used in the theoretical framework and in the empirical study.

3.3.2 Interviews

Personal interviews constitute the main source of the study. According to Saunders et al. (2003), interviews can be explained as conversations with intended objectives where the researchers aim is to obtain specific information. The interviews help researchers gather valid and reliable data that is relevant in order to answer the research questions and objectives. Moreover, Merriam (1998) stresses the importance of this method and refers to interviews as a technique that reveals aspects and facts that cannot be observed directly, such as attitudes, opinions, and intentions. The personal interviews are seen as the most important source of this study, since it is vital to directly observe and obtain a clear picture of the involved actors. For example, every respondent is asked to draw their own picture of the conference product and argue for every element illustrated in the model, which requires face-to face interaction. Additionally, by choosing to conduct interviews, the researchers' ability to seek and understand the subjective reality is supported, which is important for this study as already explained in the section about the research philosophy.

According to Merriam (1998), there are three types of interviews depending on the desired structure. These are *highly structured/standardized, semi-structured, and unstructured/informal*. Since the study is of explorative and qualitative nature, the interviews are semi-structured, which include a certain set of questions; however the answers are not limited to pre-established

categories. This means that the researcher has the opportunity to probe answers where the respondents can explain or build on their responses, which allows the discussion to go into areas that have not yet been considered but are significant for the understanding of this topic. In other words, the study involves various actors' views, and therefore it needs a method that allows the researcher to respond to the current situation based on the respondents' own perspectives. This kind of flexibility is crucial since it does not restrict the study to the theories and allows the researcher to explore and discover appropriate modifications of the theoretical framework.

In order to structure the interview guide, the research model is used as a fundamental base. Each interview starts with personal questions in order to find out the respondents position, area of expertise, background and experiences. This information is mainly collected in order to facilitate the researchers as they consider the possible subjective interpretations of the phenomenon when analyzing the data. Further more, questions concerning the research topic are raised by first asking the respondent to draw an illustration of a conference product. This way the different elements of the conference product are identified. However, the discussion is encouraged to continue in order to explore the arguments concerning a more detailed description and importance of each element. These answers help the researcher to conclude whether the theoretical framework is valid and useful for clarifying and describing the conference product. This discussion is followed by questions about the different conference purposes and their affects on the elements, which enables this study to contribute with a categorization of these in the conclusion section. Finally, the respondents are asked to speculate around the forthcoming trends and argue for their believed affects on the future conference product. This results in empirical data that is used as a base for the study's identification of

forthcoming trends and a model that describes the future conference product. Below is an outline of the interview guide.

Figure 6. Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Company/Organization Information

- Short description of the company/organization
- Core competencies
- The interview object's position, role, skills and experiences
- Contribution to the academic research of the conference industry

The Conference Product

- A general description and illustration of a conference product
- Comparison to the "conference product research model"
- Importance of the different elements; the room, the meeting, the food and beverage, the social activities, the atmosphere and the image.

Different Conference Purposes

- Identification of different purposes
- The impact of the conference purpose on the conference product

The Future Conference Product

- Future trends in the conference market
- The impact on the conference product and its elements

In total, thirteen interviews are conducted, all with a duration of 45 – 90 minutes. Moreover, all the interviews are conducted with one individual at the time. In order to make the interview objects prepared for the personal interviews the areas of discussion are sent to them in advance. Considering the nature of the questions and the ensuing discussions, the data is recorded by taking notes and tape recording. Also, email correspondence is occasionally used to verify certain facts that are brought up in a previous interview.

3.3.3 Observations

As mentioned earlier, a researcher that works with the qualitative data is more likely to use a variety of methods to collect data in order to establish different views of the phenomena. In order to better understand the complex phenomenon of the conference product, this study combines interviews with observations. They allow a first hand appreciation of what elements the conference product consists of, and most importantly, the issues that are not easily described in the interviews can be studied live.

3.3.4 Population and Sampling

Since the empirical evidence of this study does not have to present a statistical truth in order to answer the conducted research questions, but rather to contribute to an increased understanding, a non-probability sampling is seen as the most appropriate method. Moreover, the sample of this study is small and purposively selected, which means that the interviews are carried out with carefully selected industry experts in order to gain deeper knowledge about their reasoning and opinions concerning the conference product. More precisely, the *purposive and judgmental sampling* is used, which means that the interview objects are selected by using personal judgment (Saunders et al., 2003). This form of sample is often applied when wishing to select cases that are particularly informative. The interview objects in this study have been selected based on the following criteria; the background, the position, area of expertise, and experience. The sampling started with an initial group of respondents and after they were interviewed they were asked to identify other respondents who might be of interest for this study. According to Malhotra (1999), this process is referred to as *snowball-sampling* since it may be carried out in waves by obtaining referrals from referrals, leading to a snowballing

effect. The number of respondents to interview is not set from the beginning since interviews are conducted until a saturating effect is reached. Moreover, in order to obtain different perspectives, the industry experts are sampled from two different groups, which are two influential actors on the conference market; the conference suppliers and the organizations. Thereby, interviews were carried out with professionals that possess knowledge and skills concerning the conference market within each critical group. Figure 7 shows a complete list of respondents and in Appendix 1, a more thorough description is made.

Name	Company	Position	Location	Date	Duration
Ulrica Cramby	Göteborg Convention Centre	General Manager	Göteborg	Oct. 18	60 min
Johan Svensson	Svenska Möten	Managing Director	Upplands Väsby	Oct. 27	45 min
Marcus Åkerlind	Svenska Möten	Accountant & IT-Responsible	Upplands Väsby	Oct. 27	60 min
Inger Almgren	Svenska Möten	Conference Consultant	Göteborg	Oct. 18	90 min
Catharina Hamilton	Hamilton Advisory Group	Consultant	Stockholm	Oct. 26	90 min
Roger Kellerman	Meetings International	Publisher	Kista	Oct. 27	60 min
Tobias Ekman	Clarion Hotel Stockholm	Director of Sales	Stockholm	Oct. 25	90 min
Niclas Mohlin	Arken Conference Centre	Vice General Manager	Göteborg	Oct. 20	60 min
Ann-Sofie Elmér	Scandic	Product Manager	Solna	Oct. 26	90 min
Marita Sahlberg	Radisson SAS Scandinavia	Conference Manager	Göteborg	Nov. 4	60 min
Henrik von Arnold	Göteborg Convention Bureau	Director	Göteborg	Nov. 19	90 min
Maria Ohlsson	BTI Nordic	Project Manager	Göteborg	Oct. 19	60 min
Rikard Wildhuss	Step2 Möteskommunikation	Meeting Strategist	Stockholm	Oct. 25	60 min

Figure 7. The Respondents

3.4 DATA ANALYSIS

According to Merriam (1998), data analysis is the procedure of making meaning out of the data and in order to achieve this, the analysis of this study starts by structuring the empirical data similarly to the disposal of the theoretical framework and the interview guide. This indicates that the approach begins deductively where data categories and codes to analyze data are derived from the theory and the predetermined analytical framework. However, since this research has kept a certain level of flexibility, the collected data contains unstructured information as well. This requires a more inductive approach where the information is structured according to certain patterns found in the empirical data.

Moreover, the data collection, data analysis and the development and verification of relationships and conclusions are, in this study, seen as an interrelated and interactive set of processes. Thereby, the analysis occurs after every second interview, which is particularly appropriate when parts of the research require a more inductive approach. The interactive nature of data collection and analysis allows the recognition of important themes, patterns, and relationships as the data is collected. It makes it possible to adjust the forthcoming data collection approach to see whether the same themes, patterns and relationships exist in the remaining cases. The outcome of the analysis is lifted up to the conceptualizing level where the theoretical framework and research model presented before conducting the empirical study are further developed and complemented with new theoretical implications generated during the analysis process. This approach supports the study's attempt to build an explanation rather than purely testing a predicted one. This procedure has been labeled by Yin (1994) as "explanation building," and according to him it seems to be similar to the analytic induction (grounded theory) approach.

However, he pointed out that they differ in a sense that the explanation building approach is still designed to test a theoretical proposition rather than to generate a "grounded theory."

In order to apply this kind of analysis, the focus was put on managing the time and organizing the data and related documentation. The interviews were arranged in intervals, which allow sufficient time for transcribing and analyzing before proceeding to the next data collection session.

3.5 QUALITY OF RESEARCH

According to Merriam (1998), all research should be concerned with presenting valid and reliable results, but there are few roadmaps with detailed instructions to guide the researchers on how to do so. A discussion of the quality of this study allows the reader to form an opinion about the validity and accuracy of the research findings and the reliability of the methodological design. The quality of this research is partly determined by the sensitivity and integrity of the researchers and it is therefore crucial to clarify how they managed to avoid presumptions that could have affected the final outcome. Below the different criteria for judging the quality are presented.

3.5.1 Validity

Validity deals with the fact that the study is measuring what it was intended to measure from the beginning, and high validity is reached when the absence of possible errors is significant. Furthermore, an ideal measure of validity would be to compare the observed measurement with the true measure. However, the true measure is hardly ever known, and if it was, there would be no reason to measure it in the first place (Kinnear and Taylor, 1996).

Validity questions how the results of the study actually relate to reality and relevance, but interviews and observations cause problems when considering the issue of validity. Information collected through interviews raise questions about the possibility of making inferences regarding events where first hand information is lacking (Yin, 1994). Observations, on the other hand, have been criticized for lacking validity in that they may be susceptible to the researcher's bias and subjective interpretations of situations (Adler and Adler, 1994). According to Merriam (1998), validity can be improved by using different strategies such as multiple investigators, sources, data or multiple methods to confirm the findings.

To strengthen the validity of the research, interviews are conducted with experts from two different aspects of the conference market: the suppliers and the professional organizations. Moreover, observations at conference facilities are also made in order to gain an understanding of the conference product today. Moreover, by using interviews in combination with observations and secondary data obtained from leading trade magazines within the Swedish meeting industry, the validity of this study increases.

Furthermore, the interview guide is formulated in accordance to the research questions and the purpose which indicates that this study actually measures what it intended to measure in the first place. Additionally, the interview questions are carefully formulated, and leading questions are avoided. Leading questions often reflect the researchers' viewpoint regarding the question's answers, and for this reason it causes constant measurement error in the research findings (Kinnear and Taylor, 1996). In order to prove the appropriateness of the interview guide, comments are received from the mentor before using the guide in reality. Finally, the same interview guide is followed

during all interviews. The same areas of discussion are used for all interview objectives, which in turn makes it possible to compare the findings.

