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From city marketing to city branding

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Chapter 2

Methodology of the research

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2.1 Objectives of the study

The motive for this study can be phrased as to understand and depict the range of available marketing variables or measures at the disposal of city marketers, and describe the selection and combination of these variables, in the context of branding processes, in an effort to contribute to the delineation of the applicability of marketing to cities. The specific problem that this study addresses is the identification of a theoretical framework or adequate elements that best describe the various marketing variables available for city marketing and best guides their combinations, enriching it with the practical experiences of the selected European cities.

The main goal of the research is to describe the components of marketing and branding practices and define the ways in which these components are combined into practical plans and programmes in cities of Europe. Partial objectives of the study were:

1. To describe the processes involved and the importance attributed to the formulation of the city marketing mix and the management of the city's brand, as suggested by both general and city marketing literature (through the extended review of this literature).
2. To integrate the elements of the city marketing mix and the components of the city's brand management into the construction of a theoretical framework (through the extended review of this literature).
3. To operationalise the above framework and the main issues to be examined into detailed field - research framework and specific research questions.
4. To describe and analyse the sets of marketing and branding measures used in
 - a. Amsterdam
 - b. Budapest
 - c. Athens

(through the secondary and primary data collection for each of these cities, following the theoretical framework and its operationalisation).

5. To integrate the findings of the field research in the theoretical framework and to generalise to the broader theory of city marketing (through the elaboration on the results of the field research in combination with the previous parts of the study).

Examples of specific research questions that the field research in the three selected cities attempted to answer included:

1. How is the city marketing mix perceived and of what is it comprised according to administrators in each researched city?
2. What are the perceptions of city administrators of branding theories and practices?
3. What is the brand image that city leaders desire for their city and why?
4. What are the branding processes followed in each researched city?
5. What are the main points of criticism and the main gaps in city marketing and branding practice?
6. What are the specific strategies and actions that the cities adopt and undertake relevant to marketing in the areas of
 - Landscape Design
 - Infrastructure
 - Organisational Structure
 - City's Behaviour
 - Secondary Communication
7. How useful is the theoretical framework for elucidating the use of marketing variables and branding processes in the research cities and which elements identified in practice would enrich and refine the theoretical framework?
8. What can the research cities learn from each other?

The following chapters of this thesis provide answers to these questions and demonstrate that the objectives of the study as described above have been achieved.

2.2 Research methodology

The research philosophy that guided the present study and the case studies, which were conducted, is interpretivism. The research shares all basic characteristics of interpretivism as listed in Carson *et al.* (2001:62): a) the emphasis is on theory building, meaning and understanding, b) prior theory is used at various times, c) it is inductive, d) it was relatively unstructured/semi-structured and e) the involvement of the researcher was considered one of the instruments of the investigation. Particularly embraced here is the notion of the researcher as an instrument of the research, as all decisions that affect choices of methods or cases and facts or events to study are inevitably based on the researcher's perceptions and preferences. Especially is this so in the final presentation of the case

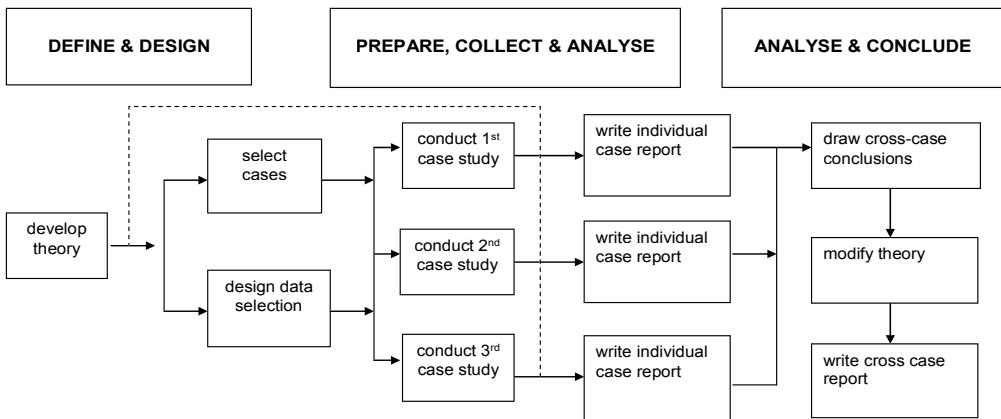
studies, which comprises a selection of facts and evidence discovered and analysed “based on what the researcher sees as relevant and important” (Vaus 2001:251).

