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The brand image of Malta as a tourism destination: a case study in public relations and corporate communication practice

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Place branding and country branding are evolving concepts, which continue to engage attention. This paper reviews the conceptual foundation of place branding and its application to public relations and corporate communication practices in the island state of Malta, a popular tourist destination in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea. The Maltese authorities use communication practices to develop Brand Malta and the study shows how the image of Malta is used to position its offer in the valuable UK market. Tourism is vital to the Maltese economy and the authorities need to create a favourable image and a strong brand.

A number of interviews were carried out with representatives from the Malta brand promoter, Malta Tourism Authority (MTA) to establish the brand strategies and communications approaches adopted for rebranding and repositioning in the market. In addition two tour operators were contacted, who specialize in promoting Malta, to illustrate the practices of the private sector and their coordination with the Maltese authorities.

The findings are analysed in accordance with the theoretical frameworks featured in the literature. The studies show that Malta has achieved some success in developing and sustaining the brand in a competitive tourism market. Niche propositions and added value have been important. A coherent approach to public relations and a corporate communication rationale do provide a strategic framework which helps competitiveness and sustains overall value.

Keywords | *place branding; country branding; Mediterranean sea; tourism; niche marketing; public relations; corporate communication; Malta.*

Introduction

Geography and history: The Republic of Malta is located in the heart of the Mediterranean Sea in close proximity to Italy, Tunisia and Libya. It consists of three main islands: Malta, Gozo and Comino, and two uninhabited islands, Fifla and Comminoto, all together referred as the Maltese archipelago. The total area of the country is 316km² with a population of 0.4 million, which makes Malta one of the countries with the highest population density in the European Union (National Statistics Office, Malta (NSO), 2004, p. 3). The national language is Maltese, although English is recognized as the second official language.

Its strategic geographical position meant Malta became a base for many of the powers who strived to control resources, trade and communications in the region between the two continents. Colonial occupiers have included Phoenicians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, French and the British. Since the late middle ages Malta has been the seat of the Order of Knights of St John.

In the early 19th century the British Empire formally acquired Malta and developed it as a major naval base. The country played an essential role in supporting the Empire during the two World Wars. In 1964 Malta gained its independence from Britain but has remained part of the Commonwealth. In 1974 Malta became a Republic (Department of Information (DoI), 2001a). Malta became a full member state of the European Union in the enlargement on 1 May 2004 and on the 1 January 2008 adopted the official currency of the Union, the Euro. Malta actively participates in a number of international and regional organizations, among which are the United Nations, the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Commonwealth and EuroMed (DoI, 2001b).

Tourism development: Malta's natural resources of its mild climate, sea and sunshine make it a major tourism destination in the Mediterranean alongside islands like Cyprus, Crete, Sardinia and Corsica. The history of Malta has given it a rich heritage and culture and strengthens its potential for cultural tourism. English is a second official language -an advantage in tourism. In 1958 the Maltese Tourist Board was set up to promote the Islands as a tourist destination resulting

in over 12,000 visitors in 1959, mainly Britons (Mitchell, 1996; Markwick, 1999). Since independence in 1964, tourism has enjoyed a positive annual growth but was not initially perceived as major economic activity. However, when the Maltese Government under Dom Mintoff negotiated the departure of the British naval base from the islands, tourism became the major force for expansion and strengthening of the national economy (Foxell and Trafford, 2010; Theuma 2006). Tourism then enjoyed a rapid growth in the mid-1960s and 1970s, with government support for building a new tourism infrastructure associated with developing of the coastal areas in Sliema and St. Julian's, St. Paul's Bay, Bugibba and Qawra (Theuma, 2006; Markwick, 1999). Malta received 728,700 international visitors in 1980, but economic recession in the early 1980s led to a decline (Theuma, 2006). In addition, the tourism sector was still dominated mainly by the British visitors, accounting for nearly 77 percent of the total arrivals in 1980 (Lockhart, 1997 in Theuma, 2006; Marwick, 1999).

The rapid downturn continued through the 1980s and highlighted the importance of market diversification along with promotion of different kinds of special interest tourism. As a response to that recession, the Maltese government adopted a Malta Tourism Development Plan with the aim to achieve market diversification, an upgrade of the product and tourist market and lengthening of tourist season (Foxell and Trafford, 2010; Theuma, 2004). Seven marketing actions were outlined, including marketing communications and development of cultural tourism as part of the strategy (Theuma, 2004; Theuma, 2006). The National Tourism Organization of Malta (NTOM) was set up after 1990 to implement the plan and this led to a minor upturn. The plan was to upgrade and reposition Malta as a cultural heritage destination which necessitated upgrading of historical assets and the creation of cultural events such as festivals and concerts. Even though the Maltese authorities established partnership relations with UK tour operators to assist in advertising, the country was still perceived as a sun-and-sea destination (Theuma, 2006). Theuma (2006, p.215) describes the tourism development in the period of the 1990s as 'characterized by an over-reliance on price factors, large hotel development and a tourism service that lacked quality'.

The impact of tourism on the Maltese

economy: Many small island states tend to depend on tourism more than larger states especially if they can gain comparative advantage from natural attractions and a mild climate (Briguglio & Briguglio, 1996). This dependence means that a large proportion of employment occurs in tourism-related activities which contribute significantly to national income. These factors have positive impact not only in economic terms, but also for the well-being of the population, including improvement in education, infrastructure, communication, medical and other facilities (Briguglio & Briguglio, 1996). Tourism in the Maltese islands is now considered as the backbone of the economy of the country, accounting for nearly 25 percent of the GDP (MTA Annual report 2001 in Theuma, 2004, p293; NSO, 2009).

In 2010 the number of visitors to Malta amounted to 1,332,086 which is a 12 percent increase on the previous year (MTA, 2011). This result shows that the Maltese economy is recovering after the recession at the end of 2008. The main purpose of visiting is for holidays, accounting for 76 percent of total inbound visits. A further 8.8 percent of visitors are business travellers and about 7.6 percent come to visit friends and family on the islands (MTA, 2011). Total visitor expenditures for 2010 amount to over one billion Euros (€1,128,176,842) or € 847 per capita (MTA, 2011).