3.5.2 Reliability

The reliability deals with the question of whether the same result would be obtained if the study was undertaken on another occasion (Yin 1994). Moreover, according to Kinnear and Taylor (1996), reliability is concerned with consistency, accuracy and predictability of the research findings, and if the study has high reliability than the validity is often believed to be high as well.

According to Yin (1994), the general way of approaching the reliability problem is to make as many steps as operational as possible and to conduct research as if someone were always looking over your shoulder. The study attempts to present the research process and methods as explicitly as possible by providing information on the overall research design as well as a detailed description of the conducted interviews. The reliability of this study is also believed to be high since the undertaken interviews are well planned and as mentioned before the questions to be asked are sent out to the interview objects in advance in order to give them time to prepare the answers. To increase the reliability most of the interviews are recorded in order to avoid the risk of missing data and to be able to fully concentrate on the discussion.

It appears impossible that another researcher would obtain the same results since the researcher does not generate knowledge of an object world, but of his or her interaction with that world. However, both researchers are attending the interviews, which are followed by a discussion about the gathered information in order to make sure that it is perceived in the same way. Thereby, it can be

stated that if this research is to be done all over again with the same interview objects and under the same circumstances, the same results would be achieved.

3.5.3 Critiques and Possible Sources of Errors

Since a limited number of theories describing the conference product were discovered, it was necessary to identify other theories and key areas that have some sort of connection to the conference product in order to conduct this research. Moreover, it was always the intention to make sure that the theories were considered to be widely accepted. Nevertheless, what characterizes the search for literature and other relevant material is the difficulty to come to a decision within what area of subject the relevant literature exists. Further more, in the empirical study the respondents must be credible in order to obtain accurate information about the conference product. The emphasis was therefore put on finding key persons directly involved with conferences. In this study the focus is put on conference suppliers and other professionals within the industry; however, the conferences buyers' point of view of the conference product is not considered since the study could be too comprehensive and hard to handle. By conducting this study, the aim is to make it as accurate and relevant as possible.

However, a number of possible errors might occur. One source of error is the inaccuracy of interpretation. When compiling collected data and information by listening to the tapes, there is a risk of interpreting information wrong. In order to reduce the errors, the interviews were always transcribed with both researchers listening to the tapes. Since the tape recorder was not used in all interviews, due to the sensitivity of some interview objects, possible errors could have occurred when interpreting the notes taken during the interviews. However, after every interview the notes where compared and the overall understanding of each interview is discussed in order to reduce the amount of

misinterpretations. Another source of error might be how the result is assessed. To be able to reduce the risk of conducting wrong assessments, a critical approach was taken during the research process.

4. RESULTS ANALYSIS

In this chapter, the theoretical framework of the conference product is compared to the empirical findings from thirteen different interviews. It also includes our thoughts and speculations of the research topic. The chapter starts with a discussion about future trends on the conference market, including changes in demand and supply. According to the research model presented in the theoretical framework, the conference product contains six different elements; the room, the meeting, the food and beverage, the social activities, the atmosphere and the image. In order to create a more complete and valid model of the conference product, each and every element is analyzed separately. First of all, the current features of the conference product are explained, followed by a description of how the conference product might be featured in the future. Additionally, these elements are put in relation to different conference purposes. In order to increase authenticity of this study some quotes from the interviews are presented in this chapter.

4.1 FUTURE TRENDS IN THE CONFERENCE MARKET

4.1.1 Changes in the Demand for the Conference Product

All respondents have noted that today's meetings are becoming shorter with a smaller number of participants, which is, besides their own experiences, indicated by the raising number of day-conferences and shorter meetings such as breakfast and lunch meetings. The respondents mainly explained this trend as a result of the shrinking economy that has not yet fully recovered from the economic recession in the 1990's. Many companies still have not become able to cover the high conference costs, which have stressed the need and demand for more efficient and effective conferences. Due to the fact that conferences

involve large costs for the companies and that they are more concerned in maximizing the efficiency, Inger Almgren at Svenska Möten and Ulrica Cramby at Göteborg Convention Centre believe that companies will put more thought and effort into planning conferences in the future.

Rikard Wildhuss at Step2 Möteskommunikation AB added that the future development of the conference is not only affected by the economical aspects but also with the change in the customers' values. Conference buyers will become more aware of the possible advantages that can be gained by having a conference, which puts a lot more pressure on the content and the result of the meeting. In accordance to the respondents, it can be stated that the customers' demands and wants will become more purposeful and that they will thereby require more convoluted solutions when compared to today. Wildhuss agreed that the future will bring shorter conferences, but he also pointed out that the focus will be put on the meeting's contribution to the business and company's success. In other words, the conference will have to be more focused on generating a beneficial result for the company and a positive return on investment. Thereby, it will become more important to formulate clear goals and objectives for the meeting, since without goals the output of the conference cannot be measured. Furthermore, Wildhuss explained that the focus should not only be on the advantages with a meeting but also on avoiding the negative effects. One bad meeting has the capability to devastate many years of hard work, e.g. a brand-building process that has been going on for years. As Wildhuss expressed:

"These days the meetings are supposed to include more effective work hours and less partying."

Consequently, it can be stated that a meeting has a great effect on the companies' success and therefore it should be included in the overall strategic decision making. There are four strategic steps, which, according to Wildhuss, every company or organization should go through when planning a meeting. These are: identification of the stakeholders, formation of goals/purposes, clarifying the message, and the evaluation. By taking these four steps into consideration, a company or an organization gains a more strategic, long-term view of the meeting and can more easily measure the result of it.

Marcus Åkerlind at Svenska Möten and Roger Kellerman, publisher at Meetings International, pointed out that the responsibility to plan and book a conference will be more decentralized by transferring it higher up in the organization structure to middle supervisors and project leaders. Marita Sahlberg at Radisson SAS Scandinavia highlighted that the typical contact person will no longer be the secretaries to the same extent. Åkerlind can also see a tendency towards a more divided target market with a larger number of people booking a smaller number of conferences. This indicates that besides the demand for more complex solutions, there is a possibility that the future conference buyers will be less experienced, and therefore the need for support and guidance will become more significant.

Nevertheless, a couple of respondents pointed out that today, this kind of demand is still a future for many conference buyers on the market. Many respondents saw the conference buyers as still being conservative in their choice of a conference. As Tobias Ekman at Clarion Hotel Stockholm explained, companies and organizations will probably become more aware of the importance of meeting management in the future, but so far the general public has a lot to catch up with. Despite the need for more effective

conferences, there are still very few of them that are well thought out and planned by the conference buyer.

4.1.2 The New Role of a Conference Supplier

Considering the forthcoming changes in the demand for the conference product, the majority of the respondents believed that it will become more crucial for the conference suppliers to track down the needs of the customers and their actual purpose with the conference. For that reason, suppliers should stress that the buyers become more involved into the process of planning and executing the conference. According to Ekman at Clarion, there are yet a few restraints in working closer with the customers in producing the conference that should be highlighted. First of all, it might be difficult to find out the actual purpose of the conference since it might be a sensitive matter for the conference buyer. Second, it will take more time to produce such a conference. Thus, the extended lead times, from the ordering of a conference to the time when the conference is taking place, could result in a decrease of sales for the conference supplier. Third, it might be difficult to convince the conference buyer to see the conference as a communication strategy and as a vital part of their business.

On the other hand, Wildhuss at Step2 Communication explained that the future depends a lot on the suppliers' willingness to develop the conference product. He is aware of their limitations but he still believes that it is the suppliers' responsibility to push the development forward. Catharina Hamilton at Hamilton Advisory Group agreed by saying that a supplier should always be updated and one step ahead of the customers. Hence, they should see this as a business opportunity. In other words, the supplier is the one that should educate the customer and create a need. According to Wildhuss, instead of only

marketing all the supporting parts of the product, such as food and beverage, the room etc., the conference supplier should try to put themselves in the buyers' position and think:

"How can we help them to achieve the desired result?"

According to all respondents, it is extremely important that the suppliers are more engaged when selling their product. In other words, as Wildhuss explained, they should offer a more "extended support in the meeting process" in terms of planning, execution and evaluation. They should push customers to be clearer about their goals and purposes or essentially the result they want to achieve by having the conference. According to Jimmie Källström, one of the sales representatives at Svenska Möten, the sales personnel have to ask the right questions and absorb the information gained from the answers (Syrén, 2004). Källström explained:

"By caring and taking the responsibility for the result of the conference, we will become indispensable partner for all conference buyers. Total responsibility is the right way to the market."

Moreover, it is important to highlight that in order to achieve a successful conference and to get the most out of it, the focus is not only on what is to be communicated but also how this should be done. According to Kjell A. Nordström, Researcher of International Business at the School of Economics in Stockholm, the meetings are more often considered as the results of a production. A meeting is produced and there is always a producer that does not participate him/herself, but is rather responsible for the dramaturge, direction, interior design, and so forth. People, today, have grown up in a world of production and a conference supplier should be seen as the owner of a studio

where the facility is used as a production area. Thereby, Nordström states that the meeting industry in Sweden is going through industrialization (Soenarso, 2004).

According to Hamilton at Hamilton Advisory Group, customers today are requiring more personalized services, which has had an impact on the conference market as well. All the respondents agreed upon the fact that the future will require even more tailored conference solutions, which will consequently put more pressure on the supplier to find customers specific needs and wants. Hamilton refers to personalization as not only an advantage in terms of improved customer relationships, but also in additional sales. Instead of offering predetermined conference packages, it is, according to Hamilton, more profitable to offer conference buyers the opportunity to create their "own", personalized conference. This strategy enables conference suppliers to satisfy a bigger variety of needs and wants as well as increase sales.

According to Gösta Fernström (2004), chairman at IFL (Institutet för Företagsledning), the conference suppliers should not only focus on delivering an efficient and personalized conference but also on creating an experience for every customer. Fernström further explained that this kind of offer increases the customers' willingness to return, which in turn builds trust, stronger supply-customer relationship and a stronger brand. Moreover, experiences are spread by word-of-mouth, which reduces the need for marketing and advertising. The tangible elements and the services are becoming the expected parts of the conference offer, which indicates that today's conference supplier has to be able to offer an experience in order to be perceived unique as well. In order to create an experience Fernström believes, in accordance to Pine and Gilmore (1998), that the supplier needs to offer entertainment, aesthetic, escapism and education. These are possible to achieve by creating different activities and by

focusing on the design, culture, and so forth that activate the human senses and create a special feeling. This way the conference participants can bring something back home, which is according to all the respondents very appreciated. The best way for conference suppliers to participate in this development is to keep a sensitive ear to the market and involve customers into the delivering process (Fernström, 2004). According to Fernström:

"It is all about gaining a start over. The future is always late, which indicates that there are opportunities at all time to be unique and one step ahead."

