

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS ABOUT THE CITY BRAND –AN EXPLORATIVE STUDY IN THE CITY MARKETING OF PITEȘTI

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Abstract: *The purpose of the present paper is to bring together theory and practice in the field of city marketing given the example offered by the City Brand of Pitești. The focus group is an interview with a constructed group, which is focused on a specific topic and a specific category of subjects. The study introduces the focus group methodology applied to some groups of students to understand young people's perceptions about an event held by the local community and to establish the correlation between the city brand of Pitești and the Tulip Symphony. Exploring the young people's perceptions about the city brand helps formulate a slogan of the city brand and constitutes the first step in the city brand design strategy. We employed the interview guide, the replies being registered with the help of a recorder. The results of the group discussions have shaped the idea that the city is perceived as the city of tulips and Dacia cars.*

Keywords: *city brand, focus group interview, city marketing, the Tulip Symphony, Pitești.*

JEL classification: M31, M38, H83

1. Introduction

In recent decades, *focus group investigations* or *group depth interviews* have become a valuable tool with a pragmatic dimension in gathering the information required for marketing studies aimed at urban areas and communities.

Globally and in Europe, cities are experiencing strong competition in attracting new human resources, new investments and efficient technologies to support their communities. Thus, cities increase their competitiveness, use resources efficiently, improve their ability to procure new resources and build attractive offers to the public, tourists and the business environment. In doing so, cities worldwide use increasingly more marketing methods and techniques in their management practices and government philosophy.

In this competition of cities, knowledge transfer from marketing to city branding strategy becomes a concern of local government, but also a time when the activities of the community take center stage in creating a city brand. The concept and tools of city marketing are used by cities as tools to associate urban space with the desired qualities of *relevant target audiences* (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005). City marketing requires knowledge of practices that have been applied in the implementation of city branding strategies of cities like Basel, Edinburgh, Amsterdam, Budapest, Athens (Anholt 2006, Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2005, Hankinson 2004), as strategies that demonstrated the popularity and necessity of city branding. Romanian cities have the potential to build brands through the use of city marketing strategies and campaigns with varied levels of sophistication depending on the effort and resources invested.

This paper begins with theoretical and methodological issues regarding the focus group as a qualitative research method employed in city marketing. Later on, the paper presents the Tulip Symphony, an event associated with the rather vague image of Pitești, which has however some strengths that could be highlighted and constitute the foundations of the process of building a city brand. In the last part of the paper, we present the results of employing the focus group on youth in Pitești.

2. The focus group in marketing studies

The focus group is a qualitative research method, which produces an exploratory qualitative research that is structured or unstructured in exceptional cases; it identifies

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perceptions, motives, feelings, needs and attitudes of consumers. It was used in the past and it's being used in present days (Iluț, 1997), especially in marketing studies, in implementing and evaluating social programs and in the design or completion of sociological research.

The emergence of the focus group as a technique of sociological investigation is linked to sociologists P. Lazarsfeld and Merton R. (Bulai, 2000), who used this method since World War II. Lazarsfeld used the first focus group methodology during World War II to analyze radio audience, while Merton developed and established this method by applying it to the analysis of propaganda products at the end of the last world war.

After 1950, focus group interviews were widely used in market studies because they produced credible results with reasonable costs (Krueger, Casey, 2005), but were difficult to accept by academia for many reasons: society tends to trust numbers, some concerns regarding quantitative methods, and certain assumptions about the nature of reality.

Focus groups were rediscovered by academia in the '80s, by taking practical strategies from market researchers and adapting them to other audiences. Thus, the focus group evolved from Merton's approach to various other approaches: market research focused on the consumer, academic and scientific research, public sector/ nonprofit sector research and participatory approach, in which community members or volunteers are involved in the study (Krueger, Casey, 2005). Currently, focus groups are used in various fields, from communication sciences, educational sciences, political science, and sociology to public health, especially in the case of marketing studies. It is believed that a focus group has special applicability in family planning and in studies regarding the infection with HIV/ AIDS (Morgan, 1996).

The focus group is defined as *a technique for data collection through the interaction between members, by relating to a matter determined by the investigator* (Morgan, 1996), but it is also considered *a group of people who meet to talk* (Krueger R.A., Casey M.A., 2005), *a type of group interview led by a moderator, a qualitative investigation* (Bulai A., 2000), *a group investigation which is based on a semi-structured interview guide with a single theme known to group members* (Giannelloni J.L., Vernetta E., 2001).

