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Place Marketing, Strategic Planning and Competitiveness: The Case of Malta

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ABSTRACT *This article investigates place marketing and strategic planning processes in the case of Malta Island as a competitive tourist destination. The article focuses on the main ingredients that compose the marketing and strategic planning performance and presents the repositioning process of Malta's image in the international tourism market. The article concludes that place marketing is a strategic process with particular phases of development that leads to the creation of a competitive and attractive destination. Finally, the article supports that strategic planning and place marketing could not operate by themselves, but they need to be built on partnerships among local actors and decision-makers.*

Introduction

Regions and cities globally, but mainly in Europe and especially during the last 20 years, have been characterized by a plurality of efforts to define their vision, construct their identity and shape their images, in order to become more attractive and, consequently, competitive, increase their market share in a globalized economy and fortify their economic development. To satisfy these aims, places have been implementing particular competitive policies, through "place marketing" (Kotler *et al.*, 1993, 1999; Hospers, 2006), "civic boosterism" (Ashworth & Voogd, 1990), prestige projects (Loftman & Nevin, 1996) or mega events (Hiller, 2000; Balsas, 2004) and also strategic plans (Moreno-Jimenez, 2001; Pinson, 2002; Compitello, 2003) in order to attract the potential target markets (new investments, tourists, new residents, specialized human resources, etc.) (Paddison, 1993; McCarthy & Pollock, 1997; Roth-Zanker, 2001; Scherrer, 2002). Building an attractive investment place image (Christiaans, 2002; Stubbs *et al.*, 2002; Ulaga *et al.*, 2002) or a cultural and tourism destination image (Dahles, 1998; McCann, 2002; Seo, 2002) constitutes an extremely important part of places' economic regeneration (Hall, 1998, p. 115).

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In the frame of place marketing as a strategic process, the article investigates all the phases of place marketing and its contribution in local economic development, examining the case of Malta. Particularly, the article presents Malta Island as a competitive tourist destination, discussing the main ingredients that compose the repositioning process of Malta's image, in order to face the major challenges in the international and competitive destination-tourism market. The article focuses on the structure of market research, marketing and promotion, strategic planning and branding phases and is structured as follows: The first section of the article presents place marketing as a strategic process, while the second one discusses place marketing relation with place competitiveness, contributing to a very interesting debate which has been developed in the last 30 years, especially in Europe. Going further, the article presents the case of Malta Island as a competitive tourist destination. Finally, the article ends with some important conclusions.

Place Marketing as a Strategic Planning Process

Presenting place marketing as a strategic process, first it is necessary to focus on strategic planning process. The concept of "strategic planning" has been widely studied by academics in the area of business, and strategic planning has been widely utilized both in the private and public sectors (Garcia-Falcon & Medina-Munoz, 1999). Several authors (Krallinger & Hellebust, 1993; Charney, 1995; McClamroch *et al.*, 2001) define strategic planning as the formulation of long-term organizational goals and objectives, including the selection of the appropriate strategies to achieve these goals and objectives. In addition, it has been identified as an important process especially in the area of local development and community economy, since public-private partnerships are based on the representation of common interests in order to define the development goals and motives, which in most cases have different characters (Bennett & Krebs, 1991, p. 53; Syrett, 1994; Williams, 2002; Markey, 2005).

At this point, we must refer to the differentiation between strategic and tactical planning. Contrary to the strategic planning, which is characterized by long-term horizon and is related to the development of specific actions on the part of an organization, in order to satisfy its objectives, tactical planning is the process of taking the strategic plan and breaking it down into specific short-term actions and plans. The relative length of the planning horizon will vary from one case to another but typically the strategic planning covers a period greater than 3 years, whereas the tactical plan covers the period from today through to the end of year three (McClamroch *et al.*, 2001; Petrakos *et al.*, 2004). Consequently, strategic planning is of designing nature, whereas tactical is of executing nature.

Strategic character has also place marketing, which has been identified as basic factor for strategic planning policies towards urban economic development, starting with the analysis of the place together with the work of the vision and the mission statements, especially in the 1980s that, however, also continued in the 1990s (Bailey, 1989, p. 3; Duffy, 1995; Oatley, 1998, p. 5; Killingbeck & Trueman, 2002). Place marketing and, more recently, place branding literature is full of image improvement success stories (Schofield, 1996; Chevrant-Breton, 1997; Cushman & Wakefield, Haley & Baker TM, 2002, 2003, 2004; Florek & Conejo, 2007; Nuttavuthisit, 2007) and examples of well-planned and implemented campaigns worldwide (Shir, 2006; Capik, 2007).