4.1.3 Summary of Future Trends on the Conference Market

To summarize the future trends in the conference market, effective and more convoluted conference solutions will be more required even more by the conference buyers. Consequently, the conference suppliers will have to take more responsibility in producing a conference. Conference buyers will also be demanding personalized conferences to a greater extent, which indicates that conference suppliers will become forced to improve their way of tracking down customers' specific needs and wants. However, in many cases the personalization will not be enough when satisfying the conference participants. The conference suppliers must thereby offer entertainment, escapism, education, and aesthetic, which enable them to offer a memorable experience to the conference participants. These trends will in turn effect the development of the conference product and its elements. However, to what extent these trends will effect the product depends on the conference suppliers and the conference buyers' willingness to adapt to them.

4.2 CURRENT AND FUTURE FEATURES OF THE CONFERENCE PRODUCT

4.2.1 The Room

Despite the differences between the respondents' positions and experiences, all of them pointed out the room as the most essential element of the conference product. Hence, according to Kotler's description of the tourism and hospitality product, the room can be described as a facilitating product since it enables a conference to take place. The respondents that have direct customer contact, such as sales personnel, have noticed that the main concerns for the conference buyers are; spacious meeting rooms, good air-conditioning, appropriate lighting and the state of condition in general. Moreover, Niclas Mohlin at Arken Conference Centre pointed out that it is also important to adjust the size of the room to the size of the group. This might seem obvious but from the respondent's experience, placing a small group in a too large room is a quite common mistake. According to Ekman at Clarion Hotel Stockholm, the in-house logistics is also an issue of great importance. Ekman stresses the significance of the conference participants having the flexibility to move around easily in different environments. For example, breakout rooms should be close at hand to the larger rooms allowing a smoother flow from general sessions to workshops, which in turn could be managed with help of moveable, discrete walls. Besides the functionality of the meeting rooms, some of the visited conference facilities have put extra effort into creating certain aesthetics for their rooms. For example, Clarion Hotel Stockholm has collaborated with famous interior designers when creating the hotel and its conference facilities.

All of the respondents agreed that it has become obvious for today's conference suppliers to provide their guests with technical equipment. As Ekman expressed:

"Technical equipment can definitely give your conference that extra glow."

Similarly to the room, the technical equipment can today be described as a facilitating product, which has not always been the case. A couple of years ago, technical equipment was mainly seen as a supporting product since the conference customers only required standard equipment such as flipcharts, whiteboards, and overhead projectors. Now, customers expect more advanced technical equipment and take this kind of support for granted. At Scandic, technical equipment such as DVD/CD players, LCD projectors, and the Internet are included in the price without any extra costs. Similar technological support was found at all conference facilities within the research, which implies that it is a crucial element of the conference product. However, this does not mean that guests do not require even more advanced technology. In those cases, external technical support is employed and is thereby not seen as a central part of the product.

Another topic was brought up during the discussion about the room. In last couple of years the conference participants have become more concerned about security. According to Cramby, at Göteborg Convention Centre security was not even brought up on the checklist when arranging a conference a couple of years ago. However, today many conference suppliers have been forced to take this issue into mind. One of them is Scandic where they have a policy to always inform the one responsible of the conference about evacuation plans, security and fire systems in case of an emergency.

4.2.2 The Future Room

Today, despite meetings' increasing importance, according to Johan Svensson at Svenska Möten, meeting rooms are still seen as just conference premises and for many conference suppliers the thinking goes no further than to make them neat and tidy and to provide a few technical functions. However, it has been noted by most of the respondents that conference buyers have initiated a need to meet in more unusual ways than before. Therefore, a question has been raised; *"How are we going to meet in the future?"*

Wildhuss believes that the central antecedent of a meeting's success is an enabled interaction between participants. He believes that meetings can be seen as one of the components of the communication mix since companies' marketing, both internal (to the employees) and external (to the customers), is no longer only about information but more about communication and relations. Thereby, the meeting room should be flexible so that it simplifies and supports the participants to have dialogs. Many of the traditional conference rooms have only been supporting one-way-communication, which has been seriously criticized by Wildhuss. According to him, it can be as simple as to replace a square table with a round one, which eliminates the hierarchy and thereby encourages the participants to interact. This indicates that it is important to be aware of furniture's ability to affect the interaction between the participants. Besides the shape of the furniture, the placement in the room is also of great importance. For example, a table might give people a feeling of safety but at the same time it might be seen as a barrier that holds down the dialog between the participants.

Moreover, according to Wildhuss at Step2, the participants should be able to switch positions from standing to seating and even laying down, which can partly be achieved by having easily adaptable furniture. This kind of furnishing

generates a more informal environment where conference participants have the opportunity to interact, which in turn facilitates the adults' learning process. The learning process is especially important when it comes to business meetings such as conferences, since reactions and knowledge have little or no value if they do not get manifested through actions or behavioral changes. To conclude, informal and stimulating are the keywords when creating successful meeting room that have been highlighted by Wildhuss. He also mentioned that design is a great mean used when wanting to make a creative environment, however it should never become more important than the functionality.

According to Svensson at Svenska Möten, in the future we will more likely hold our conferences in physical settings that will inspire our creativity and energy. At the end of 2003, Svenska Möten, in cooperation with Input Interiör, one of Scandinavia's leading interior design companies, carried out an architecture and design competition, the *"Meeting Room of the Future."* The idea behind the competition had its origin in speculations about the way the room affects the actual meeting. Different questions were raised such as; what kind of affect does the shape, lights, function, furniture and colors have on the participants and whether the room itself can improve the result of a meeting. The main aim with the competition was to give meetings a new form that would inspire companies and organizations to meet and reach good decisions. According to Svensson:

"A conference supplier should not only offer a meeting place, but should also help people to meet!"

Accordingly, some of the conference facilities of Svenska Möten have shown interest in building the winning meeting room of the future, which shows that there are actors on the conference market that are willing to drive the development of the meeting room forward. Similarly to Wildhuss' thoughts,

the winning team of the competition created a meeting room with a mix of informal and formal spaces, which could easily be modified and adapted for different environments, with different customer requirements. Furthermore, the room is equipped with modern technical equipment; however, it should be as invisible as possible since the technical equipment should not be the central feature of the room. All five entries in the competition came up with the idea to divide the meeting room into different sections, which points out the flexibility and implies that the most significant change has been the replacement of the traditional school seating style. One of the conference suppliers of Svenska Möten that is about to realize the *"Meeting Room of the Future"* is the Två Skyttlar in Örby. According to them, the room should be seen as both a saloon and a workshop since they believe that the room should be flexible so that it always can be adapted to the buyer's need.

The meeting room of the future should also enable the conference suppliers to offer the participants an experience, something out of the ordinary. Gällöfsta Läroriket in Kungsängen is another conference supplier that has reformed their business mission and today they are not only striving to offer space for a meeting, but also one that facilitates people to meet. They believe that in the future, the conference room will be seen as an experience forum and they have therefore collaborated with Work IKEA and created their own "meeting room of the future" by focusing on the design and its affect on the people's thoughts and emotions (Ludvigsson, August 2004):

> *"What we see and experience creates inner impulses within us. It encourages new thoughts and ideas and draws out the power in you and others."*

Another example of a conference supplier that has realized the need for a new way to meet is Scandic. As part of Scandic's new meeting concept, they have introduced an inspirational meeting room, The Think Tank. According to Ann-

Sofie Elmér at Scandic, it is simply a more relaxed and efficient working environment to drive ideas and discussions forward. She explained that the best ideas are brought up in a harmonious environment when you have a feeling of well-being and relaxation. The room is still developed around three key words: *flexibility, functionality, and value for money,* however the thought behind the new meeting room is to create an inspirational environment which can improve the meeting productivity. The room follows the Feng Shui concept, which is an ancient Chinese tradition of placement and design that guides human beings to live in harmony with their environments. In other words, our well being is determined by our surroundings and the way which they are furnished. The tables in the Think Tank are easy to move around, which makes it possible to create different seating styles and the chairs are multifunctional and comfortable to sit in. Also, the choice of colors and materials are essential in order to achieve a balanced and prosperous atmosphere. Lighting and sound in the room are also important matters. Lighting, both electric and natural, should be easy to adjust in order to create a desired atmosphere and different sounds such as the sound of twittering birds and rippling waves are supposed to have a relaxing effect on the participants of the meeting. The room has an aquarium which is also a contributing factor to an inspirational environment.

Another conference supplier that has engaged in creating a future meeting room is the Nordic Blue Hotel. Ejnar Söder, the founder and owner of the hotel, thought that all conference premises looked the same and that they restricted the possibilities with the meeting since most of the time the participants only sit down and listen. Consequently, the idea about a future meeting room was born. The idea behind the new room at Nordic Blue Hotel is to revolutionize all traditional thoughts about how a meeting should proceed. The room is shaped in such way that the participants can walk around, switch seats, and carry on a conversation with other participants during the time the actual meeting is

progressing. As Söder explained, the room should contribute with increased engagement among the participants, where the participants can involve themselves in the dialogue when standing or sitting, walking or eating (Emdén, 2004).

When considering the technological development, the equipment will be more advanced and according to Wildhuss it should mainly be used for "edutainment", a mix of education and entertainment. Technical support enables the visualization and enhances and clarifies different messages, however, according to Söder, it should still be undetectable. The technical equipment should not be too noticeable so that the conference participants use it excessively during the meeting. The focus should be on the participants interacting and not on the technique (Emdén, 2004). In other words, the type of technology used should be determined by the purpose, speaker, message, target group, etc. However, it should be mentioned that high-tech equipment is not preferred by everyone. Ask Agger, president of Zentropa, a successful Danish meeting production company, believes that the technology can sometimes restrain the message and therefore he mainly favours what he calls low-technology. He expressed (Svensson, 2004):

"Why use a CD-rome when paper and pen are just as useful?"

4.2.3 The Meeting

The Personnel

The personnel were among the first aspects of the conference product that were brought up by the respondents since they believe that the personnel have a big impact on the service delivery. Therefore, the personnel are seen as an essential element of the conference product. According to Grönroos (1997), the

personnel are one of the resources needed to create good customer perceived value. All respondents agreed upon that it is necessary for the personnel to make sure that the conference participants feel welcome and that they get all the needs and wants fulfilled during their stay. According to Inger Almgren at Svenska Möten, the conference buyers have always been seen as "switchers", which means that they seldom come twice to the same conference supplier. Offering good service is among the most effective way to make the customer return, which again stresses the significance of the personnel as part of the conference product.

