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Partners in coffeeshops, canals and commerce: Marketing the city of Amsterdam

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The position of Amsterdam as an international centre of business, culture and tourism has recently been threatened by increasingly fierce inter-urban competition. The desire to improve Amsterdam's attractiveness to local and international audiences, and to retune the city's international image, has led to a fundamental strategic marketing exercise involving a far-reaching examination of stakeholders, goals and competitive positioning. This article discusses this new approach towards marketing in the city, critically evaluating the marketing effort of Amsterdam in an attempt to further understanding of the application of marketing to cities. The article includes an assessment of the reasoning behind the various actions and a comparison with theoretical suggestions.
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Introduction

City marketing has been employed in most cases as a response to certain economic, political and social changes in cities and their operational environment (Ashworth and Voogd, 1990). Its use has been accelerated in an attempt by cities to position themselves strongly in the fierce competitive arena for finite and increasingly mobile resources, whether investment capital, relocation of companies, visitors and residents. The concept and methods of branding are also employed by cities as an instrument of place marketing in order to associate the place with wider desirable qualities in the perceptions held by relevant target audiences (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005).

This article describes the process followed in the city of Amsterdam to create and implement the city's new marketing strategy, based on a series of expert-interviews undertaken in the city. The choice of respondents was based on the conceptualisation of city marketing as an 'action net', because "... city management consists of many collective and interconnected actions, which can be conceptualised as an action net and engage many and varied organisations..." (Czarniawska, 2002, 4). The effort was to identify the organisations involved in marketing with additional importance attributed to the ones with coordinating roles.[1] A second part of the research involved the examination of various policy documents published by the authorities in Amsterdam. The various projects and undertakings in the city are critically evaluated and contrasted to the theory of city marketing and city branding, in order to extract valuable lessons from the experience of Amsterdam.

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[1] The qualitative approach and the interviews in particular were considered the only appropriate methodology for the research because first, it allowed respondents to identify significant issues and ideas themselves and attribute importance appropriately, secondly, it gave the researcher the opportunity to deal successfully with different respondents in different organizations and, thirdly, it catered for necessary explanations and clarifications in a topic that, admittedly, suffers from a lack of clear and unanimous definitions of its components.

City marketing is a complex endeavour that demands a wide view on its goals, effects and general approach. This article adopts a view clearly oriented towards city branding, which is suggested as an effective strategy in order to create the common ground necessary for the whole marketing endeavour. Branding is a process by which attempts are made to influence how consumers interpret and develop their own sense of what a brand is (Chandler and Owen, 2002). Furthermore, "... looked at in terms of effects rather than intent, marketing comprises everything which can potentially communicate about a brand and which can in some way be controlled by the brand owner or its agencies" (Chandler and Owen, 2002, 45). Anholt (2006) makes the key observation that "... a brand is not a message, but the context in which messages are received" (2006:22), which means that branding is best understood as an attempt to influence the context in which messages are communicated. Kavaratzis (2004) suggests a framework (*Figure 1*) which describes the communication of the place brand through the appropriate treatment of different variables with both functional and symbolic meaning in two distinct types of controlled communication. In the light of this simple framework, we now turn to the description and evaluation of marketing Amsterdam.

Why market Amsterdam?

Amsterdam is a city with a long trade tradition and a strong reputation for culture and innovation. However, the position of Amsterdam as a major national and international cultural centre has for some time been threatened by a sharpening of competition from other cities both within and outside The Netherlands. Research undertaken by the city's organisations indicates that Amsterdam's position is dropping in various international rankings, for example as a city of conferences (City of Amsterdam, 2004) and while over the past decades Amsterdam has scored well as a business location, competition is also rising in this area.

As a tourism destination, the city has been under threat by several European cities. The image of Amsterdam as a tourism destination is based on two major themes (Ashworth and Tunbridge, 1990). The first is dominated by the urban design of the early modern period. It is an image of Vermeer townscapes composed of tightly packed canal-side buildings; a wealthy 'Golden Age' trading city. The second is the current popular image of the city which was formed in the late 60s and is based upon a youth culture of sexual liberalism and narcotic indulgence; a radical hippie-Mecca. The problem with this composite image was its very success at becoming established and recognised which has made change difficult and has largely fos-

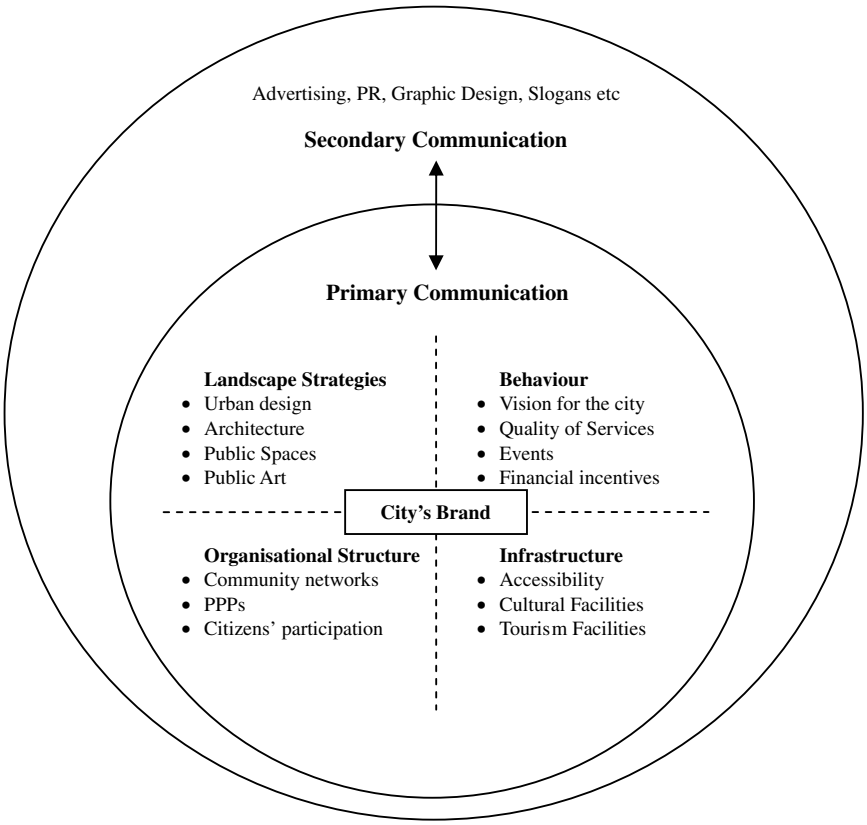

Figure 1 Communication of the city's brand. *Source*: Kavaratzis (2004).

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