

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Critical Success Factors in Managing Mass Running Events in Thailand - Event Organizers' Perspective

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine factors contributing to the success of mass running events in Thailand. Seven leading mass running event organizers are selected purposefully as research respondents and are in-depth interviewed. Qualitative content analysis is applied as analysis method. Finding indicates that clear objectives, background of the organizers, supports from local politicians and sponsors and good communication are vital for mass running event success. Lastly, the mass running event should create a win-win scenario. Knowledge gained from this study can be applied in others mass sporting events to ensure event success.

**Keywords:** Critical Success Factor, Event Management, Mass Running Event

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## บทความวิจัย

# ปัจจัยสำคัญที่ส่งผลต่อความสำเร็จในการจัดงานวิ่งในประเทศไทย - มุมมองจากผู้จัดงาน

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### บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาปัจจัยสำคัญที่ส่งผลต่อความสำเร็จของการจัดงานวิ่งในประเทศไทย โดยใช้วิธีวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ คือ การสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึก และเลือกกลุ่มตัวอย่างแบบสุ่มตามวัตถุประสงค์ กลุ่มตัวอย่าง คือ ผู้จัดงานวิ่งชั้นนำในประเทศไทย จำนวน 7 ราย และวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลโดยใช้วิธีวิเคราะห์เนื้อหาเชิงคุณภาพ ผลการศึกษาพบว่า ปัจจัยสำคัญที่ส่งผลต่อความสำเร็จในการจัดงานวิ่ง ได้แก่ การกำหนดเป้าหมายที่ชัดเจน ภูมิหลังของผู้จัดงาน การสนับสนุนจากกลุ่มการเมืองและสปอนเซอร์ การสื่อสารที่ดี ตลอดจนการทำให้ทุกฝ่ายได้รับประโยชน์จากการจัดกิจกรรม ความรู้ที่ได้รับจากการศึกษานี้สามารถนำไปประยุกต์ใช้ในการจัดการกีฬามวลชนอื่น ๆ เพื่อส่งเสริมความสำเร็จในการจัดกิจกรรม

**คำสำคัญ:** ปัจจัยสำคัญที่ส่งผลต่อความสำเร็จ การจัดการอีเวนต์ งานวิ่ง

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## Introduction

Running boom is a social phenomenon around the world. The first and second waves of running boom have emerged since 1960s onwards and the shifts from competitive running among elite runners to recreational running become obvious (Scheerder & Van Bottenberg, 2009). Road races or mass running events as product of running boom have been introduced and started to attract large numbers of runners. This increases the popularity and numbers of running events. Especially in Thailand, thousands of mass running events are held in a year (Kasikorn Research Center, 2020). But not all mass running events are success in term of reaching highest participants' satisfaction, standards and bringing back promising return.

This study aims to investigate the factors contributing to mass running events success by using qualitative approach. Mass running events organizers as service providers share their experiences and challenges in organizing mass running events in Thailand in the in-depth interviews. Qualitative content analysis is used to identify the critical success factors. Study result helps improve the standard of mass running events that may lead to higher chance for success. It also provides academic contributions, since running boom is still novel in Thailand and research in this area is lacking.

## Literature Review

### 1. Mass Sporting Events

Mass sporting events or mass participation sports events are commonly associated with large participation numbers. Murphy

and Bauman (2007) categorizes mass sporting events into elite sporting events, non-elite mass sporting events and major population-level health promotion events.

Non-elite mass sporting events such as mass running, mass swimming or triathlon allow professional and masses of amateurs to play on the same arena. Mass sporting events have experienced substantial growth world widely and also in Thailand. It also creates new segment of tourism, namely sport tourism, which is now the fastest growing sectors in tourism (Robb, 2016). The percentage of people traveling to a different country to join a race has increased significantly (RunRepeat, 2019).

## 2. Mass Running Events

Among those mass sporting events, mass running events have gained increasing popularity and numbers of events. The worldwide growth in popularity of marathon from 2008 - 2018 stood at 49.43%, especially in Africa and Asia were experiencing highest growth at 505.74% and 262.89% (RunRepeat, 2019). In general, mass running events can be classified as road running and cross country running. Road running takes place on a measured course or on established road. Road running events are seen as community-wide events, in which the community provides the venues and acts as host and spectators. Distances in races vary from 5 km. to over 100 km. or from mini-marathon to ultra-marathon distance (Runners-world, 2020).