Place marketing supporters identify local economic development and place competitiveness as goals attributing the concept of “product” or “commodity” or “good” to the place itself (Goodwin, 1993; Kearns & Philo, 1993; Metaxas, 2003) or to an island, especially talking about tourism destinations (Buhalis, 2000; Chaudhary, 2000) or tourism products (Meter & Ruzic, 1999) or destination products (Choi *et al.*, 1999; Opperman, 1996), knowing at the same time that place image promotion constitutes something more complicated and multi-dimensional. According to Zucchella and Denicolai (2005), promotion without previous strategic marketing is a common mistake caused by inappropriate application of marketing principles and by the need of avoiding the political and cultural complexities of rethinking local strategic actions and management. As a strategic process, place marketing is designed under the angle of a total strategic management (McLoughlin, 1969; Goldsmith, 1996; Wong, 1998), including tactical planning actions. For instance, such actions concern the situation audit analysis of a place, the development of tourism market research, the segmentation of the potential target markets, the creation of public relations plans, the creation of tourism packages for particular target markets, the preparation of an annual place promotion budget, etc. (Amdam, 2004; Prague Strategic Plan, 1998; Glasgow Tourism Action Plan, 2002–2007).

Place Marketing and Place Competitiveness

In the last few decades, a significant number of scholars approaching city competition and city competitiveness praises the importance of place marketing as a factor in the formation of a high degree of city competitiveness (Ashworth & Voogd, 1990; Kotler *et al.*, 1993, 1999; Bradley *et al.*, 2002; Urban, 2002; Warnaby *et al.*, 2005; Metaxas, 2006). In addition, the concept of place/urban competitiveness, although it constitutes a particularly attractive study field, with lots of converging views as far as its existence and interpretation are concerned (Rondinelli *et al.*, 1998; Begg, 1999; Deas & Giordano, 2001; Camagni, 2002; Boschma, 2004), it cannot be defined single dimensionally, since there are views that it does not exist neither as a concept nor as a measurable phenomenon (Krugman, 1996; Lovering, 2001). This fact, in conjunction with the lack of quantitative measuring methods of place marketing effectiveness, leads to a crucial question which this article tends to answer and concerns place marketing effectiveness and its positive contribution to place competitiveness where it is applied. The investigation of the relationship between place marketing and places’ competitiveness in most of the studies tends to examine each of the above terms separately, presenting, mostly, place promotion (and not place marketing) as something less interesting in the whole process of local economic development and competitiveness, without any empirical investigation of the impact of place marketing on places’ development taking place (Bradley *et al.*, 2002). Cheshire and Gordon’s (1996) studies are important exceptions that focus their analysis on the examination of factors underlying the different political performance of particular areas, in terms of their capacity to implement effective competitive policies for their economies in the new European context. Under this option, they try to answer the question: “is territorial competition beneficial to the wider community?” and suggest that there must be some evaluation between those competitive policies that are pure zero sum and those which potentially offer net gains not only for the people who live in the territory but for the wider community as well. However, of these development policies, the ones with the lowest influence and importance are those related to place’s

promotion and advertisement. The same argument has been supported by Head *et al.* (1999) who conclude that the existence of promotion bureaus in Japan has limited influence on Japanese enterprises' decision to choose US as the most appropriate investment destination in the period 1980–1992. Similar conclusions derive from Kindra *et al.*'s (1998) work who, by examining the criteria of FDI development in Asian countries (Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia and Thailand), concluded that investments promotion policies were regarded as less important than other factors in business location choice. The above arguments are considered logical to a certain degree, as in many cases, and because of the peculiarity of place marketing and the lack of know-how, problems arise which concern the analysis of the internal and external environment of places, the specific definition of the potential target markets as well as the presentation of a certain methodology for measuring the effectiveness of promotion policies (Metaxas & Petrakos, 2004).

In very recent studies, Cheshire and Magrini (1999, 2001) using data of 122 functional urban regions (FURs) for the period 1978/1980 and 1992/1994 improve the existent growth model, as reported in previous studies, by creating a new variable called “policy capacity” measured as the ratio of the FUR population in 1981 to the population of the largest governmental unit associated with the FUR. These studies show that the capacity to develop effective promotion policies is not a random variable but is conditioned by a number of factors of which the most commonly cited is the structure of local governance—or administrative capacity. This argument stems from the recognition that since the output of promotion policies is the impact they have on local performance, they can be viewed as the provision of a “quasi-public good” (Cheshire & Magrini, 2002). The main question is that “how to be provided effectively?”

The answer to the above question is found in the existence of specific decision-making groups (city councils, chambers, consultant agencies, etc.) which act in a place's environment by planning and implementing promotion policies, expressing their preferences in attitudes of a strategic nature and offering, at the same time, consultancy services to those who take decisions on the city's/place's environment. This matter, simple though it sounds, is really hard to implement. As regards this fact, we present two basic reasons: (a) although the concept of strategic planning concerns mainly the firms' environment, we cannot support that a “city/place administration” is the same as that of a firm. Firms have a clear authority and hierarchy structure with clear development and profit objectives. In the case of cities, we have opposing groups with different benefit representation and different goals (Kotler *et al.*, 1999, p. 106) and (b) place administrations have little experience of entrepreneurship, have come to depend and rely on higher authorities for their actions and are characterized by a rather different organization culture (van den Berg & Braun, 1999). It can draw attention to the city/place opportunities, get investments placed where they are likely to be most profitable for society as a whole and prevent wrong investment decisions at an early stage (van den Berg & Braun, 1999). Under this perspective, we will support that place competitiveness depends directly on the organizing ability of strategic planning (planning and implementation of competitive policies) and the entrepreneurial spirit that characterizes the decision-making agents (van den Berg *et al.*, 1997, 2003; Hall & Hubbard, 1998; Kresl & Singh, 1999; Polidano, 2000). The most important matter, however, is that city competitiveness constitutes a target which concerns all the forces that activate and develop in the places environment and which accept common visions and interests.

