Comparison of Marketing and Communication Strategy of the Prague International Marathon and Valencia Marathon

Sašo Belovski*

ABSTRACT
This work studies and compares the marketing and communication strategies developed and applied by the Prague International Marathon and the Valencia Marathon. Both organizers of these events share associable attributes, among which the fact that they are holders of IAAF Road Race Label recognitions and hence are relevant and convenient for comparison. The work first defines the ‘high level’ corporate mission and goals that the organizers want to achieve. Then, it continues to analyze how these goals are translated into marketing objectives, how the communication mix looks like, and which concrete actions are taken to implement this integrated system. Relevant information is gathered by direct involvement in and influence on the planning and implementation of these strategies, correspondence and personal interviews with relevant decision makers, available literature, as well as by having access to all the organizations’ publications, reports, and other documents. The result of this paper offers concrete practical examples of how the marketing and communication departments of two marathon and long distance running organizers function, which could be utilized by other marathon organizers and academic workers.

Keywords: Marathon; Marketing; Communication; Strategy; Sport.

Introduction
Modern marathon and distance running is an industry in sport that recently enjoys increasing global popularity and success. It can be argued that the expression ‘marathon’ became a brand itself, and very often a synonym for any long distance road running event. As such, it will be used throughout this document as well. For the avoidance of doubt, let’s point out that distances officially categorized, and their world records recognized by IAAF, are marathons (42.195km), half marathons (21.097km), 100km, 30km, 25km, 20km, 15km, and 10km races (IAAF, 2012). These race distances, in various forms, usually represent the product portfolio of marathon and long distance race organizers, together with other categories such as 5km race or relays.

As the attractiveness of marathon events increase, so does the competitiveness among race organizers who adopt various corporate and marketing strategies in the battle over the attention and loyalty of the growing community of runners. This work is an attempt to present how two selected organizers, the Prague International Marathon and the Valencia Marathon, perceive the running market and which marketing actions they undertake as part of their strategies. Both of

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* Sašo Belovski, PhD student, Charles University in Prague, Faculty of Physical Education and Sport
Affiliation: Charles University in Prague, Faculty of Physical Education and Sport, José Martího 31, 162 52 Praha 6, Postgraduate Student, e-mail: belovski@pim.cz; Czech Republic
the events have embedded attributes and associable parameters which qualifies them for analysis and comparison. For instance, both races are awarded with an IAAF Road Race Label which parallels the quality criteria. Moreover, the two enjoy evident exponential growth in participation and global recognition, not to mention the almost identical number of marathoners at their events. Last but not least, both organizers undertook quite interesting and rather innovative managerial decisions in the last several years that reshaped their position on the running market. Special flavour to the research adds the fact that PIM is the only single organizer in the World holding six IAAF labels for quality, whereas the President of the organizing committee of Valencia Marathon, Paco Borao, seats at the same time as Chairman of the Association of International Marathons and Distance Races (AIMS).

**Prague International Marathon**

The Prague International Marathon (PIM) is a private company based and operating in the Czech Republic. Its main business activity is organizing and promoting sport events, but also includes production of cultural and entertainment happenings (Úplný výpis, 2013). The company was founded in 1995, and in the same year the very first marathon race in Prague saw the light of day with 958 participants (PIM report, 2011). Since then, PIM has enlarged the number of core races and widen the range of parallel activities. As a result, the organisation’s portfolio in 2013 represented seven main events in Prague and the regions with over 61,000 participants, along with broad accompanying program such as concerts and festivals, congress, photo exhibitions, gala evenings and parties, or Sport Expo (Marketing presentation, 2013).

Today, PIM’s slogan ‘One Goal, One Team, One Mission’ communicates the corporate pursuit of “World Class Distance Running in Central Europe” (Corporate Mission, 2013).

Having the above in mind, we can move forward and analyse the marketing strategy and activities of the Prague International Marathon.

