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Stakeholder Perspectives on NMUN Ceremonies

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Abstract

Within large events there are inevitably the need for celebrations to mark the beginning and ending of the greater event—Ceremonies. No matter how joyous the celebrations may be, there may be rituals, stylistic observances and procedural protocols required in order for the ceremony to be considered successful. Specifically, any event will involve steps such as these: 1) studying the “brand,” 2) identifying the target audience, 3) devising the event concept, 4) coordinating the technical aspects prior to the event, and 5) debriefing and reflecting on the outcome.

This chapter aims to describe, understand and reflect upon aspects of the preparation and execution of the opening and closing ceremonies held as part of the NMUN 2016 event in Kobe City University of Foreign Studies.

Key words: Model United Nations simulations, ceremony, community of practice, event management, branding

1. Introduction

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

- Margaret Mead

Event Management is a relatively new profession for a job that has been done since humans first started living in groups—the creation and development of large-scale events that may serve a combination of social, economic and emotional needs. Event Management may also be used as a strategic marketing tool in order to communicate with current and potential clients/customers. Although the event itself offers a means to communicate, the event (including the weeks prior and following) also offers an opportunity for media coverage (newspapers, television, internet) to reach thousands if not millions of people. Hence, the management of events can be a hugely important undertaking with serious repercussions in the balance, so intense preparations have become the hallmarks of successful outcomes.

Within large events there are inevitably the need for celebrations to mark the beginning and ending of the greater event—Ceremonies. Considered another way, ceremonies are significant events that are used to celebrate other, bigger events; they may signify a rite of passage (e.g., birth, death, marriage) or may help to celebrate seasonal/social events. No matter how joyous the celebrations may be, there may be rituals, stylistic observances and procedural protocols required in order for the ceremony to be considered successful. By definition it assumes an attention to detail; it may include a theatrical component and it will culminate in a declaratory verbal pronouncement.

This chapter aims to describe, understand and reflect upon aspects of the preparation and execution of the opening and closing ceremonies held as part of the NMUN 2016 event in Kobe City University of Foreign Studies.

2. Background to the Research

The following sections will briefly summarize the steps taken before, during and after the NMUN event as it relates to the work of the Ceremonies committee. The steps include: 1) Studying the “brand,” 2) Identifying the target audience, 3) Devising the event concept, 4) Coordinating the technical aspects prior to the event, and 5)

Debriefing and reflecting on the outcome.

2.1 Studying the brand

In order to get a sense of what should be expected, other opening and closing ceremonies for international NMUN events (Rome, Olomouc) were observed and copious notes were collected. Items of interest included: NMUN “brand” elements (including tone and degree of formality), the sequence of ceremony components, and the timing overall and for each component.

2.1.1 Brand elements

NMUN is a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) and therefore, the NMUN brand is evoked through a number of elements including formality (dress code, code of conduct) and the use of symbols/visual media. In terms of dress code, the key concepts are to “portray professionalism and modesty” while the key concepts for the code of conduct are “professionalism and diplomacy” citing that “Professionalism in speech, actions, and appearance by delegates is a requirement of this conference, and necessary to its educational mission” (NMUN/NCCA, 2017, n.p.). Professionalism and modesty are interpreted to require “Western business dress” with allowances for “traditional dress” only for “international delegates in whose native countries professional business dress includes traditional cultural dress” thus avoiding cultural misappropriation via the use of traditional cultural attire as a costume. Therefore, the mood sought should be solemn, earnest and respectful.

Visual media also carry the brand ethos—the navy blue and grey elements in the logo seen on bags, badges and banners declare respect, authority and solemnity and the round element in the logo design evokes inclusivity, cooperation and deliberation. Delegates and other participants are all required to wear blue lanyards holding the official name badge (featuring the logo) asserting membership and belonging-ness.



Figure 1. NMUN Logos

2.1.2 Designing the event sequence of main components

In order to get a sense of sequence and timing of the ceremony components, notes were taken at other NMUN events. Figure 2 displays an example of the notes taken at an earlier NMUN event ceremony (NMUN 2015 Olomouc).