The study began with an extensive review of relevant literature. Obviously the publications that specifically deal with the topic of marketing and branding cities or places have a central position in the literature covered. However, because of the complex and multi-disciplinary nature of the subject of city marketing, the review extended to publications from several other fields that enlightened certain aspects of the subject. As Yin (2003:9) suggests, “novices may think that the purpose of a literature review is to determine the answers about what is known on a topic; in contrast, experienced investigators review previous research to develop sharper and more insightful questions about the topic”. The purpose of the literature review undertaken for the needs of the present study, together with summarising and critically evaluating existing knowledge, was to identify pressing gaps in the theory and develop well-defined and precise issues to be addressed by the research. The literature review led to the development of theoretical propositions and the construction of a theoretical framework of the study (see chapter 3), which was proposed as a framework to understand the communication of a city’s brand. Prior theory may be used as a foundation and may be introduced at appropriate stages throughout the research study (Carson *et al.* 2001). In the present case, the theoretical framework also served the purpose of guiding the research process. It particularly influenced decisions regarding the type of organisations and people to act as informants and the specific questions to be asked during the interviews. In this sense, the theoretical framework, apart from contributing to the academic discussion around the topic of city branding, played a crucial role in data collection and analysis. It is important to clarify here that as Carson *et al.* (2001:63) stress in case study research designs, “prior theory may guide or loosely frame the research but the research is not about testing this prior theory; instead it is about seeking an actual reality in a specific situation”. This was the case for the research in hand, where the purpose was not to test or prove the validity of the theoretical framework but to examine the practice of city marketing and branding in the three selected cities and extract lessons that could be extended to the broader theory of city marketing and city branding.

The research strategy adopted for the present study was the multiple case study method (the cases studied were Amsterdam, Budapest and Athens – see chapters 5, 6 and 7). “A case study is an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin 2003:13). The case study approach was considered the most appropriate strategy for the present research because it is especially useful in theory building and analysis (Bonoma 1985), in new topic areas (Eisenhardt 1989), when a phenomenon is broad and complex (Rainisto 2003) and when the phenomenon cannot be studied outside its natural context (Bonoma 1985). All the above elements are

characteristics of the topic of city marketing and branding. As Yin (2003:7) explains, “case studies are the appropriate strategy to follow when examining contemporary events, when the relevant behaviours cannot be manipulated, that is when the researcher has little or no control over the set of events studied”, which was the case for the research in hand. Identifying the roots of investigated phenomena and conceptualising the underlying realities are research goals that case studies demonstrate their advantages (Easton 1995; Rainisto 2003). Multiple case studies are more compelling than a single case. They are more powerful and convincing and provide more insights than single case designs (Vaus 2001). Given the adequate time and access of the researcher to investigate more than one case, the multiple case study design was the appropriate design to provide rich evidence and results for the study in hand. However, and in accordance with the suggestions of relevant literature (e.g. Vaus 2001; Yin 2003), the unit of analysis remained at the level of the single cases and they were treated as separate in order to establish a full account of each case before engaging in cross-case comparisons (Vaus 2001). The design of the research reported here was based on the combination of developing complete descriptions and interpretations of each particular case

Figure 2.1: The case study method process (source: adapted from Yin 2003:50)



and later using evidence from all three separate cases to achieve a more generalised understanding of broader theoretical issues (Vaus 2001) and common concerns. Figure 2.1 shows the process followed for the present study from the initial exploration of existing literature to the final cross-case report.

Case study research typically combines various methods of collecting data and various types of data, such as archives, direct observation of the events being studied and interviews of the persons involved in the events (Yin 2003). The research for each city consisted of two parts, which overlapped and complemented each other. The first part consisted of the collection of secondary data about the cities under investigation and their marketing activities through various sources. Academic literature on the cities investigated, along with reports on similar or relevant researches undertaken in the past were one main source of secondary data, another one being literature published by the cities' authorities and marketing agencies, such as promotional brochures, advertising campaigns, development plans and other reports on strategies adopted and methods implemented by the cities. Other sources of data included, particularly, city rankings published by several organisations (such as European Cities Monitor and Urban Audit Surveys) statistical archives, governmental reports, press articles etc.

This data deepened the familiarity of the researcher with the three cities and provided valuable starting points of understanding and analysis about each city, as well as guidelines for the field research in terms of the organisations and specific people of interest. The collection and analysis of secondary data took place continuously throughout the whole period of the study, from the beginning of the literature review until after the end of the field research in each city, as new relevant information was frequently made available. Throughout the data collection period but particularly during the collection of secondary data, the researcher paid significant attention to seeking all available evidence about the marketing of the three cities. Considerable time and effort was invested in searching for documents and reports either in electronic or printed form, making sure that all marketing activities and marketing related documents were taken under consideration and examined for this research.

