

Branding Strategies Affecting Foreign Tourists' Decision To Participate The International Marathon Events

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Abstract: *Marathon has become a phenomenon that is popular with more than 30 million people worldwide each year. For this reason, the marathon has become a popular sport activity that has grown rapidly over the past decade. The International Marathon in Thailand is steadily gaining increased interest from runners both in domestic and overseas and generates revenue from the enormous number of runners participating in the competition each year. However, the image of Thailand international marathon is not as clear as the global marathon, such as Boston Marathon, London Marathon, and Tokyo Marathon. This research therefore emphasizes on the analysis of branding strategies that can attract runners from all over the world to participate in the international marathon in Thailand and create a memorable image of Thailand as an international marathon destination. The study followed quantitative approaches, collected data from 400 runners who had attended to the international marathons event in Thailand, and analyzed by descriptive statistic and multiple linear regression analysis.*

Keywords: *Branding strategies, tourists' decision, international marathon event*

Introduction

Sport tourism will reach record highs and generate more revenue than ever in the near future (Silk *et al.*, 2017; Kapadia, 2017). The tourism industry has grown remarkably over the past six decades, especially in regions such as Europe, which have received a large number of foreign tourists for short breaks. Travelers often have a good budget and look for good food and accommodation. Therefore, sport tourism has become a profitable market due to its potential for global destinations and the diversity of sports services. Hotel bookings increased 3 to 4 percent in 2016 in 2015, due to Sports tourism continues to increase (Sarah *et al.*, 2013). Marathon events are sport tourism events. In the last few decades, these events have been used in many destinations to increase tourism demand (Papanikos, 2015; Koronios *et al.*, 2016). Many countries have held many marathons held each year, resulting in the number of marathon participants increasing steadily (Wicker & Hallmann, 2013). For instance, Germany hosted more than 180 marathons in various cities and regions in 2010 (Statista GmbH, 2011). Major races like the Boston, London, Chicago, or New York Marathon have many participants in the competition and many cheering supporters encourage throughout the competition. (Shipway & Jones, 2008). Marathon participants can spend a lot of money on registration and travel fees. The marathon race can make a positive impact on the economy of the host city as well. (Daniels & Norman, 2003). In 2014 there are more than 300 marathons in Thailand throughout the country, including the marathon (42.19 kilometers), 15 - 20 courses per year, half marathon (21.1 kilometers), 50 - 75 courses per year. The mini marathon (10.5 kilometers) has 150 - 175 courses per year, and the healthy running track or fun run (3.0 - 5.0 kilometers) has more than 230 - 300 courses per year (Aieophuket *et al.*, 2014).

Branding is a marketing practice in which a company creates a name, symbol or design that is easily identifiable as belonging to the company (Hamann *et al.*, 2007). It is help to identify a product and distinguish it from other products and services. Branding is important because not only is it what makes a memorable impression on consumers but it allow customers and clients to know what to expect from company (Arthur, 1995; O'Neill & Mattila, 2004). It is a way of distinguishing company from the competitors and clarifying what is offer that make the better

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choice. Branding is absolutely critical to a business because of the overall impact it makes on company. Branding can change how people perceive brand, it can drive new business and increase brand awareness (Sammut-Bonnici, 2015). Branding is important when trying to generate future business, and a strongly established brand can increase a business' value by giving the company more leverage in the industry (Keller & Lehmann, 2006). This makes it a more appealing investment opportunity because of its firmly established place in the marketplace. Strong branding generally means there is a positive impression of the company amongst consumers, and they are likely to do business because of the familiarity and assumed dependability of using a name they can trust (Todor, 2014). Once a brand has been well-established, word of mouth will be the company's best and most effective advertising technique. A professional appearance and well-strategized branding will help the company build trust with consumers, potential clients and customers (Cheng & Cheok, 2008). People are more likely to do business with a company that has a polished and professional portrayal (Došen, 1998).

Although Thailand have many international marathon events but not successful, most of the participants are local and domestic runners (Aieophuket *et al.*, 2014; Go to race, 2019). It reflects the international marathon of Thailand is unable to generate perceived brand and brand awareness among foreign runners. Therefore, the researcher is interested to evaluate the effectiveness of branding strategies of the international marathon events in Thailand. In order to measure the different types of branding strategies that are effective and able to stimulate the decision to participate in the international marathon in Thailand of foreigners. Due to brand strategy is extremely important for brand promotion and brand value creation as brand strategies have a direct impact on brand value and the success of all strategies related to promotional activities, distribution, pricing and products (Wagner, 2007; Yakup & Hatice, 2016).

