

Experience Marketing As an Accelerator of Customer Satisfaction on the Sport Tourism Market

Zygmunt Waśkowski

*Poznan University of Economics and Business, Faculty of Management, Poland
z.waskowski@ue.poznan.pl*

Sport events are a driving force of the sport tourism market. The way they are organized as well as their attractiveness have a significant influence on the number of participants, therefore the organizers look for solutions that will ensure the highest attendance possible. The concept of experience marketing is a popular one and perfectly fits the needs arising from the management of sport events. Thanks to this concept the organizers can offer tourists what they seek most: emotions and experience. This article describes how the concept of experience marketing is used by the organizers of international marathon runs. The conducted research made it possible to establish that this concept is widely applied and the marketing tools used are numerous. On the basis of a detailed problem analysis, a model of managing sports events with the application of experience marketing was developed. The model distinguishes three phases of organizing a run: before, during, and after the event.

Keywords: experience marketing, sports tourism, sports events, marathons

Introduction

Regardless of the market development stage, the participants that constitute its supply must constantly compete with each other to meet the increasing needs of customers. The sport tourism market, analysed in this article, is currently going through the phase of dynamic development. For several decades, it has been the source of significant revenue for many countries, both developed and developing ones.

Sport events with thousands, even tens of thousands of participants are an important part of the sport tourism market. Marathon runs, which this article focuses on, is one example of such events. The participants of marathon runs and the people who accompany them, who come from places far from the run venue, are active or passive sports tourists and, as customers, have specific needs and expectations (Wicker, Hallmann, & James, 2012, pp. 165–182). Buyer satisfaction and pleasure is the key to success for the sports

event organizers on the sports tourism market as well as on any other market. One of the concepts that can contribute to the increase of satisfaction is experience marketing, which has been developing for about two decades (Palmer, 2010, pp. 196–208; Schmitt, 2010, pp. 62–64). As its underlying assumption is to provide experience, trigger positive emotions and impressions, it seems to be a perfect competitive tool on the sports event market. Especially given that sport events, seen as a marketing product, are co-produced by their participants: the sportspeople and the supporters. As prosumers, they have a significant influence on the event attractiveness and its ability to fulfil the observed needs.

The aim of this article is to diagnose the potential and the possibilities of the concept of experience marketing on the sports tourism market and to identify the actions undertaken by the organizers of marathon runs as a part of implementing the aforementioned

concept. To realize the set goals, a detailed literature study was conducted. The results of the author of this paper's own research and available data on the sports market were also used.

Experience Marketing

The concept of experience marketing (other names used in the literature: experience economy, customer experience management) assumes that building relations between an enterprise and its customers based on emotions triggered by experiences that are important to them, acquired in the process of collaboration and consumption (Sundbo & Sorensen, 2013, p. 12; Pine & Gilmore, 1998). The creation of the experience-based economy was a result of changes and trends. The following are among the most important ones:

1. Developing consumerism, resulting in increasing customer demand concerning the form of the purchased products and the places where the products are offered, purchased and consumed;
2. Increasing, but also the levelling-off quality of the offered products and services (commoditization), resulting in the customers being unable to see the difference between these products. The enterprises lose their possibilities to create competitive advantage based solely on technology, product range, or image;
3. The increase in the demand of the customer looking for new values in spiritual or emotional spheres, not explored or insufficiently penetrated by enterprises thus far;
4. Mutual marketing communication becomes more common, which allows customers to state their expectations and desires directly, and the enterprises to personalize their messages;
5. Developing the need for rapid communication, most importantly through social media, and for sharing information (in extreme cases turning into customer exhibitionism).