Resources and assets: images of Malta 'Although Malta is an internationally recognized tourist destination, the reconstruction and promotion of its image policy was deemed necessary in order to face the new tendencies and challenges in the global tourist market and retain a competitive profile towards its rivals, especially in the Mediterranean basin' (Metaxas, 2009, p. 1361).

Economic dependence on tourism stresses the need for Malta to develop a strong country brand on the global level based on awareness, familiarity and national values. Malta needs to compete with other tourist destinations in the Mediterranean region and elsewhere. The main competitors are large countries like Spain, Greece and Italy and long-haul destinations. Malta as a small state does not have the resources to spend in advertising and promoting like the larger states. The

national tourism administration budgets of the competitors exceed that of Malta many times. In 2005 Malta spent 22.7 million euro whilst Greece spent 121.7 million euro; Spain 96.2 million euro and Italy 49.8 million euro; even Cyprus, another small island state spends 51.9 million (Ministry of Tourism and Culture (MTAC), 2006, p .26).

From the early 1990s the main body responsible for the marketing of Malta overseas was the National Tourism Organization of Malta (NTOM). Over the last decade, it was clear that Malta could no longer sustain the growth and development in the sector based in the image of a sun-and-sea destination (Theuma, 2006; Foxell and Trafford, 2010). The rich cultural heritage the country inherited from its colonial past provided a different image of the country with potential. Malta's unique history and culture with various prehistoric temples, architecture and ancient buildings, crafts, archeological sites and museums, set up the routes for repositioning and rebranding of the country.

Although close to Italy, Malta's statistical data over the years shows the high dependence of Malta's tourism on the British market. Following independence in 1964, Malta's economic activities were still strongly related to Britain (Foxell and Trafford, 2010). According to the latest statistics the major market for tourism exports is the UK, accounting to approximately one-third of the total visitors to Malta (NSO, 2010). The second largest market is Germany, followed by Italy and France. Statistical data shows that the British visitor component has declined since the 1980s, but Malta is still highly dependent on the UK market.

According to a recent survey by MTA, people associate Malta with three things: friendly and hospitable people; history and culture, and sun and blue sky (MTA, 2011). According to the study, people mainly choose Malta for their holiday destination because of the agreeable climate, it is a new place to go and because of its history and culture (MTA, 2011). The most frequent visitors were between 40 and 58 years old and typically office or retail workers and professionals. Before 2000 Malta had attracted around a million tourists equivalent to twice the island population (Foxell and Trafford, 2010). First Markwick (1999) and later Foxell and Trafford (2010) have both argued that mass tourism growth was no longer sustainable. High-density tourism, road congestion, overcrowded beaches and shortages of water

during peak season were negative factors.

Facing competition from other Mediterranean destinations offering sun-and-sea holidays, in Malta the prices of package holidays were increasing and the quality of the product was declining. Malta was no longer competitive destination in term of a mass sun-and-sea holiday destination.

Markwick (1999) claims that it is been inevitable for Malta to shift towards special-interest tourism, more specifically towards the growth of cultural tourism. Malta was facing the need to redefine its product, since mild climate, sea and sun no longer gave a strong competitive advantage. However, the diverse and rich cultural heritage suggested a strategy for attracting visitors (Metaxas, 2009; Marwick, 1999).

Theuma carried out surveys in 2002 with informants from both public and private tourism sectors which supported the view that the 'Malta product was "very fragmented", since the Maltese authorities sell Malta as a sun-and-sea destination, a cultural destination as well as an activity destination' (quoted in Theuma, 2006, p. 215-216). Theuma goes on to point out the lack of a clearly defined image was leading to confusion as to what the Maltese Islands stand for. According to her research, the overseas representatives from the MTA undertook separate approaches to address the public with fragmented marketing and advertising campaigns, sending mixed images and conflicting signals. So Malta stood for beach tourism in UK, culture in France and Italy, an English language destination in continental Europe, and an attraction for elderly visitors in UK. Theuma's research identifies the need to develop a coherent image of the Maltese islands.

The Malta Tourism Authority (MTA) had been set up in 1999 as a more strategic approach to development. The MTA took over the responsibility of NTOM as the country brand promoter and its responsibilities are in three main areas: product development, re-imaging of Maltese Islands, and redefining marketing campaigns. MTA took action by creating of a logo, defining specific segments of the public, and developing a brand image (Theuma, 2006; Metaxas, 2009).

Country branding: the importance of the branding of countries and destinations

The American Marketing Association defines

brand as a 'name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them intended to identify the good and services of the one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competition' (Kotler and Gertner, 2002). There are numerous studies developing the notion of branding in corporate terms. The concept of corporate branding and brand management has followed the development of traditional product branding and shares the same objectives to differentiate and create preference (Knox and Bickerton, 2003; Ashworth and Kavaratzis, 2009). The brands are considered a valuable asset to the company as they develop personality and create social and emotional value for the user, which can be transformed into customer loyalty (Kotler and Gertner, 2002). The brand personality played an essential role in creating a differentiation, awareness and reputation of the product in the marketplace. Knox and Bickerton (2003, p. 998) define corporate brand as 'the visual, verbal and behavioural expression of an organisation's unique business model'. Balmer (2001) states that there are three main virtues of the corporate brand: 1) Communicate; 2) Differentiate; and 3) Enhance.

However, Kotler and Gertner (2002) put the question: can a country be a brand? FutureBrand (2010) in association with BBC World News, developed an annual executive study on Country Brands and claims that country brand is '[the] nation's ultimate intangible asset and goes beyond its geographic size, financial performance or levels of awareness'. Ashworth and Kavaratzis (2009, p. 521) argue that place branding can be defined as 'the practice of applying brand strategy and other marketing techniques and disciplines to the economic, political and cultural development of cities, regions and countries'.