Notes on Opening

17:00-17:45 rules training had to be moved from small room to the opening ceremony room. This meant that when the training was done, many delegates were already in the room. Session ends early. More delegates start to drift in.

17:40 to 18:00 meeting and greeting among delegates

18:00 ME urges people to find seats

18:02 ME urges people to sit down so that we can know if there are any more empty seats.

18:13-18:14 ME calls hall to order, introduces SG

18:14-18:16:30 SG short opening, refers to current affairs, introduces featured speaker

18:17-18:32 FS does pep talk on how to be a delegate/diplomat

18:32:30-18:35 ME acknowledges Faculty sponsor of event, other board members/facility/location

18:35-18:37 SG intros of staff, chairs, directors, volunteers

18:37-18:40 short address about university→ official declaration open 18:40

18:40:30 ME, (housekeeping notes)—let directors go first, pick up snacks on your way to sessions

Ceremony total time just less than 30 minutes

Hall empties by 18:55

Figure 2. Notes on other ceremonies

Among the important points collected, the ceremony duration was later compared with similar notes from NMUN Rome and NMUN Korea.

2.2 Identifying the target audience

Initially it was assumed that the opening and closing ceremonies would be primarily for the enjoyment and celebration of the NMUN delegates. However, as the event approached, many more stakeholders and participants became important elements for the ceremony committee to consider. Besides the NMUN delegates and their accompanying faculty advisors, there were five other audience types: 1) VIPs/NCCA representatives, 2) visiting High School students/teachers, 3) KCUFS faculty, administration and organizing committee members, 4) members of the general public who were permitted to attend on a pre-registered basis due to the lack of available

seating, and 5) press and media representatives.

2.3 Devising the event concept

Taking into account all of the audience types and stakeholder needs would be a daunting task. From the stakeholder side, there was a need to “locate” the ceremonies culturally—so all team members agreed that there had to be something that evoked some flavor of “Japan” that would be recognizable to non-Japanese yet avoiding stereotypes or superficiality that could be criticized by Japanese audience members themselves. Furthermore, since this was a youth organization, it was agreed that there needed to be an element of positive energy. So, it was decided that there should be some kind of cultural performance involving young adult performers in both the opening and closing ceremonies.

There were numerous possibilities discussed including *Wadaiko* Drumming and various forms of traditional dance. One member suggested the Yokaso dance group *Minato* since the group consisted of university students from the entire Hyogo area and their performances were renowned for being energetic and inspiring. Their performances involve a very large number of dancers and rapid movements. Besides the fact that the only hall capable of hosting such a performance was the large hall in Convention Center, it was felt that the Closing Ceremony required a huge climax to release the pent up emotions of the NMUN participants at the end of the event. So *Minato* was contacted about performing at the closing ceremony. In contrast with the explosive energy of the closing, the team agreed that we needed positive energy with perhaps more elegant restraint at the opening ceremony. The music/dance troupe *Ren* fit this description perfectly.

2.4 Coordinating technical aspects prior to the event

There were three main technical aspects that it was necessary to coordinate: 1) estimating/recruiting/training volunteers, 2) logistics of performers/speakers, and 3) venue hall layout challenges.

2.4.1 Volunteers

At an NMUN planning committee meeting in July 21st, it was estimated that the number of volunteers required for each of the ceremonies alone would be 55 (note that the number volunteers required for NMUN over all ran into the hundreds).

2.4.3 Venue hall layout challenges

The Student team created a seating chart to visualize where each of the audience groups would be located (see Figure 4).