A detailed analysis of the problem of building relations in the emotional sphere leads to the conclusion that the possibilities and scope of the experience marketing concept applications are not uniform, and the concept efficiency depends on many factors, e.g. on

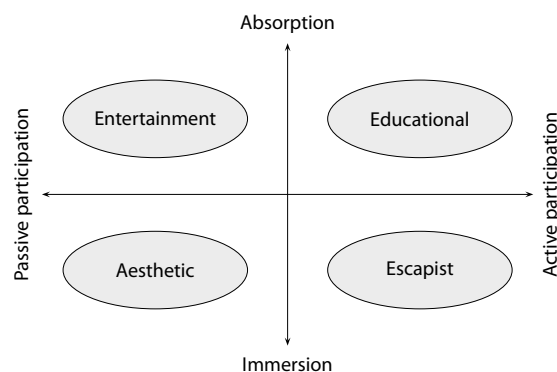


Figure 1 Types of Experiences (adapted from Pine & Gilmore, 1998)

the possibility of including the buyers in the process, among others.

The literature shows different divisions of customer experience. Pine and Gilmore presented an interesting division, taking into account the level of absorption or immersion and active or passive participation; they named four types of experience (Figure 1).

Experience marketing efficiency increases when customers reach a high level of immersion, and when they need to participate actively. This situation can be encountered in the sport or sport tourism markets, among others. With lower involvement and a passive approach, the strength and time of the experience are significantly lower.

The change of customer market behaviour, the constant search for something new, something more involving, absorbing, emotional and, additionally, for technological development, accessibility and that possibilities of so-called new media are the factors that make experience marketing noticeable and used by various enterprises regardless of the industry and products offered (Hoyle, 2002, pp. 171–174). However, as previous observations show, the greatest chances of succeeding in implementing the aforementioned concept are attributed to the projects in which both the suppliers and customers are directly involved in the creation and exchange processes, and the product consumption takes place in the open and is highly emotional (Mallen & Adams, 2013, pp. 3–6). Such conditions are created by the sports event market, which is a part of a widely-defined leisure time industry.

Sport Tourism Market

The tourism industry has visibly diversified in the last two decades, turning into a structure of many specifically profiled forms of leisure. One of the most dynamically developing types of tourism is sport tourism, which generates a significant share of this branch income. It is estimated that the total turnover from sport tourism in the USA alone amounts to almost 30 billion dollars each year (Greenwell, Danzey-Bussell, & Shonk, 2014, p. 9). According to Pitts (1999, pp. 31–50), a sports marketing specialist, two types of sports tourists and, related to them, types of tourism: active sports tourism and passive sports tourism, play a key role in the development of the global sports market. In contrast, Derry, Jago, and Fredline (2004) believe that what drives the sports tourism industry are more and more frequently organized mass sports events, especially those in which visitors can participate actively. This criterion is met by, among others, marathon runs. The biggest ones attract tens of thousands of participants. Moreover, according to various research, one person participating in a marathon run is accompanied by, on average, one or two people who support the runner. Gammon and Robinson call those who participate in marathon runs 'strong marathon tourists,' while those who accompany them 'soft marathon tourists' (Gammon & Robinson, 1997, pp. 1–6). According to Miller and Kelli (2008), each year, more than eight million runners around the world finish a marathon run.

Even though sports tourism is developing dynamically, the sports event organizers continuously look for new concepts and marketing solutions to fulfil the growing expectations of their customers (Police Executive Research Forum, 2011). One of the relatively new solutions, which positively surprises the sport tourists, is the concept of experience marketing. Nowadays providing the customers with emotions, regardless of the industry, becomes a strategic success factor. Modern customers less and less frequently ask themselves: 'What do I want?' and 'What don't I already have?' But more frequently they ask: 'What do I want to experience?' and 'What haven't I already experienced?'

The concept of experience marketing assumes building the relationship between an organization and its

customers on the basis of emotions induced by experience significant to the customers, emotions connected with the process of collaboration and consumption. The sport event market as well as the sports tourism industry related to it, are perfect to be used in competition because the sport event participants are an integral part of these events, they help create the atmosphere (they are prosumers) and have a direct influence on the event value in the opinion of customers (Greenwell et al., 2014, pp. 115–116). Therefore, even though the global sports tourism market is developing, the concept of experience marketing can be an accelerator of customer satisfaction.