**Marketing and Communication strategy of PIM**

Interestingly enough, the very first impression and internal corporate belief is that the organisation nurtures two different general marketing and communication practices. The first one, obviously, targets the community of runners and potential runners as main stakeholders of the company. The second is addressed to partners, a group that involves commercial sponsors, patrons, institutions, suppliers, and charities. We can even differentiate a third community of stakeholders consisted of general public, visitors, spectators, journalists, or TV viewers (Marketing presentation, 2013).

Even though the company is able to distinguish separate marketing and communication strategy towards each of the mentioned groups, in this paper we will stay close to the community of runners as focal point and strategic interest.

Runners can be differentiated as ‘elite runners’ on one side and ‘amateur runners’ on the other. Whereas the elites are very important chain in building company’s image, sportive prestige, and international recognition, the crucial focus group remains to be the so-called ‘normal people’, amateur or leisure runners. The bottom-line marketing strategy for both groups is recognized in PIM’s main promise to be ‘runner-centric’ (Corporate Mission, 2013).
One of the main marketing directions and central communication tools that follow this promise is investing in, achieving, and then communicating the IAAF Road Race Labels. These international awards, coming in Gold, Silver, or Bronze, are simply perceived as a ‘stamp of quality’ as they require fulfilment of strict criteria such as, among else, strong elite runners start field and doping controls, pre-determined services and safety measures for all runners, officially measured course and timing systems, or TV broadcasting and other media coverage (IAAF, 2013). The Prague International Marathon and its project RunCzech are holders of two Gold and four Silver Labels, making the organisation among the most admired in the world. “You have every right to base your communication strategy as the best marathon organisation worldwide”, comes out from the mouth of IAAF representatives and other race organisers on various occasions. The fact that the city of Usti nad Labem is the smallest place on earth holding a Label only helps to have catchy and memorable communication actions. As a result, the six Labels are graphically and textually translated and used in the whole communication mix, starting from outdoor, print, and digital media, through stationery layouts and PR occasions, to direct marketing and race day branding.

Another essential marketing advantage is the positioning of the events as prestigious and exclusive with one of the most beautiful scenery courses. It is fair enough to say that this claim evolved from the opportunistic fact that the streets in the centre of Prague and other Czech regional capital cities are narrow, which limits the capacity of runners. The positioning became especially applicable since 2010, the year when all races from the RunCzech portfolio were sold out in advance. “The market is changing and we need to make decisions fast”, says Capalbo, founder and president of the organising committee, and continues, “the running-mania and marathon boom typical for the United States and Western Europe in the 80’s and 90’s finally came to the Czech Republic” (Capalbo, 2013). “We could have moved the start and finish of the races to the periphery and double the capacity, but we prefer to stay in the city centres and become even more runner-centric by investing in quality and by improving services”, almost simultaneously explains the rest of the PIM team. This marketing message is being conveyed to the stakeholders through the company’s communication mix and by phrases like ‘sold out’ or ‘beautiful course where no one rush to finish’.

The organisation is very careful not to neglect any communication tool and, as a result, its audience reach is quite widespread, timely expanded, and deeply penetrated into the market. The platform includes all generally used forms of media channels and basically the full communication mix defined by Kotler (2009), where special attention is given to non-conventional methods of spreading the marketing message. Few examples of how the company approaches this matter are:

- outdoor spaces (billboards, city lights, posters, mega boards, video screens)
- print media (advertisement, invitations, countdowns)
- television and radio (invitations, jingles, announcements, broadcasting, TV magazine)
- direct marketing (promotional stands, distribution of fliers, newsletters)
- digital media (corporate website, social websites, web banners)
- PR (press conferences, press releases, special supplements)
- non-conventional ideas (“come again to run the Czech Republic” slogan on the boxes where people place their belongings before passing the passport control at the Prague Airport and leave the country)
It can be said that one special marketing and communication channel is the event day and the races themselves. Transferring the marketing message of a company is most effective through one’s personal experience or given reference. PIM’s and sport events in general have the opportunity to leverage on this platform and create emotional bond with its stakeholders (Marketing presentation, 2013).

