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**Towards a Typology of Marketing Town
Centre Management Schemes through the use
of KPIs**

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Abstract

Whilst town centre management (TCM) has proved to be a successful strategy to maintain, improve and regenerate town centres through local partnership, there has been relatively little attention drawn to the marketing of TCM schemes. This paper explores the issues surrounding the use of key performance indicators (KPIs) for the marketing of TCM schemes in the context of wider place marketing activities undertaken by towns or cities. The results draw on data collected from two studies of town centre managers in the UK carried out between 1999 and 2001. It is posited that town centre managers might usefully employ carefully selected KPI data to maintain and attract private investment to TCM schemes from internal and external town centre stakeholders. The paper introduces a typology for the use of KPI marketing in town centre management.

Keywords: Town Centre Management, Marketing, Key Performance Indicators

Introduction

Since the 1970s there has been considerable growth in the marketing and promotion of urban places in the UK. This has been catalysed *inter alia* by the need to attract new employment opportunities to areas with declining manufacturing bases and an intensification of inter-urban competition. These imperatives were such that by the mid-1990s 93 percent of all local authorities were engaged in some form of promotional activity (Millington, 1995). Invariably the promotion of urban places has been focused on inward investment and tourism initiatives. Despite the obvious importance of retailing in the urban economy, the marketing of urban places as *retail* destinations has been neglected by both place marketing practitioners and academics alike. Indeed, many place marketing practitioners regard the promotion of retailing as outside of their specific remit and are content to leave the marketing of the town or city as a shopping destination (especially to the local population) to town centre management schemes (Warnaby, 2000).

Town centre management has been defined as "the search for competitive advantage through the maintenance and/or strategic development of both public and private areas and interests within town centres, initiated and undertaken by stakeholders drawn from a combination of the public, private and voluntary sectors" (Warnaby *et al.*, 1998: 17-18). Since the establishment of the first UK TCM scheme in 1987, their growth has been phenomenal and there are now around 300 across the UK (ATCM, 1999). A recent estimate by the ATCM indicates that there may be as many as 500 schemes (ATCM, personal communication). While the original emphasis was on 'janitorial' improvements to the urban infrastructure, in many schemes a more 'strategic' perspective has started to develop. This is manifest in a number of ways, including the development of business plans incorporating explicit marketing and promotional initiatives, and systems of performance monitoring involving key performance indicators. This latter issue is becoming more important as funding for TCM is dependent on contributions from local authorities and, increasingly, the private sector, particularly those retailers with a significant presence in UK town centres, who in an increasingly competitive and hostile business environment are now demanding 'value' for their investment in TCM (Williams, 1998; Hogg and Medway, 2000).

Warnaby (2000) identifies town centre managers as taking a lead role in marketing their towns and cities as shopping destinations. In implementing any such marketing activity they are supported by their professional body, the Association of Town Centre Management (ATCM), who list 'promotional skills' as a key competency of a town centre manager (ATCM/Oxford Brookes University, 1995: 22). Page and Hardyman (1996: 159) also highlight the importance of marketing: 'Clearly, town centre managers themselves regard marketing communication as a vital activity in their strategy to revitalize the town centre, in order to attract both residents and visitors'. In this respect, TCM can be regarded as one element within the wider place marketing strategy of a town or city. In many places town centre managers interact with various agencies and local authority departments in order to develop consistent and coherent marketing activities aimed at 'users' of the town centre such as residents, visitors and potential investors. However, the role of marketing for TCM schemes involves a number of dimensions beyond merely marketing the 'place' to these target audiences. This can include marketing the concept of TCM and the scheme itself to those urban stakeholders who can be regarded as 'intermediaries' in, and 'producers' of the town centre (a fuller discussion of this classification of urban stakeholders is given in Evans, 1997). These include retailers and property owners who already sponsor the scheme or who may do so in the future. Such issues will be explored in this paper through an examination of the way in which TCM schemes market themselves using the key performance indicators they gather.

Methodology

This paper combines the results from two complementary research projects. The first project comprised a series of semi-structured interviews with a sample of town centre managers. These managers were drawn from four contrasting TCM schemes. Criteria for the sampling of respondents included factors such as organisational structure of the scheme (for example, partnership, local authority dominated and private company), longevity (ranging from schemes that are in the process of being established to well-established schemes over ten years old), and characteristics of the urban areas within which the scheme was based, (defined in terms of the classification of shopping destinations from the 1998 Management Horizons

Shopping Index). The purpose of the interviews was to ascertain town centre managers' attitudes to the marketing of towns and cities as retail destinations, the process of marketing planning (including their interaction with other place marketing agencies), and the specific marketing activities implemented.