The second part of the research was the collection of primary data. Issues concerned with marketing in a specific context or situation are, according to Carson *et al.* (2001), typical examples of circumstances that require in-depth analysis, focusing upon a small number of cases. It was therefore considered that a qualitative approach was appropriate for the proposed research and the specific method adopted was expert interviews. Considering the unique characteristics of each city examined, the process of marketing takes place in a very particular context. Qualitative methods in general and interviews in particular are especially appropriate to understand the particular context within which the participants act and the influence this context has on their actions (Maxwell 1998). Furthermore, it was the aim of this research to develop an understanding of the rational and shed light to patterns

of actions by city marketers concerning the process of managing the city's brand. Such explanations are the direct outcome of qualitative methodologies (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

The research population consisted of people in key-positions in each of the selected cities. Following the theoretical framework that resulted from the review of the literature and the information gathered from the secondary data, the people approached to participate in the interviews were the ones who were at the time, or had been in the recent past, responsible for planning, organizing and implementing the marketing and branding effort of the city. Additionally, several people were approached that had an active participation in their city's marketing effort through their roles in organisations that in one way or other contribute to that effort. An important factor that influenced the selection of research participants was the conceptualisation of city marketing as an 'action net'. As Czarniawska (2002) suggests, "...city management consists of many collective and interconnected actions, which can be conceptualised as an action net. Such collective actions are not performed within the boundaries of a specific organisation. An action net of this sort engages many and varied organisations – municipal, state, private, voluntary – as well as loosely and temporarily organised groups of people. The task of a researcher who undertakes an exploration in this field is to follow the creation and re-creation of connections among such actions" (2002:3-4). The respondents were chosen based on this conceptualisation of city marketing as an 'action net'. The effort was to identify and investigate the main organisations involved in city marketing with an additional importance attributed to the ones with coordinating roles within the structure. Official authorities of the cities under investigation were attributed particular significance but were only a part of the organisations approached. Adopting this approach, "avoids the fallacy of seeing big cities as one formal organisation" (Czarniawska 2002:4). City marketing is a complex action net undertaken by a set of inter-connected organisations, "wherein city authorities constitute just one point of entry and by no means provide a map of the whole terrain" (Czarniawska 2002:4).

Apart from officially appointed positions for coordinating all aspects of the marketing process and members of the official local authorities, the informants included people in various organizations that operate within specific action fields, for example people in development agencies, tourism boards or with responsibilities for social programmes. Such purposive selection of participants was necessary and inevitable for the research, as it was exactly this research population that were themselves "rich" sources of data, in the sense that they simply knew, had the experience and participated in the decision-making on marketing measures and the components of the city's brand. The number of informants depended on the degree of integration of the marketing effort in each city and the final theoretical framework adopted but was, at the same time, restricted by limitations of time and costs. The research design expected that the minimum number of interviews in each research city would not be less than seven (in order to collect a substantial amount of data

and cover as many aspects as possible), while the maximum number could not be more than twelve interviews in each city (considering the cost limitations and the time needed to analyse data). Finally 27 interviews were taken in total (9 in Amsterdam, 10 in Budapest and 8 in Athens).

The form of semi – structured interviews with open-ended questions was considered appropriate for the study for four main reasons. First, the intention was to allow respondents to identify significant issues and ideas themselves and attribute to the various issues the importance that they consider appropriate; a task facilitated by loose structure. Semi-structured interviews employ a series of open-ended questions based on the topic areas the researcher wants to cover and provide opportunities for various themes or sub-topics to develop. Themes are usually identified by the researcher prior to the interview, but the interview schedule framework should be sufficient to allow themes that develop throughout the discussions to be explored (Harvey-Jordan and Long 2001). It was one of the intentions of the researcher to identify and explore such themes that would emerge from the practitioners themselves and therefore the semi – structured interview was chosen. Secondly, a flexible structure was considered necessary in order to deal successfully with the different participants, as they were part of different organizations, not only acting within different operational environments but also having differing goals according to the specific operation fields. The flexibility of the interview process allows for correct evaluation and appropriate treatment of such differences among the interviewees. Thirdly, the topic of city marketing measures and even more so the city's brand, are complex and include several interrelations between the various partial issues, on which the anticipated varying experiences of each respondent were valuable. In-depth interviews in general are appropriate to deal with such complex matters and the lesser degree of structure allowed room for clarifications and adequate descriptions of interrelations. Furthermore, as Kent (1999) states, "the open-ended nature of the interviews means that the process of questioning is flexible and responsive to what individuals have to say. This maximizes the opportunities to obtain from the respondents what they, uniquely, have to offer by way of information, experiences, attitudes, ideas and so on". Fourthly, and perhaps more importantly, the research topic in general suffers from a lack of clear and unanimous definitions of its components and other related concepts. It was, therefore, necessary for the research methodology to cater for a high degree of flexibility, which was useful, on the one hand, for the researcher to provide explanations of terms and concepts and, on the other hand, to get a clear understanding of the participants' perceptions of the various concepts included in the research questions.

