

## **IMAGE BUILDING STRATEGY ON THE EXAMPLE OF SELECTED POLISH REGIONS**

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**Key words:** image, identity, image building strategy, region, regional development.

### **A b s t r a c t**

The objective of this study was to identify and evaluate image building strategies in selected Polish regions. A mail questionnaire survey was carried out in 2013 in the regions of Pomorze (Pomerania), Pomorze Zachodnie (West Pomerania), Małopolska (Lesser Poland), Podkarpacie (Subcarpathia), Warmia and Mazury (Warmia and Masuria), and Podlasie. The importance of image building strategies is widely recognized by the local authorities, but most strategies are implemented on a short-term or medium-term basis. Image building strategies are often regarded as auxiliary measures that contribute to the achievement of strategic development goals. In the analyzed regions, image building is often reduced to strictly promotional measures. The relevant strategies focus on too many landmarks of regional identity, which detracts from their effectiveness. An absence of regular market surveys and evaluations also contributes to the weakness of regional image building strategies.

## **STRATEGIA KSZTAŁTOWANIA WIZERUNKU REGIONU NA PRZYKŁADZIE WYBRANYCH REGIONÓW POLSKI**

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**Słowa kluczowe:** wizerunek, tożsamość, strategia kształtowania wizerunku, region, rozwój regionalny.

### **A b s t r a k t**

Celem opracowania było zidentyfikowanie i ocena strategii tożsamości realizowanych w wybranych regionach Polski. Ankiety pocztową przeprowadzono w 2013 roku w województwach: pomorskim, zachodniopomorskim, małopolskim, podkarpackim, warmińsko-mazurskim oraz podlaskim.

Zauważono, że problem budowania pożądanego wizerunku regionu jest ważny w opinii przedstawicieli władz regionu, najczęściej jednak ma charakter krótko- lub średniookresowy. Strategia tożsamości często jest określana jako strategia pomocnicza w stosunku do innych strategicznych celów sformułowanych w strategii rozwoju. Zaobserwowano, że kształtowanie wizerunku regionu często sprowadza się do jego promocji. Problemem jest też to, że strategia kształtowania wizerunku koncentruje się na zbyt wielu wyróżnikach tożsamości regionu. Brak systematyczności w badaniu i ocenie rynku także nie sprzyja skuteczności strategii tożsamości realizowanych w regionach.

## Introduction

Recent years have witnessed growing awareness among businesses that their development is determined not only by material factors. Businesses are increasingly likely to recognize the importance of knowledge, potential, brand strength and image in their evolution. Similarly to businesses, local authorities are faced with the need to build their competitive advantage at the municipal, urban and regional level. This study analyzes image building strategies implemented at the regional level. It makes the assumption that a positive image is an intangible asset that can contribute to a region's development and competitive strength. Regional development is defined as a process of positive changes that increase production, employment, volume of investments, equity participation, incomes, consumption and other economic indicators. Regional growth also promotes social progress and the accompanying qualitative changes, including technical and technological progress, optimization of domestic and international ties, improvement in labor force qualifications, changes in economic structure that contribute to modernization, improvement in microeconomic and macroeconomic flexibility, emergence of new products and improvement in the quality of currently manufactured products (HADYŃSKI 2011, p. 9). Regions with a greater competitive advantage attract more investors, residents and tourists, which stimulates the domestic market, the service sector and infrastructure investments, thus contributing to the region's social and economic development. The benefits that follow from a strong competitive advantage are increasingly often recognized by local authorities who make conscious efforts to build a positive image of the region. An image is a cognitive concept that encompasses the recipient's subjective impressions, knowledge, opinions, judgments and emotions associated with a given object, such as a region (FLOREK 2013, p. 94). An image is composed of cognitive (knowledge about the region), emotional (feelings and impressions associated with the region) and behavioral components (propensity to engage in specific types of behavior towards the region). Regional identity is a set of characteristic features that contribute to a region's uniqueness and are manifested by various measures that are initiated locally to impart distinctive

qualities to a region (ŁUCZAK 2000, p. 48). Identity is the desired perception of a territorial unit, which is shaped through attitudes, behaviors and visual elements, whereas an image is the actual expression of identity as perceived by the recipients (SZWAJCA 2009, p. 30). In literature, image building strategies are often referred to as identity management strategies. A strategy is a set of assumptions and measures that contribute to the development, reinforcement and modification of a city's identity and market perception (ALTKORN 2002, p. 35).