Literature review

- *Product differentiation strategy*

Product differentiation is a marketing strategy that businesses use to distinguish a product from similar offerings on the market (Hashem, 2012). The difference could be something concrete, like speed, power, performance and better service. Or, it could be a more ephemeral quality, such as just being cooler or more stylish than competitors. It is important for companies to stand out because when faced with too many choices, consumers can be overwhelmed and often walk away rather than make a buying decision (Arping & Lóránth, 2006). That is why it is imperative to find a way for your product to stand out and be considered uniquely valuable. When utilized successfully product differentiation creates a competitive advantage as customers view product as superior (Dirisu *et al.*, 2013).

- *Cost leadership strategy*

Cost leadership strategy is a method to reduce costs and produce the least expensive goods in a market or industry in an effort to gain market share (Hashem *et al.*, 2012). The modern business environment is a very complex and sophisticated one with consumers being aware of the choices available to them. One way firms differentiate themselves is through competitive pricing. Businesses who have the least production costs are able to offer the same level of product quality compared to their competitor for a much lower price. Consumers are constantly looking to increase their purchasing power and if that cannot be achieved through an income increment, then buying more at a lower price is the next best alternative (Hilman & Kaliappen, 2014). Businesses who seek to be cost leaders tap into this opportunity to offer the average consumers great products at great prices.

- *White ocean strategy*

White ocean's concept is concerning about "social" more than "profit" that made white ocean strategy outstanding than the others oceans which is gaining reputation and profit from their customer by using any strategies to be apart or win the competition in market (Čhančhaochāi, 2012). The concept of white ocean strategy is focusing on People, Planet, Profit and Passion. Concerning in sociological and environment are most important in this ocean (Aithal, 2016). If companies add white Ocean strategy in their development plan would help company growth sustainably.

- *Content marketing strategy*

A content marketing strategy is a plan for building an audience by publishing, maintaining, and spreading frequent and consistent content that educates, entertains, or inspires to turn strangers into fans and fans into customers (Baltes, 2015). Content marketing is much more than creating, distributing and sharing content in order to engage audiences, generate leads, improve branding, and other marketing goals can serve with content marketing (Lieb,2012).

- *Influencer marketing strategy*

At a fundamental level, influencer marketing is a type of social media marketing that uses endorsements and product mentions from influencers—individuals who have a dedicated social following and are viewed as experts within their niche (Ranga & Sharma, 2014). Influencer marketing works because of the high amount of trust that influencers have built up with their following, and recommendations from them serve as a form of social proof to brand’s potential customers (Gretzel, 2017). A decade ago, the influencer marketing arena was limited only to celebrities and a few dedicated bloggers. Now, it seems like we’ve seen influencers rise (Glucksman,2017).

- *Integrated marketing communication strategy*

Integrated Marketing is an approach to creating a unified and seamless experience for consumers to interact with the brand/enterprise; it attempts to meld all aspects of marketing communication such as advertising, sales promotion, public relations, direct marketing, and social media, through their respective mix of tactics, methods, channels, media, and activities, so that all work together as a unified force (Kitchen & Burgmann, 2010). It is a process designed to ensure that all messaging and communications strategies are consistent across all channels and are centered on the customer (Holm, 2006). Today, integrated marketing needs to go beyond merely integrating messages and communications. Integrated marketing is about message and content consistency across channels as well.

Research Methodology

According to average number of athletes in 2010-2018, the total number of athletes was calculated as 13,370 persons per event, researcher determined sample size 400 people in this study. The survey data was collected from foreigner runners who’s participate in Chombueng international marathon 2019, Khon Kaen international marathon 2019, and Laguna Phuket international marathon 2019 by accidental sampling technique during January – June 2019.

The questionnaire used for this study was composed of two main parts. The first part of the questionnaire included questions to collect socio-demographic details of the respondents. The second part consisted of 6 branding strategies in order for respondents to evaluate the effectiveness and were asked to rate their reactions on the 19 items of measurement. The likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly insignificant to 5 = strongly significant, was used to collect the responses. Then analyzed by descriptive statistics and multiple linear regression analysis: MRA

Research Results

Table 1 presented the effectiveness of 6 branding strategies from evaluating the importance of runners' perspective. The results show that respondents place the first priority on white ocean strategy, especially on the issue of environmentally friendly and contribute to social responsibility. The second priority is integrated marketing communication strategy, by focusing on the issue of social media allow access to competition and encourages the desire to attend the event. The third branding strategy that runners focus on is content marketing, with the main focus of communicate the message that is going in the same direction and there is no confusion.