The questions that the participants were asked to answer were relevant to their position, their every day tasks, their perceptions of the importance of the issues covered by the research and their experience with the wider environment of their city and the implementation of the marketing effort. An interview guide was developed (one for each city) in order to ensure that the same general

areas of information are collected from each interview; this provided adequate focus, but still allowed a degree of freedom and adaptability in getting information from the interviewee (see Appendix III). The guide was also intended to remind to the researcher that all the topic areas are covered and served the purpose of assisting in the later phase of data analysis (Creswell 1994) as it worked as a data capturing instrument.

The interviews were recorded with the permission of the participant and then followed the processing and analysis of the data collected which took place in distinct stages, largely following the phases of data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing (Miles and Huberman 1994). The first stage was the transcription of the taped interviews into written text (Kent 1999) and the translation of the transcripts from Athens from Greek into English. The second stage was that of coding and categorizing what respondents said, by grouping answers and concepts that pertained the same phenomena (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Ulin *et al.* (2002) describe this part as consisting of five distinct but interrelated steps. The process begins with immersion – reading and rereading texts, then comes coding of the identified themes, after that displaying in detail the information relevant to each category, which is followed by reducing this information to its essential points. The last step was the interpretation of the data, which according to Kent (1999) involves considering the implications of the data collected for the objectives of the research and, last, making comparisons and drawing conclusions, in order to provide insights to the research problem. These stages of the analysis together with data collection formed an iterative process that moved among data, literature and emerging theory (Rainisto 2003). The researcher made an explicit effort at the stage of data analysis to attend to all the evidence collected in the three cities leaving no piece of information unprocessed.

It is important to clarify that the phase of conclusion drawing included a large period, which was concerned with the capacity in the conclusion to generalise from the individual cases. This was not a statistical generalisation but an analytical generalisation (Yin 2003) to the theory of city marketing and city branding. As Vaus (2001:237) explains, “theoretical generalisation involves generalising from a study to a theory. Rather than asking what a study tells us about the wider population (statistical generalisation), we ask what the study tells us about a specific theory. Case study designs are fundamentally theoretical. They are designed to help develop and refine theories”. Yin (2003) also supports theoretical generalisation, stating that “critics typically state that case studies offer a poor basis for generalising. However such critics are implicitly contrasting the situation to survey research, in which a sample readily generalises to a larger universe. This analogy to samples and universes is incorrect when dealing with case studies. Survey research relies on statistical generalisation, whereas case studies rely on analytical generalisation. In analytical generalisation, the investigator is striving to generalise a particular set of results to some broader theory” (Yin 2003:37).

As is shown in chapter 9 of this thesis the results of the case studies allowed generalizations to be made that contribute to the advancement of the theory of city marketing.

The first set of interviews took place, for reasons of convenience, in Amsterdam and the first three interviews in the city served as a pilot research, in order for the researcher to identify possible flaws in the design of the research and improve them on time. This included controlling the research design as to the organizations and persons approached, evaluating the structure of the interviews and the interview guide developed, as well as controlling the results that emerged from those pilot interviews and revising several points of the research design for the following interviews. A similar evaluation took place after the first interview in Budapest and in Athens in order to consider the peculiarities of each city.

2.3 Choice of cases

Three cities were examined in this thesis, namely Amsterdam, Budapest and Athens. The main criteria by which the specific cities were selected were appropriateness for the research and accessibility by the researcher.