Running boom has hit Thailand. The first wave started in 1980s and the second wave begins in 2012 onwards. Media and social media play an important role in driving the growth. There

were 700-800 running events held in 2017 but it is expected that the number of mass running events will be over 2,000 in 2020 (Marketeer, 2020). Numbers of running event organizers stood at 15-20 in the beginning of running boom. Now hundreds of mass running event organizers jump into the industry to serve increasing demand (Prachachat, 2018), while one-fourth of the population enjoy running and walking as physical activities (Thaihealthreport, 2020) and 4 - 6 million people are participating in mass running events in Thailand (Kasikorn Research Center, 2020). The value of mass running event business is estimated at 1,700 million Baht.

### **3. Mass Sporting Event Management**

Event management is the process of using business management and organizational skills to the creation and development of the events (Raj *et al.*, 2017). Event management involves important functions such as planning, executing and evaluating the event and requires strong organizational, budgeting and creative skills (Quinn, 2017).

Masterman (2004) proposes an approach to the event planning process that entails both short-term requirement of the event implementation and the long-term objectives. Event planning process consists of different stages, starting from defining the objectives and concept of the event, conducting feasibility study, event bidding, event execution and post-event evaluation.

### **4. Success Factors of Event Management**

The success of mass running events can bring some benefits to the organizations and stakeholders involved, because of their potential to attract sport tourists, stimulate business and create

jobs. However, not all events are success in term of reaching highest participants' satisfaction, meeting the standards and objectives and becoming sustained. There are critical success factors that need to be achieved to ensure the event success.

Success factors of festivals and events have been studied in number of research. Rofner (2009) investigated critical success factors of international sport events using the semi-structural interview with event organizers. The success factors within and beyond the planning process frame from Masterman (2004) were identified as clear objectives and concept of the event, feasibility of the event, event evaluation, good communication and management skills as well as volunteer and project team. A study from Won Yoon and Eun Kim (2018) used the Delphi method to analyze critical success factors on hosting professional golf tournaments in Korea. Services, presences of professional golfers, relay broadcasting and location were in the top priority. The study from Ismail (2014) used qualitative approach and supported with quantitative approach to identify the critical success factors of MICE event in Malaysia. Clear objectives, location of venue, financial resources, code of conduct, marketing & promotion and event sponsorship were the critical success factors identified in this study.

Previous research mainly focused on mega sporting events or on others special events. But the study of critical success factors of mass running events is lacking. The aim of this study is to examine the critical success factors of mass running events in Thailand.

## Research Methodology

To identify critical success factors, qualitative research and purposeful sampling are applied. Criteria for selection include the experience in organizing mass running events (road races), the ability and willingness to provide information. Sample size of qualitative study tends to be small, because the aim qualitative study is to obtain the depth information about the issues of interest (Patton, 2002). Some literatures suggest saturation concept, which refers to the point, when no new information is discovered as an indicator to determine when sufficient sample size has been reached (Glaser & Struss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009).

In this study, seven respondents are in-depth interviewed. They are leading mass running organizers in Thailand. Respondents' profiles are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

### *Profiles of the respondents*

No.	Name	Position	Area of Specialization	Experience (Years)
1	A	CEO	Tech-Events	17
2	B	CEO	Mass sporting events (Run, Bike, Swim, Triathlon)	10
3	C	CEO	Mass running events	30
4	D	CEO	Mass running events	30
5	E	Co-Founder	Mass running events	36
6	F	Co-Founder	Mass running events	3
7	G	CEO	Football, Motor Sports, Mass running events	8

Three of them organize mass running events that have been awarded the Label Road Races by World Athletics (former IAAF). One has organized the oldest and most well-known mass running event. Two are pioneers in organizing mass running events in Thailand with more than 30 years of experiences. They have organized numbers of mass running events from mini- to full marathon under their own brands and for clients. Last respondent is a new comer but has organized numbers of mass running events in the past few years.