This method requires the existence of group effects to intensify the value, relevance and validity of social data, and reproduces a type of social environment in which *the generation, communication and validation of data usually occurs* (Bulai, 2000), as it is a more natural environment than those created by the interviewed – interviewer dyad.

The advantages of focus groups consist of providing information on the issues discussed, as group members state their motivations, beliefs, communicate and interact naturally in groups, formulate personal, spontaneous opinions, support or annihilate certain opinions and attitudes of others group members.

Focus group investigations, used as a means of collecting qualitative information, gained popularity among city marketing professionals. In this context, the analysis of qualitative data gathered during focus group interviews is a challenge for many academic researchers.

The purpose of a focus group is to understand how people feel or think about a certain problem, service or idea. The group discussion is held several times with similar types of participants, to give researchers the opportunity to highlight rules and current views (Krueger and Casey, 2005). A survey by focus group involves a carefully planned series of talks designed to gather opinions about a well-defined area of interest in a welcoming, unthreatening environment. Group members influence each other, reacting to others' ideas and comments by giving answers that are influenced by the group effect.

The optimal size of a group is 7-10 people (Giannelloni, Vernetta, 2001) to allow the moderator to speak freely to each participant. There's also a recommendation to establish groups of 5-12 people or 6-14 people (Krueger, Casey, 2005). Small groups can be very

sensitive to the leader, while a group with more than 12 people does not allow individuals to be genuinely involved and, in this case, the moderator should do exhausting and often sterile tours of the table. Group members must be recruited based on their degree of common interest in evaluating a product.

To create a discussion group, one must select a limited number of subjects from a given population and *ensure the homogeneity of the group members* in terms of fundamental demographic and socio-economic characteristics (occupation, nationality, race, income, social class), but preventing the selection of people with identical traits (Gherasim, 2005). In the attempt to achieve a focus group investigation, the moderator holds a vital role in employing skills and competencies that ensure communication with group members and conducting discussions to stimulate the process of obtaining useful data for the research.

The results of focus groups derive from the interaction of the group, not from summing individual opinions (Morgan, 1996; Kueger, 1993), and a good researcher will use his knowledge, abilities and skills to communicate and negotiate with group members. The questions raised by employing this method do not have a clear answer, as the efforts of specialists focus on the specific use of focus groups for educational purposes and, more recently, the activation of citizenship.

3. The Tulip Symphony, element of the city brand of Pitești

Pitești, the capital of Argeș County, is a city with a history of more than six centuries that constantly changes its personality. In its evolution, Pitești went through different stages (village and town), and at the beginning of the fourteenth century was acknowledged as a city, as the first document attesting its city status dates from May 20, 1388 when ruler Mircea cel Bătrân consolidates "*a mill on the border of Pitești*" for the Cozia Monastery (Popa, 1982). Contemporary Pitești relies on the automotive industry and trade, proclaiming the dimensions of its modern existence (national and European) in an emerging market of places, countries and cities where it competes with important cities in the country and in Europe using its unique image, which is actually the competitive advantage of each individual place.

In city marketing, the fundamental element is to create a city brand as the starting point of future marketing efforts of the administration. Several researchers observed and analyzed the similarities between branding a corporation and a city branding (Kavaratzis 2004, Ashworth, 2005) and developed a conceptual and pragmatic framework of city marketing and city branding using the examples of cities (Amsterdam, Budapest, Athens) that developed acknowledged city marketing policies and strategies.

A product brand is characterized by three components (Aaker, 2005): *identity* (how the brand wants to be perceived), *positioning* (part of the added value that is communicated to target audience and that represents the competitive advantage) and *image* (how the brand is perceived). In the works of some authors, a city brand is determined by its components: identity, positioning and image (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005). Other authors (Anholt, 2010) use the concept of city brand in three completely different ways: *image* (refers to consumer perceptions, difficult to directly influence), *identity* (includes logos, slogans, communication campaigns, that create the capital of a brand) and *purpose* (the common strategic vision that unites groups of people to create, change and build a reputation). When building a city brand it is important to focus on creating a competitive identity that will appeal to the emotional side.

All cities are recognized specifically, but not all have a specific element, an urban identity. *Urban identity* is a consistent set of features, an ensemble which bears the same meaning for every inhabitant of the city (Brunette, Ferras, 1992) and is reflected mentally by a symbol that is adopted and built in time by each generation to ensure the consistency and

continuity of life for that urban community (G. Dematteis, 1994). A city is actually *the sum of beliefs, ideals, and impressions people have toward a certain territory* (Popescu, 2007).