## **Materials and Methods**

In this study, a mail questionnaire survey was carried out to identify and evaluate identity management strategies in selected Polish regions. A questionnaire survey was selected as the most effective way of collecting qualitative data. The deployed survey method has other advantages, including:

- the questionnaire can address a variety of issues,
- complex and badly phrased responses can be analyzed at a later date,
- questionnaire surveys are an inexpensive and fast method of gathering data (in comparison with in-depth interviews that had been initially planned in this study).

Questionnaires also have several disadvantages, the major ones being the subjective character of responses and difficulties with unambiguous and correct quantification of the evaluated parameters. The subjective nature of responses cannot be completely eliminated, but attempts were made to improve their reliability by mailing questionnaires to competent employees of regional marshal's offices and encouraging them during telephone communication to express their opinions in an honest and objective manner.

The aim of the survey was to evaluate regional image building strategies. Questionnaires were mailed to selected (most competent) employees of marshal's offices in all Polish regions (structured questionnaires were mailed to 16 marshal's office employees). Completed questionnaires were returned by the regions of Pomorze (Pomerania), Pomorze Zachodnie (West Pomerania), Małopolska (Lesser Poland), Podkarpacie (Subcarpathia), Warmia and Mazury (Warmia and Masuria), and Podlasie. The response rate was only 37.5%, therefore, the results were not generalized, and the six regions that responded to the survey were regarded as representative of the entire population. The survey was expanded to include an analysis of secondary data and observations. Data posted on the websites of the offices were analyzed. The survey was carried out in 2013. Its results will pave the way for further analyses and more in-depth surveys in the future.

## Identity management strategies in the analyzed regions

In the first question, the respondents were asked whether their respective regions implement identity management strategies and develop plans for building a positive image of the region. Four of the analyzed regions had implemented such strategies (Podkarpacie, Małopolska, Warmia and Mazury, and Podlasie). Those strategies have a clearly defined goal, which is to build a positive image of the region, select landmarks of identity, and plan instruments and measures that contribute to the achievement of those objectives. Two regions (Pomorze and Pomorze Zachodnie) implement measures that are oriented towards image building, but according to the respondents, those activities do not constitute a coherent strategies. The importance of image building is recognized in all regions, and none of the respondents chose the answer that image building measures had never been initiated in their region.

The second question addressed the planning period. In most of the analyzed cases, image building strategies were implemented on a short-term or medium-term basis. Long-term image-building campaigns were initiated only by the Region of Warmia and Mazury and the Region of Małopolska. An identity management strategy should be accompanied by a long planning period because an image is an intangible asset that cannot be developed within a short period of time. A region's image is linked with its historical heritage that has been shaped throughout the centuries, and it cannot be transformed in the short term. In view of the slow process of cultural evolution, the recommended 10-year planning period also seems to be insufficient. Image building is a goal that can requires long-term planning. Short-term, provisional measures may be adopted at the operational level (and they often obscure the significance of the problem), but if a strategy is understood as a plan for building a positive image of a region, it has to be a long-term process.

The successive question explored the significance of identity management in the surveyed regions' development strategies.

Every entity implements a single global strategy, which is sometimes referred to as the basic strategy (*Rozwój przedsiębiorstw...* 2002, p. 212). Sub-strategies addressing various areas of activity as well as functional, operational and instrumental strategies can be formulated as part of the global strategy. Strategies differ in their reach, tasks, resource allocation, sources of competitive advantage and decision-making areas (OBREBALSKI 1998, p. 20).

The aim of the global (general, dominant, basic) strategy is to find the most effective means of achieving the goals indicated in the mission statement. Above all, a global strategy involves:

- selection of activity areas, and

– acquisition of resources and resource allocation to various types of activities.

At the highest level, strategic problems are solved by the authorities, and they are referred to as issues in development policy. Second-level strategies communicate directions for action to different organizational units, such as departments, branches, agencies and institutes. Business area strategies are developed for various types of business activity, and they propose operating standards for different market segments or market areas.