Research Problem and Methodology

Sport events for amateurs, seen as a marketing product, should be organized mainly with runners' needs in mind (Hoyle, 2002, pp. 18–19). Numerous studies on this problem have already been conducted, and their results allow for a rather detailed diagnosis of recreational runners' expectations. However, similarly to other industries, running event organizers, while competing, need to constantly look for new solutions in order to surprise their customers in a positive way, attract their attention and gain acceptance. One of the marketing activities with a strategic meaning for the competitive success of these entities can be the implementation of the concept of experience marketing. The correct implementation of the strategy of developing a running event can not only attract runner's attention; they are the organizer's potential customers, and they can be encouraged to participate, but it can also turn them into so-called advocates (supporters) of the brand who will recommend the run to other runners. Therefore, marketing activities of the marathon run organizers related to the concept of experience marketing and the behaviours of marathon runners connected to their participation in a specific run became a research problem for the author of this article. The study is to:

- identify the activities based on the concept of experience marketing, used by the organizers of international marathon runs,
- identify the runners' motives for participating in

marathon runs organized away from their place of living.

Before the research commenced, three hypotheses were stated:

- H1 *The concept of experience marketing is a widely used method of encouraging the runners to participate in a marathon.*
- H2 *Emotional factors rather than rational factors influence the marathon run attractiveness.*
- H3 *The hedonistic approach of the runners' determines their decision to choose a marathon run in which to participate.*

The research methodology was adjusted to verify the aforementioned hypotheses and to realize the set goals. The following research methods were used:

1. *Participating observation.* Research conducted in 2010–2016 in 8 European countries that annually host marathons of recognized reputation on the sport market (Germany, France, Great Britain, The Netherlands, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Austria, Poland). The scope of observation was the marketing activities of organizers of nine biggest marathons or one of the biggest marathon runs in the aforementioned countries.
2. *Questionnaire.* The research conducted in 2014 in Poland with the use of the CAWI method; conducted among marathon runners (1,993 randomly chosen respondents).
3. *Individual Deepened Interviews.* Research conducted in 2015 among 12 Polish marathon runners that regularly participate in foreign marathon runs.
4. *Analysis of information from secondary sources,* mainly reports and statistics published by marathon organizers after each run, information and messages published on marathon websites, reports with research results concerning the running market in the USA, Great Britain, and Poland.

The methods used and the timespan of research made triangulation possible, therefore increasing the credibility of the results.

Activities of Running Event Organizers Based on the Experience Marketing Concept

In the course of the nine participant observations, several marketing activities, which result from the analysed concept of this article, were identified. Marathon organizers compete with each other and attempt to win marathoners' approval. They use different marketing tools, most of them are to capture runners' imagination and to be a promise of a fascinating adventure that could encourage someone to participate in the advertised event.

One of the key elements of building the competitive advantage of a marathon is the sports arena that is the venue for the run. In the case of marathons, the course of the run plays the role of the arena, right from the start to the finish line. The organizers do their best to organize the course so that the runners go through beautiful tourist attractions of the city hosting the run. The majority of runners sees the run as a way of sight-seeing, so the more interesting historical places and buildings can be seen on the course, the better for the event it is.

Of the marathons observed, the most beautiful courses were found in the runs with the highest numbers of participants: London, Paris, and Berlin. Fewer tourist attractions along the course can be found in cities, such as Kosice, Prague, Frankfurt, and Poznan, which translates into a lower number of runners participating. The start and finish lines are the most important parts of the marathon courses. Not only should they have a suitable capacity for letting people through, but also be of emotional meaning both to the runners and the supporters. Some examples of well-selected start/finish lines are the following: Old Market Square (Prague), Olympic Stadium (Amsterdam), Champs-Élysées and the Triumphal Arc (Paris), and Brandenburg Gate (Berlin). These choices are not random; each of these places is distinctly beautiful, has its own history and is easily memorable to the tourists that visit it, not only the sports ones.

A complementary tool that influences the runners and supporters emotionally, used by the marathon organizers, is music played during the event. Music is played before the start, during the finish, but also on the course. The runners are informed about it long be-

fore the event. Music is both a form of support, and it makes the event more attractive and helps create a cheerful atmosphere among its participants.