The Case of Malta as a Competitive Tourist Destination

Since the 1980s, research on island tourism has attracted many studies that investigate tourism in island destinations (“Mauritius Islands” (Archer, 1985), “Channel Islands” (Romeril, 1985), “Malta, Fiji, Barbados” (Milne, 1992), “Montserrat” (Weaver, 1995), “Caribbean Islands” (McElroy & de Albuquerque, 1998), “Crete” (Ekinici *et al.*, 2003), “Canary Islands” (Parra Lopez & Baum, 2004), etc). Several studies investigate marketing strategies to which small islands must address or emphasize the significance of market research and segmentation for a better understanding of tourist trends and demands (Conlin & Baum, 1995; Ryan, 1995, Wing, 1995). One of the characteristic examples of successful implementation of promotion policies in the frame of strategic planning is that of Malta and the Maltese Islands.

Malta and the Maltese islands have received great attention of research especially since the decade of the 1980s and so on (Bolssevain, 1979; Oglethorpe, 1985; Markwick, 2001; Bramwell, 2003). Situated in the central Mediterranean Sea, Malta is a small archipelago of five islands—Malta (the largest), Gozo, Comino, Comminotto (Maltese, Kemmaunett) and Filfla. The last two are uninhabited. The capital city of Malta is Valletta. Its land area is only 316 km² and in this restricted space live 378,000 people giving it one of the highest population densities in the world (Makhzoumi, 2000; Bramwell, 2006), hosting at the same time over 1,000,000 visitors per year (Chapman & Cassar, 2004). Given Malta’s geographical location, there are no direct connections to the European land corridors. However, due to its strategic position on the main routes of the Mediterranean Sea, Malta has a pivotal role for sea-lane connections (National Reform Programme (NRP), 2005, p. 10) (Figure 1).

In Malta’s case, tourism has been recognized as an industry for far longer than 40 years. This fact is very common, since the majority of small islands states tend to depend on tourism more than larger states do (Briguglio & Briguglio, 1996; McElroy & Olazarri, 1997). The reason for this could be associated with the competitive advantage and specialization that islands tend to have in tourism-related activities (Briguglio & Briguglio, 1996; Kerr, 2005), while some scholars support that the economic development in small islands is positively affected by the growth in tourism (Latimer, 1985; Croes, 2006). Tourism has been acknowledged as Malta’s foremost economic activity generating as much as 24% of gross national product and 27% of full-time equivalent employment in the Maltese Islands; this demonstrates tourism’s major role in the (actual and potential) social economic and environmental scenarios in Malta, putting up pressure due to dependence, constraints and vulnerability (Mangion, 2001; NCSD, 2004, p. 33; UN, 2002, p. 47). The number of incoming tourists has increased rapidly from 1960 to 1980 followed by a large decrease in tourism inflows from 1980 to 1985. Finally, the tourists’ numbers peaked rapidly again during the last half of the 1980s and the 1990s (Briguglio & Briguglio, 1996).

Define the Problem and the Solution: The Repositioning of Malta—“Every Visit would be a Unique Experience”

The case of Malta is not unique, but is very distinctive, since Malta is not only an island tourism destination but also a state. Although Malta is an internationally recognized tourist destination, the reconstruction and the promotion of its image policy was deemed necessary in order to face the new tendencies and challenges in the global tourist market and