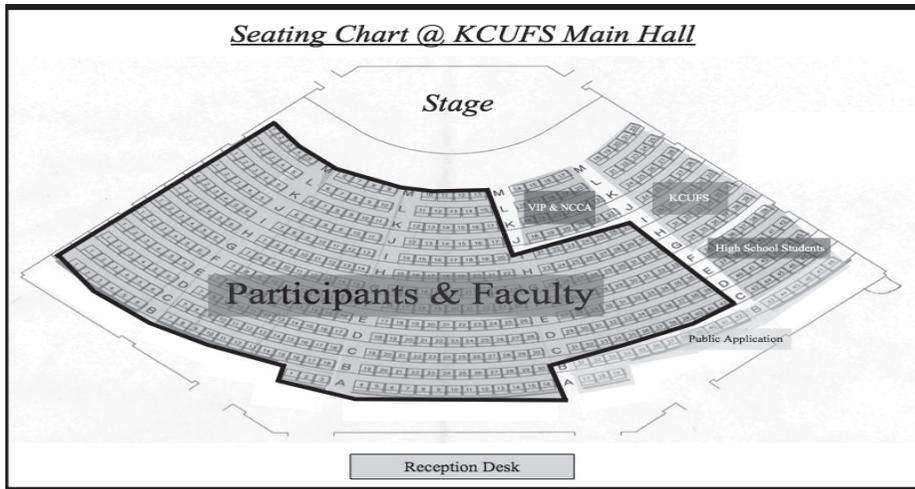


Figure 4. KCUFS team designed seating chart

Once we saw the various groups who needed to be accommodated and the movements on and off stage by performers, speakers, VIPs and others, it finally began to dawn on us the enormity of the ceremony-planning task.

2.4.3.1 The decision to outsource

Although the student and the administration teams both worked well with regards to the ceremony vision, planning and preparation, all members admitted that they were lacking in certain knowledge areas. For instance, the ceremonies would entail the invitation of many VIPs and there would be a myriad of rules and protocols to obey. None of the committee members felt they had sufficient expertise of such protocols. They felt that the face of the entire university could suffer if any breach of protocol occurred regardless of the reason.

Furthermore, ceremony events with large numbers of both participants and observers invite the possibility for accidents and mishaps. Therefore, in order to guard against accidents and offer protection from liability, a professional company (Linkage Service) was enlisted. Although they would follow the concepts already realized in the committee plan, they would oversee the entire scenario and thus, take responsibility if

anything unacceptable occurred. The company also was put in charge of signage (portable and fixed banners and a very large signboard that was to be erected at Kobe City Hall).

The cancellation of floral arrangements on the stage was an example of the changes that they made to the committee plans, citing predicted problems/potential for danger with rapid stage setting and the movement of many parties on and off the stage (see Figure 5 for the Linkage Service assessment).