In reference to this, Ollins (2002) in one of his works follows the development of the nation branding through history. According to the author the concept of nation branding is not well accepted in the public's eye and provokes negative reactions based on the idea that corporations or products can be branded, but not nations. His work refers to the development of certain nations that have experienced several rebrandings over the years. Ollins (2002) follows closely the history of France that has had five republics, two empires and four kingdoms, as an example of the development of the concept of branding and rebranding nations. Ollins (2002) also points out the

transformations Germany made through the years and the changes since Bismarck, from Kaiser to Reich to becoming an emerging industrial, economic and military power, 'the most admired and by some the most feared new brand of the 19th century'. Branding transformation also occurred in the Ottoman Empire after World War One and after the collapse of the European colonial empires when new nations emerged. The point Ollins (2002, p. 245-246) makes is that 'nationalism and national identity have been the fundamental ideas which fuelled the creation of nation-states over the past two centuries ... some nations like Spain and Australia whose realities have changed have very carefully and deliberately adapted the techniques used by corporations in marketing themselves and their products and services in order to help them project a new or revised or in some way modified view of themselves'.

Kotler and Gertner (2002) argue that the 'country's images result from its geography, history, proclamations, art and music, famous citizens and other features' and positive images are most likely to influence people's decisions of purchasing, visiting, travelling, investing and even changing residence. They also state that even if the country does not consciously develop and manage its name and reputation, people still have an image of the country and perceive it in a certain way. Gilmore (2002) claims that most countries already have developed a sort of an identity and image of themselves, each carrying certain associations, both positive and negative, such as Argentina being associated with Eva Peron, the tango or even the disputes over the Falkland Islands. He refers to the positive element of the brand identity as the 'communication equity' elaborating on the brand communication assets such as logo, colours and design of the product.

Additionally, the term country equity has been introduced by Shimp et al. (1993, in Kotler and Gertner, 2002) which is defined as the 'emotional value resulting from consumers' association of a brand with a country'. Whether it is the smallest village or the largest country, place marketing and strategic marketing play the role to attract a specific target audience: tourists, investments, companies, workers and so on (Dinnie and Fola, 2009; Kotler and Gertner, 2002).

Place marketing: marketing countries as tourism destinations

'We have seen how places increasingly compete with other places to attract their share of tourists, business, and investment. The marketing of places has become a leading economic activity and, in some cases, the dominant generator of local wealth' (Kotler et al. 1993, p. 21).

Lumsdon (1997, p. 30) argues that even though the principles of marketing can be applied universally, when it comes to marketing tourism, the application of those principles and specific marketing management tools are slightly different. The tourism sector shares a number of similarities with the service sector in general such as intangibility of product, perishability, and properties fixed in time and space (Middleton, 2001). However, the difference with tourism marketing and more specifically in the marketing of destinations comes from the following (Lumsdon, 1997):

- The seasonality of the product: most leisure tourism markets are affected by the climate and changes of the seasons
- The destination is a combination of services and highly dependent on various suppliers: e.g. tour operators, airlines, hotels, restaurants, museum, galleries, etc.
- The destination offers relative fixed supply of facility which can be changed only slowly, in contrast to the often rapidly shifting demand from customers
- The similarity of promotion according to the targeted segments: historical sites, sunny beaches, entertainments, shopping destinations etc.
- The lack of control over the brand as there is no real ownership: the suppliers are responsible for creating and delivering the destination or attraction (Source: Lumsdon, 1997, p. 30).

'The tourism destination comprises a number of elements which combine to attract visitors to stay for a holiday or day visit. There are four core elements: prime attractions, built environment, supporting supply services, and atmosphere or ambiance' (Lumsdon, 1997, p. 238). Kotler and Gertner (2002) on the other hand suggest that it is essential for country brand managers to understand that different places attract different tourists. They suggest that the segmentation in the tourism industry should be according to either the attractions the tourist seeks, such as natural beauty, sun, sea, adventure, sports, events or culture and

history; or by areas, regions, locations; or by seasons; by customer characteristics, or by benefits. Kotler et al. (1993, p.33-40) proposes four strategies to attract the target audiences:

- Image marketing: the main idea is to identify, develop and disseminate strong positive image that communicates the features to the main targets
- Attraction marketing: some places have the natural attractions (natural resources, climate), or historical buildings
- Infrastructure: visitors need good transportation system, safely on the streets, good restaurants and hotels, medical help available
- People- friendly and hospitable environment.

The control over the promotional approaches and brand strategies are mixed between public and private sector. Middleton (2001, p. 334) claims that most of the organizations dealing with the overall marketing of countries as tourist destinations tend to be mainly National Tourism Organizations/ Administrations (NTO/ NTA). However those NTOs are responsible for only part of the total tourism and travel marketing efforts made on behalf of the country. In addition, there are various business firms, tour operators and private organizations dealing with promotion and marketing of countries with which the NTOs need to establish a two-way partnership to increase their influence on tourism marketing.

Countries should adopt a more conscious approach towards branding in order to compete, and that includes strategic marketing planning (Kotler and Gertner, 2002). Metaxas (2009) adds that place marketing does not operate on its own, but it rather has to be produced, distributed and promoted through a strategic planning process in order to be more effective. The strategic planning is defined as the formulation of long-term objectives and goals. As strategic planning is characterized by long-term actions, place marketers need also to take into account the short-term activities i.e. tactical planning actions to achieve total management planning (Metaxas, 2009). Through strategic marketing planning processes, place determines which industries, services and markets should be encouraged and maintained. The aim of the process is prepare a plan for actions to integrate place's objectives and resources with the changing environment which will require developing an information, planning and control systems for monitoring and responding to changes

in opportunities and threats (Kotler et al., 1993). The strategic management approach according to Kotler and Gertner (2002) should include a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis, identifying the main industry, landmarks and historical events as a basis for the brand and adopting an umbrella concept for all the branding activities on behalf of the country. According to Metaxas (2009) place competitiveness depends on the organizations ability of strategic planning.