An additional interview was also undertaken with a respondent from the private sector who was a former town centre manager and a member of the Board of Directors of the ATCM. This was in order to obtain a national perspective regarding the issues surrounding both marketing and the use of KPIs in town centre management.

The second research project comprised a postal questionnaire on usage of, and attitudes towards, KPIs in town centre management. This was mailed to all individuals in the UK whose job title identified them as having some responsibility for a TCM scheme. Of these 227 potential respondents, 100 questionnaires were received giving a response rate of 44 percent. The sample was generated from the ATCM Directory of Managed Towns (ATCM, 1999a). Respondents were asked to indicate KPIs they used and evaluate their objectivity, accuracy, source etc. The questionnaire included open questions asking town centre managers to give their opinions of the advantages and disadvantages of the KPIs that they used. Analysis procedures were carried out using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Scientists).

Major Results

Town Centre Managers' Perceptions of Marketing

The interviews with town centre managers focused on a number of areas including:

- (1) their knowledge of the concepts and principles of marketing;
- (2) their perceptions of their remit for marketing the town or city to various target audiences;
- (3) the process by which this marketing activity is planned and implemented;
- (4) the specific marketing messages that are articulated and marketing activities used;
- (5) the ways in which the effectiveness of marketing activity is evaluated.

Regarding their knowledge of marketing concepts, a number of respondents freely admitted their ignorance. One respondent stated:

[TCMs] are not actually from a marketing background, or if they are, they don't do just marketing... So somewhere along the line, as well as being an environmental and a regeneration expert, and a funding expert, and a partnership management expert and all the rest of it, you are also a marketeer... So we often find ourselves in a situation where we have this responsibility, without actually any professional kind of background at all. (TCM#1)

This quote emphasises the wide-ranging role of town centre managers, which not only incorporates marketing but a host of other duties. Indeed, some of the town centre managers interviewed emphasised that marketing skills and knowledge were not a part of the initial job description, but have grown in importance as this more 'strategic' dimension to their role has developed. Town centre managers often feel poorly equipped to carry out marketing roles, not only because of their self-perceived lack of knowledge, but also their professional backgrounds. The background of many town centre managers lies in the public sector, where the concepts and principles of marketing are not as well established.

Town centre managers generally report to a steering group comprised of town centre stakeholders from both private and public sectors and the expectations of superiors and/or the TCM partnership steering group defined the nature of their role in marketing the town or city:

I am more of a co-ordinator. My background is inward investment and dealing with businesses, so they see me more as establishing strategies, going out and getting sponsorships, you know, working with businesses on a day-to-day sort of level. (TCM#3)

Notwithstanding these issues, many town centre managers are very effective marketers for their particular schemes and towns. A recurring theme in the interviews was the fact that lack of specific marketing knowledge could be overcome by the personal qualities of the town centre manager, and that sophisticated marketing activities were not necessarily appropriate or desirable. Indeed, the personal qualities of the individual were often regarded as more important than formal qualifications in marketing or related areas:

I don't have any formal training, I don't think I need formal training in marketing. I'm not a brand manager in a big plc and I don't need to understand the intricacies. We've achieved profile and success by just spouting the same old story and just being in the press and media quite a lot. (TCM#1)

Indeed, respondents often regarded themselves as facilitators of marketing activities that may actually be implemented by other town centre stakeholders, especially those private sector stakeholders, such as retailers, who actually comprise the city centre retail 'product':

The way I saw it as I first came in is the fact that everyone has got very good ideas about what to do and how to promote their own area, and although they've been working together for quite a while there still seems to be a little bit of lack of communication between what's happening, especially to the smaller, individual shops, [and it] is quite important that they are incorporated within it (TCM#3)

I'm sort of a co-ordinator or facilitator, so I would be the one who starts off the idea and hopefully other people will carry it through. (TCM#3)

As has been stated, the role of marketing in town centre management schemes has gradually developed over time and, as a result, the specific remit for the marketing activity undertaken by these individuals has often developed in a haphazard way:

I think what city centre management tends to get left with, if you like, are the bits that nobody else does. What we do, is either identify that there's a requirement or sort of fill a gap. We wouldn't do it if it wasn't necessary, if it didn't provide any long-term benefit. (TCM#1)

Often this remit was articulated in terms that contrasted with other promotional agencies in their locality. Indeed, it must be remembered that the TCM scheme may be only one of a number of agencies with responsibility for marketing the town centre or the wider urban area, and in the towns and cities that were part of the research it was clearly apparent that the town centre manager interacted with representatives from a number of other agencies (such as tourism promotion agencies, local authority economic development departments and other urban regeneration agencies) each with their own specific remit in order to market the town or city. This interaction and co-operation occurred both formally and informally. One town centre manager (TCM#2) articulated that there were 'unwritten rules' governing 'how far one does and doesn't go' in terms of encroaching on others'

remits. However, all respondents emphasised the importance and effectiveness of these links.