Each semi-structured interview takes 1-1.30 hours. This allows respondents to express their viewpoints (Flick *et al.*, 2004). Respondents receive brief information about the topic and questions in advance. Consent for audio taped records is inquired. Extensive notes are taken during the interviews.

The interviews include company profile, initiative and experiences in organizing mass running events as well as the questions about critical success factors. Probing questions are used to attain deeper insight. All in-depth interviews are conducted in Thai language. Quotes in the findings and discussion are translated into English. Secondary data such as press conferences, news and posts on social media are considered.

Qualitative content analysis is applied as analysis method, as it is commonly used for analyzing verbal data collected through interviews or focus groups (Schreier, 2012). Passages and rewording with the same or similar interpretations and meanings are summarized and categorized.



## Findings

Among thousands of mass running events held in Thailand, 10-20 events are stand out and recognized as highly success and only 4-5 running events are recognized as having world class standard, guaranteed with the World Athletics Label Road Races. Factors that make mass running events differ from the others in term of standard and level of success can be explained as follows.

### 1. Clear Objective

Setting clear objective is very important for project or event management. Clear objective defines what to be reached or what are the desired results. This assists the successful execution of the project. All event organizers admitted that they have some objectives in mind when organizing mass running events but three of them have expressed clear objective to make the best race with highest level of standard.

In an interview with a CEO of company A, an ultra-marathon finisher who is passionate in running, he revealed that, *“the initial of organizing this mass running event is to create the finest running event ever. Because I suffered from some mass running events, so I want to make it better”*.

The event organizer A has started with organizing the 21km mass running event and it quickly became talk of the town because it went far beyond runners' expectation. Standard of the race and medical team have been raised. The customer's journey was carefully planned. Now this 21km race owns the first Gold Label Road Races in Thailand.

Also, in an interview with CEO of company B, a former professional sportsman, he also stated a clear objective to make the

best international marathon running event in the capital city of Thailand that attracts foreigners to participate in the race.

As he mentioned *“I set my goal to make this race the best in Bangkok capital city with 100 percent road closure and full production of multimedia. And I strongly believe after 5 years, this event is going to be a legend”*.

Now this running event possesses Bronze Road Race Label and makes Bangkok becomes world’s new marathon destination. It had roughly 5,000 foreign runners participating and 30,000 runners in total.

Similar to company G who organizes the first Silver Label Road Races for full marathon in Thailand, the event was first held in 2017 with a clear position to be ultimate destination for marathon runners. This marathon should be the running event with highest level of standard and the highest safety and to be the running event that creates highest impression and happiness. This event has gained best reputation for the standards of the race, quality of medical team, the friendliness of the host community and facilities provided for running participants.

## **2. Management and Organizational Background**

Past skills and competency have a great contribution to the success of mass running event. Majority of the respondents are runners who joined mass running events inland and overseas. These CEOs understand the feeling in the race and runners’ pain points.

Additionally, management competency and business background play important role in organizing mass running events. Three of the respondents possess experience in MICE industry,

dealing with huge number of participants and complex issues. They apply these experiences and knowhow when organizing mass running events, as these events have something in common.

CEO of the company A revealed that, *“the key success factor is we do what we are expert in. As tech-event organizers, we are in a very competitive industry. We are forced to be dynamic and creative. When organizing mass running events, our creativity makes our race differ from others”*.

Also in the interview with CEO company B, who is a sportsman and has long experience in media and entertainment industry.

He revealed, *“I used to organize music festivals or countdown events, that the whole city areas were closed and thousands of people joining. I know how to deal with people and the authorities and also how to combine entertainment into sports. I use all these when organizing mass sports events”*.

Lastly, in the interview with CEO of company G who has experience in organizing mass gathering events such as football and motor sports. He admitted that previous background helps but organizing mass running event is far more complex compared to others sporting events, since he has to be responsible for all runners, who can be injured or facing heatstroke during the race, while in football match, he is responsible for maximal 40 football players.