Public relations and communication techniques for building and promoting country brands

'Public relations is about reputation - the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you. Public relations is the discipline which looks after reputation, with the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and behaviour. It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics' (Universal definition adopted by The Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR)).

The notion of public relations developed into the roots of the corporate communication function to integrate specialized disciplines including corporate advertising, corporate design, internal communications with employees, media relations, investor relations, issue and crisis management. The concept of corporate communication is responsible for the management and coordination of all internal and external communications with various stakeholders groups on which the organization is dependent and maintaining its good reputation among them (Cornelissen, 2008). This definition is applicable not only to corporations, but also to the public and private entities, business and not-for-profit organizations, as well as countries as corporate entities.

Lumsdon (1997, p. 176) claims that many tourism organizations are increasingly using public relations due to the social and environmental pressure on them. He also adds that many destinations are relying more on public relations (PR) rather than on advertising campaigns, arguing that if managed strategically, PR activities can convey the message more effectively.

The tourism industry and the need to attract tourism is only one of the aspects for developing strong nation brand. Yang et al. (2008), quoting Morgan and Prichard (2005), notes that public relations plays a significant role in tourism industry as a promotional tool when it is integrated with other partnerships of place/destination marketing.

The development of the brand strategy: the Maltese case

Two major shifts in the tourism industry have been identified by the Director of Communications and PR of the MTA headquarters in Malta (Mr K. Drake), as a driving force for taking further steps into rebranding and creating a new coherent image of the Maltese Islands that will be disseminated globally.

The first shift was the emergence of new destinations in the Mediterranean and the increase in regional competition. The newer destinations in the region, such as Croatia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and countries from North Africa (Tunisia and Morocco) are capable of providing better package holidays at attractive prices, and often cheaper than Malta, and they provide better natural resources of virgin beaches and wildlife to explore. Countries like Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia, Montenegro and Croatia evolved as tourism destinations in the last 15 to 20 years and impose a big threat in terms of competition to Malta. The conclusion of MTA was that the Maltese islands were not able to sustain their competitiveness in the market by providing only sun-and-sea packages.

The second shift is a move in the international tourism and travel industry from tour operator tourism to individual travelers using Internet booking portals. In addition, '... individual travellers, are now looking for much more than just sun and sea. Most travellers nowadays want to experience all that makes the country unique' (Director of Communications and PR). The former NTOM were projecting very diverse and conflicting images of Malta in the core markets: Maltese luzzu (traditional small fishing boats) with a fisherman (France); people on bikes (Germany); a family on a beach (UK). Consequently, MTA recognizes that "The first and most important thing is to have a very clear branding strategy."

The new branding strategy began in 2005 with the external consultations from branding specialist Christian Sinding from Interbrand. The decision was taken to adopt a single logo to stand out for the Maltese Islands. The strategy was to push the Maltese Cross that originally belonged to the Order of St. John as a universal logo that will be used for branding and merchandising alongside the old logo the Maltese eye (Figure 1). The element of the Maltese Cross was added to the original logo of the Maltese eye in 2006 during the new brand strategy by MTA. According to Mr. K. Drake the Maltese Cross has been valued at between a half to one billion dollars.

Figure 1. Malta brand logo

(Source: MTA Official Logos Download; <http://www.mta.com.mt/official-logos> (Accessed 14 August 2011))



In addition to the logo, brand values have been identified through a survey among 5,000 people, both Maltese citizens and from other countries. The three core values were: Heritage, Hospitality and Diversity. These values are used as a brand platform and are incorporated in any promotional item, brochure or advert produced by MTA.

Those core values stand for the following:

- **Heritage:** The Maltese Islands have a history, heritage and culture that no other country has dating back to prehistoric times. For example the Italians have the Baroque, but Maltese have the Baroque and the British colonial heritage as well. The island has prehistoric temples from the early ages, the Roman, Byzantines and Arab presence, the Baroque period, and the French and British heritage. The first traces of humanity on the islands dates back to 5000BC and one of the oldest man-made buildings in the world, the Ggantija temples, are on Gozo. The choice of Heritage according to Mr. Drake had been logical: "The place is like a living museum."
- **Hospitality:** Malta is the only country in the world whose hospitality has been stated and promoted around 2,000 years ago in the Bible, in the Acts of the Apostles. With regards to the shipwreck of St. Paul on the Islands, it was said 'the locals showed us uncommon kindness' [and hospitality]' (The acts of the apostles, Ch. 28, v. 2).
- **Diversity:** Malta enjoys not only cultural diversity and rich history, but also diversity in activities and leisure opportunities within easy reach. The islands provide opportunity for various sports activities (diving, rock climbing, swimming, country walks); cultural activities (museum, theatres, galleries, festivals, concerts); entertainments with events and cultural calendars all year round; seaside restaurants and clubbing opportunities. Due to its size, everything is within easy reach of a 30 to 40 minute drive.

The branding campaign was launched internally in Malta citing all Maltese citizens as the main stakeholders. The campaign has been called '1001 things to do in Malta and Gozo' and was featured in a two-page advert in a local newspaper. The advert showed a list of 1001 things to do and see in Malta and Gozo with a note at the bottom saying 'This is just the tip of the iceberg'. Before launching the brand platform overseas, the strategy has been to approach the locals first and explain what brand is all about. A campaign called 'You are the Brand' with text in Maltese language reading 'You respect your country', was launched referring to every citizen as brand ambassador of the country. Published materials, explaining the need for branding and how MTA intended to brand Malta, were sent to all homes in Malta and Gozo, and to managers and people working in tourism.

In addition, a six-month campaign for hotels, restaurants and interest groups was done that included presentation of the purpose of the brand and creation of brand ambassadors. Another initiative for internal branding was the development of courses and an educational campaign to train people in the industry how to be more sensitive to the tourists, to be proactive, more conscious and more aware of how to help the tourists.