Table 1 The effectiveness of branding strategies

Branding strategies	Level of important					X	SD	Level	No
	Highest	Hig h	Moderat e	Lo w	Lowest				
1. Product differentiation strategy						3.22	1.125	Moderate	4
1.1 You choose to participate in the	41	180	74	45	60	3.24	1.232	Moder	2

Branding strategies	Level of important					X	SD	Level	No
	Highest	Hig h	Moderat e	Lo w	Lowest				
marathon that is formatted to stand out as unique, different from the general competition	10.3 %	45.0 %	187.5 %	11.3%	15.0 %			ate	
1.2 You decide to join the marathon with shirt designs, medals, and trophies, which are beautiful and eye-catching	43 10.8 %	145 36.3 %	93 23.3%	77 19.3%	42 10.5 %	3.18	1.174	Moderate	4
1.3 You'd like to participate in the marathon that has been standardized internationally	50 12.5 %	159 39.8 %	83 20.8%	67 16.8%	41 10.3 %	3.28	1.184	Moderate	1
1.4 You choose to participate in a competition with admission process that is modern, convenient and easy to use	54 13.5 %	145 36.3 %	81 20.3%	65 16.3%	55 13.8 %	3.20	1.257	Moderate	3
2. Cost leadership strategy						3.16	0.967	Moderate	5
2.1 You can choose to participate in the marathon which its registration fee is not too expensive	44 11.0 %	140 35.0 %	109 27.3%	88 22.0%	19 4.8%	3.26	1.067	Moderate	1
2.2 You decide to join the marathon that is the registration fee is the cheapest compared to other	32 8.0%	117 29.3 %	122 30.5%	102 25.5%	27 6.8%	3.06	1.066	Moderate	3
2.3 You early register for the competition to receive a discount on registration	36 9.0%	136 34.0 %	123 30.8%	71 17.8%	34 8.5%	3.17	1.091	Moderate	2
3. White ocean strategy						4.04	0.734	High	1
3.1 You decide to join the competition which is donated to charity	128 32.0 %	171 42.8 %	85 21.3%	15 3.8%	1 0.3%	4.03	0.840	High	2
3.2 You support a competition that is environmentally friendly and contribute to social responsibility	132 33.0 %	173 43.3 %	88 22.0%	7 1.8%	0 0.0%	4.08	0.785	High	1
3.3 You support the activity that provide an opportunity for the disadvantaged and those with physical limitations can participate in the competition	128 32.0 %	167 41.8 %	93 23.3%	10 2.5%	2 0.5%	4.02	0.836	High	3
4. Content marketing strategy						3.93	0.608	High	3
4.1 You choose to participate in a race with clear slogan	78 19.5 %	209 52.3 %	103 25.8%	9 2.3%	1 0.3%	3.89	0.744	High	3
4.2 You want the organizer to communicate the message that is going in the same direction and there is no confusion	94 23.5 %	211 52.8 %	86 21.5%	7 1.8%	2 0.5%	3.97	0.752	High	1
4.3 You'd like the marathon to be inspiration of fitness and health	79 19.8 %	231 57.8 %	79 19.8%	11 2.8%	0 0.0%	3.95	0.709	High	2
5. Influencer marketing strategy						3.04	1.107	Moderate	6
5.1 You decide to join the competition because there are people you accept/favorite specially joined the	33 8.3%	144 36.0 %	108 27.0%	70 17.5%	45 11.3 %	3.13	1.141	Moderate	1

Branding strategies	Level of important					X	SD	Level	No
	Highest	Hig h	Moderat e	Lo w	Lowest				
competition									
5.2 You want to meet a celebrity who is famous (actor, singer, athlete) while attending a marathon	32 8.0%	128 32.0%	89 22.3%	90 22.5%	61 15.3%	2.95	1.215	Moderate	2
6. Integrated marketing communication strategy						3.97	0.610	High	2
6.1 You decide to join the marathon which has been promoted through a variety media channels	87 21.8%	224 56.0%	83 20.8%	6 1.54%	0 0.0%	3.98	0.697	High	3
6.2 Media, TV, and radio can motivate you to be interested in finding information about the marathon management even more	81 20.3%	200 50.0%	98 24.5%	18 4.5%	3 0.8%	3.85	0.820	High	4
6.3 The marathon advertising though social media allow you to get to know the competition and urged the need to join the competition	115 28.7%	192 48.0%	88 22.0%	5 1.3%	0 0.0%	4.04	0.746	High	1
6.4 Using only one message in communication for a variety of channels causes you to get clear information and are not confused	117 29.3%	181 45.3%	94 23.5%	7 1.8%	1 0.3%	4.02	0.788	High	2