To increase the prestige of their events, the organizers of international marathons tend to invite professional runners, the so-called elite, to participate in their runs. The declaration of participation made my recognized famous marathoners encourages other amateurs to participate in the same run so that they can directly compete with their idols, whom they know only from TV. To run together with such celebrities such as Mo Farah, Heile Gebrselassie, or Kenenisa Bekele is an extraordinary experience for thousands of amateurs.

Photos of the runners taken by the authorized photographers on the course are a standard element of a tourist product like a marathon run. A few days after the event, under their marathon number, each marathoner can find their photos on the event website and purchase them. In recent years, organizers have also started to offer short video recordings, in which the participant can see themselves running.

Various forms of final results presentation are yet another tool used by experience marketing and applied during marathon runs. Not only do they develop very dynamically but they are also a tool to compete successfully. Examples of this include finishing time, 5 km lap times, average running speed on different distances, the number of other runners overtaken on different distances, the runner's position compared to the elite runners, etc.

Further encouragement attracting the runners are the supporting events such as sport equipment, healthy food and medical product fairs; lectures given by experts; meetings with famous athletes; music concerts; other sport presentations, gadgets designed for the current run; games and contests for the supporters.

The observations over the years and the research findings were to be verified during the Individual Deepened Interviews conducted with twelve experienced marathoners. All interviewed runners agreed that the concept of experience marketing is widely implemented by the marathon organizers, especially the international ones. According to those interviewed, capturing imagination is the main way of attracting

runners to a sports event. Providing emotions during the event means fulfilling the promises made, and souvenirs such as medals, special t-shirts, certificates, and photos are a way of making the event memorable. According to the interviewed marathoners, the organizers continually improve the marketing tools they use: for example, the presentation of the results and videos from the course. Moreover, they also attempt to introduce innovations such as holding a lottery with expensive prizes (cars, a starting package for prestigious marathons), organizing competitions for the supporters, additional runs or virtual participation in the marathon (Prague).

It should be noted that most of the identified and presented above tools of experience marketing are used by the organizers of all observed marathon events. Each of the activities is done in a slightly different way and in a different place; therefore, they are all distinctive, which makes them exceptional. The use of several experience marketing tools makes it possible to create a unique formula of each running event. It is up to the runners to decide which offer meets their expectations, which one causes more emotions and provides more experience.

Motives to Participate in and Recommend Marathon Run

The questionnaire survey conducted in 2014 on a group of nearly two thousand marathoners from Poland was to determine the importance of emotions and experience as a factor in purchase decisions taken by sports tourists.

Table 1 presents the structure of responses to the question about motives that drive Polish marathoners to decide to participate in a 42.195 km run. It can be seen that three motives are more frequent than others: the will to check one's capabilities, the distance from the place of living, and the atmosphere promised by the organizer. The last motive should be mainly considered by the organizers attempting to implement experience marketing tools. For the majority of the respondents the most important factors that determine the marathon they choose to participate in, is the unforgettable experience connected with the place, the expected emotional impressions before, during and af-

Table 1 Motives to Participate in a Marathon Run

Reason	%
Will to check one's capabilities	60.0
Distance from the place of living	55.8
'Magic of a marathon'	47.7
Encouraging promotion of the run	17.6
Large number of participants	17.1
Friends' suggestions	16.2
Low participation fee	14.6
Other	10.6

Notes The respondents could choose more than one answer

Table 2 Reasons to Recommend a Marathon to Other Runners

Reason	%
Event's atmosphere	78.8
Organization's efficiency	74.2
Support on the course	54.2
Large number of participants	42.5
Starter pack	26.5
Fast and flat course	23.1
Supporting events and attractions	23.0
Facility	14.3
Other	3.6

Notes The respondents could choose more than one answer

ter the run, being a part of a community of thousands of the people who share the same interests and passions and the recommendations of other runners.

An even greater importance of tools and activities resulting from experience marketing was observed in the question about the reasons to recommend a marathon to other runners. As Table 2 presents, the most important reasons to recommend a sports event are those connected with the emotions of the runners.