Although a single logo and brand platform were identified, the Director of Communications still claims that occasionally there is a difference in the images projected in different markets. The difference comes from the diversity of the activities and various segments that are promoted and not all of them are suitable for certain countries. 'For example, it is pointless for us to show Baroque architecture in Italy since they have much more than we do. They would not come here to observe Baroque architecture. So we have found a different way. The prehistoric temples-they are a good idea. It is useless for us to show Spain beaches, sea and all that because they have quite a lot themselves. So we try to promote things that Spanish people like, for example the cuisine as they like to try different cuisines, events, activities, learning English, various things. For Scandinavia, being besides the sea might be a good thing to promote there, learning English may be not so much... There are specific realities in each market that we take into consideration.' (Kevin Drake, Director of Communications and PR, MTA). However, the brand platform and the logo are universally used.

The advantages to differentiate Malta over its competitors are its image of "Home from home" (Chevron Holidays representative); "the uniqueness in history and diversity" (K. Drake, MTA-Malta), "the ability for quick response, change in strategy and shift in campaigns at a time of current crisis with the events from the war in Libya and political crisis in North Africa" (A. Incorvaja, MTA-London); "a safe atmosphere in an English speaking nation" (Belleair Marketing Director).

The image of Malta in the UK and the need to change strategy: The dependence on the UK market shown by statistical data was confirmed by both representatives from MTA. They claimed that even though British tourists are decreasing in recent years, currently accounting to only 30 to 40 percent of total visitors, UK still remains the predominant market.

“UK is a very particular market for us, for the reason that, first and foremost the UK was always our biggest market... The UK still remains our number one market, but it has changed very much in size and in image... although British tourists were decreasing in number significantly, in percentage-wise as well, the makeup of the British tourists was very much the same. The image of Malta was dropping considerably in UK. British tourists of a certain generation are very loyal. They would like to go to the same place year after year after year. But that is a generation that is dying out. Because of this Malta was getting an image in the UK like “O, yes, Malta, is the place where my parents used to go every year” or “Malta, the place my grandparents met during the War”. The image was like a retirement home by the sea for a lot of people under 40 in the UK. First of all, people who knew about Malta decreased significantly, and the people who knew about Malta had the impression of Maltese Islands for being the place where their parents used to go every year, boring, where the grandparents used to go etc. So we had a very particular demographic group coming to UK consistently. Now realizing that this is a dying generations, we have to keep the interest in our country going “

(Kevin Drake, Director of Communications and PR, MTA)

The influence of the former British colonial heritage as a strong factor in the favourable image of Malta in the UK was confirmed by interviewees. However, according to the Director of MTA London office this is no longer the driving force. The activities the London office undertakes are to promote diverse activities for a number of segments, such as culture, sports and activities, youth market, Gozo holidays, luxury holidays, spas and weddings in addition to the history and heritage.

The organization of public relations and corporate communications : The public relations and communications activities of the MTA in the different countries are organized by their overseas network and office stations. In certain countries there are only one or two people in the offices, while in the major markets, such as UK, Germany and Italy, there are well developed offices with managers and various executives. The overseas offices use the services of PR agencies for the organization of activities which are coordinated with the head office in Malta. The UK office is considered as a distinct unit that uses a PR agency in coordination with counterparts from Malta headquarters.

Target Audience: “We try as much as possible in our marketing and in our promotional campaigns to have something that appeals to all the major demographic age groups“ (K. Drake). In most countries the main demographic groups are the 35 to 50 age group, followed by the over-50s, 25 to 35s and the under-25s. As stated earlier, the strategies towards the British public are to attract the younger generations and to create a favourable image for the under-25s and 25-35 demographic groups. However, as mentioned by A. Incurvaja (MTA, London), MTA is trying to promote a niche for every type of traveller.

Market segmentation : “There are a number of niches we are promoting aggressively on the market to make it truly an all-year-round destination for all types of travelers”(Alex Incurvaja, MTA, London). According to the interviewees, a number of different segments have been developed by MTA to attract different types of tourists. In addition, both representatives from MTA opposed the concept that Malta make a shift from sun-and-sea destination to cultural heritage destination, claiming that it was not just cultural heritage, but rather focusing on various segments.

In terms of the British market, as identified earlier, there was a need to attract a younger generation, who were approached through the development of leisure segment that include clubbing, entertainment, sport and sun-and-sea. A purely entertainment segment was developed with the approach to become the second Ibiza in Europe. A sports segment has been developed as well, referring to water sports, rock climbing and diving. Cruise liners, meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (MICE), luxury holidays and

wedding destinations are also being promoted. In addition, two other segments had been referred to: the religious or church destination and health and well-being. The religious segment has been developed for the people interested in Christianity in the Mediterranean, and Malta provides a good basis for that with around 400 churches and chapels from the Baroque and pre-Baroque periods, St Paul's shipwreck, and sites built by the Knights of St. John.

Another segment has also been identified: English language teaching, which for obvious reasons is not promoted in Britain.

Improving the brand value of Malta: country branding strategy

The study of the communication practices of the Malta Tourism Authority as the main country brand promoter provides useful information regarding the strategies and organization of public relations and corporate communications in terms of branding a country as a tourism destination, both internally and externally.

Visual identity and brand values : With regards to the brand visual identity MTA has adopted on behalf of Malta, the logo represents the eye of Osiris connected with the Phoenicians and it is usually illustrated on the traditional Maltese luzzu fishing boats. The colours used for the logo are the same as the colours of the boats - red, blue and yellow. The Maltese Cross on the other hand belongs to the Order of St John, and the symbol was associated with the award to the Maltese by the king of the George Cross. This was their heroic role in World War II. Both symbols are strongly related to the history and culture of Malta and it is a good way to communicate with the local people. Although the Maltese Cross is well recognized as its associations with the Knights of St. John, the Osiris Eye is a long-traced tradition and it is not well recognized symbol for someone who have not been to Malta or is not familiar with their culture and tradition. As defined by Balmer (2001), corporate brand has the virtues to communicate, differentiate and enhance. To analyze the logo in the Balmer's framework, the symbolical meaning could communicate well to the internal audience of the Maltese and with regular visitors to the islands who are familiar with the culture, history and have seen the luzzus. But it does not mean much for an

external audience, external stakeholders and potential visitors.