Most TCM schemes have business plans, regarded as crucial by the ATCM (n/d, 1997). The normal method for planning marketing activities was through annual planning cycles, using the business plan as a context:

It all starts with the business plan. We'll say, "Right OK, we're going to have to run particular seasonal campaigns", or whatever. Each year, for example, say, with the Christmas marketing group, we get together in April, we'll review what we did last year, we'll say, "OK, what changes do we make, what elements do we want to change to the campaign, i.e. do we do TV this year, how much are we going to spend on radio?"... [We get] small working groups [working on individual initiatives], because I don't think that any more than three or four people sitting down on a specific thing like that, gets things done. Then each of those people go away and do their own little bit and in six months we'll have a marketing campaign. (TCM#1)

The role of formalised marketing/promotion sub groups in the development and implementation of marketing activities was common. However, problems of gaining support and funding for marketing activities have implications for what can and cannot be done:

It's up to you to go and find the money for it [marketing activities]. This is why things are always *ad hoc* and what I call 'management on the hoof'. Dream up an idea and if you can get some money for it, then "Hey, bingo", it becomes a very successful project. Dream something up that you feel needs doing, it doesn't get resourced and, 'Oh, that was a bad idea'. (TCM#1)

Another key issue influencing the effectiveness of marketing activities developed in a collaborative way, which was articulated by most respondents, is the problem of 'free riders' who do not contribute to such collective activities but take the benefits from them (for a wider discussion of free-riders in TCM schemes see Forsberg *et al.*, 1999). This was regarded as 'inevitable':

There's always those people who will become involved, will support, and of course there are always those that will be the free riders that take advantage of it all but they won't be prepared to put their hands in their pockets for anything or do anything. And it's the same everywhere. (TCM#2)

The reluctance of many town centre stakeholders to adequately fund the marketing of the town centres impacted on the actual marketing activities undertaken. Public relations, often embodied in the person of the town centre manager, were perceived as very important:

You can do an awful lot of pretty cost effective promotional marketing work by having the right person and the right face associated with whatever it is you are trying to do. I don't shy away from publicity in [the city] at all. I see my role as city centre manager as I need to be known in the streets, I need to be known in networks and I am consistently giving that message about – "[the city] is a great place." That's a very cheap way of marketing, but it's a very effective way. (TCM#1)

The effectiveness of the town centre manager in developing a personal profile in the town as critical for the effectiveness of any marketing and communication activity.

Other popular marketing activities included seasonal promotions and events (especially at Christmas), leaflets (such as shopping guides etc.) and some limited advertising (generally radio, but occasionally TV campaigns at Christmas in some of the bigger towns and cities). Major advertising campaigns were not developed due to the cost implications and the use of commercial marketing agencies was very rare, again for similar reasons.

The evaluation of marketing activities is generally *ad hoc* and reliant on anecdote, primarily because of financial considerations. As one respondent (TCM#1) stated "I don't think anything is actually built into the costs with town centre management". This meant that formal evaluation of marketing activity was virtually unknown.

However, the evaluation not only of marketing activity, but all TCM activities is becoming increasingly necessary as those retailers who do contribute to initiatives developed under the aegis of town centre management schemes are more and more concerned to see some 'value' arising from what they are increasingly regarding as an investment as opposed to a donation. The onus is on town centre management schemes to prove their worth and then communicate this worth to all relevant internal and external stakeholders. As the interview respondent from the private sector with strong links to TCM stated:

'I think they [TCM schemes] have to be transparent to progress anyway. If you're hiding your light under a bushel, then you're not doing your job properly anyway. If you're hiding it because you're not performing then by definition you're not doing your job. So there has to be accountability if you expect your partnership to prosper.'

As a consequence, town centre management schemes seeking to prove their worth are increasingly using key performance indicators as a way of proving their effectiveness in a more 'objective', less anecdotal manner. Up to now, measuring the effectiveness of TCM has, arguably, been largely subjective, relying upon the measurement of town centre 'vitality and viability' (URBED, 1994) by means of some form of arbitrary numeric rating or 'healthcheck' (see ATCM, 1996 for an example of this type of approach, and Tomalin (1997) for a wider discussion of the use of town centre healthchecks). The need for more objective, empirical methods of measuring effectiveness has been articulated by academics (Pal and Sanders, 1997), practitioners (Wright, 2000) and retail stakeholders (Williams and Baker, 1998). Thus, TCM schemes are under considerable pressure to implement effective measures of performance if they are to maintain and enhance their current funding base. The next part of this paper considers the role and use of KPIs by town centre management schemes, before moving on to discuss their utility as marketing tools.

