

Marathon Events and City Marketing: A Case Study of the Taipei Marathon

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Abstract

With the developing trend of globalization, hosting international marathon events has become a crucial city marketing strategy for countries to promote their cities and enhance tourism. Therefore, this study conducted a literature review with the objective of exploring the relationship between marathon events and the effectiveness of city marketing. Based on the four local marketing strategies proposed by Kotler (2002), the Taipei Marathon was selected as the case for analysis and discussion. Findings reveal that the organization of the Taipei Marathon indeed helped promote Taipei in terms of publicity and brand identity in the world, achieving the city marketing effect. This study not only supplements the previous research associated with sporting events and city marketing but also presents tangible suggestions for marketing strategy. The conclusions and advice can serve as a crucial reference for other cities in hopes of holding international marathon events and executing city marketing strategies in the future.

Key words: Taipei Marathon, city marketing, case study

1. Introduction

Numerous international cities have increased city reputation and attracted tourists through city marketing strategies with the recent trend of globalization. Among all city marketing strategies, sporting events have become one of the most essential for promoting the city brand. According to Huang and Wang (2012), the organization of international sporting events affords the opportunity to introduce the politics, economics, culture, delicacies, architecture, and unique events of the host city to the world. As an example, the World Games 2009, hosted by Kaohsiung, successfully shaped the city into an international tourist destination through the display of the special style, fascination, and competitive advantages of its enthusiasm-permeated harbor. In recent years, the number of people participating in road running and marathons has increased rapidly. Therefore, hosting marathon events has become a strategy used by many cities for city marketing.

The concept of city marketing originated from place marketing, and regards the city as a market-oriented product; through the cooperation of the government, corporations, interest groups, nonprofit organizations, and local residents, cities are promoted in existing and potential target markets (Kotler, Hamlin, Rein, & Haider, 2002). Therefore, the definition of city marketing is based on the creation of city value. The main objective of tangible and intangible policies is to focus on a city to attract tourists or enhance publicity, thereby enhancing economic income, strengthening industrial scale, and increasing employment opportunities. Sheth and Sisodia (2002) suggested that the sustainable development of a city depends on successful marketing. Therefore, a city must analyze its internal and external environments as well as its strengths and weaknesses to construct various strategies based on its vision. Armstrong and Kotler (2000) categorized city marketing strategies into image marketing, attraction marketing, infrastructure marketing, and people marketing. Image marketing is a strategy to convey the overall image of the city to consumer groups. Attraction marketing strategy highlights a city's natural landscape, historical monuments, special buildings, and sports competitions as urban features to attract tourists. Investment in resources to improve the overall construction of a city's tangible and intangible facilities is considered infrastructure marketing. Finally, people marketing utilizes famous people to augment the benefit of support from urban residents.

With the trend of globalization, ameliorating city competitiveness has become a relevant topic. Regarding the connection between sporting events and city marketing, Herstein and Berger (2014) indicated that city policy makers should formulate diverse city marketing strategies and city images in accordance with sporting events of various scales. Many cities, such as London, New York, Boston, and Chicago, hold international marathons for city marketing with the objective of raising the awareness of physical activity and developing sport tourism. These cities already list international marathons as principal annual events (Hsu, K.P., Hsu, G.S., & Lee C.H., 2015).

Although previous studies have made substantial contributions to the study of the effect of hosting international sporting events on cities or countries, inadequacies remain in the research regarding the effect of marathon events on the competitive advantage of cities. Therefore, to further investigate the relationship between marathon races and city marketing, this study conducted longitudinal research based on the four local marketing strategies (i.e., image marketing, attraction marketing, infrastructure marketing, and people marketing) proposed by Kotler (2002). Through a case study, the relationship between the Taipei Marathon and city marketing was analyzed; the results and findings may serve as a reference for other cities planning to use marathon races as city marketing strategies in the future.

2. Method

This study explored the relationship between the Taipei Marathon and the marketing effectiveness of Taipei. The objective and research questions were proposed in an attempt to clarify why a policy is adopted, how a policy is implemented, and the possible outcomes. Generally, case study research may adopt single-case or multiple-case designs. The present study adopted single-case research design and selected the Taipei Marathon as the case, because it meets two major principles of such research design; it is both a unique case and a revelatory case (Yin, 1994).

This study conducted literature review to collect and analyze data including event-related information, reports, and academic research, according to the primary research questions and objectives of this study. Following the data collection principles of case studies proposed by Yin (1994), the present study collected both primary and secondary data. For primary data, the author personally participated in the Taipei Marathon to observe the city marketing strategy used by the race organizer. To collect secondary data, the present study searched for reports of the Taipei Marathon over the years from newspapers and magazines for empirical analysis and collected related academic papers from online academic databases. In various journals and academic research, this study searched for related experiences and content to serve as a reference for the theoretical model. This process allowed us to comprehensively and accurately understand the devised research questions. The analysis of primary data and secondary data was according to the principal of theoretical saturation and helped understand the whole pictures of and the connections between the Taipei Marathon and city marketing.