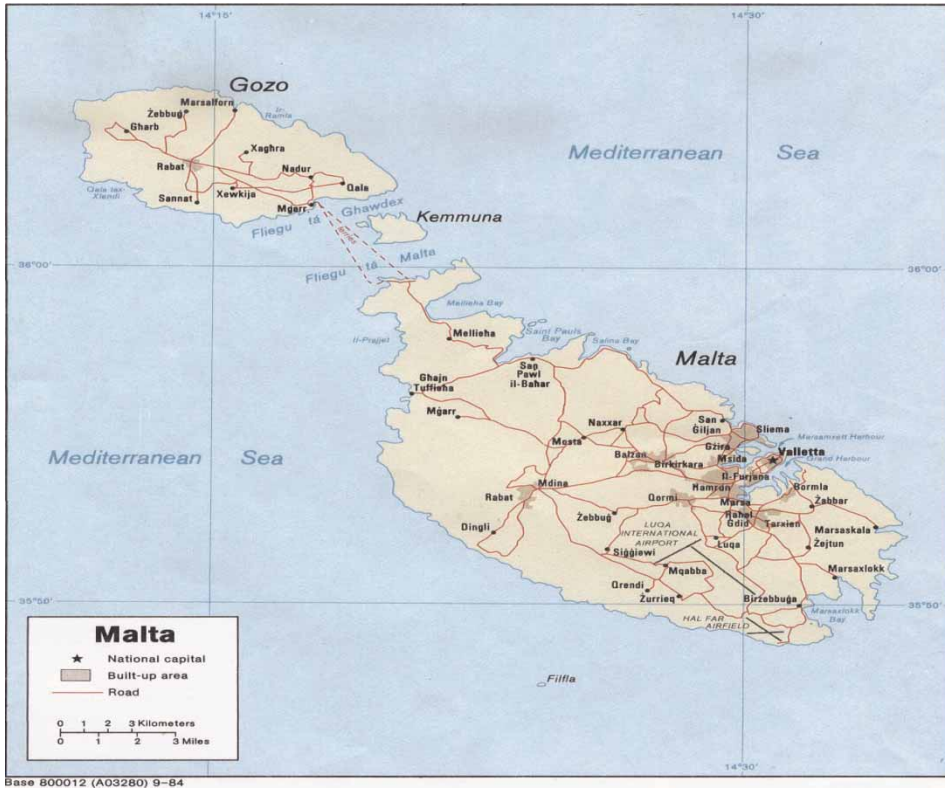


Figure 1. The Maltese islands.

Source: www.nationsonline.org (5 December 2006).

retain a competitive profile towards its rivals, especially in the Mediterranean basin. This fact generates one important question: Why does a competitive destination need to plan and implement promotion policies in frequent time periods? A logical answer is that the implementation of marketing policies is related to a variety of factors that have to be investigated so that cities or regions can remain competitive and attractive in a long-term basis. Consequently, the implementation of marketing policies reflects on the place' necessity to secure their sustainable process of development, contributing positively to the local and regional economic development.

According to Ashworth and Tunbridge (2003, pp. 1–3), the three interrelated problems that Malta faced are summarized as the “tourism problem” (the “traditional” coast tourism vs. the “new” tourism consumers, including cultural and heritage experiences), the “heritage problem” (management of heritage resources focusing on the cost of preservation, renovation and continuing maintenance) and the “development problem” (building on Malta’s competitive advantage, implying that tourism, and especially heritage tourism, has been identified as such an international competitive advantage whose exploitation is thus immediately pressing).

During 2004, a process of restructuring commenced at the Malta Tourism Authority (MTA), with an aim to increase the value of tourism to Malta more effectively. The

MTA, set up by an Act of Parliament on 1 September 1999, has undertaken an in-depth evaluation of the Malta tourism offer. The conclusion was that Malta was no longer competitive in the basic sun and sea package due to the much extended offers by larger and often newer destinations which could handle much larger volumes. A fundamental shift was therefore set in motion, where the Malta product was redefined to rest on Malta's distinctive comparative advantage, away from the more traditional sun and sea product to one which adds "our rich heritage" (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 2003, p. 5). It was clear therefore that what had basically fuelled the growth of the Maltese industry in the last decades could no longer sustain the growth and development of the industry. Malta therefore had to think creatively and to innovate in order to rejuvenate the Malta tourism offer. According to Ashworth and Tunbridge (2003, p. 36), the promotion of heritage tourism as an independent, rather than an add-on activity, requires a different set of images projected to different markets using different techniques than at present. Especially, in the case of marketing, Malta has to provide more specific images than the very generalized, to more specific and interesting markets. Furthermore, advertisement placement in the markets of UK, Germany and Benelux, in particular, will need to use more upmarket media than in the current phase. In the end, the investigation of small, more profitable niche markets and the development of more effective management of tourism behaviour should be taken into serious consideration.

The MTA (2002a, p. 6) is therefore engaged in a process that began in 2002 and it is summarized as "The repositioning of Malta", as a different type of destination, where "every visit would be a unique experience". Within the restructuring process of MTA, a new, two-pronged strategy for tourism encompassing mainstream tourism and identified niche tourism is implemented. This strategy will also outline ways of increasing private sector involvement in the management of attractions such as beaches, cultural assets and other areas. Furthermore, key heritage sites are upgraded to improve their interpretation, accessibility, conservation and promotion and finally, a branding exercise for tourism, shifting overseas marketing from a geographical market approach to a segment-based approach, by focusing, not in particular geographical areas, but in particular segments of the international tourism market is implemented (NRP, 2005, p. 22; World Report Malta, 2006).

The MTA is responsible for Malta's single, most sophisticated tourism marketing plan on a global scale (MTA, 2002b). The plan consists of a number of programmes aimed at increasing visibility in the international market and establishing a strong and positive brand image in Malta's source markets. In order to carry out such an ambitious plan, the MTA's Marketing and Promotion Directorate operates an international network of offices and representatives, commissions advertising campaigns, co-ordinates a public relations programme, supports tour operators through joint marketing activities and participates in a wide range of trade and consumer fairs. The four core axes of this tourism marketing plan include: (a) market research analysis and collection of primary data, (b) marketing and promotion, (c) strategic planning and (d) branding. These are explained more particularly as follows.