Town Centre Managers' Usage and Perceptions of Key Performance Indicators

In total 87 of the 100 town centre managers responding to the questionnaire reported that they have made some use of key performance indicators. Table 1 details the KPIs adopted in these 87 TCM schemes, with most schemes using a variety of indicators.

Table 1: Usage of key performance indicators

KPIs Utilised	(% Respondent schemes using KPIs)^⓪
Car park usage	90
Town centre footfall figures	87
Vacant property rate	84
Town centre theft	79
Shoplifting	74
Town centre user surveys	71
Retail sales	70
Town centre violence	69
Zone 'A' property rents	51
Retail investment	48
Public transport usage	43
Capital investment	35
Yield (as defined by PPG6)	32
Trade diversion	25
New job creation	22
Non retail floorspace	17
Other (e.g. tourism)	12

^⓪Percentages rounded to 2 significant figures

Results from this questionnaire shown elsewhere (Hogg and Medway, 2000) explain that the respondents have a high confidence in the accuracy, objectivity, and importance of the KPIs they use. There also exists a good deal of enthusiasm surrounding the usage of KPIs, especially in their 'potential for demonstrating the effectiveness of the scheme to outsiders' (44 percent of the 87 respondents using KPIs named this as an advantage). Other related advantages included 'demonstrating the strength of the partnership' (21 percent), and 'defending the TCM scheme' (9 percent).

Clearly, therefore, town centre managers are already making use of KPIs for purposes other than planning and reviewing performance, so a key issue must be, how can these KPIs be exploited further by town centre managers to communicate the value of TCM and to market their individual TCM schemes? The Association of Town Centre Management (ATCM, 1999b) is adamant that KPIs are meant for the use of the town centre manager and the supporting TCM partnership only, primarily as a means of assessing trends and making future plans. However, this perspective neglects the marketing potential of KPIs as a means of communicating the

effectiveness of a scheme to different audiences. Fundamental to this is the question of who receives the results of KPI analysis.

Table 2: Recipients of KPI analysis

Receiver of KPI data analysis	Respondent schemes	Respondent schemes (%)
Local authority officers	67	80
Retailers	64	74
Police	52	48
Councillors	48	55
Chamber of Commerce	43	49
Other	30	36
Institutional investors	26	30
General public	19	22

When asked whether the data were shown to anyone outside of the TCM scheme, it became clear that in many cases KPIs give the managers a chance to show stakeholders and other interested parties how the scheme has progressed in its objectives. Most of the respondent schemes show the results of their KPI analysis to at least one other party, and often more than one (see Table 2). Local authority officers and retailers were the most regular recipients of KPI data analysis, probably because they are likely to be the key TCM stakeholders and are some of the main providers of data for KPIs. Other receivers of KPI data included: city centre steering groups, TCM company members, all town centre businesses, town centre forums and developers. Only two schemes kept their KPIs for ‘internal use only’.

As well as being responsive to the needs of existing sponsoring stakeholders, KPIs frequently perform the function of a marketing tool used to attract further funding to a TCM scheme. The respondents were asked to indicate whether they used KPI data in this way to either attract core funding and/or funding for specific initiatives within the scheme (ringfenced funding). The results shown in Table 3 demonstrate that KPI data were used to attract ringfenced TCM funding (62 percent of schemes) more often than core funding (43 percent). This is because a KPI can highlight a particular strength of a scheme, thus a sponsoring stakeholder may fund a particular project in the knowledge that they have seen ‘proof’ of its previous success and potential benefit to their business.

Table 3: KPI data as a means of attracting funding

Type of funding	Yes	No
Core funding	43%	57%
Ringfenced funding	62%	38%

These results are in line with research carried out in 1998 by Medway *et al.* who demonstrated that retailers prefer to make ringfenced payments to TCM initiatives because they are more flexible and accountable than the free-standing type:

“Retailers view ringfenced payments as more accountable, because they are able to choose exactly what type of TCM initiative their funding is spent on, and thus ensure it is one which may benefit them” (Medway *et al.*, 1998:78).

Performance measurement is evidently instrumental, therefore, in attracting this form of funding. However, there is a need to develop a system of KPIs that encourage sponsoring stakeholders to provide free-standing core funding that can be spent at the discretion of the town centre manager.