Furthermore, according the majority of the respondents, the personnel at the conference facilities have gained more attention since the conference participants are demanding individualized/customized services to a greater extent. The individual customer is in focus and they expect opportunities to choose. This in turn requires the personnel to have a sensitive ear to their demand. For example, at Radisson SAS Scandinavia, they strive to increase the customers' participation into the planning process of the conference in order to deliver a customer tailored conference. According to Sahlberg at Radisson SAS Scandinavia:

"The personnel should always be one step ahead the guests."

According to Elmér at Scandic, care and assurance that everything is working in accordance to customers' specifications is of greatest importance. This concern was pointed out as the most important element of a conference by both new and existing customers in research conducted by Scandic. It was sometimes actually seen as more important than both the meeting room and other standard equipment. This kind of support from the personnel is even more vital when a new concept is introduced. A good example is Scandic's new meeting room, *the Think Tank,* where according to Elmér, the conference

personnel is responsible to show their customers how to use the room and for what purpose.

Moreover, now that advanced technical equipment has become a more common feature of a conference, Ekman at Clarion Hotel stresses the importance of personnel acting as technical support. The conference rooms are full of potential pitfalls and traps, and in order to make the conference run as smoothly and successfully as possible the personnel needs to give full technical instructions to the conference participants before the meeting starts. But they should also act as technical support during the meeting. According to Ekman, failure in technical support can have a major negative effect on the end result of the conference.

Other Customers

According to Kotler et al. (1999), during the consumption phase other customers are part of the product and hence, the interaction between different customers needs to be managed. The majority of the respondents explained that they offer the conference buyer an opportunity to control the interaction between conference participants by offering them a possibility to choose between different seating styles. All the respondents explained that the matter of seating in the meeting room is of concern for the conference participants since the seating style depends on the way the participants are aimed to interact. For example, a U-shape allows eye contact and encourages participation and a theatre style is appropriate for larger groups and lecture style presentations. Moreover, a banquet or small islands are very effective formats when group work is to be done while reception or lounge style is an informal setup for groups in which a more relaxed and casual atmosphere is appropriate. Likewise, according to the respondents, in order to enhance the interaction between conference participants, different kinds of social activities are offered

as well as certain environments where guests feel more comfortable to socialize. The conference should allow participants to meet and exchange ideas during formal discussions, but also in less formal settings around breaks and lunch hours.

Almgren at Svenska Möten explained that the discussion of other customers should not only involve the participants of the same group. The interaction between participants from different conferences must also be taken into consideration by the conference suppliers. Similarly, Groove and Fisk (1997) point out that the other customers are present in the service environment and can affect the nature of the service process and as they explain, other customers might detract from customer satisfaction. According to Almgren, many companies and organizations prefer to be the only group in the conference facility, especially when it is a smaller group and the sense of community is of great importance between participants. If this need is not fulfilled there is a risk that it has a detrimental effect on the conference.

4.2.4 The Future Meeting

The Personnel

As already discussed, most of the respondents explained that it is possible that customers will become more aware of the desired outcome with the conference in the future, which means that a lot more responsibility could be put in the hands of the conference supplier. Moreover, the clearer stated goals by the customers and the intensified customization will put more pressure on the personnel's knowledge and skills.

Wildhuss explained that the more important and valuable the meetings are the easier it is for the conference buyer to share their goals and purposes with the

conference supplier. Nevertheless, it is a matter of possessing skilled sales people that can create a trustful relationship between them and the conference buyer. Hamilton at Hamilton Advisory Group pointed out trust as the key to making successful business, especially when it comes to services. Services such as consulting are very intangible and impossible to be fully understood prior to delivery, and concerning conferences, those responsible for the booking are seldom participating at conferences and therefore have little or no experience themselves. This indicates that the customer does not have a total picture of the product before the purchase and therefore building trust is essential. Hence, it can be stated that the personnel is the element of the conference product that will probably gain a lot more attention than it gets today.

The respondents perceive the personnel's contribution to the content of the conference and the actual meeting as limited, which is something that the respondents experience as already changing. Today, as already mentioned, the personnel's main responsibility is to welcome the participants, make them familiar with the conference facility and always be reachable and close at hand. However, many of the respondents especially articulated the fact that the conference buyers stress the importance that everything is working in accordance to their specifications in terms of technical equipment, food and beverage, and other practical issues. In the competition, the *"Meeting Room of the Future"* by Svenska Möten and Input Interiör, the winning team suggested that the conference host or hostess must take a more active role during a conference in the future and become more of a meeting coach. He or she should be more familiar with the agenda and the desired outcome so that it is possible to follow the group during the entire conference, making sure that they are creating the necessary comfort for the conference participants. For example, the conference host or hostess must make sure that the technical equipment is

working, help with coffee, set up the meeting rooms, and take care of other practical matters so that the conference participants can fully concentrate on the meeting. In other words, by developing the role of the traditional conference host or hostess so that he/she works closer to the conference participants, it is possible to deliver a more personalized, effective service and at the same time create a memorable experience.

Furthermore, according to Sahlberg, Radisson SAS has educated their conference personnel in cooperation with Meeting Professional International, MPI. Engagement and caring are the keywords of the education and it is mainly about offering the conference participants broader support during the conference. Sahlberg, working at Radisson SAS Scandinavia, has experienced a clear change in her role as a conference hostess. Today, she works much closer to the participants and feels that they are to a greater extent striving to build a stronger relationship with them. The conference buyer is encouraged to come to the facility before the conference so that they can organize together and structure a conference that specifically fits their needs and requirements. According to Sahlberg, the service delivery has definitely become more of a cooperation between the supplier and buyer than just simply offering a service, mainly because the aim has been to produce more tailored solutions.

The majority of respondents believed that many conference suppliers today do not have enough knowledge in order to keep up with the more complex customer needs, and therefore more trained and educated personnel will become more essential in the future. According to Elmér at Scandic, the conference personnel need to improve their skills in many different areas, such as technical support and sales, but foremost in making appropriate need-analysis of the customers. Elmér believes that this kind of education is part of the future. However, at the moment Scandic is investigating whether there is yet an actual demand for this kind of service. At the same time she also

questions whether it is possible to posses this competence at all of their hotels. Kenth Larsson, Director of Meetings & Event Sales at Rezidor SAS, explained that in terms of commercial advantages it is favorable to tangibilize the conference product by offering features such as comfortable chairs, which results in that the personnel's contribution is often neglected. Today, many suppliers are aware of the personnel's input to a conference, however it is a very difficult task to convince the conference buyers the benefits with educated personnel. Larsson believes that the personnel's role will be enhanced and highlighted in the future. Many conference suppliers will have a meeting coach and the conference buyer will become eager to pay for this kind of competence (Emdén, 2004).

Additionally, Wildhuss at Step2 explained that the personnel should also improve their knowledge with the aim to provide a more strategic approach to the conference. According to him, the future will require meeting strategists that are able to advise and cooperate with the conference buyer on how to set clear goals with a conference and on how to achieve those. Svenska Möten is a good example of how conference suppliers have applied a more professional way to treat their customers by taking an active part in investing new knowledge and skills. During the spring of 2004, the personnel of Svenska Möten participated at one of Wildhuss' lectures about meeting strategy in order to be able to offer an even better service and to keep a market leading position. They felt that in general the significance of meetings is rising in terms of the recognized return on strategic investments, but also that people are developing into individuals and as a group when participating at meetings.

Other Customers

Since the Internet has smoothed the progress of information flow, according to Elmér at Scandic, it has reduced the number of conferences where transmitting information is the main purpose. Thus, it could be stated that conferences

where participation and interaction are in focus will become even more common in the future. Wildhuss at Step2 pointed out the increased importance of the pedagogy's role in reaching a desired outcome of a conference. According to him, dialogues, interaction, and engagement are the key issues when implementing a successful meeting. He believes that since it is easier to create new beliefs and values than to change already existing ones, a meeting where interaction is enabled is necessary. Interaction gives the conference leader an opportunity to find out the participants' fundamental values and knowledge and avoid cognitive dissonance. This way the meeting's impact will be stronger and more long-lasting.

However, it is consequently important to mention that according to the majority of the respondents, the conference supplier will be forced to consider and strive to encourage the participants to socialize to a greater extent. To what degree depends on the purpose with the conference. For example, a certain seating style or a certain social activity that encourages participation and interaction could be suggested. Another way to enhance the interaction and thereby the creativity could be to offer less informal environments and support less informal meetings such as longer and organized coffee breaks. The participants will then leave their formal roles and everyone will have the opportunity to chat with each other, which in turn might generate new interesting discussions and ideas. Kjell A. Nordström, Researcher at School of Economics in Stockholm, explained the coffeebreaks as one of the most fostered icons of a meeting. The majority of the participants expect them and many of the participants have been part of a meeting where the coffeebreak itself steers the meeting instead of the other way around. It is during the coffee breaks that discussions suddenly become lively, the participants are interacting and everyone feels free to express their thoughts, feelings and opinions (Soenarso, 2004).

4.2.5 The Food and Beverage

Food and beverage have been pointed out as important elements of the conference product by all respondents, which justifies its position among the basic elements of a conference product. Food and beverage are most of the time present factors in meetings between people (Gustafsson and Strömberg, 2004) and are, according to the respondents, always taken for granted by the conference participants. Almgren at Svenska Möten argued:

"The food and beverage are often the first things to be commented on after participating at a conference."

Moreover, when attracting conference buyers today, it is very common to point out food and beverage in marketing. For example, in the marketing material of Grythyttans Gästgivaregård, the food is illustrated as the central feature of the conference offer. They point out the following in their advertising:

"Conferences in a historical and cultural environment with first class gourmet food and wine from one of the best Swedish wine cellars. A conference that the taste buds will never forget."

Considering, the respondents' opinions about food and beverage, it can be expressed to be as important as a facilitating product of a conference. Besides the food being present, most of the respondents especially pointed out the increasing importance of the fact that poor food quality can ruin an entire conference experience. On the other hand, high food quality can make a conference into a successful and a memorable event. This is mainly due to the fact that Swedes in general have become more interested in food, but they have also become more aware of what they eat (Ludvigsson, 2004). The majority of

the respondents have noticed that the demand for more healthy alternatives has grown. For example, at the Göteborg Convention Centre the traditional, unhealthy cake at the coffee break has been replaced by fruit salads and smoothies and the bowl of sweets is often replaced by a basket of fruit. As Mohlin at the Arken Conference Centre explained:

"You should be able to enjoy food without having a bad conscience."

Furthermore, Almgren described that the lunches offered at the facilities of Svenska Möten often consist of traditional Swedish dishes, which indicates that the chosen food is in line with the conference suppliers' image. According to Maria Ohlsson at the BTI Nordic Event and Conference Solutions, a good idea is to serve food and beverage that represent what is typical for the area and its culture where the conference is taking place. One example is that fish and seafood are often served on the west coast of Sweden.

