



# CITYWIDE Festival Research: Measuring the Impact of Citywide Festivals in the Emirate of Dubai

By Alexander Blandl

## Introduction

The Dubai Festivals and Retail Establishment (DFRE), formerly Dubai Events and Promotions Establishment, was established in 1996 with the objective of positioning Dubai as a world-class tourism and shopping destination and is an agency of the Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing, Government of Dubai.

Since then DFRE has evolved from an organizer of the Emirate's various shopping festivals to a far more comprehensive role as developer, adviser and regulator for Dubai's retail and festivals industry.

Through the numerous festivals including the Dubai Shopping Festival (DSF) and promotions such as Eid in Dubai, the Establishment ensures year-round attractions and reasons to visit the Emirate and to create returns from festivals for the hospitality and retail industry.

Today DFRE's festival portfolio covers the Dubai Shopping Festival (DSF) and the Dubai Summer Surprises (DSS) as well as activations of the religious festive seasons with Eid in Dubai and Ramadan in Dubai.

A core component of the festival planning and execution process is DFRE's market research approach which measures the impact of its festivals on Dubai's economy and its festival sponsors and reveals preferences, behavior and demographics of its attendees to guide marketing and event planning efforts.

Today, we would like to share this approach as it offers insights into how market research can be conducted for multi-event, multi-day and city wide festivals and through this support other festival organizers in tailoring their market research.

## Difficulties in Measuring Impact of Citywide Festivals

While most event and festival organizers would agree market research is critical in planning better events and festivals and in raising contributions and gaining support from sponsors, governments and other partners, it is most difficult to measure the impact of city wide festivals. The common challenges include but are not limited to the following:

- **Multiple locations of festival activations and events across the city over several weeks**

With often over 100 events and activations during a festival like the DSF lasting for 32 days or the DSS running for up to 2 months, researching and measuring each individual event and/or activation can quickly become unfeasible for both operational and financial reasons.

- **Many different activations and events of various sizes as part of the festival which are mostly un-ticketed, with open access and planned and executed by multiple stakeholders**

This means typical research methods to calculate participant numbers based on tickets sales or on size of venue or festival areas cannot be applied easily.

- **Diverse participant groups in terms of nationality, ethnicity and origin**

Dubai's festivals need to cater for a diverse group of festival participants consisting of international and regional visitors, visitors from other Emirates and a local population with over 200 different nationalities. In this multicultural environment, preferences of the different participant groups often strongly diverge and so research and subsequent analysis need to incorporate ethnicity, religious and/or nationality as explanatory factors in addition to age, gender, income and family status.

## **DFRE Festival Research Methodology**

While the Establishment has conducted market research for many years, in 2011 the complete method was reviewed to overcome the various challenges highlighted above. This was done in cooperation between an internal team covering marketing, festival operations, strategy and policy as well as sponsorship and with the involvement of international research agency, YouGov.

### **Objectives**

The objectives of the new methodology for festival research were to (1) standardize the measurement approach in order to produce comparable and sound results across all festivals, (2) assess perceptions, attitudes and behaviors surrounding the festivals, (3) estimate the contribution of each Festival to Dubai's economy and (4) create cost efficient methods for research.

### **Audiences Under Investigation**

At the outset of the research, the audience under investigation was defined as two main groups

- **Residents of the United Arab Emirates**

The internal or local visitors defined as all residents from the seven Emirates of the United Arab Emirates, including Dubai. These were further segmented into four segments (Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Sharjah and Northern Emirates) and into groups of ethnic origin. The ethnic groups reflect the population composition and similar behavioral patterns within groups and consisted of Emiratis (UAE nationals) and Expatriates further split into Arabs, Central Asian and South East Asian, Western, Iranian, Other Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC) and Levant expatriates by their nationality.

- **International Visitors**

The external visitors were segmented using two different approaches, namely, main nationality groups and country of residence (broadly split into

Americas, Europe, Iran, Levant, North Africa and other Arab countries, Russia and CIS, South Asia (Subcontinent) or the GCC.

### **Methodology**

Given the city wide nature of these festivals with multiple locations, multiple events and large participant numbers (with between one and four million attendees per festival), the overall approach was based on researching the overall population rather than focusing on specific festival events.

The advantage of this approach is it included both attendees and non-attendees and so allowed us to better understand factors which influenced the decision to attend or not attend the festival or whether the festival was the main reason for their visit to Dubai.