Additionally, Metaxas (2009) compares the Maltese logo with the logos of two main competitors in the Mediterranean Sea: Greece and Cyprus (in Figure 6.1). Comparing with the other two logos, the Maltese is not easily differentiated. According to Metaxas, even supporting the idea that the Maltese logo transmits the message of a pleasant and competitive destination, the image projected can hardly be differentiated with the other two competitive destinations providing the relatively the same product as a sunny Mediterranean destination.

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

(Source: www.mta.com, Whisper Brand Strategy Consultant (2006) in Metaxas, 2009).



In terms of the corporate and country identity of Malta, the image presented is based on the three core values: Heritage, Hospitality and Diversity. In addition, in the latest video advertorials Malta is presented as 'Truly Mediterranean'. The corporate identity that has been formed of these elements - the visual logo, values and slogan, creates a well-built, enhanced image of Malta as a brand. These elements have been presented in all forms of communication by MTA: in their promotional materials, advertising and publicity. The brand education programme undertaken by MTA to present the brand strategy to the internal stakeholders - local people, hotel and restaurant managers and staff - ensures a thorough understanding of the principles of branding. These elements will be implemented in the behaviour of the local people and employees and will be presented to the external stakeholders. Viewed this way, through coordination of the elements of symbolic presentation, communication and behavior, MTA efforts could easily be applied to the model of Birkigt and Stadler (Cornelissen, 2008) of corporate identity as a successful way to present the image of Malta to the external audiences and create corporate personality. Kotler and Gerner (2002) propose that a country should choose an industry, landmark or historical event as a basis for the management of the brand and identity, and should adopt an umbrella concept that will cover their communication activities. In the case of Malta, the Maltese Cross has been a successful adoption in the branding strategy referring to the historical events and the Order of St. John. Applied under the brand core values of Heritage, Hospitality and Diversity, it creates a complete image of the country and a strong brand platform to be used in all forms of communication.

Global brand and intercultural

communication: In terms of the global presentation of the image, MTA adopted a successful approach towards the target countries by applying the concepts of intercultural communication. The strategy applied by MTA in some of the countries considered as core markets was to promote some of the market segments and activities to meet the need of the particular country, such as marketing the English language teaching in Italy, rather than promoting Baroque architecture, or marketing history and heritage in UK as opposed to the English language teaching.

These strategies successfully apply the concept 'Think global, act local' in terms of intercultural communications and reflects on the needs of the host country while at the same time keeping the strong brand platform and identity of Malta.

Internal branding: Another important aspect of the branding strategy is the branding education programme given by MTA at the beginning of the branding campaign. The introduction of such a programme is a crucial element in the process of engaging the main stakeholders in the country and encourages the whole community to act in an hospitable and warm way towards visitors. Transmitting the message of branding from the management level to the people directly and indirectly affected by the tourism industry is an important strategic element to raise awareness of the community and to improve the service. However, the model for communication with the internal stakeholders could be identified with Grunig's one-way symmetrical model of communication and informational strategy (Cornelissen, 2008). The model suggests that stakeholders are informed about the decisions of the organization, but the stakeholders are not involved in the decision-making process and are not actively communicated to in order to provide feedbacks and create a dialogue. Even though the practice to start branding from the inside is important, MTA should actively seek engagement with the local communities to build a relationship and create mutual understanding through a dialogue strategy to achieve a two-way communication model (Cornelissen, 2008).

Improving the brand value of Malta: market research and strategic marketing planning

The research and situation analysis undertaken by MTA plays an important part in marketing and branding strategy. The data gathering process through a survey in the process of developing the brand core values was an essential step in the foundation of the brand. The survey was conducted with local people, tourists and people from core markets who have never been to Malta, and showed that the MTA engages closely with its stakeholders both inside (the local communities) and outside (tourists and people from the core markets).

In order to implement a successful campaign and build a strong image, MTA have a constant need for data and information about the visitors to the island, their purpose of visit, country of origin, interests, motivators, impressions etc. MTA implemented a number of tools and techniques for data and information gathering including arrival statistics and cooperation with NSO, Malta International Airport PLC (MIA) and Malta Hotels and Restaurants Association (MHRA). Taking into consideration the information needs of MTA, the tactics implemented ensure data collection both internally and externally, gathered from primary formal sources. The collection of the data streams and market intelligence is useful to help understand the trends in the tourism industry and the developments of the market and to be implemented in the long-term strategy of the organization.

Improving the brand value of Malta: public relations and communications strategy

MTA undertakes a very creative approach towards promoting the country through a wide range of public relations activities. Cost efficiency is an important aspect of the various tactics undertaken. Given the relatively low budget, the techniques MTA have adopted are an effective mix of activities that ensures publicity at relatively low cost.

Market segmentation: The strategy of MTA is strongly focused on developing various niche markets to attract tourists all year round. It is a successful strategy in terms of approaching various interest groups and expands the

spectrum of special interest tourists. The strategy coincides with the suggested model of Kotler and Gertner (2002) that different places attract different tourists and it is essential for country brand management to develop segments according to the attractions the tourists seek. However, in the attempt for segmentation and promoting parts of the attractions for particular group of tourists, the strategy lacks consistency in the image and fails to create an image of Malta as a whole item composed of those parts and segments.

Target audience: In terms of defining target audiences, there is a difference in the total approach of the MTA and the Malta specialized tour operators in the UK with regards to the age groups. While MTA is adopting strategies to target the younger generations in the 25 to 35 and 35 to 50-year-old demographic groups and diminish the image of retirement home, the two tour operators that specialize in promoting Malta only provide their holiday packages mainly for the grey market. This difference in approach will reflect on the approach of the MTA in terms of cooperation and coordination of public relations and advertising campaigns with the private sector.

While campaigns targeting the grey market could be coordinated with the Malta specialists, the younger generations should be approached through other means and with coordination with other tour operators and/or travel agents.