Functional strategies:

– determine the manner in which a given function will contribute to the achievement of competitive advantage (by defining the principles on which the function will be implemented),

– integrate and coordinate a given function with other functions.

Operational strategies describe the detailed goals of departments and other organizational units and set the directions for action for units performing partial strategies. Instrumental strategies occupy the lowest level in the hierarchy. They relate to specific instruments that are used in the process of implementing operational strategies<sup>1</sup>. The discussed sub-strategies are an integral part of the development strategy. For this reason, all sub-strategies should be fully cohesive.

A region's identity management strategy is a functional strategy, and its role in the development strategy is differently defined in the literature. Identity management can be a regional function or a concept deployed by the authorities in the process of managing a region (*Strategie marketingowe*. 2004, p. 38). In line with the above definition, those strategies differ in the character and scope of identity management instruments and the manner of resource allocation at different levels of regional management. In the first approach, an identity management strategy belongs to the category of functional strategies, which also include marketing, financial, investment and human resource strategies. This approach is most often cited in the literature. In this study, regional identity management and image building were regarded not only as functions (methods of achieving specific goals in a given market segment), but management concepts that are deployed by regional authorities. An identity management strategy entails both operational and strategic components. It should not be governed by a predefined regional development strategy, instead, it should set the tone of the global strategy. In regions that are keen on

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<sup>1</sup> Various approaches are adopted in the literature. Several authors have proposed an additional level that accounts for the process of adaptation to strategy requirements (BANASZYK et al. 1997, p. 43). Some authors reduce the number of hierarchy levels to the basic strategy, business area strategy and functional strategies (PENC-PIETRZAK 1998, p. 140, STABRYŁA 2000, p. 54, PIERŚCIONEK 1998, p. 78, *Rozwój przedsiębiorstw. Modele, czynniki, strategię*. 2002, p. 212), whereas others disregard functional strategies (STEINMANN, SCHREYOGG 1995, p. 82).

actively building a positive image, image building will be a priority goal of their development strategies. In line with this approach, identity management and image building should be prioritized at every level of strategic planning in a region. The services responsible for identity management should participate in the process of formulating strategic goals and the final development strategy. This is a strategic consideration in managing regional identity, and in the literature, the emphasis is generally placed on operational and instrumental aspects of the process. If identity management were to be classified as a function, it would not relate to the entire process of regional development, but only its fragments. Image building activities should be incorporated in all regional activities, therefore, the resulting identity management strategy should also address the region as a whole. The main goal of building a positive image of a region should be taken into account in the regional development strategy (mission, strategic goals). All business area strategies should strive to achieve that goal. Functional strategies should propose methods for attaining that goal and indicate instruments and tools that facilitate identity management in every area of activity (various instrumental strategies).

An analysis of correlations between identity management and the regional development strategy reveals the presence of feedback between strategy, regional identity and image. The development strategy is a carrier of regional identity, and it shapes a region's image. Regional identity should also determine the choice of a development strategy and strategic directions. Strategies that run counter to a region's identity and desired image undermine the reliability of those assets, whereas conforming strategies reinforce local identity and positive image.

The attitudes towards the discussed problem in the six analyzed Polish regions are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

The role of an image building strategy in a region's development strategy

| Responses  | Regions  |
|--|--|
| A positive image drives the entire regional development strategy   | Podlasie, Warmia and Mazury (Warmia and Masuria)   |
| Identity management strategies are auxiliary measures that contribute to the achievement of goals formulated in the development strategy | Podkarpackie (Subcarpathia), Pomorze (Pomerania), Małopolska (Lesser Poland), Pomorze Zachodnie (West Pomerania) |
| Image building is often reduced to strictly promotional measures   | Małopolska (Lesser Poland)   |
| Image building is not a part of the region's development strategy and the relevant measures are implemented separately                   | –  |

Source: own elaboration based on survey results.

In the majority of the evaluated regions, identity management strategies are often regarded as auxiliary measures that contribute to the achievement of strategic goals (66,67% of the respondents). An identity management strategy is of functional significance – it promotes the achievement of the main goal, which is to build a positive image of a region. In the Region of Podlasie and the Region of Warmia and Mazury, the attainment of the above goal has a strategic dimension, which seems to be the most effective approach.