Furthermore, as already mentioned, the conference participants are requiring more individual and personalized services, which also has had an effect on food and beverage. The conference participants are requiring more individual meals to a greater extent, which has encouraged many conference suppliers to serve food and beverage in the form of buffets. This way the participants have gained a better opportunity to choose according to their own taste. According to Elmér at Scandic, there is great concern to fulfil all customers' needs when it comes to food and beverage during the entire conference. The buffet food service gives the participants a lot of flexibility and variety, including healthy options that reflect the suppliers' healthy living philosophy.

Additionally, Elmér believes that by serving a lunch buffet at Scandic, the conference participants not only have the option to choose between a wide

variety of food, but that they also have the option to decide the time and length of the meals. Some groups are very busy and only have time for a quick lunch while others spend more time enjoying the meal. Furthermore, at Scandic they see breaks and time outs as important as the meeting itself. Thereby, flexible breaks are encouraged by having food and beverage always available. Also, at Radisson SAS Scandinavia they are serving buffets and according to Sahlberg they see the time for lunch and other breaks as extensions of the formal meetings. Therefore, they are avoiding chairs and tables, which in turn allows people to move around and interact in a more informal environment.

When it comes to beverages, the alcohol is still an unavoidable part of the "after-meeting" activities. As Hamilton at Hamilton Advisory Group explained, it puts a certain status on the conference, which shows that the conference organizer is generous and willing to spend money on the participants. Hence, the participants feel appreciated and important.

4.2.6 The Future Food and Beverage

Many of the respondents have predicted a healthy trend in the food and beverage element of the conference product. Elmér at Scandic agreed, but according to her the suppliers should be careful of taking away all the "traditional" conference food, such as the cake at the afternoon coffee break. Many participants see the conference as a reward and an excuse to eat and drink whatever they want. This indicates that the supplier should keep broad spectra of food in order to be able to provide personalized service that satisfies a range of different needs and wants.

According to Wildhuss at Step2, the food should not merely be adjusted to the participants' different tastes but also to the different types of meetings. As

there is a purpose with the entire meeting there should be a purpose with the food. For example, when having a board meeting where a couple of problems should be solved it is illogical to serve food that is heavy and that devastates participants' ability to concentrate and engage. Wildhuss explained that the conference supplier should mainly serve food with low glycemic index since this kind of food contributes with energy and in turn effectiveness. Thereby, besides keeping focus on healthy food, more thought should also be put on food that improves the conference participants' effectiveness.

Moreover, Svenska Möten, among others, has noticed the increasing importance of being able to offer the participant a memorable experience. As it has already been mentioned, the food and beverage are often the first things to be commented on after a conference, which indicates that it is an effectual and memorable element of the conference product. This made it natural for Svenska Möten to focus on this particular feature in order to turn the regular conference into a memorable experience. Thereby, according to Åkerlind at Svenska Möten, Svenska Möten has started a competition called *"The Best Meeting Meal,"* where the attention is put not only on the food but also on the favorable atmosphere created at the informal meeting that takes place at the dinner table. The competition focuses on the overall experience of the meal and thereby considers of both the food and the service.

4.2.7 The Social Activities

All respondents agreed that social activities are an important element of the conference product since they contribute with an informal environment where the conference participants have the opportunity to interact and create a sense of community. According to the respondents, activities that are physically strenuous are no longer demanded to the same extent as they were before.

Today, when choosing a social activity the conference participants are more interested in activities that make them feel better and healthier and that are more associated to their own well-being. Such activities are; yoga, lectures about stress and healthier life, spa-treatments, painting, cooking, etc. Almgren at Svenska Möten stressed that it is also important to mention that in order to be able to create a sense of community, all activities should be performed in a group. For example, cooking together is a very popular activity that involves a bit of a challenge but at the same time brings people together. Ohlsson at BTI Nordic, Mohlin at the Arken Conference Centre and Elmér at Scandic pointed out that similar to food and beverage, the activities can be connected to the cultural or typical experiences of a certain area, which adds to the uniqueness and value of the conference. For example, depending on where the conference is geographically placed, the activities at the Scandic Hotels look differently. Every Scandic Hotel has a list of different activities and many of them are adjusted to the local and ethical surroundings.

However, all the respondents pointed out that the demand for social activities during a conference has decreased due to the fact that the number of overnight conferences is decreasing. Today, day-conferences have become more popular and there is often no time or money for any social activities. According to the respondents, the social activities are the first ones to be taken away from the conference package when the conference buyer is forced to save both money and time. This is also apparent at many of the conference facilities where social activities are not included in the conference packages but can instead be purchased at an extra cost.

4.2.8 The Future Social Activities

The social activities are the product element of a conference that have been continuously neglected ever since the economic recession, which is a fact that all respondents could refer to. The companies' strive to save money and time has immediately lowered the demand for activities, since activities are often seen as an additional, rewarding element of the conference.

However, the future looks differently and according to Almgren at Svenska Möten, the conference buyers' increased awareness of the efficiency and effectiveness will have an impact on their conception of the social activities. Most of the respondents believe that the demand for activities will recover but the "new" kind of activity does not have to have a direct connection to the meeting agenda and its duration will probably be much shorter than before. Salberg at Radisson SAS Scandinavia explains these new kinds of activities as short energy breaks such as relaxing yoga for 20 minutes, etc. According to Wildhuss Step2, the social activities will be more formed in accordance with the over-all purpose of the conference, even though the main purpose of the activity is simply to have fun. In other words, besides rewarding the participants, the activities should also be used for communicating a certain message that supports the conference buyers' desired result and their long-term strategy.

Nonetheless, in order to accomplish a more efficient and effective conference in terms of inspired and creative participants, Almgren expresses the importance to turn the conference into an experience. In other words, the conference suppliers should try to exceed the participants' expectations and surprise them in a positive way. This could be accomplished with the help of the social activities, which will thereby again gain attention. According to

Wildhuss, the activities evoke emotions and give the participants something out of the ordinary. Henrik von Arnold, the CEO of the Gothenburg Convention Bureau, has experienced that these kinds of activities make the entire conference memorable and in turn make the participants retain the detailed information from the actual meeting. As he expresses:

"A conference needs to give the participant a memorable experience."

Elmér added that in the future it might be difficult to raise the salaries due to the lower price levels in some European countries, and instead it will probably become more important for the companies to reward their employees. An option is to reward them with a conference with delightful activities, and for this reason the activities will again play an important role of the conference product in the future.

4.2.9 The Atmosphere

According to the research model of the conference product and to the respondents' answers, the atmosphere is seen as critical element since the participants are present in the production premises of a conference. As Bitner (1992) explains, the general elements of the physical environment that affect the atmosphere include all aspects of the organization's physical facility and other forms of tangible elements. Nevertheless, when it comes to a conference product, all the participants agreed that the verbal communication and interaction should also be considered as factors that have an impact on the atmosphere. In other words, it is important to mention that the atmosphere is created by a combination of the room, the meeting, the food and beverage, and the social activities.

Mohlin has experienced that the conference buyers often have the option to hold a conference at their own offices, but despite all the needed resources they still choose to come to Arken Conference Centre. This indicates that they are looking for a certain atmosphere. Mohlin experienced that in many cases the customers of the Arken Conference Centre strive to escape from the working environment and seek a more relaxed, pleasant and comfortable setting. Furthermore, Mohlin explained that the atmosphere is sometimes even the most critical element when choosing a conference supplier. In those cases the conference participants are not specifically interested in certain elements of the conference such as the room, the food and beverage, the service or the social activities, since those elements are not able to solely attract this customer. Those kinds of customers choose, for example, to have their conference at a spa without even participating in the treatments, which shows that the customer is actually interested in the relaxing spa atmosphere.

According to Middleton (2001), the internal and external characteristics of the environment should be considered simultaneously when offering a tourism product since they both have an influence on the overall atmosphere, and in turn on the entire service experience. Likewise, Almgren at Svenska Möten has experienced that besides the facility and its inner characteristics, the outside environment also has an affect on the overall atmosphere of the conference. The outside environment is, according to her, often one of the most crucial determining factors when a customer is choosing a facility. The conference facilities of Svenska Möten are mainly situated in calm beauty spots, which indicates an inspiring and relaxing overall atmosphere and are most often chosen because of these characteristics.

4.2.10 The Future Atmosphere

Most of the respondents have become aware of the atmosphere's increased importance and see it as one of the most important elements of the conference product in the future. The atmosphere has gained a lot of attention in the last few years and no longer simply entails a search for a relaxed, pleasant and comfortable setting. Lately, it has been realized that atmosphere can be used as a means to contribute to the effectiveness, and enable the conference supplier to offer a memorable experience by affecting participants' different senses. Some tests have shown that groups that have been placed in different types of rooms have come up with different results, which has proved the impact of an atmosphere.

Conference suppliers, such as Svenska Möten and Scandic, have made investments in collaboration with famous and successful designers in order to improve the inner physical environments. These will generate an atmosphere that will inspire participation, learning, creativity and energy. For example, at the Gällöfsta Läroriket, the rooms have been assigned different atmospheres with different characteristics. One example is a room that stimulates power, fantasy, cooperation, and calmness, and offers the external prerequisites for creativity and a successful result. According to Elmér, Scandic has put a lot of effort in creating an atmosphere based on the overall image, the *"Nordic Common Sense."* Their core value is *caring,* and thereby their focus is on making each stay easy for the guests by offering a relaxed and informal environment together with practical yet inspired solutions.

According to Wildhuss at Step2, a homogenous atmosphere of the entire conference will become even more essential in the future and will include not only the meeting room but also the informal settings and the external

environment. As it has already been explained, informal settings such as the dining room will gain a lot more attention in the future since it has been acknowledged that it is during these circumstances where the level of interaction is probably higher and where most creative ideas are formed. Moreover, the external environment of the conference, such as natural beauty spots or hectic city surroundings, is becoming an even more important determining factor when choosing a conference supplier in the future. Except for the physical environment, it should not be forgotten that a more active and involved personnel, higher food-quality and stimulating activities will also contribute to an atmosphere that conveys well-being, trust and inspiration, and in turn create a more effective and memorable conferences.