The atmosphere of a sports event is the most often frequently argument that results in the event receiving a high grade and in recommending it to other people. Half the respondents said that support on the course was necessary, both the one organized offi-

cially (e.g. music bands, dancing cheerleaders, organized school groups) and the spontaneous one, by the citizens standing along the course and encouraging the runners to compete. Almost one in four runners would recommend an event because of various accompanying events and attractions. There are, for example, sport equipment fairs, music concerts, and photo exhibitions. The aforementioned examples testify to the crucial role of runners' emotions and how they perceive the event and whether they would recommend it. It is noteworthy that many respondents mentioned the functionality of marathon organization. Arriving at an unknown city and participating in a run means dealing with a few minor obstacles, such as finding the run's office, picking up the start number and the starting package, going to the orientation dinner (pasta party), and on the marathon's day: leaving some of the sportswear in the cloakroom, finding the correct zone at the starting line, collecting the sportswear after the run and the like. The efficient organization and lack of problems are not connected with any particular positive emotions; however, organizational chaos, lack of information and the like can cause very strong negative emotions, thus lowering the eagerness to recommend the event.

The research findings confirm the substantial importance of the experience marketing concept on the sports tourism market. Marathon runs organizers who try to gain new customers, marathoners, should use the tools that influence the emotions to convince them to participate in the event and, subsequently, to have them recommend it to the other runners.

Experience Marketing Model on Marathon Market

It is extremely difficult to gain an advantage in the highly competitive sports tourism market. The marathon runs market is also a demanding market, even though it is still developing, which can be proven by the increasing number of participants in the majority of marathons all over the world. The run organizers constantly need to look for new solutions that will not only be accepted by the runners but will also amaze and surprise them with something unexpected, and make unforgettable impressions. Experience marketing meets the demand of the organizers as the con-

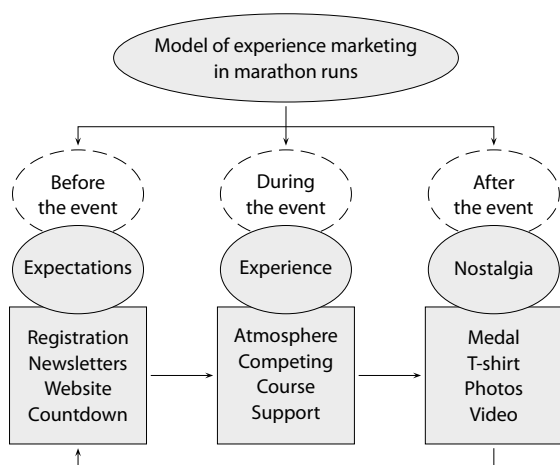


Figure 2 Experience Marketing on Marathon Runs Market

cept assumptions fit in well with the specifics of the marathon run market. That is why the concept might be used with better efficiency than on other markets.

The research was conducted for several years and the deepened analysis of information from secondary sources leads to the conclusion that experience marketing is widely applied by the running event organizers, although with various results. The thorough analysis of empirical data leads to the development of a model that suggests the possible uses of experience marketing on the sports event market (Figure 2). Marketing support of the marathon run organization process can be divided into three phases: before, during, and after the event. In each of these phases, the organizer should focus on different activities, briefly described further in the article.

The marathon run organizers should use the concept of experience marketing many months before the event, when their activities focus mainly on promotion. It is already possible to develop the feeling of expectation and tension before the run. To achieve this, the following tools can be used: the course visualization, the medals presentation, countdown, periodic newsletters, etc. The main task of experience marketing in the first phase should be developing the runners expectations for the marathon. The expectations resulting from marketing activities of the organizer, the brand created in the sports environment and

other runners' recommendations are the most important factors that influence the choice of a marathon run.

In the second phase, experience marketing is applied during the sports event. Generally speaking, the activities are to provide the emotions that were previously promised. The runners come to the event to experience fascinating moments related not only to the run itself but also to additional events, meeting new runners or experiencing something completely new to them. It is worth mentioning that the sport event atmosphere is created mainly by its participants, their number, behaviour and shared emotions. The marathoners and the people who accompany them are the prosumers, who, together with the organizers, have considerable influence on the quality and attractiveness of the sports event (Mallen & Adams, 2008, pp. 170–172).