Market research analysis and collection of primary data

Market research constitutes a very important part of an effective place marketing plan implementation. The majority of studies (Jansen-Verbeke & van Rekom, 1996; Garrod *et al.*, 2002; Deffner & Metaxas, 2003) focus on places' tourism and cultural development,

concerning the investigation of tourism trends globally, the analysis of tourists' behaviour and their particular characteristics, the auditing of strengths and weaknesses of cities in order to become competitive in international tourism and cultural market, etc. The MTA constantly monitors trends and performance in the different source markets for Malta's tourism industry. Advance booking information, market profile surveys, outbound market trends and brochure analysis are some of the research tools used to feed into the marketing plan (MTA, 2003).

- Tourist arrival statistics are being collected on a monthly basis from "disembarkation cards" which all non-Maltese nationals have to fill in upon their arrival in Malta. These cards—the property of the police and used for border/security control—are passed on to National Statistics Office (NSO) for statistical purposes. This system produces the actual number of tourist arrivals to Malta since it is practically a head count of tourists visiting Malta.
- Furthermore, as Malta becomes a member of the EU, border controls for EU nationals will be shed, necessitating a change in the system adopted by NSO to calculate tourist arrivals. NSO, with the assistance of Eurostat, developed an alternative method for measuring tourism flows to Malta. In 2001, the NSO introduced "Tourstat", a survey on inbound tourism carried out at departure points. Face-to-face interviewing techniques are used to ensure better response rates. The questionnaire is translated into a number of languages including Italian, French, German, Arabic and Russian.
- In addition, Malta International Airport (MIA) provides data for total passenger movements (arrivals and departures, i.e. two way) which include Maltese and foreign passengers. When the number of transit passengers is added, this provides international passenger movements. MIA also provides data for domestic passengers who have used inter-island helicopter flights.
- Finally, Malta Hotels and Restaurants Association (MHRA) offers the latest information on hotel business performance in Malta based on the results of a survey independently compiled by Deloitte and conducted on a quarterly basis. The MHRA survey focuses on the performance levels in the five, four and three star hotels and other forms of serviced accommodation (i.e. tourist villages and apartments/hotels/timeshare resorts).

Marketing and promotion

Marketing and promotion axis includes several actions (networking, advertising, public relations, etc.) that focus on the development, distribution and promotion of Malta's distinctive characteristics to its potential target markets globally.

- The MTA's "overseas network" ensures that Malta's tourism industry is extremely active on a worldwide basis. Currently, the number of outstations manned by MTA officials amount to 12. The largest presence is in Malta's core markets, namely the UK, Germany, Italy, France and the Netherlands. Other offices are operational in Russia, Belgium, Sweden, Austria, the US and China. Representative offices service smaller markets. Such offices are located in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Portugal, Finland, Turkey, Cyprus, Australia and Japan (MTA, 2003).
- "Advertising" is recognized as being a very expensive but effective means of destination promotion. The use of slogans and campaigns is also very popular in a place promotion

process (Haider, 1992; Beerli & Martin, 2004; Burton & Easigwood, 2006). A variety of materials has been examined, including brochures (Getz & Sailor, 1993; Molina & Esteban, 2006) advertisements and postcards (Markwick, 2001). During 2003, the MTA undertook a dynamic advertising campaign in the UK, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Belgium, Holland, Eastern Europe, Sweden, Norway, France and Italy. The medium of television was the main one that was utilized in the UK, where the promotional message of the campaign was "Malta: you just have to join in!" In addition, press and posters carried Malta's message to other markets. The MTA's (2003) efforts were supplemented by advertising campaigns carried out by the overseas travel trade. Figure 2 presents the logo of Malta in comparison with the logos of Greece and Cyprus. Commenting on Malta's logo, it becomes understandable that it contains the aspects "sea and sun" through the combination of respective colours, leaving behind a restful feeling, bringing out Malta's image through the wet element which is the focal point of the specific logo. Although a subjective view, we will support that it is a logo which transmits the message of Malta, as a pleasant and competitive destination, to the potential target markets. One cannot say though that it is distinctive or unique because the premise and the messages that it tries to pass over are similar with, if not the same as, those of other Mediterranean and highly competitive tourism destinations like Greece or Cyprus. Consequently, we will support that a differentiation on the part of Malta is difficult to come to light since similar destinations offer the same goods.

- The "public relations" plan consists one of the core tools of place marketing effectiveness (Avraham, 2000, 2004; Dahles, 2002; Kim & Petrick, 2005; Kirat, 2006; Xie, 2006). The public relations plan run by MTA goes a long way to complement the destination advertising undertaken by the organization. During 2003, the MTA (2002a) hosted no less than 812 foreign journalists and 55 television teams from different markets (the relevant number of journalists in 2002 was 546). These visits resulted in thousands of pages and hundreds of minutes of free exposure of Malta in foreign media coverage, which Malta would be financially impossible to purchase at market rates. As a result of these public relations actions, an MTA billboard promoting holidays in Malta in Germany was placed first in a survey of advertising billboards, while the MTA's office in Moscow received the "Guiding Star" in recognition of its work in the Russian tourism industry (MTA, 2003).
- International "fairs", "exhibitions", "workshops" and "events" provide excellent opportunities to showcase the destination and its service providers, contributing at the same time in local economic development effectively (Lawson, 1982; Getz, 1989; Fayos-Sola *et al.*, 1994; Mazaraki & Voronova, 1994; Bramwell, 1997; Bennett *et al.*, 2004; Garcia, 2004). MTA participates in more than 80 international travel and tourism fairs, which include consumer, trade and specialized fairs. In the case of the major exhibitions, such as London's World Travel Market, Berlin's ITB and Milano's BIT, the MTA gives the opportunity to the Maltese travel trade to actively participate on the stands through the provision of stand space which is offered at discounted rates to enable and encourage participation. Furthermore, Malta is ideally placed to host international organizations and international meetings. Based on its friendliness, stability, safe and secure environment, Malta constitutes a unique backdrop for constructive and forward-looking dialogue and debate (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2006, p. 18)
- "Special interest travel market" received great attention in the last years (Shackley, 1993; Sorensen, 1993; Markwick, 2000; Plummer *et al.*, 2005). Segments pertaining