The disadvantage of this approach is that insights on individual events were often limited and dependent on the number of participants who attended a specific event among the interviewed persons. Therefore, for some larger and more important events, a separate on-site event research was sometimes necessary.

The methodology applied was a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Online methods were applied wherever possible to reduce costs and leveraged the high internet penetration of over 70% in the UAE.

Qualitative methods included focus groups (online and offline) and in-depth interviews. These were more predominantly used in the first year to gain a deeper understanding of behavioral and preferential aspects towards festival components such as marketing, promotions or specific events. Focus groups were segmented either on the basis of key demographic characteristics (i.e. nationality and age) or special shopper segments such as 'fashionistas' and 'technologists' for the DSF research. In-depth interviews were used to assess satisfaction and impact of the festivals for strategic partners, which were mostly senior executives from the retail, aviation or hospitality sector sponsoring festivals. In the second year, once a solid base of understanding was established, qualitative efforts were reduced to cover specific issues only.

Quantitative methods included online and face-to-face surveys depending on the main audience under investigation. For residents, YouGov's pure research panel was utilized, to conduct online surveys. This was not only more convenient for the interviewed person but more cost efficient for DFRE. Moreover, YouGov's experience in the region over the years has demonstrated that answering surveys online, in the comfort of home, often results in more honest and genuine answers.

For international visitors, face-to-face interviews were conducted in major malls, high streets and airport departure lounges. The latter was a large advantage to capture post festival results and a well-comed diversion for passengers waiting to board their aircraft.

Furthermore, omnibus and desk research were used as explained later in more detail.

### **Sampling and Segments**

Given the need to understand and differentiate across different ethnic or nationality segments among residents and international visitors, large sample sizes were decided upon to allow robust analysis of responses.

The final sample of residents recruited via YouGov's online panel aimed to broadly reflect the UAE's overall population composition as well as festival attendance, with over 50% of those interviewed coming from the Emirate of Dubai. Surveys were issued in both English and Arabic. The interviews were conducted immediately after the festival to ensure the most accurate recall possible of the event and its activities. The sample size for residents was 1,200 per festival.

For international visitors a total of 1,200-1,300 interviews were conducted face-to-face. To minimize sampling bias, interviews were conducted across multiple locations, at different times of day and week as well as across the festival's duration.

### **Economic Impact Calculation**

In an effort to quantify each festival's contribution to Dubai's economy, the consumer research was used to arrive at claimed expenditure figures for those living in Dubai or visiting the Emirate during each festival period. Specifically, visitors to Dubai during the festival period were asked to estimate their likely total expenditure on accommodation, shopping, transportation and food & beverage while visiting the Emirate. For Dubai residents, the focus for economic impact was primarily on retail shopping.

### **International Visitors' Economic Impact Estimate**

The consumer survey data was utilised to calculate median per-capita expenditure by nationality group. As outlined previously, this was asked not only at an overall level but also by key sectors (i.e. Accommodation, Shopping, Transportation and Food & Beverage). In order to extrapolate this 'survey derived' median spend by nationality group to the larger population of visitors to Dubai during each festival, a number of steps were undertaken:

The table illustrates some of the key information areas covered in the festival surveys.

Subject Area	Questions	Dubai Residents	Other Emirates	International
Demographics	Age, gender, nationality, medium household income	x	x	x
	Emirate of residence	x	x	
	Country of residence		x	
Marketing, advertising and participation	Awareness of festival and level of familiarity	x	x	x
	Advertising recall and perceptions	x	x	x
	Festival event awareness, participation and interest	x	x	x
	Source of Festival awareness	x	x	x
Satisfaction	Overall and detailed perceptions of Festival	x	x	x
	Likelihood to recommend Festivals to others		x	x
	Likelihood to encourage out-of-town visitors to come to Dubai specifically to attend Festival	x	x	
	Festival's performance against expectations	x	x	x
	How Festival has evolved over the years	x	x	
	Likelihood to return to Dubai		x	x
Travel planning and booking	Specifically traveled for the Festival		x	x
	Travel party size and composition		x	x
	Key drivers in selection of Dubai as a destination			x
	Trip planning and booking (e.g. how far in advance, sources consulted and channels used to book)			x
	Individual or package travel and spending on travel			x
Transportation and hospitality	Mode of travel, airline flown			x
	Length of stay in Dubai and type of accommodation		x	x
	General activities, landmarks visited while in Dubai		x	x
	Mode of transportation used while in Dubai		x	x
	Food beverage behavior (location and type of restaurant)		x	x
	Spending behavior	x	x	x
Retail	Deferral of major purchases in anticipation of festival promotions	x	x	
	Items most interested in buying vs. items actually bought; perceived quality of deals	x	x	x
	Raffles participation and perception	x	x	x
	Malls and high streets visited and perception	x	x	x
	Spending behavior	x	x	x