PR tools and activities: The MTA has a very proactive approach in terms of public relations and corporate communication according to the shifts in demands and trends in the tourism industry. An example is the sponsorship of Sheffield United football club and use of Expedia, making Malta as a pioneer for using these PR tools for country branding. In terms of adaptation to the developments in digital communication and social media platforms and the shift in trends towards individual tourists, MTA treats these developments more like opportunities rather than threats. In this respect, more initiatives for presence in the new media, web portals and e-marketing, forcing the creation of the digital asset management system have been introduced by MTA.

Presence at travel and tourism fairs and events increases the international awareness of the country and is a direct way to address the public in this particular market. Appearance

in fairs and events, providing information and making presentations where information about the country as a tourism destination is presented, creates an opportunity for press coverage, workshops and business meetings. With regard to the media relations of MTA, the International Media Relations Programme adopted is an effective way to present Malta to the international media representatives to ensure press coverage at relatively low cost. Unlike paid advertisements, unpaid coverage after such an event will gain more credibility in the eyes of the target public. Even though media visits are creative and cost effective and ensure publicity afterwards, this strategy is not long lasting and MTA faces the challenge to be more innovative and creative every year to keep the interest of the media and present something new and fresh every year at the annual visit.

Developing the various niche markets creates an opportunity for more exposure in the various sectors, such as extreme sports and diving publications and special programmes and editions. The creation of festivals and concerts with world famous singers and artists is also a good way for promoting the country and gain extra publicity.

The partnership with Music Television (MTV) and the free entrance concerts as part of the Isle of MTV, an annual music event in Malta, in recent years not only gains circulation in that broadcasting channel but traces the path for Malta to be considered as the second Ibiza in Europe.

Sponsorship opportunities also include additional media coverage and exposure of the brand logos. The decision to sponsor a football team in the UK (Sheffield United) is a creative and proactive approach to invest in sports activities in the major core market where this particular sport is very popular. Therefore, the sponsorship of Sheffield United is in line with the public relations strategy for image exposure in the major core market, targeting various age groups, although mainly from the male gender, supporting good causes and sports activities and gaining extra media coverage. It meets the intercultural needs of the host country and has a very strong effect due to the fact the football can be like a religion in UK.

Main tools and techniques for promoting Malta

As a small country Malta cannot afford to have advertising budgets like the larger countries. According to Mr Drake, whatever Malta does, it needs to be done intelligently, "to shout louder than the others, if not in the wider picture we have got to be more focused". Some good practices have been developed including:

- **International Media Relations**

Programme: This is an annual event, when between 800 and 1,000 journalists and photographers are invited to Malta. MTA covers the expenses for accommodation, flights and food. The event generates millions of euros worth of value and insures coverage in the respective publications and media. The programme generates a lot of column inches, TV specials, radio programmes, and photographs.

- **Traditional media advertising:** The use of the traditional media have been used in the core markets by MTA. In the UK for the last three year there has been a TV campaign with the use of productions especially made for Malta by National Geographic. The campaign is launched on Boxing Day, 26 December and lasts until June. In addition, the representatives in the overseas network offices participate in certain TV and radio programmes and specials. Print advertising in most of the source markets in magazine, newspapers and special publications is also used.

- **Fairs and exhibitions:** The MTA appears at a number of travel and tourism fairs and also in more specialized fairs according to the segment, such as history and culture, and MICE fairs. The overseas offices also organize presentations around the year and provide materials, audio-visual presentations and video productions in the languages of the target markets.

- **Sponsorship:** Malta is the official sponsor of the English football team Sheffield United. According to the interviewees Malta is the first country to sponsor a football team. For the last three years, MTA ensures that the players have the visitMALTA.com logo and the Maltese Cross on their shirts. The partnership is a strategic approach to ensure a large distribution among Britons and will achieve more equitable and demographic distribution and in male audience in the main source market.

- **Cross-promotional tools:** Cooperation has been established between the MTA and various airlines to work on joint marketing

campaigns especially when new routes to Malta are launched. Cross-promotions are also done with various places and events in Germany, UK and Italy where various VIPs and tour operators are invited. "One of them is with Arena Di Verona, which is biggest opera and venues in Verona. We sponsor summer concerts every year and this goes for around 16 days".

- **Outdoor advertising:** The use of outdoor posters in Metro/Underground Stations, billboard posters and building exposure in the core markets is another tool.
- **Web portals:** The increase in use of website booking portals has been treated as an opportunity by MTA. Expedia is one of the largest travel booking portals and a place for promotions of resorts, hotels, car rental. However, MTA was the first to promote a whole destination, a country, through Expedia, which was also beneficial for the hotel and restaurant industry in Malta as well. "We were the first country in the world as a destination to actually start promoting the destination on Expedia... For three years in a row, Expedia gave us the most valued partner award at ITV and they have called us 'Pioneers' as we are the first to do that."
- **E-marketing and digital communications:** MTA created a digital asset management system online with a database of high resolution photos, images and videos of the Maltese Islands. They are available to the public and were initiated to help future travellers, tour operators and journalists. Through the website, anyone is able to download any material they need either as a souvenir or for business purposes. Additional banner exchange on certain websites is initiated by MTA as promotional tool.
- **Promotional materials:** A large number of promotional materials (such as cards, leaflets and brochures) are produced and distributed in tourist information offices, hotels, events and different sightseeing sites across the Islands.

Cooperation with private entities and organizations: Business relations and partnerships with various organizations and associations related to tourism in Malta are very important. The tourism and travel industry is a complex sector where the total experience is the product and many entities and suppliers are involved. For this complex system to function effectively it is essential for the country brand promoters to establish partnerships with the national airlines, airports, hotel and restaurants associations and tour

operators and agents. The task for the MTA has been to establish partnerships with Malta International Airport, Air Malta, the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, MHRA and FATTA.

They must ensure that there is a constant exchange of information and that departments communicate on daily basis, as well as with the representatives in the core markets in order to ensure coherency and consistency in the image and delivered product.

The strong relationships of MTA with the various private organizations, such as tour operators, travel agents, airlines and tourism and travel associations, ensures good business relations with the actors in the industry. The good business relations and partnerships with those stakeholders are beneficial in terms of promotion, joint campaigns and cooperation in various strategic practices.