4.2.11 The Image

Today's consumer society is more and more image conscious, which is one of the characteristics of a postmodern society (Urry, 1990). This indicates that managing image is becoming an essential part of the product design. However, it should be clarified that image was mentioned as an essential element that has an impact on the conference product by those conference suppliers that have created a unique concept for their conferences. Scandic has, for example, put a lot of effort in creating their image, the Nordic Common Sense, which goes deep into the Nordic heritage. Scandic has used the traditional Nordic "taking care of each other" attitude and they have developed a relaxed, affordable, environmentally friendly, mid-market hotel concept. These principles have been automatically transferred and used to communicate the conference product as well. Another example is the Clarion Hotel Stockholm, which has an image of a modern design hotel that blends contemporary Swedish architecture with modern Scandinavian art. The strong image of art and design indicates the laid-back youthful atmosphere, and the modern and innovative meeting rooms

have high-tech equipment, which in turn is believed to have an effect the customers' perceptions of the product.

On the other hand, Almgren at Svenska Möten and Mohlin at the Arken Conference Centre do not believe that the image has a significant effect on the conference participants' perception of a conference, and is therefore not seen as a vital component of the conference product. However, most of the conference suppliers of Svenska Möten have chosen to keep "a low profile" in order to stay flexible and attract a wide variety of demand, but also because of the constantly changing trends on the market. Many of the conference suppliers of Svenska Möten have many similar characteristics since all of them put focus on the Swedish theme and high quality of environment, service, activities and food; however what differentiates them is the size and where they are geographically situated. Similarly, Mohlin explained that the Arken Conference Centre has not put a lot of effort in creating a strong image.

4.2.12 The Future Image

In the last couple of years, many of the giant conference suppliers have developed their meeting concepts and many of the respondents believe that this will be even more important in the future due to the fierce competition in the conference market and to the fact that the corporate culture plays a more important part in the choice of a conference.

Hilton has launched a new meeting concept, "Hilton Meetings", which stresses two key elements. First, Hilton Meeting guarantees high-quality meeting rooms and secondly, impeccable business-focused services, no matter which Hilton Hotel you choose. The new concept also includes a Meeting Quality Guarantee, which is a guarantee that if the customer is not entirely satisfied with the

facilities and services provided by Hilton Meetings, an equivalent future meeting is offered free of charge (Emdén, 2004).

Also, at Scandic Hotels with meeting facilities, they are now offering a new meeting concept called MEETING. Their meeting concept involves a standardization of the service and the meeting premises so that the conference buyer can expect the same treatment and infrastructure, regardless of the Scandic Hotel they choose to hold their conference at.

Moreover, at Radisson SAS they emphasize as much on the human factor as they do on their facilities. Their meeting concept, "Meeting & Event Promises", is built upon four elements: professionalism, commitment, caring, and a 100% Guest Satisfaction Guarantee.

4.3 DIFFERENT PURPOSES WITH CONFERENCES

In order to be able to offer a satisfying conference product, the respondents have experienced that it is important to clarify the customers' purpose with the conference since it affects the features of the product. All respondents agreed that the first issue discussed with a new customer is the purpose of the conference. However, it is not enough to only agree on the size and the duration. At the BTI Nordic, Event and Conference Solutions, they are careful in conducting a detailed "need analysis" of the conference buyer. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that a proper need analysis is of greater importance in this case since they are creating a conference package by collaborating with independent actors from many different businesses such as hotels, entertainment companies, restaurants, etc. The following purposes were identified as the most common by the respondents as well as their effect that they have on the conference product:

- *Kick-offs* are regularly arranged, mainly in the beginning of a new season and their aim is to give the employees a good start. According to Almgren at Svenska Möten:

"Employees see kick-offs as a reward and want to experience something fun to get them started."

  Thereby, the activities are important since they are able to create an informal and eventful conference. A conference that contains these kinds of activities can inspire the participants and strengthen a group's sense of community, which is crucial in getting a good start.

- *Mergers* involve groups of participants that have no prior or very little knowledge about each other, but are in the future supposed to work in a team. This kind of purpose requires that a conference enables the participants to socialize and interact in order to improve their collaboration. Similarly to a kick-off, activities are an essential element of the conference product; however the main aim is to introduce the participants to each other. Hence, activities that involve some kind of teambuilding are the most appropriate ones.

- *Board meetings* mainly involve a smaller number of participants, which requires smaller conference facilities in order to create a comfortable ambiance. The focus is put on the effectiveness and functionality where the activities are not that significant. Thus, a good, personal service that makes the participants feel welcome and make sure that everything runs smoothly is significant.

- *A product launch* has to be more of a spectacular event that manages to impress all the participants. The focus is on the product and the extra attention is given to the room in terms of design, lightening, technical support, etc.

- *Informative/Educational* conferences are more of a "traditional" nature where the lecture seating style is often preferred. At these conferences, efficiency and functionality are appreciated since the main concern is the flow of the information. The main goal is to communicate the information so that it can easily be interpreted by every participant.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS TO FURTHER RESEARCH

Following chapter concludes the major findings from the empirical study and analysis. Since the conclusion's aim is to answers the research questions, the outline of this chapter is structured as such. First of all, in order to visualize the conference product, the research model has been modified according to the empirical findings and a complete model of today's conference product is introduced. This is followed by a description of the trends on the conference market and what impact they might have on the future conference products. In order to visualize future conference products the model has been further modified. Furthermore, practical and theoretical implications of this study are presented. Finally, suggestions for further research are discussed.

5.1 WHAT ARE THE FEATURES OF THE CONFERENCE PRODUCT?

As introduced in the theoretical framework, after conducting explicit literary research, it was assumed that there is no recognized theory that particularly describes the conference product. However, based on other theories and facts, six elements that define a conference were distinguished. These are; the room, the meeting, the food and beverage, the social activities, the atmosphere, and the image. A research model was created, visualizing the six fundamental elements of the conference product, and after analyzing the empirical data it can be stated that the same elements were identified.

As found in this study, *the room, the personnel, the food and beverage,* and *the atmosphere* were seen as the most important elements of a conference product by the majority of respondents. On the other hand, *other customers, social*

activities, and image were also seen as essential elements of the conference product, but they were not among the first ones to be mentioned.

The room is one of the elements enabling a conference to take place, which indicates its significant importance among the elements of the conference product. The room is important when purchasing a conference since the conference participants are spending a longer period of time in the conference premises. Today, the foremost concern with the room is its functionality in terms of layout and comfort. Due to the increasing demand for personalized conferences, conference suppliers are, to a greater extent, required to offer flexible meeting spaces designed to accommodate a variety of functions. In addition to functionality, some conference suppliers have also put focus on the esthetics in terms of architecture, style, and the interior and exterior of their facilities, which is often done in order to accomplish a certain image. Another aspect of the room, which is also important, is the technological equipment. Conference participants often take technical support for granted and if failures occur they can have a detrimental effect on the outcome of the conference.

The personnel have a great impact on the delivery of a conference since they are constantly interacting with the participants during a conference, which implies the significance of this element. Today, the main responsibilities of the personnel are to welcome the conference participants, make them familiar with the facilities and technology, and always be close at hand in order to make the conference participants feel comfortable during their stay.

Food and beverage are often central elements in meetings between people and, as found in this study, food and beverage are a fundamental prerequisite during the conferences as well. When marketing conferences, many suppliers use food and beverage in order to attract buyers and this element is often the first thing

to be commented on by a conference participant after a conference has taken place. Now, healthy food is in the center of attention for numerous conference suppliers. Other conference suppliers are focusing on food that is in line with their image or they are offering food that is typical for the local surroundings. In general, many conference suppliers are offering buffets since it can fulfill many different demands and at the same time it gives the participants an opportunity to choose between wide varieties of different food.

The atmosphere is also seen as a critical element of a conference since the conference participants are present in the production premises. This study shows that it is rather common for conference buyer to choose a certain conference facility due to its atmosphere, which indicates that the atmosphere is sometimes even seen as the most critical element of the conference. Many times the conference participants are escaping their stressful working environment, searching for something different.

In the same way that personnel are present in the delivery of conference, so are the *other customers,* and therefore they also have an impact on the outcome of the conference. As observed during the empirical study, conference suppliers are aware of the interaction between participants from different groups and, for example, they are not placing two competing companies or organizations at the same conference facility at the same time. However, it is not obvious that the suppliers are concerned with the interaction between participants that belong to the same group. It is common that the conference participants have the opportunity to be seated in different ways and to take part of the social activities in order to enhance interaction. Nevertheless, it seems that the majority of conference suppliers do not take an active role in encouraging nor restricting the interaction.

Despite the low demand for *social activities,* the empirical study shows that this element is of great value since it contributes with an informal environment where the conference participants have an opportunity to create a sense of community. During the economic recession, conference buyers cut down on the social activities, and as a consequence it is common that the conference suppliers take away the social activities from the conference package. When social activities are on the program, the trend today is to offer activities connected to the human well-being, such as spa treatments, yoga, and lectures about how to avoid stress, and so forth. Other activities are often tied to the local and ethical surrounding of the conference supplier.

The *image* is also seen as an important element of the conference product mainly by those conference suppliers that have created a unique concept. For example, Scandic has created a meeting concept, which differentiates themselves from many competitors; hence they are persistently communicating their image in order to attract a certain group of conference buyers. However, image is of minor importance for those that have not put a lot of effort in offering something unique and unusual. Consequently, they are not using their image to the same extent.