A strong city brand shapes the personality of a city on two key dimensions: material aspects that are *tangible for residents and tourists* (infrastructure, taxes, expenses) and immaterial aspects that are *intangible to population* (mentalities, art, culture, health), showing both the amount of resources and the quality of life (Popescu, 2007). Every city brand represents the unique benefits and features that make it stand out in the current marketing environment.

Urban branding assumes that there is already an image (positive or negative) to be developed or changed. City image is subjective and cannot be dissociated from the object it represents, as it is responsible for people's perceptions once it is formed (Crețu, 2010). An urban brand is based on information disseminated about the city, perceptions of tourists, ratings of other cities and is formed with the aim of promoting a particular city. The image of the city is a collective representation that is subjectively perceived and cannot be dissociated from the represented object.

Internal climate, historical image, tourist attractions, culture, social factors and the separation of political factors are elements of an urban brand (Tai-lok, 2008), but creating an urban brand involves adding an emotional element to the city image through the positive impact on an increased number of people with different studies, from different social groups, residents, inhabitants, tourists, entrepreneurs, investors.

Pitești is a city located 100 km from the Romanian capital, with a relatively well-represented industry, with a positive impact on regional development, a city with great potential for business and an educated population with average incomes. With six centuries of existence, Pitești has several obvious elements of identification and identity that can influence the behavior of residents, visitors and investors to boost the promotion of the city brand.

In this context, Pitești is an example of a city that *sells* through *tangible attributes*, such as physical infrastructure, public services, taxes, but also through the promotion of *intangible attributes* such as town values, feelings of citizens and visitors. Regarded as a *creative city of the future* (Suciu, 2010), Pitești aims to align the dimensions of its development to the attributes of a commercial and industrial city, with an urban brand whose marketing communication is controlled by city authorities. (Kavaratzis, 2006).

Pitești City Hall included a program for the creation of local brands in its post-accession development strategy. Among the items associated with the image of Pitești, flowers (tulips in particular) became a symbol that is frequently recalled by residents and visitors of the city. In a study conducted in 2007, the Tulip Symphony was identified by 55% of citizens as a defining element of the city and was associated during the last four decades to the image of the city.

The Tulip Symphony is registered at OSIM under number 102211 since 2009 as a combined brand (name and color graphic element), ensuring its worldwide uniqueness. Since 1978, Pitești City Hall regularly organizes this event as a part of city life, also covering other various events during its festival days.

4. Research methodology

This work is part of a larger independent project that started eight years ago, with the establishment of the post-accession strategy for the 2007-2013 period, and aims to gather the necessary information for building an effective urban brand for the municipality of Pitești.

The current focus group investigation pays attention to a problem of the local community, is conducted by academia and is used to learn about the image of a community event amongst the young citizens of Pitești and determine the extent to which this event is an ingredient of city brand. The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of young

students on a local event that they know and which generates both pro and con opinions, aiming to collect information for a larger study to promote the brand of the city.

The objectives of the study are: 1) learn about the perceptions of youth on the Tulip Symphony; 2) correlate the city brand with the Tulip Symphony event; 3) formulate a slogan for the city brand strategy. The interview guide was the main instrument, and we used open questions in order to determine the views of young people on the brand of the city and familiarize group members, and introductory questions to introduce topics on the theme of this research.

The research was conducted on three groups of 1st and 2nd year students attending masters programs, aged under 35 years, from Pitești or Argeș County. The first group included 7 2nd-year students (study program: Marketing Services), while the other two groups included freshmen from different programs of study (a group of 9 students and another of 11 students). We used three groups of young people, and when saturation occurred we continued the study with other focus groups of other categories of respondents able to share useful information for the city brand of Pitești.

The moderator explained to each group the purpose and requirements of the discussion, bringing to their attention that the discussion would be recorded with a tape recorder. We constituted only three groups, as we have determined that the phenomenon of satiety occurred. A new focus group could be formed with other young people from Pitești working in different companies or public institutions in Argeș County.

The moderator led discussions between participants, encouraging interaction. Each participant was free to express personal views on what was being discussed. Communication between group members was open and participative, emphasizing the importance of active listening so as to encourage the expression of views, judgments and opinions, perceptions and expectations.