The selected cities are an appropriate set of cities for the needs of the research in hand, in the sense that they demonstrate the diversity of cities in the setting of the new Europe, while at the same time, sharing essential characteristics that make them suitable for comparisons. The similarities and contrasts evident in the operational environment on the one hand and the instrumentation and implementation of the marketing effort on the other, allow useful conclusions to be made especially as to what each city can learn from the others. The notion of the theoretical instead of statistical generalisability of case studies, as explained above, influences apart from the analysis of the data and the conclusions drawn, also the selection of cases. As Yin (2003:38) describes, because of the common complaint that it is difficult to generalise from one case to another, "...analysts fall into the trap of trying to select a 'representative' case or set of cases. Yet, no set of cases, no matter how large, is likely to deal satisfactorily with the complaint. The problem lies in the very notion of generalising to other case studies. Instead, an analyst should try to generalise findings to theory". Therefore, it was not the intention to select highly representative European cities since the purpose of the cases was not to achieve statistical but theoretical generalisability. However, it was considered reasonable to include cities in different countries and different socio-geographical settings. Finally, the relevance of the research topic to all three cities at the time of this research was very strong, and continues to be, making the research a topical one. Specifically:

- **Amsterdam** is a city of the 'old' core of urban Europe, with a strong planning tradition, as it is proud to be the first planned European city, and a relatively high place in a/the European urban hierarchy. The challenge for Amsterdam is to maintain its competitive advantages. According to Grosveld (2002) Amsterdam is considered by 'citymakers' as one of Europe's most important urban centres, especially for trade and transport (2nd), corporate services (4th), fine arts (4th) and academia (4th). Directly before the start of this research, the city had just launched a new branding campaign after a period of far-reaching reorientation and reorganisation of its marketing effort. It was therefore interesting to examine what this new effort entailed and how it was implemented, which made for a special reason to choose Amsterdam as a case for this study.
- **Budapest** belongs to the cities of the former "eastern block", with planning and governing philosophy heavily influenced by the communist regimes. The city is in search of regaining its earlier high status in the European urban hierarchy taking advantage of a privileged geographical location. The main challenge lies of course in exploiting the opportunities presented by Hungary joining the European Union and the funding possibilities this creates. The main focus of the marketing effort is on attracting foreign visitors, but also the conventions sector (ranked fourth most popular conference destination in the world). Urban tourism, thermal bath tourism and cultural tourism are aimed for through a multitude of festivals and events. The special reason that made Budapest an interesting case for this study was precisely the fact that it is not a city that demonstrates any extensive use of city marketing or any particular Mega Event but that it is a city like all other cities, especially in Central-Eastern Europe, who sense the need to react to the increasingly competitive environment.
- **Athens** belongs to the periphery of Europe, where problems of accessibility are more intense, as is the need for action, with no planning tradition, but with an exceptionally significant heritage and the opportunities offered by hosting a major event as the Olympic Games of 2004. The city is undergoing drastic changes especially in transport infrastructure and, perhaps more importantly, in the planning mentality and organization, as exemplified in radical urban design interventions. The special reason for choosing Athens as a case for this study was the opportunity to examine the effects of the Olympic Games on its marketing efforts.

The practical issues considered in the selection of the above cities were certain advantages in undertaking the research under favourable conditions and taking full advantage of the researcher's own potential. For the case of Amsterdam the advantages stemmed from the researcher's residence

in the Netherlands and formal connection to the University of Groningen, which brought along valuable advice, extensive knowledge and important contacts by senior researchers on the topic and on the city of Amsterdam itself. For the case of Budapest, the advantages lay in the researcher's family connection to the city and therefore familiarity with the operating environment and especially with the practical measures taken by the city. Finally the Greek nationality, language and familiarity with the researcher's hometown, the city of Athens, were the main advantages in the case of the Greek capital.

Very little has been written about Greek applications and the city of Athens in terms of its marketing, and this research sheds light on the answers and solutions that market planning and branding suggest for the situation, problems as well as opportunities of the city. The Hungarian capital has also not been covered by the literature. By examining, describing and analysing the marketing measures and brand components used in practice in these three large cities and comparing the results, it was the researcher's intention to draw significant conclusions on the degree to which city marketing is adopted and the way it is implemented in these geographically and socio-politically different areas of Europe. In this sense and considering that as the capitals and largest cities of their countries the three chosen cities represent the cutting edge of city marketing implementation in three representative countries of the expanded European Union, this study aimed at a significant contribution towards a better understanding of city marketing in Europe.

Before the final selection of case studies, a careful "screening of case study nominations" (Yin 2003:37) was undertaken. Its results included the three cities finally studied and the cities of Berlin and Brussels. Considering, however, first, resources and time limitations and, secondly, the practical (and vital) advantages of the three final cases, the other two were abandoned.