During the empirical study, *security* was brought up by several respondents as an important element of a conference. According to the respondents, in the past few years many conference participants have become more concerned with safety issues and thereby, security is added as another element of the conference product.
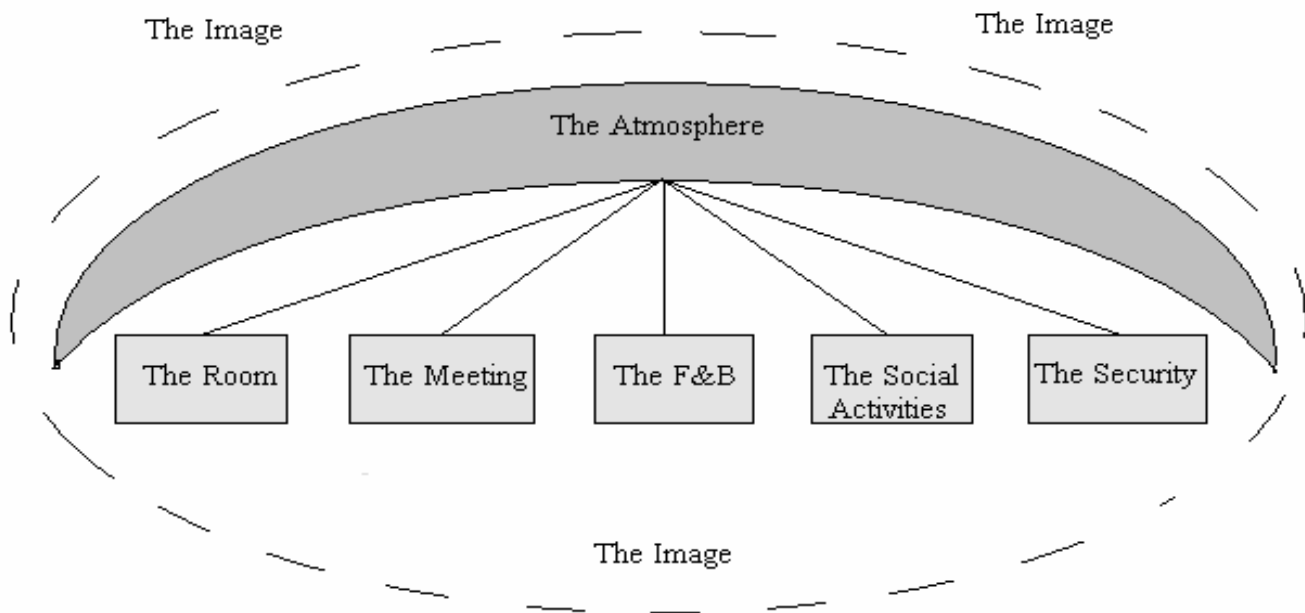
Figure 8. Today's Conference Product

 Moreover, depending on the purpose of the conference, different elements are more or less important. As it has already been explained, there are two main purposes when choosing what kind of conference; *the process-oriented* and *the experience-oriented.* If a buyer has a process-oriented purpose, the focus is put on logistics and other rational factors for meetings with relatively standardized content. On the other hand, with an experience-oriented purpose, the buyer is focusing on generating a creative and unique experience, which encompasses both motivation and surprise. This study has identified five different purposes; *kick-offs, mergers, board meetings, product launches,* and *informative/educational*, which can all be placed on the line of continuum with the "process-oriented" and "the experience oriented" as two extremes that has been illustrated below in the Figure 9. This leads to a conclusion that if a conference is placed on the left part of the continuum, the social activities are of minor importance, the room and the atmosphere are to communicate functionality, effectiveness and comfort, and the personnel is to make sure that

everything runs smoothly. On the other hand, if a conference is better placed on the right half of the continuum, the room's design, the social activities that enable the participants to interact, and an inspiring and impressing atmosphere become of great importance.
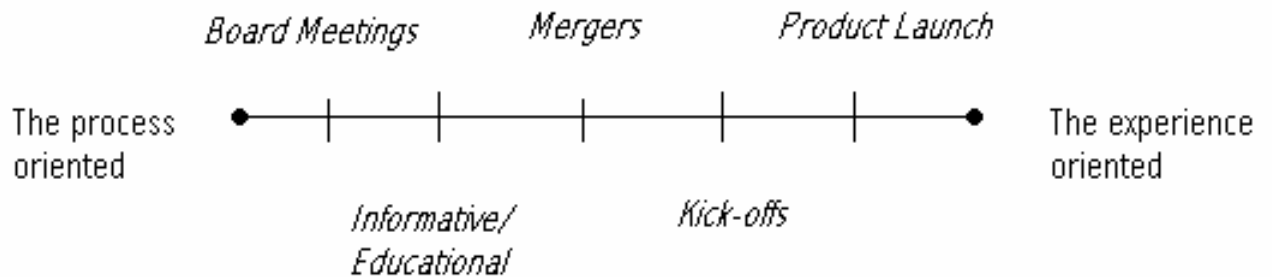

Figure 9. The Conference Purpose Continuum

5.2   WHAT ARE THE FUTURE FEATURES OF THE CONFERENCE PRODUCT?

Everything presented considering future are speculations that only describe tendencies towards a certain development. However, these tendencies show the direction that will probably be followed by the majority of the conference suppliers and can in that sense be perceived as highly valuable. By looking back in time, the majority of the respondents agreed that the conference product has looked quite the same in the past thirty years. However, by concluding the findings from the empirical study and analysis, it can be stated that it is during the last few years that the most significant changes have been made. Still, these changes are defined as future trends since the majority of conference suppliers have not yet reached the specific level of modification set up by the initiators.

In other words, they are just tendencies that imply the possible future development of the conference product.

During this study, three overarching forthcoming trends are noticed. These are: enhanced efficiency and effectiveness, more enthusiastic experience offering, and intensified personalization. However, compared to the different trends in the past, it is important to highlight that the development forecasted in this study will contribute to a much more profound change of the conference product. The earlier trends mainly differed in the type of social activities added to the basic conference product but in the future, the empirical study supposes that besides the shorter meetings, the focus will be put on the conference's contribution to a company's success. This will put more pressure on the conference supplier to enable not only a more efficient but also a more effective conference. In order to achieve a higher standard for the offer, it can be assumed that the conference suppliers will need a more strategic approach. This will encourage buyers to not only clarify the overall purpose with the conference but to set clearer goals and objectives. This in turn will enable the conference buyers to more easily measure the result of a conference and to put it in a more long-term perspective. The relationship between the supplier and the buyer will be characterized with closer collaboration where the conference supplier will become better initiated in and responsible for the desired outcome of the conference, compared to when the conference supplier's only goal is to offer a set of supporting tangible and intangible conference features.

However, it is important to clarify that the effectiveness should not only be seen in terms of numbers but also in emotional factors, such as happiness, well being, loyalty and so forth. Thereby, the conference supplier should not neglect the advantages gained by creating and offering an experience to the conference participants. This way the participants will gain something they will remember

and the conference will be associated with positive feelings. Moreover, the strategic approach will lead to a production of more tailored and convoluted solutions for each and every conference buyers, which could gradually eliminate the offering of pre-produced conference packages.

To conclude, the role of a conference supplier will be more characterized as a producer than a provider of a conference, and a conference will be seen as a result of a more organized and purposeful production. This indicates that the higher standards will be put on the procurement of conferences and the level of business professionalism will be higher.

As already assumed, these trends will have an impact on the future development of the conference product elements. This leads to the conclusion that the model of the conference product today has to be modified in order to illustrate a more accurate picture of a future conference product. Besides the elements mentioned in the model of the conference product today, the "Outcome of a Conference" has to be added, which will present the actual core product of a conference. The room, the meeting, the food and beverage, the social activities, the atmosphere, the image and the security will all be seen as supporting elements that are utilized in order to achieve the desired outcome. Furthermore, the meaning and the contribution with all the elements will be much clearer and goal oriented; however the central factor of the agreement between the conference supplier and the conference buyer will be the outcome of the conference. In other words, the supporting elements will be much more integrated and synchronized so that they operate together towards the same outcome. This is illustrated in the Figure 10.
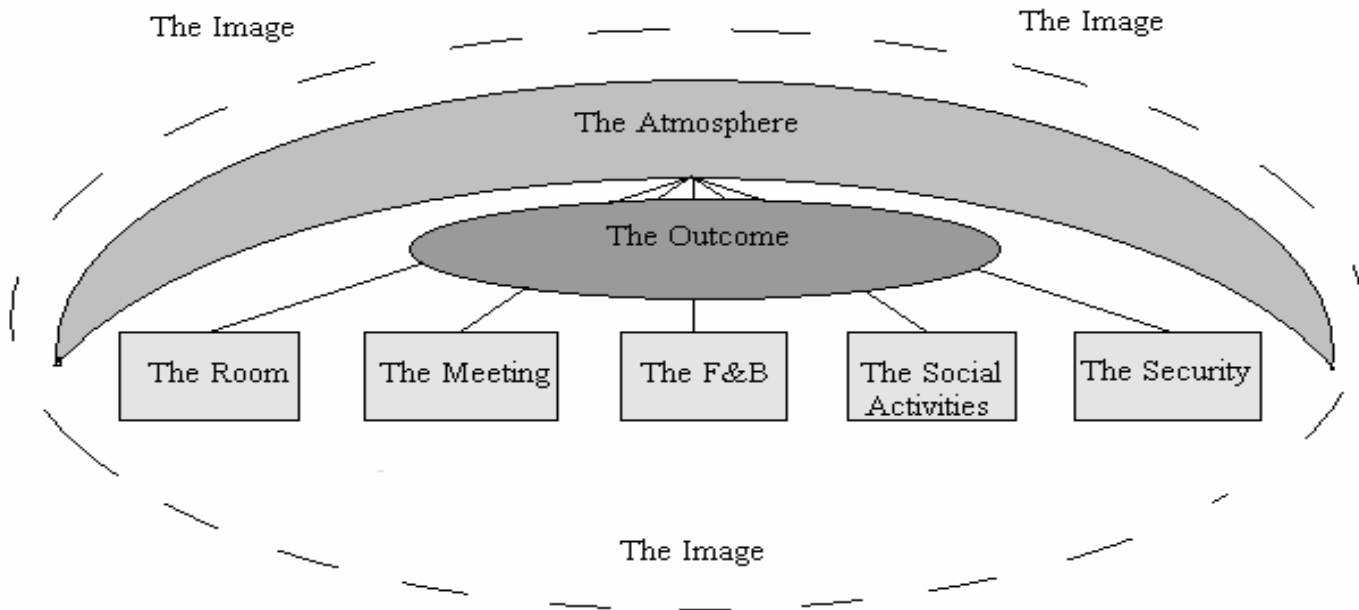
Figure 10. The Future Conference Product

Consequently, the room is expected to be even more functional where investments will be made in more flexible spaces with the focus on informal environments, which encourages interaction and thereby stimulates creativity and facilitates learning. The informal environment is sometimes seen as the most beneficial setting when generating ideas and it allows the reactions and knowledge to be easily manifested, which makes the outcome of the meeting more valuable. Moreover, much focus will be put on the meeting room in terms of aesthetics such as architecture, color, style, and accessories. However, compared to today, the physical environment will be formed and designed with a motive that extents further than simply creating a certain image. Hence, generating an atmosphere that stimulates creativity and learning and contributes to a more effective and memorable conference will be in the center of attention. This indicates that the conference buyer will become more aware of the advantages with different atmospheres and will not choose a conference supplier mainly in order to escape the stressful work-environment. Thereby, the

room and the atmosphere enable and facilitate a progress of a more efficient and effective conference, unlike simply contributing with a place to meet.

Similarly, the personnel's contribution to the outcome of the conference is presently perceived as limited compared to what will probably be expected from them in the future. In order to be able to approach the conference buyers in a more professional way, the conference buyers will have to continue to invest in the personnel's knowledge and skills. When it comes to other customers, the conference suppliers will probably take a more active role considering the way different conference participants are interacting.