To analyze the city brand we first addressed the conceptual issues regarding trademark and brand, the existence or the absence of differences between trademark and brand, and exemplified trademarks and brands.

A trademark is, according to the law, *a hallmark of goods or services represented by words, people's names, drawings, letters, figures, figurative elements, three-dimensional shapes, combinations of colors and any combination of the foregoing*, and certifies the right of intellectual property, if it is registered (Law 84/1998). A brand is defined as a *"mix of tangible and intangible attributes, symbolized by a trademark which, if there is proper management in place, creates and influences the value of a business"* (Bogdan A., 2010). Stephen King asserts that *a product can be easily copied, but a brand is unique, a product ages, while a successful brand transcends time*.

Focus group participants indicated what a trademark or a brand are, while participants from all groups defined and exemplified the two concepts as they encountered them in their work or university courses.

Focus group participants exemplified trademarks and brands of products and services: group 1 cited examples of brands such as: *Albalact, Fulga, Zuzu, Carpatica, Covalact, Râuareana, Danone, Bucegi, Borsec, Caraiman*; group 2 exemplified brands such as: *McDonalds, Milka, Unilever, Capital, MTV, Topoloveana, iPhone*; group 3 listed brands such as: *Dacia, Ford, Renault, Pampers, Orange, Coca Cola, Apple, Kodak, Dero, Bunica, Gerovital*. It must be noted that the aforementioned brands exist in the Romanian market and are specific to products or services consumed by group members.

Members of the three groups also identified people brands (*Nadia Comănești, Simona Halep, Gheorghe Zamfir*), idea brands (*Eat daily fresh fruit and vegetables, Wear seat belts*), place brands (*Danube Delta, Maramureș, Bucovina*), country brands (*Ireland, Switzerland, France*). They mentioned city brands such as *London, Amsterdam, Paris, Barcelona, Milan,*

and Venice. In Romania, Alba Iulia has a city brand, the citadel. Members of the three groups mentioned this Romanian city brand that is unique as a result of the city branding strategy built around the citadel.

4. Results

An urban brand is based on a unique image that comes to mind when uttering a city's name. A good brand is a tool to attract attention and subsequent revenue. In a country where population declines, most cities will experience increased competition in attracting investments, physicians, managers, teachers, students, tourists, and access to information and new technologies will level the chances of each city to compete for economic success.

Group members stated that Pitești doesn't have a city brand, but that it could be built using a city branding strategy. Each participant stated that the city should be analyzed in terms of its cultural, historical, physical, geographical, commercial, architectural, artistic unique dimensions to differentiate it from other cities and put it on the map. Pitești has several identity elements such as: the Tulip Symphony, Trivale Forest, Dobrin, Pitești brandy, Dacia cars, all insufficiently associated and promoted by the city's image.

The most frequently mentioned identity element of Pitești was the Tulip Symphony, an event with certain notoriety, despite its recent birth four decades ago. The event is associated with *flowers, tulips, spring, floral exhibition, youth, exuberance, joy, cheerfulness, and beauty*, characteristics that highlight the specificity of an urban space beautified by the existence of tulips. Participants also noted unwanted aspects of the event, the strong commercial character of the event, the reduced presence of tulips in the flower exhibition.

Building a city brand for Pitești requires a positioning in the area of public information, as branding strategy is determined by the strengths of the city (geographical location, cleanliness, flowers, especially tulips).

Pitești is perceived as either a city with a recent history or a merchant city, with few elements truly worthy of being promoted. The industry that developed in the city after 1965 exists only in small or insignificant proportions, while the only car manufacturer has been reinvigorated after the Renault Group took it over in 1998.

Pitești is deemed as a city of tulips and Dacia cars. This image has grown in recent decades, highlighting the advantages and the unique features that turn Pitești into a contender in the national competition. The most interesting slogan formulated by group participants was that of *Pitești – the Dacia of tulips*.

Study limitations

The qualitative nature of the study limits its external validity. However, this is an exploratory study evaluating the perceptions of young students on the city where they live, work and study. Considering the trend of qualitative studies that provide a better understanding of consumer behavior and attitudes, and of combining research methods, further study is required by combining this method with questionnaire surveys and individual interviews in a study done in two stages: before and after the Tulip Symphony.

Conclusions

After discussions, the three groups concluded the following: Pitești has the image of a city of flowers, especially tulips, the city brand requires ideas and ways to encourage the entire community to build a picture of the city in which tulips are the main element.

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