Figure 2. Malta's, Greece's and Cyprus's logos.

Source: www.mta.com and Whisper Brand Strategy Consultants (2006).

to the conference and incentive market and the complex special interest travel market are central to the achievement of MTA's strategic plan objectives of increasing both volume and earnings during the off-peak months. The three core segments that amount to around 26% of national tourism inflows are: history and culture, conference and incentive travel and sports tourism (Malta Business Bureau, 2006). These specialized segments possess strong earnings potential and are not limited to the summer

season, but rather tend to peak during the quieter off-peak months. It is estimated that currently Malta hosts around 60,000 conference and incentive travel clients, 45,000 English language students and 60,000 divers and accompanying persons. This implies that over 200,000 annual visitors pertain to three specific special interest segments.

Strategic planning and research

In the case of Malta, the information generated and compiled by the Strategic Planning and Research Division, together with internal and external consultation, forms the basis for the strategic planning process that has been taking place within MTA, particularly in the phase which requires the identification of the main priority areas to be addressed over the coming years (*Annual Report and Financial Statements—MTA, 2003*). More particularly, the most important dimensions of Strategic Planning are the following:

- **Market intelligence:** During 2003, the MTA provided up-to-date information of relevance to tourism industry decision-makers through the Malta Tourism Digest service. Recent statistics and reports are regularly updated via e-mail and by post.
- **Product research:** The division also provides information which is product related. These studies, which are locally based, provide information on tourists' perceptions, evaluations and experiences. In addition, this research provides and compares the suppliers' views with those of tourists.
- **Human resources research:** On a place/city marketing procedure, the term "people" is used in order to satisfy two main dimensions: first, the "human resources management" process. Referring to human resources management for visitors' attraction, Swarbrooke (2002, p. 244) supported that it is concerned with obtaining, organizing, training, motivating and rewarding the people needed by the organization so that they can perform in a way which allows the attraction to meet the needs of customers. In this case, the customer's "post-purchase behaviour" must be examined (Ashworth & Voogd, 1990, p. 102; Needham *et al.*, 1999, p. 42; Sandhusen, 1993, p. 237), taking into serious consideration the fact that the ultimate customers' decisions are based on the satisfaction of their needs and expectations and secondly, "the citizens' contribution to the city's development". In the case of Malta, the Strategic Planning and Research Division provides information on human resources aspects in the tourism sector. The collected data refer to the analysis of general attitudes of working tourism staff, but also to the evaluation of customer services provided to tourists (i.e. the research in Gozo Island) (MTA, 2003).

Branding Malta

Communicating a brand image to a target segment has long been regarded as an important marketing activity in business environment (Park *et al.*, 1986; Reynolds & Gutman, 1984). But in the case of destinations, although the concept of destination image has been an area of study for the last 40 years, the concept of branding is quite new, as far as its determination is concerned and how it is related to the successful implementation of place marketing policies (Pritchard & Morgan, 2001; Westwood *et al.*, 1999; Watkins & Herbert, 2003). According to Hall (1999) the concept of "branding" includes (a) a clear and distinct image of the place, which truly differentiates it from other competitors, (b) associations with quality and with a specific way of retailing to the final consumer, (c) ability to

deliver long-term competitive advantage and (d) overall, something greater than a simple set of nature attributes.

In the case of Malta, the MTA has embarked on a branding exercise which will lead to marketing Malta more effectively; an exercise which will have an impact on the way Malta is marketed in the various tourism segments. The branding of the Maltese islands is high on the agenda of the government and the MTA and, indeed, goes hand in hand with the MTA's new approach towards marketing the destination (MTA, 2003). The process was kicked off with a workshop held on 7 July which saw the active participation of more than a hundred stakeholders. The project has been split into two equally important parts: external and internal branding. One key decision has been to operate Malta's tourism sector on a segment basis, dividing potential markets into separate areas and targeting each accordingly (World Report Malta, 2006, p. 10). During the MTA's Annual Conference, which was held on 7 December 2005, a detailed research study, entitled the Malta Brand Survey, was also conducted by the authority as part of this branding exercise. The study was based on the dissemination of detailed questionnaires to over 5000 Maltese nationals. This survey helped determine the three core values of Malta's brand platform: "heritage", "diversity" and "hospitality". The branding campaign highlights the essential messages that give Brand Malta a qualitative and quantitative edge over other destinations: (a) a distinct heritage based on a long historical tradition, (b) impressive diversity—with hundreds of leisure options only 30 min away, maximum, from any one point and (c) warm hospitality straight from heart. Kevin Drake (Manager of MTA Brand Communications Office) said that the new branding effort takes into account the dramatic changes sweeping the global tourism market. "The traditional role of tourism is changing. MTA is providing stakeholders with innovative marketing tools to ensure the competitiveness of our international image. A strong local brand is one of the most important assets we can offer the Maltese tourism companies in their worldwide marketing efforts" (MTA Uploads, 2006).