The last yet equally important phase of the suggested experience marketing model consists of creating nostalgia connected with the event. The organizers should make sure that the runners, going back home, have plenty of new exciting experiences that will positively influence their opinions of the event and will encourage recommending it to the other runners, perhaps even returning and participating in another run. To increase the efficiency of marketing activities in the last phase of the model, the runners receive gadgets with the run's logo, and specially designed medals with their finishing time; they can also purchase photos of themselves running taken by a photographer, etc. Marketing activities undertaken in the last phase of the suggested model are to strengthen the memory of the experience during the run. Therefore, the emotional bond between the runners and the run will last for much longer than just those few days of their stay at the event venue.

Further Research

The research that was conducted does not exhaust the problem of applying the concept of experience marketing on the sports tourism market. The research made it possible to discover many interesting marketing activities undertaken by the run organizers and purchasing behaviours of sports tourists, the mara-

thoners coming from other cities; however, it did not explain all the determinants and reasons for acting.

One of the areas that need scientific exploration is the use of information technologies in the process of building emotions for the marathon run participants. The availability of mobile devices that have become the most important source of information to many tourists suggests a wider use of such marketing communication that should be included in the strategy of sports event organizers. Another problem for further research is the segmentation of runners based on other not-yet-used criteria and offering various packages of benefits to the selected groups. Different groups of runners might seek different benefits. The correct segmentation might help the run organizers better prepare their offer adapted to the various needs of identified homogenous segments of buyers. The example of the new classification of marathoners can be separating a new group apart from the so-called elite: professional runners with slightly lower skills, but still representing the above average level, which are the so-called semi-elite. The marathoners who participated in the research say that the runners with higher capabilities are driven by different motives and have different goals than those who run for fun only. Another subject that requires further research is the problem of building the runners' loyalty, perceived as repeated participation in the subsequent marathon runs. Sports tourism as a leisure activity is inherently connected with sightseeing in new places and, in the case of the marathon runs, participating in various sports events. This is slightly against the general intention of the marathon organizer who would like their buyers (runners) to be loyal and repeat their participation in the other runs. To date, little is known about the runners' motives that influence their decisions to participate in the same marathon more than once. One can guess that these motives are connected with emotions and experience of the past runs. If identified, these motives could help profile the marketing activities to be more effective and aim at building the loyalty of runners.

Conclusion

The runners coming from places far away from the marathon venue fulfil their active leisure needs. That

is why they constitute part of the tourism market demand, more precisely: sports tourism market. Trying to meet their own expectations and fulfil their sports dreams, their choice of the sports event is mainly based on emotional criteria. Experience is the most important determinant that influences the decision whether to participate in a marathon or not. It motivates them to participate and significantly influences different opinions about various analysed events (Schwarz & Hunter, 2008, p. 94).

Therefore, the concept of experience marketing perfectly fits the needs of the marathon run organizers who, due to the strong competitiveness on the sport market, constantly need to appeal to the participants. The conducted research shows that the effectiveness of the marketing activities of the marathon run organizers depends mainly on:

1. appropriate choice of a course that will give the runners plenty of aesthetic experience, focusing mainly on the starting and finishing lines,
2. providing a number of attractions and supporting events the will be value added to the basic product (the marathon run itself),
3. skilful tension building and expectations with a teasing method: revealing the subsequent facts related to the run, thus capturing runners' imagination,
4. creating a unique, exceptional atmosphere with the help of runners and their supporters, who play the role of the prosumers; they participate in the process of event creation,
5. offering the runners tangible gadgets and souvenirs that will stimulate their memories of the run long after it is completed.

All the factors above can be found in the concept of experience marketing, the use of which might act as an accelerator that will increase the positive experience of the runners: it will provide exactly the thing they expect most from participating in a marathon run. The research shows that the concept of experience marketing is widely applied to the sports event market. However, many organisers find it challenging as its successful implementation is not easy. Although they are doing their best, the run organizers all over the world

are still unable to meet the number of prospect participants, which testifies the challenge that experience marketing poses.

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