The correlation analysis of branding strategy with multiple linear regression analysis found that the correlation coefficient (R) is 0.92 and R square is 0.85, indicating that branding strategy was able to explain 85% of the variation of tourist's decision to participate in the international marathon with a standard error = 0.49, F = 54.22, and Sig. = 0.00. The order of relationship between independent variable groups to the tourist's decision to join in the international marathon is descending as follows

Increasing 1 unit of product differentiation strategy (X₁) will increase the tourist's decision to participate in the international marathon by 0.37 units and P-value = 0.00.

Increasing 1 unit of cost leadership strategy (X₂) will increase the tourist's decision to participate in the international marathon by 0.30 units and P-value = 0.00.

Increasing 1 unit of influencer marketing strategy (X₃) will increase the tourist's decision to participate in the international marathon by 0.26 units and P-value = 0.00.

Increasing 1 unit of white ocean strategy (X₄) will increase the tourist's decision to participate in the international marathon by 0.20 units and P-value = 0.00.

Increasing 1 unit of content marketing strategy (X₅) will decrease the tourist's decision to participate in the international marathon by 0.12 units and P-value = 0.04.

Increasing 1 unit of integrated marketing communication strategy (X₆) will decrease the tourist's decision to participate in the international marathon by 0.17 units and P-value = 0.10.

Predictive equations can be written for branding strategies affecting foreign tourists' decision to participate the international marathon when variables are entered as follows:

$$Y = 0.68 + 0.37X_1 + 0.30X_2 + 0.26X_3 + 0.20X_4 + 0.12X_5 + 0.17X_6$$

Table 2 Regression analysis of branding strategy

R	R square	Adjusted R square	Std.error of the estimate	F	Sig.	Durbin-Watson	
0.92	0.85	0.79	0.49	54.22	0.00**	1.92	
Variables	UnStandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	P-value	Collinearity statistics	
	B	Std.error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF

b ₀	0.68	0.21		3.22	0.00		
Product differentiation strategy	0.37	0.06	0.35	6.20	0.00	0.43	2.34
Cost leadership strategy	0.30	0.07	0.25	4.06	0.00	0.36	2.79
Influencer marketing strategy	0.26	0.08	0.22	3.32	0.00	0.31	3.28
White ocean strategy	0.20	0.05	0.19	3.74	0.00	0.52	1.94
Content marketing strategy	-0.12	0.06	-0.11	-2.03	0.04	0.46	2.18
Integrated marketing communication strategy	-0.17	0.06	-0.16	-2.60	0.10	0.35	2.83

** Significant 0.01

Discussion and Conclusion

This study was conducted on foreign runners participating in the well-known international marathon in Thailand in order to measure various types of branding strategies that are effective and can stimulate foreigner's decision to participate in the International marathon of Thailand. From the analysis of effectiveness of branding strategy from tourist's perspective, it is to be noted that most runners choose to participate in the marathon by paying attention to social responsibility and charity first. Jermsittiparsert and Chankoson (2019) show that the tourism industry needs a lot of attention to control the harmful effects of environmental indicators, in accordance with Filo (2011) said that the charity-based motives make a strong contribution for Half Marathon challenge. Followed by the stimulation from integrated marketing communications, which is in line with Jermsittiparsert *et al* (2019) state that communications via social media is an important factor influencing to build brand awareness. As the results of multiple regression analysis, it is possible to sort out the influences of the branding strategies that affect the tourist's decision to participate in the international marathon are product differentiation strategy, cost leadership strategy, influencer marketing strategy, and white ocean strategy. Finally, public and private sectors should cooperate in supporting the creation of Thailand international marathon brand to be widely known to promote sport tourism and generate income from the participation of tourists from all over the world. By focusing on making a difference, reasonable price, and attracting world-renowned runners to promote Thailand's international marathon to increase the number of foreign runners in the future.

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