Moreover, food and beverage will also be steered in a way that supports the desired outcome of a meeting by, for example offering, food with a low glycemic index that improves the conference participants' effectiveness. However, it is important not to forget the balance between the efficiency and the delivered experience. Due to the fact that all mealtimes are seen as informal environments where the interaction flow is high between the participants, the conference suppliers should put more effort in tending this part of a conference. By not only focusing on the food-quality they will also be more aware of the overall atmosphere around a meal that creates a certain experience.

Besides the food and beverage, the social activities will also become more valuable once their actual contribution to a more efficient and effective conference becomes realized. Like different mealtimes, such as lunch or a coffee break, the social activities include the informal environment and thereby are able to support the interaction, participation, creativity and effective learning. They make it possible for the participants to better enjoy the conference and to obtain a memorable experience.

Furthermore, the image will also gain much more attention in the future. In accordance to the heightened level of professionalism in conference business, more effort will be put into creating stronger concepts with brands that communicate clearer and more convoluted benefits as compared to today. Finally, there is no indication that the importance of the security issue will lessen in the future, and thereby it remains as an essential element of the future conference product.

5.3 THE PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

As it has already been explained, the Swedish conference market is surrounded by a turbulent environment and is characterized by fierce competition that forces the conference suppliers to constantly seek new competitive advantages. Moreover, the conference business is sensitive to changes of the economic situation due to the fact that companies choose to cut down on external conferences during economic recessions while during economic booms companies are more likely to spend money on external conferences. This study can be useful for conference suppliers in order to get a better perspective of the conference product today and the possibilities to change and develop in the future. By increasing benefits and advantages of a conference for the buyers the conference suppliers will become less sensitive to fluctuations of the economy, which might stabilize their profits over time.

Moreover, this study could specifically be of great interest for those conference suppliers that have yet neither carried through any significant changes of the product nor contributed significantly to the development of it. After conducting this study it was noticed that these kinds of conference suppliers are still the majority on the conference market, which means that it is only a small group of suppliers that are driving the development forward. Hence, in order to boost the

development, more suppliers need to realize the advantages with innovation in terms of improving the conference product.

In order to be inventive, conference suppliers should acutely invest in gaining knowledge that could be transformed into future success. This kind of knowledge can be gained by benchmarking with a small number of very successful conference suppliers on the market or by being actively involved into the work of different organizations within the meeting industry such as Meetings Professionals International (MPI), International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA), and the International Association of Congress Centers (AIPC). Moreover, the conference suppliers could invest in more educated personnel that have knowledge and skills in working closer to the conference buyers on a more professional level.

This study implores that conference suppliers should become more like consultants in designing the conferences compared to a provider that seems to be the role of the majority today. However, to what extent the suppliers are able to or should act as consultants is up to each and every conference supplier. This is still a financial issue for many, which indicates that this kind of development will most likely occur gradually. To start with, it will probably be more suitable for conferences suppliers to cooperate with meeting designers and consultants. This kind of cooperation enables the conference suppliers to provide their customers with not only the supporting elements of a conference such as the meeting rooms, food and beverage, activities, and transport. This could be a sufficient investment until the demand for more holistic conference solutions takes off.

However, it is important to highlight that in order to drive the development forward in the conference market, it is not enough with only the conference

suppliers' investments. The buyers' meeting planning process has to become well thought out and the content of the meeting should be better specified. In other words, the buyers' requirements need to be higher and their priorities much clearer. Conclusively, it can be stated that conference suppliers and conference buyers should be working more closely together in order to contribute to the development of the conference business.

5.5 THE THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

There is a wide variety of literature involving descriptions and models of the service and tourism and hospitality product. However, despite the importance of the conference market, there is lack of research in this area. As introduced in the theoretical framework, after explicit literary research, it was discovered that there is no recognized theory that describes the conference product. Thereby, in order to find out a solution to this research problem, it was necessary to complement and modify the existing theories. This resulted in a theoretical framework and a research model that functioned as a fundamental base for the analysis. From this, a theoretical model was developed, which contributed to the conclusions and implications of the study. Hence, the theoretical implications present the theoretical conclusions, which are compiled as a contribution to the conference literature.

The model can facilitate the processes such as production and marketing by making the suppliers better aware of the conference product. However, the development of the product can also be improved since the model has been applied to the forthcoming trends, which is of specific importance concerning the turbulent and competitive environment of the conference market.

5.4 SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The Swedish meeting industry involves a number of challenging opportunities for future research. This study has shown to be a varied and complex subject involving many significant factors, and therefore this subject could contribute to various areas for further investigation.

One major challenge for future research would be to develop this study and engage in evaluating the actual demand for the conference product. This study is mainly based on the conference suppliers' thoughts and beliefs, which implies that the conclusions could be combined with the customers' needs and wants. Because the customers actively play an important part in service delivery, they should be involved in the new service development process. Beyond just providing input on their own needs, customers can help design the service concept and the delivery process, particularly in the case of the conference product where the conference participants are an important actor in the service process. Moreover, in the empirical study it was found that there is a tendency towards a more divided target market and that the typical conference buyer is no longer the secretaries to the same extent as before. There are probably new target groups with new needs and wants that are not yet detected and therefore, it is of great interest to further investigate who these new conference buyers are.

Future research could also involve employees' opinions. According to Zeithaml and Bitner, (2003), it is critical that a new service development process involves both employees and customers, since services are produced and consumed simultaneously and often involve interaction between employees and customers. Employees frequently are "the service", or at least they perform or deliver a service. Thus, their involvement in choosing which new services to

develop and how these services should be designed and implanted can be very beneficial. Contact employees are psychologically and physically close to customers and can be very helpful in identifying customers needs for which new services can be offered. Moreover, involving employees in the design and the development process also increases the likelihood of new service success because employees can identify the organizational issues that need to be addressed to support the delivery of the service to the customers.

The final possible research area would be to investigate the use of unusual venues as conference facilities, such as museums, theatres, art galleries, boats, and so on, since this study is mainly focused on purely dedicated conference suppliers and hotels. Since there is an increased interest for unusual venues, it would be interesting to conduct a market analysis of this sector with reference to market demand, product design and so forth.

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APPENDIX 1 – THE RESPONDENTS

Ulrica Cramby

Ulrica Cramby works as the General Manager at *Göteborg Convention Centre* and she has been active in the meeting industry for several years. The Göteborg Convention Centre has a long tradition and experience in arranging both small meetings and large world congresses and they were recently selected as the seventh best convention centre in the world.

Johan Svensson

Johan Svensson is the managing director of *Svenska Möten,* which is a members' organization for over 100 of Sweden's leading hotel and conference centers. Through quality assurance and an efficient customer-friendly reservation system, including 24-hour service, they enable guests to conduct more effective meetings. In 2004, he received the SHIE-award[1] for his work in transforming and developing Svenska Möten into one of the leading supplier organizations in the Swedish meeting industry, but also for initiating the competition, the "Meeting Room of the Future".

Marcus Åkerlind

Marcus Åkerlind is the accountant and the person responsible for IT at *Svenska Möten,* but also one of the driving forces in the organization.

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[1] SHIE is an abbreviation for Scandinavian Hospitality Incentive Event, which is the Northern Europe's largest and most important fair for business travel and MICE-industry.

Inger Almgren

Inger Almgren is working as a conference consultant and project leader at *Svenska Möten* and she has more than twenty years of experience in advising and coordinating conferences for companies and organizations.

Catharina Hamilton

Catharina Hamilton is the former Group Managing Director of Congrex and one of the co-founders of the same company. She has more than thirty years of experience and is one of the most respected persons within the conference and convention industry. Today, Hamilton is working as a consultant for her own company, *Hamilton Advisory Group,* and one of her present missions is to find an operating company for the new convention centre on Gotland.

Roger Kellerman

Roger Kellerman works as a publisher for *Meetings International,* which is one of the leading meeting communication trade journals in Sweden. Kellerman has 18 years of experience as chief editor of trade journals, such as Mässor & Kongresser and Konferensvärlden. Furthermore, he is one of the founders of Meeting Professional International in Sweden.

Tobias Ekman

Tobias Ekman has solid experience as sales manager working with placing the Grand Hotel and Berns Hotel in Stockholm on the map for national and international conferences. Today, he is working as the Director of Sales at *Clarion Hotel Stockholm,* which is part of the Choice Hotel chain with 5,000 hotels in over 40 countries. Hotel Clarion Stockholm is a modern design hotel and is the largest upscale full-service hotel and conference facility in Stockholm, with a meeting capacity for up to 1,000 delegates.

Niclas Molin

Niclas Mohlin works as Vice General Manager and Human Resource Manager at *Arken Conference Centre* in Göteborg, which is one of the largest conference centres in Sweden. Arken's basic focus is on hotel and conference operations, and with over 40 conference rooms they are able to host meetings of two persons up to 800 participants.

Ann-Sofie Elmér

Ann-Sofie Elmér is working as the Product Manager for Meetings at *Scandic Hotel.* She has been working with conferences for several years and in 2002-2003 she was one of those responsible for developing Scandic's new meeting concept, the MEETING.

Marita Sahlberg

Marita Sahlberg is working as a Conference Manager at *Radisson SAS Scandinavia* in Göteborg. She has been working within the hotel industry for several years and she has a lot of experience in food management and conference arrangements. The conference department of Radisson SAS Scandinavia consists of 12 meeting rooms that can seat from two to 500 conference guests. Moreover, Radisson SAS Scandinavia is part of the Radisson SAS meeting concept, Meeting & Events, that is applied to most premises within this hotel group.

Henrik von Arnold

Henrik von Arnold is the Director of the *Göteborg Convention Bureau*, which markets Göteborg as a meeting place towards association meeting and corporate event organizers. In 2004, Henrik von Arnold received the SHIE-scholarship for his engagement in placing GCB and Göteborg on the list of Europe's most attractive meeting places. Moreover, von Arnold is a board

member of the European Federation of Conference Town and he is also the president of the Scandinavian chapter of the International Congress & Convention Association.

Maria Ohlsson

Maria Ohlsson is working as a project manager at *Event & Conference Solutions*, which is part of BTI Nordic, the leading business travel group in the Nordic countries. Ohlsson has several years of experience within the travel industry. Working as a project manager at Event, she covers all phases of the event from concept to implementation. Every new project is assigned to someone who is to act as the client's contact and who is totally familiar with the entire project.

Rikard Wildhuss

Rikard Wildhuss has been working in the meeting industry since 1988 and is today one of the leading meeting strategists in Sweden. Wildhuss is a co-founder and joint partner of *Step2 Möteskommunication AB,* which helps companies and organizations to use meetings as a strategic tool for business and work activity development. Furthermore, Rikard Wildhuss has a degree in CCM, Certification in Meeting Management, and he has also written two books about meeting communication.