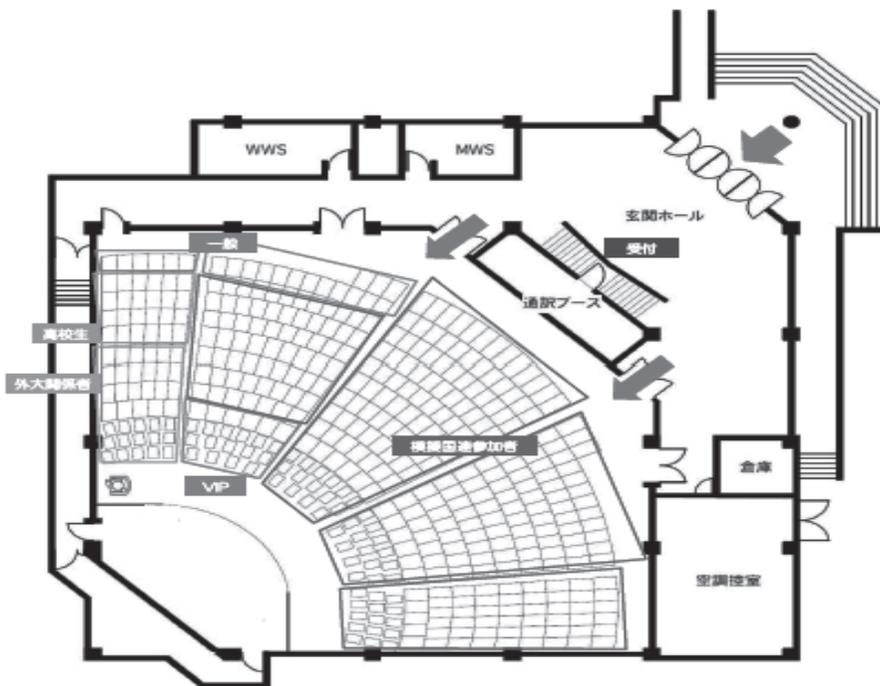


Figure 5. Assessment of KCUFS Main Hall Plan by Linkage Service

The professional company also prepared notes on the possible stage setting for the UN Forum. The reason for this was the settings permissible for the opening ceremony would be under some constraints since a good number of VIPs were involved in both events (see Figures 6 & 7). The VIPs would need to move from the audience area to the stage area twice. It was feared that the more movements we expected from our VIP guests, the more potential there would be for physical accidents or social gaffes. Added to this we were facing the need for crowd control to ensure security for the participants and guests as well as the ever-present need for disaster preparedness since Japan is prone to earthquakes. Once the challenges of the stage setting were sorted out, it was important to map out the stage movements for VIPs and others (see Figure 8).

国連フォーラム 席次 (大ホール)

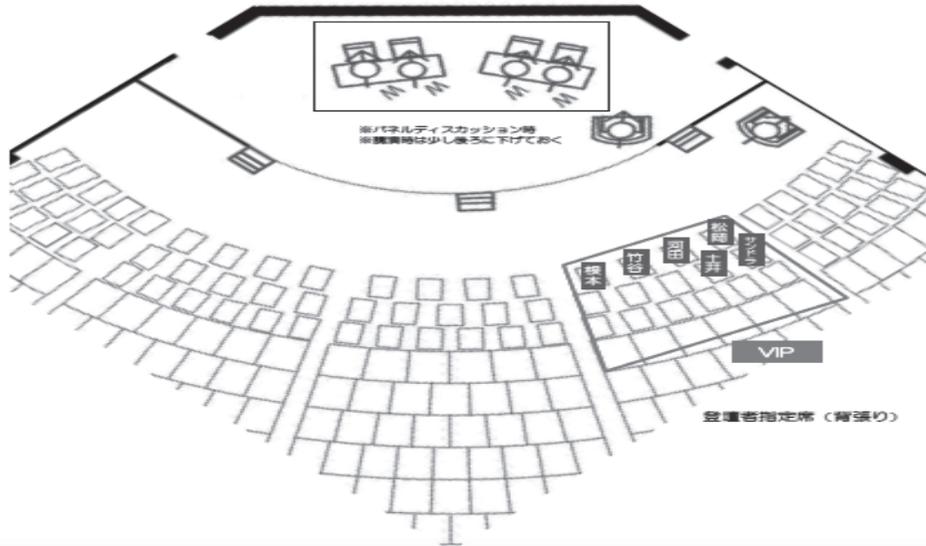


Figure 6. UN Forum stage setting

開会式 席次 (大ホール)