According to Malta statistics, Malta can accommodate around 1.5 million tourists. Therefore, Malta's strategy is to be selective about those 1.5 million visitors, aiming for the upper end of the market with a product offer that includes a rich array of cultural sites, activities and events, and a range of luxury accommodation from which to choose (World Report Malta, 2006). Figure 3 provides some of Malta's branding images, focusing especially on heritage, tourism and particularities such as the island of Gozo, as they presented by Malta at the official site of MTA (www.mta.com). Commenting on the branding images of Malta, we could support that Malta is oriented towards the double package of "sun-sea" and "culture-heritage" as the main axes of its tourism development. Following the segmentation strategy of the potential target markets that Malta has adopted, we could say that each of the above images is applied to specific target market.

Malta's Tourism Policy for Forthcoming Years (2007–2011)

Malta's tourism policy presents the guiding principles upon which decisions and actions relating to tourism and culture in Malta are to be based and the framework within which Malta's tourism activity is to be formulated in the coming years, 2007–2011 (MNTP, 2006, p. 5). In the frame of Malta as a competitive and attractive tourism destination, the Malta's National Tourism Plan (MNTP) focuses on the following issues regarding the development and the enforcement of tourism and culture (Table 1).



Figure 3. Branding images of Malta and Maltese islands.
Source: “Branding Malta” (www.mta.com, 5 December 2006).

It becomes easily understandable that the strategic planning of Malta for the next 5 years (2007–2011) focuses on especially important issues which concern the upgrading of the tourist services, the continual and effective co-operation with tour operators and the effective management of the tourism zones which present infrastructure problems concerning both their existence and their maintenance. It is very important that special interest is being paid in the quality and the availability of statistical data, which, as already mentioned, constitute a significant point in order for the proper tourist packages to be formed according to the needs, the trends and the expectations of the potential target markets. Furthermore, the dissemination of Malta’s image to overseas markets and the confrontation of the main competitors, namely the tourism destinations in the Mediterranean basin, are fields to which Malta has to pay serious attention. The continual availability of statistic data coming from the studies of the international tourism market is possible to contribute to the effective segmentation of the potential target markets and the formulation of specific development strategies (penetration strategy, focus strategy or diversification strategy), so that Malta will establish itself into the provision of alternative or specialized tourism forms, such as golf tourism and scuba diving. The last targets for Malta’s tourism policy in the near future focus on the constant and effective exploitation of the opportunities that arise in the EU environment, the reduction of seasonality and the creation of a competitive price policy—as much on the part of prices set up by tour operators as on the part of the prices that the tourists can afford. High tourism expenditure is formulated as a final goal, with the aim, however, of the creation of additional benefits and profits for the economy of Malta as a whole.

Table 1. Issues, objectives and responsible actors of MNTP (2007–2011)

Issues	Objectives	Responsible actor(s)
Public finances	Contribute to attaining a balanced position for public finances in the medium term that would lead to long-term economic growth and higher standards of living	MTAC, MTA, IMC for tourism
Define the role of government to act as facilitator for and regulator of the tourism industry	Provision of direction to the tourism industry; ensure consumer protection and the adherence to standards to achieve competitiveness	MTAC, MTA, MCMP
Development of tourism in a sustainable way to ensure an improved quality of life through the conservation and maintenance of environmental and socio-cultural resources	To direct tourism activity towards complementing the three pillars of economy, environment and society rather than allowing them to work in conflict	MCMP, MTAC, MRAE, MUDR, MJHA
Structural reforms required in tourism	Addressing the required structural reforms and deepening Malta's offerings, focusing on existing types of activity for improved quality and service provision	MTA, MIA, MTAC, MITI, PPCD
Tour operators business	To sustain tour operator business to Malta by continuing to work with tours operators which provide business to Malta by improving relationships not just at the level of operations but also at the strategic level	MTA, MTAC
Tourism statistics	To review the current tourism statistics system with the aim of extending the range and improving the quality of available data so as to truly understand the tourism phenomenon in the Maltese islands	MTA, NSO
Accessibility	Increase accessibility to Malta and Gozo through the continuing development of air transport networks and the mobility of persons	MTAC, MTA, MGOZ, MCMP
Product offer and destination management	To continue to focus Malta's efforts on deepening the tourist offer through quality improvements in both the existing physical product and the service provision (areas of: land transport and information, culture, maritime environment and landscapes)	MUDR, MTAC, ADT, MGOZ, MRAE, police, MRES, heritage Malta, MCCA