To ensure the reliability and validity of this study, triangulation and multiple sources of evidence were adopted in this study. Cross-checking of various data sources allowed us to confirm whether the collected data accurately reflect the background information of the studied case and the intended phenomenon, to examine whether the data achieve convergence, and thereby to enhance the construct validity of this study (Patton, 1987). Additionally, this study compared the results of the literature review with related theories through pattern-matching; this method improves the internal validity of a study to a certain degree (Yin, 1994).

3. Results

3.1 Introduction to the case of the Taipei Marathon

Recently, road running and marathon races in Taiwan have developed considerably. Taiwan has a more frequent rate of marathon events compared with other countries when considering population density. The rapid growth in road running and marathon participant numbers entices local governments or road running associations to organize a variety of themed road running races and marathon events to attract participants and media coverage. Thus, marathon events have become a strategy used by many cities for city marketing. Literature reveals that there were only 35 road running events in Taiwan, including ultra marathons, full marathons, half marathons, and informal road running events (shorter than half marathons) in 2005. In the following years, the number of road running events in Taiwan began to increase substantially. In 2015, there were 637 half or full marathons, with an average of 53 events per month and 6.6 events per weekend, which excludes the short-distance races and ultra marathons held in Taiwan (Chang & Hung, 2017). Among all road running events in Taiwan, the most representative urban marathon event is the Taipei Marathon. The Taipei Marathon was first held in 1986, and was suspended and transformed into the Taipei National Freeway Marathon during the construction of the Taipei Metro Rapid

Transit system. The Taipei Marathon was reorganized in 2001 and featured corporate sponsorship for the first time in a marathon event in Taiwan, sequentially boasting title sponsors EnTie Commercial Bank Co. Ltd, ING, and Fubon Financial Holding Co., Ltd. In 2015, the Taipei Marathon achieved a breakthrough innovation by integrating with international marathon events; the event reverted to the city name and began rejecting title sponsorships. With marketing unique attractions of the city as the main focus, the Taipei Marathon was expected to be the iconic event leading urban marathons in Taiwan. Started over 30 years ago, the race has become Taiwan's longest-established marathon event (Chang & Hung, 2017). Therefore, this study selected the Taipei Marathon as the case to explore the relationship between the Taiwan Marathon and city marketing.

3.2 City marketing strategy of the Taipei Marathon

Based on the four local marketing strategies—image marketing, attraction marketing, infrastructure marketing, and people marketing—suggested by Kotler (2002), this study analyzed the relationships between marathon events and city marketing strategies. The findings are discussed as follows.

(a) Image marketing

First, local features were integrated into route planning and the city image was incorporated into the course; this approach is fundamental to many marathon events. Although the Taipei Marathon racecourse has undergone multiple changes, participants can still enjoy the architectural landscape and ecology of Taipei each time they attend the event. The ING Taipei International Marathon in 2004 attracted 90,000 participants and created the most outstanding results in the history of Taiwan marathon; known as the world's largest marathon, the race also allows Taiwan to show its prominence in the international arena (Hsu, Hsu, & Lu, 2013). Moreover, the race was incorporated with public welfare activities. Held since 1986, the Taipei Marathon has become a large-scale road race integrated with public welfare; participants are encouraged to care for the disadvantaged through actions including purchasing limited-edition t-shirts for funds and participating in activities such as Turning Runs into Donations and the Run to Dream Champion Chip Donation. According to the study conducted by Kuo, Yang, Lin, and Lee (2015), Taipei City successfully created a satisfactory image after holding the Taipei Marathon. In accordance with the image transfer theory proposed by McCracken (1989), the Taipei Marathon emphasized charity sales and donations. In this way, the positive image of the race could be transferred to the host city to optimize its image.