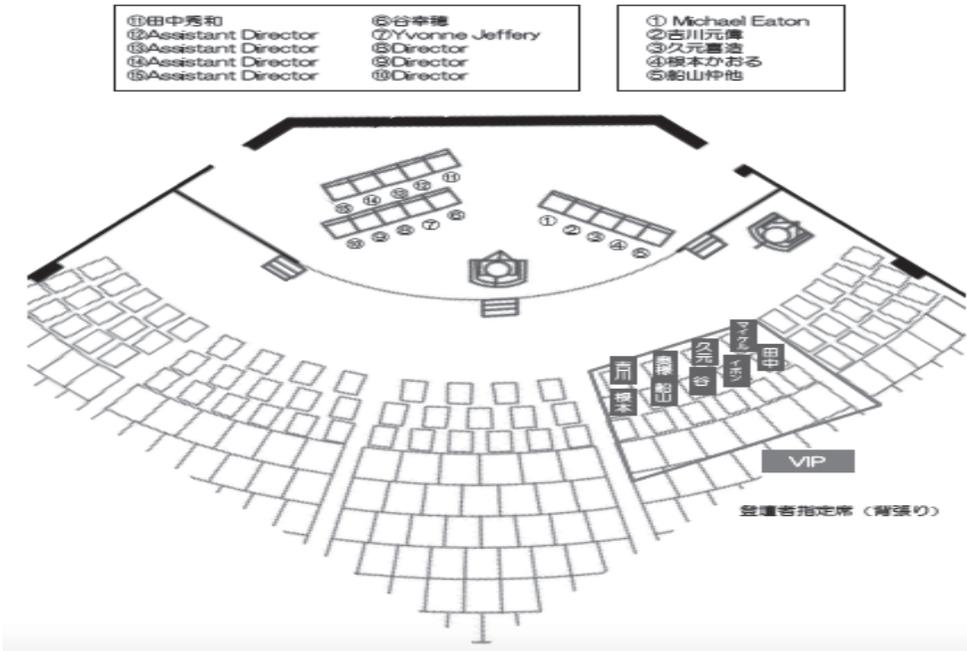


Figure 7. Stage setting for opening

開会式 進行 (大ホール)