Management of tourism areas	Provision of particular attention to the tourism zones. Within these zones immediate priority will be given to ensuring that basic facilities are available, well presented and maintained	MTAC, MTA, heritage Malta, MSA, MRES, MJHA
Services provision through people	The provision of a professional service combined with a hospitable attitude that contribute to Malta's competitive advantage	MTA
Image/perception/brand building	Malta must compete with major tourist destinations through the creation of the right image and perception of Malta in overseas markets	MTA
Market development in areas of leisure and tour operating, Gozo island, culture, MICE ^a and sports (diving, golf, etc.)	Local policy-makers and authorities must ensure that there is a close synergy between destination management and the requirements of each tourism segment. Segmentation cannot be achieved unless synergies are created within the cluster contributing to and forming that segment	MTA, MTAC, MGOZ, heritage Malta, police, ADT, Malta enterprise, MEYE
Reduce seasonality	Acknowledgement that tourism activity is by its own nature seasonal	MTA, MTAC, MIA
Price competitiveness and value for money	Monitor Malta's overall price competitiveness, mainly in terms of the destination's relative price with Malta's markets and competitors, in terms of tour operator packages and in terms of the prices of items purchased by tourist	MTA, MTAC, MCMP
Achieving growth and value added in a mature destination	Increase tourism expenditure and more important the increase of economic return and value of tourism in Malta	MTAC, MIA, MTA, NSO

Source: MNTP (2006).

Note: ADT (Awtorita dwar it-Transport), MICE: meetings, incentives, conferences and events, IMC for tourism (inter-ministerial committee for tourism), MCCA (Malta Council for Culture and Arts), MCMP (Ministry for Competitiveness and Communications), MGOZ (Ministry for Gozo), MITI (Ministry for Investment, Industry and Information Technology), MJHA (Ministry for Justice and Home Affairs), MRAE (Ministry for Rural Affairs and the Environment), MRES (Ministry for Resources and Infrastructure), MSA (Malta Standards Authority), MTAC (Ministry for Tourism and Culture), MUDR (Ministry for Urban Development and Roads), MEYE (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment), PPCD (Planning and Priorities Co-ordination Directorate within Office of Personnel Management (OPM)).

Conclusions

The aim of the article is to investigate the role and the significance of place marketing as a strategic planning process in the whole process of local development and competitiveness. In our opinion, place marketing is a strategic process based on the strategic development planning of a place. Place marketing requires knowledge, critical thinking and strategic analysis. Place marketing is not something coincidental or something which concerns only some promotional actions in order to promote cities images. The development of a product, although an intrinsic part of place marketing, involves different perspectives, approaches and skills than promotion. It involves the selection, monitoring and prediction of economic and social behavioural trends on a continental, if not global, scale, the identification of potential products to serve these markets and the creation of the combination of interests capable of shaping them (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 2004, p. 23). In addition, it requires the co-operation between local authorities and public sector, the citizens' direct contribution and, of course, market research, target market segmentation and evaluation, so that it would not turn into waste strategy. Place marketing does not operate by itself. It can be effective if the city's actors realize that the city's image is a very particular and distinctive good, which has to be produced, distributed and promoted through a strategic planning process. The last phase of it is the place/city competitiveness. Competitiveness is a target shared by all places and place marketing is able to contribute positively to its implementation, if and only if it is designed and developed in the frame of strategic planning. Marketing has a negative influence on an organization when it is not oriented towards its actual needs and perceptions of the target markets. The implementation of marketing policies does not mean the denaturing, or the reduction, of the historical or cultural value of the place nor the destruction of a place traditional cultural identity. Despite this, place marketing as a procedure remains open to much criticism and dispute as far as its effectiveness, its connection with local development and competitiveness and the means and the methods of its implementation are concerned. In the above analysis, there was an attempt for some answers to be given, without, however, the discussion over these matters to have been flogged to death.

In the case of Malta, because of its character as a state and an island at the same time, but also as a famous tourist destination, it has invested its development and competitiveness on the tourism sector. MTA plan is a plan in which all the actions concerning tourism are identified, and which focus on the performance of specific primary researches, target markets segmentations, statistical evaluations, the creation of packages of alternative types of tourism and finally the identification of the most appropriate and suitable strategies, tactics and alternative scenarios of actions. The principle goal of Malta is the repositioning of its image, the retaining of the brand name and the continual promotion of its image into the international tourism market.

Despite the strategic planning, though, we will support that Malta ought to focus on its differentiation from the other Mediterranean, serious competitors. According to Whisper Brand Strategy Consultants (2006), "Diversity, heritage and hospitality are 'core values' that apply equally to any number of destination tourism brands, such as Croatia, or Cyprus, or Catalina". Consequently, the differentiation of Malta's branding has to take into account the overall premise of the rest destination branding images of the Mediterranean. In conclusion, we will support that Malta constitutes a representative example of effective planning and implementation of place marketing, since it defined successfully its problem,

decided the reconstruction of its image, without strong differentiation though, designed very specific action strategies and, most importantly, secured the reinforcement of its economic development and competitiveness towards other destinations through the participation and co-operation of all the actors involved.

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