(b) Attraction marketing

According to Lee (2010), sport is a universal language that often touches people's hearts and draws much attention. That is, sporting events themselves have a certain level of appeal. The Taipei Marathon event starts in December annually. Before the race starts, ING charity ambassadors, the volunteers' assembly, and the cheerleading assembly are arranged as warm-up events for the marathon. Warm-up events create continuous discussion and augment the charitable image. An example includes the 3-kmING Run and the road runner club initiated in 2004 (Huang, 2011). In that year, the contestants of the competitive group reached 17,000 people, whereas those of the recreational group reached 70,000 people, breaking the record for participant numbers (Fang, Lin, & Kao, 2005). In 2006, the event attracted students of 380 primary schools from throughout Taiwan to participate. In 2008, the first 2-km timing chip specifically designed for the children's

group, introduction of new runners by experienced runners, and the “Healthy Company” (promoting community physical fitness) road running successfully shaped the ING Taipei International Marathon into a healthy, pleasant, and diverse city marathon event, leading the event to become the most anticipated annual event for national marathon runners (Huang, 2011). Compared with other marathon events, the Taipei Marathon has additional special categories, such as the runs for kids and for police and fire workers, in addition to dividing the marathons by distance, thus maximizing the diversity of the event. Based on a passionate and delightful image, a distinct topic is proposed each year to maintain the attention of the public. This approach conforms to the perspective proposed by Lee (2010), successfully connecting with the people’s affection.

(c) Infrastructure marketing

Infrastructure construction is often concurrent with hosting marathon events. To be capable of organizing international sporting events, the government must improve the infrastructure, because well-developed infrastructure further attracts foreign contestants to participate. Two months before the competition, Taipei City implemented the Road Smoothing Project to improve the quality of the race course. Particularly, unevenness, water retention areas, depressions, and cracks on the running route were repaired. The original 1.5-meter-wide bicycle lanes of riverside parks were widened to 2.5 meters to provide runners with a superior race course (Hsu, Hsu, & Lu, 2013). The study conducted by Kuo, Yang, Lin, and Lee, (2015) revealed that the general public’s perception regarding the environmental effect after the Taipei Marathon was significantly higher than that before the event. Scores for tidiness and transportation planning of the city were both higher than before the race. Therefore, the organization of sporting events also facilitates further support from local people, proving it an effective city marketing strategy.

(d) People marketing

Although the contestants are the focus of a marathon event, the staff and the crowd play essential roles in ensuring the participants to feel at home. Therefore, students in the physical education department and citizens are invited to serve as volunteers and spectators in the Taipei Marathon. Everyone participates in the event regardless of their occupation and age, serving and cheering for the contestants with maximal enthusiasm. The passion and creativity of the city and its citizens are thereby stimulated. In the 2009 event, 60 rest stops were installed along the road. The runners were motivated to achieve optimal performance by the continuous cheering of the crowd, which formed a delightful cheerleading squad; the sonorous cheering created a memorable experience of the Taipei Marathon (Hsu, Hsu, & Lu, 2013). For foreign contestants, Taiwan has long been full of hospitality. Such spirit is fully embodied through the people marketing of marathon events, enhancing the image and competitiveness of the city.

4. Conclusion

The concept and objective of city marketing are to define the characteristics of a city through a mix of city marketing strategies to create marketing benefit and increase the international reputation of the city. Through analysis, we discovered that holding international marathon events is an activation mechanism for city marketing. To a host city, organizing marathons is not only for sports and entertainment purposes but also for increasing the visibility and publicity of the city in the world and benefitting the city’s image. Kaplanidou and Karadakis (2010) indicated that the organization of sporting events generates both tangible and intangible benefits; the intangible benefits include the improved international reputation and the enhancement of city image. Hosting

the Taipei Marathon indeed helps gain international recognition and promotes the brand features of Taipei. The unique style and charisma of Taipei can be developed by establishing a comprehensive tourism development strategy that involves organizing such marathon events.

The present study revealed the relationship between marathon events and city marketing through analysis of the Taipei Marathon. Taipei intended to attract a large number of participants and tourists through hosting the Taipei Marathon, achieving the effect of city marketing. To a certain extent, the revelation of this relationship supplements the deficiency in previous studies that have neglected the significance of the intangible benefits of sporting events. The relationship also extends research beyond its current limits, because contextual research in the process of city marketing analysis is rare in the related literature. However, not all sporting events are beneficial to the city. Studies have revealed that hosting sporting events can bring negative effects as those brought by sightseeing tourism (Balduck, Maes, & Buelens, 2011; Gursoy, Christina, Jin, & Brendant, 2011). Thus, the organization of marathons must be coordinated with well-developed marketing strategies to minimize the negative effects of the event (Berridge, 2012; Bull & Lovell, 2007).

In terms of practical contributions, this study suggests a city must first consider its style and characteristics when organizing marathon events. Subsequently, the city must conceive how these events should be conducted to ensure the thorough practice of city marketing. Although marathon events play a substantial role in the city's publicity, there may be unexpected failures induced by major mistakes if the city does not possess the competence to plan, execute, and market these international sporting events. Overall, by emphasizing the value of city marketing for marathon events, the study suggests that the city must first consider how to establish and review an effective marketing strategy during the preparation for marathon events, thereby adjusting the strategies and actions for organizing the events, to create a competitive advantage for the city and establish the value of marathons or other sporting events.

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