### **3. Good Partner and Strong Political Support**

According to the interviews, all respondents admitted that although Thailand is in the peak of running boom, it is not easy to organize mass running event, since it requires permission to use

the public space and road closure. The governors of all layers, all traffic police stations along the route must be informed. This process is very bureaucratic. It depends primarily on local authorities and their policy. The central policy to position Thailand as sport tourism hub by the ministry is not fully adopted on local level.

CEO of company A pointed out that *“to make the running event grow and become sustained, it may take 3-5 years. But the city governor position rotates every 3 years. If the governor is not interested in mass sporting events, as these may impact lives of local residents, the event may be forced to resize or suspend”*.

This is similar to the interview with CEO of company D who revealed that *“organizing mass running events outside Bangkok, it depends much on the city governor, if he agrees with the event, things will run easily. However, the situation will change, when the governor changes.”*

CEO of company A also added that the model that works well is that mass running events must be co-developed by local authority or having local politicians as partner, since part of the standard requirements such as the quality of the roads, sufficient lighting systems or safety and security along the race courses are beyond the task of event organizers, but they are direct responsibility of the city, respectively local politics. Thus, local politicians play very important role in raising the standard of the event and contributing mass running event success.

Additionally, the CEO of company B and G admitted that their events have some advantages because they are sanctioned and strongly supported by the ministry and local authority. This makes it easier to deal with related stakeholders and paves the way

for full road closure, which is one of the essential criteria for the certification of World Athletics Label Road Races.

#### 4. Sufficient Sponsorships

Event sponsorship is the way in which organizations give support to an event by providing financial assistance, products or services. Sponsors can make big difference to events. Although runners pay registration fees, but most of the organizers admitted that the fees are not sufficient for organizing good events. Especially in Thailand, there are some unique requirements for mass running events such as runners are expecting Finisher T-shirt, food festival or massage at the end of the race. These cost extra money.

CEO of the company A explained that *“we charged quite high for the marathon running because we wanted to create the finest running events. Good medical services, pedestrian barriers or even rubbish bin, they all cost money. Without sponsors we could not make a good race”*.

The significance of sponsorships is confirmed by the mass running events organized by company B and G. Both events have title sponsors. This enables them to organize high standard large scale running events. Also company E who organizes one of oldest mass running event in Thailand that lasts longer than 30 years, has adopted the idea of having title sponsor in order to support the increasing numbers of participations and costs.

#### 5. Facilitated Ecosystems

Like the ecosystem of nature, the ecosystem of the events industry involves diverse stakeholders, venue locations as

well as event technologies. All respondents revealed that facilitated ecosystem is essential for successful mass running event.

CEO of the company A shared the view about ecosystem in the interview, *“when choosing venue locations, many aspects were considered such as the location and ecosystem. First, the location should be 1-2 hours’ travel range from Bangkok. Second, I looked for the venue location that has appropriate ecosystem and facilities such as suppliers, accommodation, transportation and space for start and finish assembly”*.

In contrast, the running event organized by company G is located 300 km from Bangkok, but easily reachable. The city is positioned to be sports city and has experiences in hosting big sporting events. The sharing economy business model such as Airbnb or Grab is made allowed to strengthen the transportation and lodging network. Organizers also provide thousands of overnight tents to accommodate large number of participants.

In addition to good facilities provided at event venue, technology is also important. Event technology is used during events to facilitate event planning processes, to engage and create fabulous event experiences for participants. Besides the online registration and bib tag timing system, technology-led innovations such as Face/Photo Search or e-Cer are created and widely adopted by leading event organizers, since these organizers aim to provide new standard and experiences for participants (ThaiRun, 2019). It also creates opportunities for tech-startups such as ThaiRun to be part of the mass running event ecosystem.

## 6. Effective Communication

Communication is one of the most important element of successful event management. Event organizers need to communicate with different audiences such as working staffs, government authorities, suppliers, event participants and also community residing around the venue at all time.

The communication with community serves many purposes such as to gain acceptance and to engage participation. All respondents admitted that since mass running events may create inconvenience or disrupt lives of local residents, they should be at least informed in advance when the event will take place and which roads will be closed. Moreover, communication to encourage community engagement is essential, because community and residents are integrated part of brands through their characteristic and supportive behavior. The perceived degree of friendliness of local people can create positive image and differentiates one event to another (Freire, 2009; Valano, 2008). This contributes to the success and sustainability of the event.