Discussion

There are a complex set of issues at play here, including the spatial focus, the purpose of the marketing of KPIs by individual TCM schemes, and the target audience of this marketing effort. Other aspects that need to be considered are the types of KPIs that might be used to achieve particular marketing objectives and the specific marketing activities implemented. All these different factors can be synthesised into a typology of KPI marketing in TCM (see Figure 1). This typology shows that the marketing of KPIs by TCM schemes can be at the local (i.e. typically the town or city in question) and/or national spatial scale. Within this, it can also be seen that KPI marketing for TCM can occur for at least four distinct purposes, each of these targeted at specific audiences. In addition, the typology also describes the types of KPIs that can be tailored to these specific purposes and the consequent indicative marketing activities.

Figure 1: A typology of KPI marketing for town centre management schemes

Spatial scale	Purpose	Target audience	Examples of KPIs	Indicative marketing activities
Local	To maintain existing investment and attract new funding to a TCM scheme	Existing and potential sponsors of the TCM scheme from the public and private sector e.g. retailers & other town centre businesses, local authority	Footfall (flows) Crime and security Retail investment Retail sales TCM activity Tourism Vacancy rates Variety of offer Yield	Action plan Newsletters Media relations Leaflets Networking
	To alert public of TCM work and improvements to town centre	Town centre users e.g. shoppers, residents and businesses	Car parking Crime and security Evening Economy Facilities for special needs Public facilities Public transport Street maintenance and cleanliness User surveys Variety of offer	Media relations Leaflets Shopping guides Newsletters
National	To attract inward investment and grants which can be used specifically for TCM or for wider place marketing activities of which TCM may be a part	Retail head offices and other sponsors of TCM from the private sector Government (UK and EU)	Capital investment Footfall (flows) Retail investment Retail sales TCM activity Tourism Vacancy rates Variety of offer Yield	Practitioner publications Bidding processes Public relations
	To raise profile of TCM scheme and the success of town centre manager	'TCM Industry' e.g. Association of Town Centre Management	Crime and security Footfall (flows) Retail investment Retail sales TCM activity Tourism Yield Zone 'A' property rents	Media relations ATCM publications Practitioner publications

However, there are inherent problems in using KPI data in terms of ensuring accuracy and objectivity, the interpretation of the resulting information (particularly by outsiders), and the fact that there may not be a clear vision of how the KPIs will be used or disseminated (e.g., Carter, 1989; Likierman, 1993; Pal and Sanders, 1997; Smith, 1995). Consequently, their use as *marketing* tools by TCM schemes may be problematic, the increasingly so as the data become more public and more prone to misinterpretation by external audiences (such as the press and other media) who may not have a full grasp of the remit and activities of TCM schemes. Responses to open

questions on the questionnaire indicated that this could lead to KPI data being placed in an incorrect context (with obvious negative consequences for marketing activity) and, moreover, could result in the apportioning of blame or indeed praise when it was inappropriate to do so. For example, one town centre manager stated that, “If you’re not careful town centre management can be held responsible for everything!”

Clearly, there are issues of risk in the use of KPIs for the marketing of TCM schemes that relate to the factors identified above. Referring to the typology in Figure 1, it also seems logical that such risks may increase as KPI data are disseminated to target audiences at wider spatial scales, who are less likely to be involved in the core activities of the TCM scheme in question and thus less aware of the context or the specific situation in which the KPIs are used. Deciding how widely KPIs should be used in the marketing of a TCM scheme may be a function of how well that scheme is established (often a temporal issue) and the extent of local support it enjoys. This contention, however, remains an area for future research.

Conclusion

Thus, the potential for using KPI data, not only for the primary purposes of performance measurement and monitoring, but also as part of the *marketing* activities of TCM schemes is obvious. The need to collect data that can be translated into KPIs is fast becoming an integral part of the job function of town centre managers as external stakeholders increasingly require this information in order to justify their investment in individual schemes, and indeed, as TCM schemes seek to justify their own continued existence. As this is inevitably a time consuming and costly activity, it seems sensible that TCM schemes should seek to maximise the utility of KPIs by using them for marketing purposes in addition to their original function.

Research Agenda

This study is an exploratory one, assessing the role of place marketing within the specific context of TCMs (as opposed to marketing aimed at generating inward investment to the urban place which may cover a much greater spatial area than the town centre). Since Page and Hardyman's study in 1996, there has been no major coverage of this topic. To update this, a major quantitative study of overall marketing

planning process and activities by TCMs must be undertaken to encompass KPIs, a topic which was not high on the agenda when Page and Hardyman did their research. In addition, the study will need to account for current developments in TCM including the drive for schemes to become privatised (ATCM, 2001), and thus a more professional approach towards the management of schemes.

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