An effective identity management strategy (*Rozwój miast i zarządzanie...* 2004, p. 486):

- should be developed in a collaborative process involving the key local actors,
- should be cohesive and coherent,
- should meet the present and future needs of the local community,
- should be adequate to the available resources,
- should deliver a satisfactory level of risk management, which is determined by key resources and determines the success of the implemented strategy,
- should be far-reaching,
- should be realistic.

The above issues should be addressed by the competent staff members (units, departments, agencies) (Table 2).

Table 2

Organizational units responsible for image building in marshal's offices

| Region                                 | Organizational unit in marshal's office         |
|--|---|
| Podlasie                               | Department of Foreign Cooperation and Promotion |
| Podkarpacie (Subcarpathia)             | Department of Promotion and Tourism             |
| Pomorze (Pomerania)                    | Department of Regional Promotion                |
| Małopolska (Lesser Poland)             | Department of Tourism, Sports and Promotion     |
| Warmia and Mazury (Warmia and Masuria) | Promotion Coordinating Department               |
| Pomorze Zachodnie (West Pomerania)     | Department of Tourism, Economy and Promotion    |

Source: own elaboration based on survey results.

In every marshal's office, the image building function is assigned to a department responsible for regional promotion, which seems to suggest that image building is reduced to promotional measures in practice. In an ideal scenario, identity management should not constitute the responsibility of a single organizational unit because positive image building should be a priority at every level of regional management and in every area of activity.

The respondents were asked to describe and evaluate the respective regions' strategic goals (Table 3).

Strategic goals in the analyzed regions

Table 3

| Goals  | Average score |
|--|---------------|
| To increase the region's competitive advantage                               | 4.0           |
| To improve the regional transport network                                    | 3.4           |
| To improve the regional transport network                                    | 3.2           |
| To improve living standards in the region                                    | 3.2           |
| To give support to less developed areas                                      | 2.8           |
| To foster regional cooperation and participation in the EU's regional policy | 1.8           |

Source: own elaboration based on survey results.

Goals were evaluated on a scale of 1 to 5, where: 1 – insignificant goal, 5 – the most important goal

The surveyed subjects evaluated the identified goals subjectively with reference to the relevant provisions of regional development strategies. The achievement of competitive advantage was the highest rated goal. The respondents declared that regional authorities assist local businesses in strengthening their competitive advantage, actively search for investors, promote local goods and services and provide business-support services. The second most important goal was to improve the regional transport network. The following priority was to raise the local standards of living, which, in the respondents' opinion, requires improvements in:

- education,
- availability of health care services,
- availability of housing,
- public security and welfare,
- culture and entertainment products.

Positive image building in various market segments scored an average of 3.2 points, which indicates that image building is an important goal in regional strategies. Image building was regarded as a strategic goal only in the Region of Małopolska. The respondents underlined the significance of:

- visual identification systems that are being developed in all regions. Most regions have unique logos and other visual elements that emphasize their distinctive features,
- effectiveness of communication,
- measures that promote positive attitudes towards regional development,
- improved regional identity and social cohesion.

Other goals that were identified, but not evaluated, included tourism promotion, job market improvement, energy security, higher level of civic



engagement, improved quantity and quality of network connections, higher level of innovation and management effectiveness, improved spatial competitiveness and nature conservation.

According to the respondents, various image building strategies should be addressed to different market segments. Image building strategies promoting a highly complex product – a region – should be based on market segmentation, which requires research in various market areas (Table 4).

Table 4

Consumer needs assessments in the analyzed regions

| Responses                              | Region   |
|--|--|
| Assessments are performed regularly    | Małopolska (Lesser Poland), Warmia and Mazury (Warmia and Masuria), Pomorze Zachodnie (West Pomerania) |
| Assessments are performed sporadically | Podlasie, Podkarpacie (Subcarpathia), Pomorze (Pomerania)  |
| Assessments are not performed          | –  |

Source: own elaboration based on survey results.