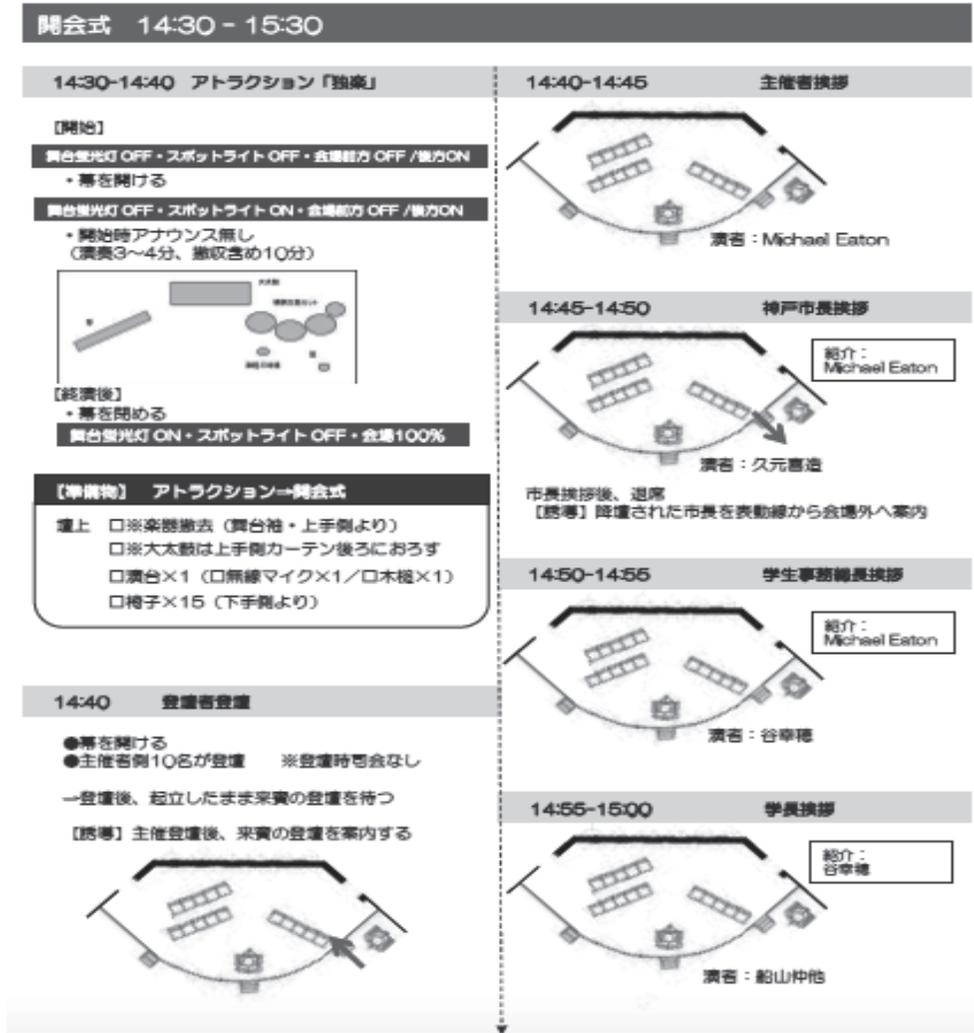


Figure 8. Movements of VIPs and others

2.5 Debriefing and reflecting on the outcome

Based on a variety of feedback (questionnaires, interview comments, personal anecdotes and ceremony committee collective memories), we can claim that both the opening and closing ceremonies were memorable, highly successful parts of the NMUN Japan experience. One example of the kind of audience response came to us from one of the Chilean delegates:

This is very difficult to me, because I want to share this video and express my feelings from the depths of my being. But for that, I must do it from my mother language. Nevertheless, I want my friends from other countries to understand what I write, so I should do it in English.

In the closing ceremony, I was very moody. Sincerely, I was crying the whole day realizing that this experience was going to end. When I saw this show commenced, I started recording with tears in my eyes. I was thinking about how much this Model have cost for the host. University of Kobe received us, each delegate, with such generosity.

More than 300 volunteers, if I remember rightly, offered for helping in whatever. Most of the tourist guides were my age and they had everything previously planned (awesome). I was thinking about the students, which planned the shows of the ceremonies, the students-volunteers which offered to receive us at airport, the students-volunteers which were in every stop for we do not get lost. I did not have any words. It was a very intense and powerful week, and it was going to end with a wonderful show.

I have learnt a lot from them: I have learnt a lot from their patience, their level of preparation (so high), their kindness and their respectful way to be. Those lections were one of the most valuable things I take from Japan!

Thank so much! You volunteers are very amazing people! (Jhonatan Diaz, Universidad de Santiago de Chile)

Even with the many great responses from fellow delegates and other stakeholders, it was important for each of the student committee members to sit down, reflect and write about their triumphs and struggles through this process. Each committee member cited his or her own unique learning from this experience, ranging from improved email skills all the way to an improved ability to negotiate contracts with performance groups. They were unanimous in their gratitude for such a “wonderful and valuable experience” (Minami Kanemoto) and all came away from their committee work feeling stronger and closer to each other. They also came to understand and respect the role of teamwork:

I sincerely think that the success of NMUN Japan is not because it succeeded because "someone" did its best, but because of the efforts of "all the people involved". (Haruna Sawade)

I finally felt that not only the establishment of relationships of mutual trust between members, but also the transmission of intentions and the progress of the meeting was completed in a very systematic way. (Kana Okamoto)

The complexities of decision-making also became apparent for them and the insight gleaned was well expressed:

...when participating in a long-term project in the future, I felt that I should pay attention to whether the process of decision-making is clearly presented. It should surely be directly connected to the motivation of stakeholders, and it will also affect the results produced by the parties involved. (Naohiro Uramachi)

3. Discussion

What started out as a deceptively easy task (planning 30 minutes of talking heads on a stage, following a pre-determined order, uttering ritualized phrases) later revealed layers of complexity and possibilities for mishaps, accidents and breaches of protocol. It was gratifying that many of the decisions made by the student committee (such as the choice of performing groups to evoke the right atmosphere for the event) were respected.

On the other hand, it was slightly discomfiting to know that the social stakes were considered so high that a professional team had to be enlisted to essentially follow all the plans created by the student group but to be there to bear response in case anything unexpected were to occur. This may be a specifically Japanese fear or lack of resilience but as a member of the committee, I fully respected the decision and yielded to the will of the other stakeholders.

4. Conclusions

Participation in the preparation and realization of the opening ceremonies meant climbing a steep learning curve for all of us. We had to understand some of the basics of event planning and followed the five basic steps from studying the “brand,” getting to know our target audience and therefore creating an event concept. This was followed up with the actual coordination of the technical aspects prior to the event, and was complete with our final debriefing and reflections on the outcome.

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