Improving the brand value of Malta: image and practices in UK

With regard to the images projected in the major market, the primary data collected confirmed that the roots and reasons for the favourable image of Malta in the UK could be traced back to the history of the Islands as a former British colony, but this is not the major motivator. The image of England by the sea creates emotional connections with British people and Malta. The tourism industry in Malta developed initially when it was still part of the British Empire and the British navy was based on the island. The major consumers of Malta as a tourist destination in UK are people from the older generations who still feel the emotional and historical ties. Taking into consideration that unfortunately this is a dying generation, MTA made an attempt to approach the younger generation and people in their 20s, 30s and 40s and clear the image of retirement home by the sea where the grandparents used to go. The public relation activities undertaken by MTA and the various niche-markets identified for special interest tourism expands the image from an old people's holiday destination. However, in their attempt to expand the images of Malta and go further beyond the historical past of the Islands, MTA in their current approach towards the British public does neglect those important historic elements, which include the English-speaking nation, the historical and cultural sites related to the British colonial times and the whole atmosphere that makes Malta a

home from home destination for the British. There is still the opportunity to present Malta as a sunny England that is easily accessed by a short-haul flight, where people still feel at home and will be able to have short weekend breaks during the winter season. The historical ties with Britain could be used as an opportunity to create stronger emotional connection with the British public not only with the grey market but also with the younger generations and an advantage over the competitors is that Malta provides a homely atmosphere for the British.

The way ahead: a role for strategic public relations through country branding

The concept of country branding is not an easy task for marketing and communications practitioners, as it requires allocation of considerable resources, it takes time to be developed, lots of suppliers and actors are involved and it is not the same as promoting tourism. In this respect the Maltese authorities show a number of good practices in terms of developing Brand Malta with the relatively small amount of financial resources the country can afford to allocate to the project. However, the communication strategy is an ongoing process and possible improvements can be suggested for further developments.

- **Visual identity:** As discussed earlier, the Maltese logo lacks differentiation from the logos of Greece and Cyprus, two of the main competitors in the Mediterranean. Similar to the other two logos, Maltese emblem shows elements that could be associated with sea and sun that is an identity Malta is trying to leave behind and rebrand. The cultural association is not well recognized for the external stakeholders and potential visitors. As Kotler and Gertner (2002) suggest, good practice would be to adopt natural landmark, historical building and/or even the national emblem.

- **Internal communications with the local communities:** The adoption of internal branding ahead of the global branding is a very successful strategy. However, the strategy of MTA is only to inform the locals for their branding exercise and explain the purpose and advantages of the brand. Possible improvement could be made in the communication practices towards the local communities regardless of whether they are directly or indirectly involved in the tourism industry. Surveys, questionnaires, debates among groups, in schools and or university classrooms with students from the Tourism areas of studies and even in the local councils will be a good way to involve the local communities in the branding process, engage them in the problem and enable them to express their opinions and give feedback. The social media would also be a good way to allow local people to express their views with launching of websites or social media platforms for local people only and not for potential visitors.

- **Coherency in the image of Malta:** With the adoption of the various niche markets for presenting Malta and to increase the inflow of tourists outside the summer months, the MTA needs to create a coherent image of Malta. A strategic approach towards image of Malta as a sum of these various niche elements could be adopted. The base for the approach could be one of the brand core elements 'Diversity', and can be shown as a total experience of all these niches.

- **The International Media Relations Programme** is a successful approach for generating press coverage and most importantly gaining credibility. Similar activities could be initiated with representatives from tourism and travel institutes and representatives from various associations and local councils that MTA works with. Especially with the development of the MICE segment that includes meetings and conferences, the invitations of high profile figures and opinion leaders in Malta will generate extra press coverage. Inviting the team of the Sheffield United to spend a number of training days in the Islands could also be used in a number of occasions.

- With regards to the **image in the UK**, the communication strategy could include elements from the historical past of Malta as a colony of the British Empire. Malta could be presented as a home from home destination or sunny England with an aim to promote the British heritage left in the Maltese Islands and create emotional connection with the British and to make them feel welcome and at home.

This research had the aim to illustrate the importance of the concept of branding in relation to countries and nations, more specifically in terms of branding a country as a tourism destination. It has explored the role of branding and use of public relations

and corporate communications as a strategic approach to develop a strong country brand. Every country has its identity and reputation and with the development of the nation brand, the country could prosper further, gain competitive advantage and improve its overall economy. The process of developing the image and market position of a country requires integrated marketing and communication strategies and approaches in order to achieve a strong coherent image in order to stand out in the international stage.

In the case of Malta as a small island state which is highly dependent economically on tourism, the concept of country branding is essential for its global strategy. With the country's historic development as a former British colony which became an independent state, and with developments in the tourism industry in other states in the Mediterranean basin providing direct competition, the state of Malta is facing the challenge to find a new course of direction for tourism and the need to improve its image overseas.

The research elaborated on the major challenges facing the Malta Tourism Authority, as the country's main brand promoter, to make a shift in the approach to presenting Malta, to build and retain the brand name, to reposition the image and to adopt a proactive communications approach in promoting the country to the international market. Greater emphases have been given to the British market as the major recipient of Malta's image as a tourism destination. Following the developments of the tourism industry in Malta, it can be concluded that the MTA has succeeded in adopting a coherent approach in their branding strategy.

Establishing a clear brand platform for universal use in the promotional activities and maintaining and developing the brand platform on behalf of Malta has been successfully applied.

The investigation has explored the main reconstructions and maintenance of the image undertaken. There are still challenges of differentiation from competitors, communication to the target audiences and market segmentation to achieve. However, appropriate communications strategies and tactics have been developed as part of a total tourism development strategy.

Clearly the policy MTA has adopted shows improvements in the brand image of the country and more proactive approaches towards the main markets, by maintaining strategic partnerships with various actors in the industry and reinforcing further developments and local participation.

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