CEO of company A emphasized the importance of communication in the interview *“since the marathon running event is novel in Thailand, there are some resistances. Local residents and community need to be informed and educated. And it is getting better from year to year. We see that running event slowly turns to be a traditional event of the community that people are looking forward for it”*.

Even in the long established running event, the communication is still essential. As the co-founder of company E revealed that *“to encourage community to willingly participate*

*from year to year, it needs a good and right communication strategy that explains the desired scenes, how the good host should be and what runners expect when they join the race”.*

Similar to the interview with CEO of company B, he revealed that *“to have 3,000 local residents involve in the events, we need to communicate at all level to ensure that they really understand what is going to happen here. And after the event, we sent them the pictures and feedback. And they are impressed and want us to come back in the following years”.*

## 7. Win-Win Situation

Lastly, for the mass running event to be success, it should be a win-win situation that not only one party benefits but other stakeholders should also gain. Event organizers should consider key stakeholders and special interest groups in order to align the organization of the events with the needs and expectations of stakeholders. This creates acceptance, participation and encourages supportive action. And the benefits of the event should be well communicated.

CEO of company B emphasized the win-win situation that *“my event creates the win-win situation for all parties. The government gets their KPI in promoting sports tourism. Private enterprises get their product promoted and create brand awareness. I get my profit”.*

Co-Founder of the organization E revealed that *“to encourage community supportive actions, you should support them too. That is why we spend sum of money from charity Bib to schools*



*and villages along the race course. So people see that they also gain something”.*

## Discussions

Study result shows that all running event organizers try their best in delivering good mass running events. However, there are factors that lead to different degree of success and distinguish mass running event from recreational running events to high standard or international acknowledged races.

It is to highlight that the goals and proposes are the initial points that differentiate the mass running events. Goals and proposes set the position, directions and actions. Mass running events that state clear objective to organize elite race are more likely to achieve higher level of standard and thus, higher degree of success. The organizers of such elite or high standard running event are more committed to this goals and are more motivated, since these are their own race, operated under their own brands. This aligns with goal setting theory which states that goal setting is essentially linked to task performance. Specific and challenging goals contribute to higher and better task performance (Managementstudyguide, 2019). While mass running organizers working for clients are facing some limitations, since the objectives are primarily set by the clients. So event organizers must keep the theme and budget align with the clients' objectives, which are rather to create awareness about the products, make good brand publicity or other purposes rather than to make a race. These shape the way the event is planned and executed. And sometimes this leads to principal-agent problem.

Additionally, managerial capabilities and competency inherited from company background, the communication ability, the connection or good relationship with partners, sponsors and local politicians are important factors contributing to mass running event success. The role of local authority and politicians is essential in upheaving the standard of mass running events, since there are tasks that must be performed by the city such as improving facilities - roads, lights, security and tourist attractions. And in many cases, local authority and politicians can better communicate in order to gain community acceptance and engagement. Therefore, when mass running event organizers and local politicians are working together, it does not only ease some processes but also increases the chance for mass running event to be success. These together with supportive ecosystem are key sources of competitive advantage and are critical factors contributing to event success.

Lastly, to make mass running event success and sustained, event organizers should manage it in a way that all parties can benefit. Mass running should create a win-win scenario or at least the majority should see that they or their community benefit from being a host venue of the event.

## Conclusions and Implications

This study provides knowledge about mass sporting event management, critical success factors and the emergence of running boom new social phenomenon in many countries. It also serves as the case study of how running events in Thailand are managed. The insights about the management, challenges and critical success factors are revealed by leading event organizers. Factors such as

past experiences and good connection with partners, sponsors and strong political support are main sources of competitive advantage that allows an organizer to outperform other. Whereas others factors must be provided to ensure the event success.

This study will directly benefit the event organizers as well as stakeholders involved, since it can be applied to other mass participation events. It helps improve the quality and increase the attractiveness of the events and also leads to higher stakeholders' satisfaction and ultimately generates profitable return.

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