- Actual visitor numbers (airport entries and border crossings) by nationality group were sourced from the DNRD.
- Since a considerable number of GCC visitors also travel into the country by car through Emirates other than Dubai (and are, therefore, not counted in international entries to Dubai via airport or border crossings), an additional step was required to quantify GCC nationals visiting Dubai during this time period. This involved using the survey data to estimate the percentage of GCC respondents entering the UAE by car during the time period in question. This estimate, combined with the DNRD figures, then allowed us to estimate the total number of visitors to Dubai by GCC nationals during each festival period.
- Once the actual number of visitors by nationality group was estimated, this number was then multiplied by the median per capita spend for each cate-

gory to arrive at total Accommodation, Transportation, Shopping and Food & Beverage spend for each visitor group.

### UAE Residents' Economic Impact Estimate

To assess the contribution of UAE residents to Dubai's economy during each festival period, residents were split into two groups—'Dubai residents' and 'non-Dubai residents'. Similar to international visitors, spending by non-Dubai residents was fully accounted for across all categories. Attendance figures were derived by calculating the percentage participation in festivals from the overall population figures for each Emirate. The participation figure was derived from the surveys which covered the full population and included festival participants and non-participants.

For Dubai residents, only money spent on Retail Shopping during this time frame was taken into consideration. The

key to deriving UAE residents' economic impact was to estimate population figures for each of the seven Emirates. Then having derived attendance figures for Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Sharjah and the Northern Emirates, the median claimed expenditure data from the consumer surveys conducted during the period was then used to estimate the total economic impact for each of the resident groups above.

### Results and Insights

With the above research approach, the Establishment has successfully managed to shed light on the various areas for planning, improving and, last but not least, measuring ROI and satisfaction of its festivals. The results also provide a strong leverage in raising sponsorship and support from government entities for the festivals highlighting preference, perception, behavior, spending and satisfaction in areas as hospitality, travel, transportation and retail.