Market segment research is conducted by all of the analyzed regions, but in some regions, the relevant measures are carried out sporadically. The market is a dynamic structure, and consumer needs change rapidly, therefore, measures that are based on a past diagnosis of consumer expectations will not necessarily deliver the anticipated outcomes in the future. In the analyzed regions, consumer needs assessments involve mostly local residents and tourists. They are not addressed to businesses, prospective investors, students or other social groups.

The effectiveness of an image building strategy is largely influenced by the choice of landmarks of regional identity. The respondents were asked to indicate the attributes that are most emphasized in image building strategies (Table 5).

The listed landmarks of regional identity generally lack originality and weakly accentuate a region's unique character. Most respondents cited much overused slogans that did not impart distinctive qualities to their regions. The observed lack of originality could lower the effectiveness of identity management strategies. An excessive number of distinguishing features of regional identity also poses a problem. Podkarpacie was the only region where the discussed strategy is based on a single landmark of identity. In the remaining regions, the strategy is developed in view of several, most important features. In the Region of Pomorze Zachodnie, the general trend is to incorporate the highest possible number of attributes in the image building strategy to emphasize all of the region's strengths. The respondents did not recognize

Table 5

## Landmarks of regional identity

| Region                                 | Landmarks of identity  |
|--|--|
| Podlasie                               | Cultural heritage, investment opportunities  |
| Podkarpace (Subcarpathia)              | A well-developed network of tourist facilities, investment opportunities, high standards of living               |
| Pomorze (Pomerania)                    | Cultural heritage, attractive location, investment opportunities   |
| Małopolska (Lesser Poland)             | Cultural heritage, attractive location, a well-developed network of tourist facilities, investment opportunities |
| Warmia and Mazury (Warmia and Masuria) | Investment opportunities, high standards of living, attractive location  |
| Pomorze Zachodnie (West Pomerania)     | A well-developed network of tourist facilities, investment opportunities, attractive location                    |

Source: own elaboration based on survey results.

the importance of attributes that testify to their regions' uniqueness. Their strategies lack originality and individuality, the undertaken measures are similar and fail to bring out the region's unique qualities. They are also easy to emulate, which further obliterates the differences in the perception of various regions. A well-planned identity management strategy should underline and reinforce the unique character of a region. The above problems decrease the effectiveness of image building strategies at the regional level. The vision statement of the Region of Małopolska says: „We want the Region of Małopolska to be an attractive place to live, work and enjoy life, a European region of knowledge and activity with strong universal values, regional identity and aspirations, a region that draws upon its heritage and resources and creates multiple opportunities for human and economic development” (Development Strategy of the Region of Małopolska 2011–2020). Similar strategic goals have been formulated, albeit in different words, by other regions, and none of them were able to identify distinguishing features that would increase the effectiveness of image building strategies.

## Conclusions

The objective of this study was to identify and evaluate image building strategies in selected Polish regions. A questionnaire survey was carried out in the regions of Pomorze, Pomorze Zachodnie, Małopolska, Podkarpace, Warmia and Mazury, and Podlasie. The results indicate that:

1. The importance of building a positive image of a region is widely recognized, but not all of the analyzed regions consider it a strategic goal.

2. In most regions, identity management strategies are implemented on a short-term or medium-term basis. Only long-term strategies can contribute to positive perceptions of a region.

3. In the majority of the evaluated regions, identity management strategies are regarded as auxiliary measures that contribute to the achievement of strategic goals (functional significance). In two regions, the attainment of the above goal has a strategic dimension, which seems to be the most effective approach.

4. In the analyzed regions, image building is often reduced to strictly promotional measures. The image building function is assigned to departments responsible for regional promotion.

5. The achievement of competitive advantage was the highest rated goal. Building a positive image of a region in various market segment was regarded as an important goal in regional development strategies.

6. Market segmentation and regular consumer needs assessments are important elements of an image building strategy. Market segment research is conducted in all of the analyzed regions, but only sporadically, which could lower the effectiveness of image building strategies due to rapidly changing consumer expectations.

7. In the analyzed regions, image building strategies focus on several, most important landmarks of identity. The selected features lack originality, and the resulting strategies fail to bring out the region's unique qualities, thus reducing the effectiveness of regional image building strategies.

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