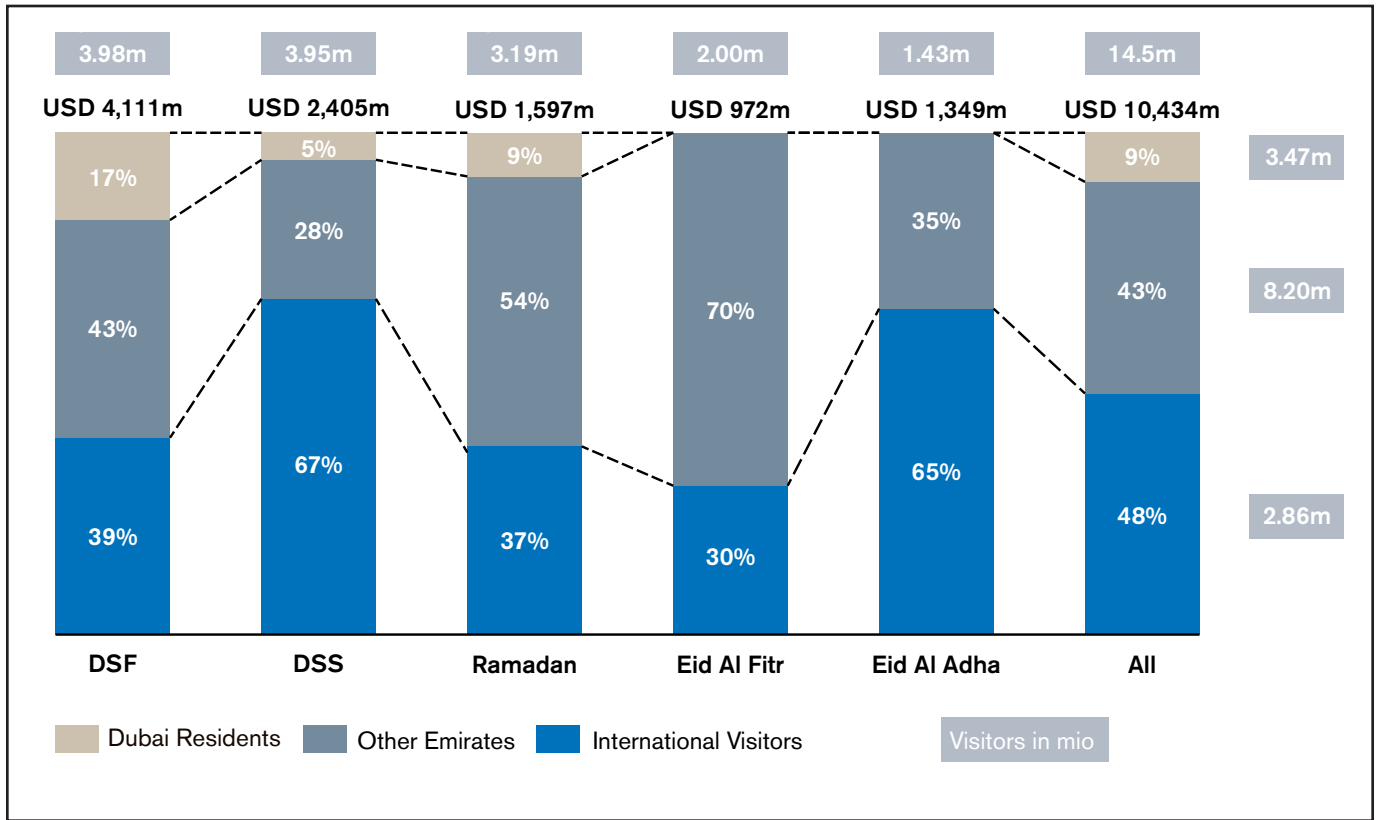
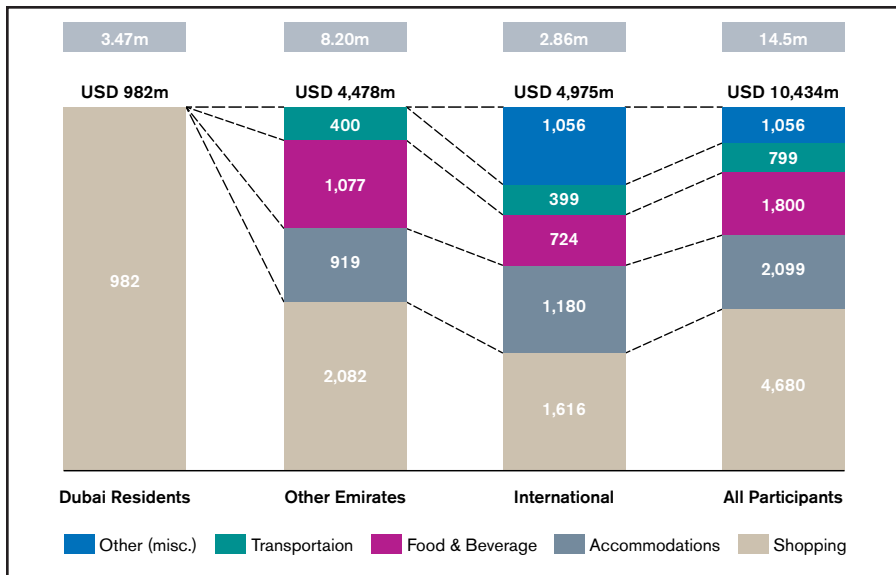


Figure: Spending across festivals by participant group in 2011

Perhaps one of the most valuable insights from the research program is the assessment of each festival's contribution to Dubai's economy as well as a more in-depth understanding of the contribution of individual participant groups based on their nationality or country and Emirate of origin. Summarized below are the

annual and individual festival impacts (for 2011) which make up not only a very strong communication message but also a justification for how city wide festivals bring economic growth to cities. As illustrated below, overall, during 2011, over 14.5 million people engaged with the five festivals organized by the Establishment

throughout the year, spending more than USD 10 billion during these festivals, out of which retail received the largest share of over USD 4.6 billion, followed by hospitality. Over 90% of the value is generated with almost equal shares of international and domestic visitors from other Emirates.



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Figure: Overall festival spending on five festivals in 2011 by category