The above mentioned marketing messages and communication tools are addressed to the community of runners as a whole. However, PIM recognizes the fact that different running communities have different needs and, therefore, its strategies are targeted and dispersed differently. Some of the groups of runners and other stakeholders that the organisation fosters and interacts with in diverse way are:

- first timers (starting guidelines of how to drink or dress, special brochures)
- loyal runners (loyalty membership cards, discounts on registrations)
- women (special project Women’s Challenge, special t-shirts, newsletters, gatherings)
- local runners (contests, TV running magazine, running clubs)
- foreigners (fliers and website in 11 languages, welcome package, accommodation offers)
- families (Family runs, mini-marathon, customized t-shirts, diplomas, medals)
- corporate runners and CEOs (team races, Gala Evening, CEO Challenge)
- volunteers (equipment, volunteers’ parties, presents from partners)
- students (Junior Marathon, University Run, running excursions, meeting with elites)
- other communities (embassies – fastest embassy teams; barmen – Barmen’s show)

Before we move onwards, it is important to mention the organisation’s future plans, partially implemented in 2013, but mainly planned for the 2014 season. Namely, the organisation is in the process of launching two new projects, the Running Mall and the RunCzech Running League. The Running Mall is the new headquarters of the PIM organizing team. It is a quite unique initiative which represents a physical hub for the running community, a place where runners have a chance to meet, share experiences, train together, rest, have workshops, purchase running equipment, or just spend a quality time together with people sharing same interests and passion. Namely, the Running Mall consists of the PIM Running Club, Zatopek Conference Room, Water Bar, adidas running store, Sport Lounge, and RunCzech Elite Racing Team. The RunCzech Running League offers runners a unique ranking system where they can compete among each other in categories based on gender, age, but most importantly profession. The main idea is to offer the adrenaline of competitiveness, something that doesn’t really exist in the running industry. The crucial communication conveyor of this league, supported by all the general tools, will be a new runner-centric digital platform led by an interactive and runner friendly corporate website and Runners ID system.

Valencia Marathon

The Valencia Marathon has been inaugurated in 1981. “In those times, the word ‘marathon’ was not even in the vocabulary of the people of Valencia”, laughs Paco Borao, the president of the organizing committee, trying to make a parallel with the present day situation (Borao, 2013). The event is being co-organized by the SD Correcaminos sport association and the Valencia City Hall
The SD Correcaminos organization as such, engages two main corresponding activities, managing a sport club and acting as event organizer. On one side, the sport club represents a hub for the local community of active people and it offers variety of benefits for its members. On the other hand, the event portfolio extends not just to different running races, but also comprise events such as triathlon and other outdoor activities (SD Correcaminos, 2013).

For what regards road race running, the two flagship happenings of the organization and the city are the half marathon and the marathon events. Sharing similar historical development with other World’s road running races, the Valencia races as well grew out and transformed from local occasions for few enthusiasts to international grand sporting events for the mass population. Today, the Valencia Marathon and Half Marathon are perceived as integral part of the local social, cultural, and sporting life, and among the leading mass participation running events in the World. Their influence has long exceeded the athletic challenge, and their social impact is now being conveyed through a rich accompanying program such as music concerts, parties, art exhibitions, fairs, charity actions, and other (Press Kit, 2013).

Marketing and Communication strategy of Valencia Marathon

The Valencia Marathon had 3,600 runners in 2010 with only 10% of foreigners. Since then, the event has experienced an exponential growth in participation which has increased by 140% in these last three years, with 22% of runners coming from abroad. As the organizers announced, this fact meant their marathon has had the highest growth rate in Europe in the last three seasons (Press Kit, 2013). While it is true that ‘marathon’ as brand indeed enjoys mounting popularity and is becoming a worldwide trend, the organizer of the Valencia Marathon tends to rather attribute this success to a well thought marketing strategy and innovative management model. This model has been developed and realized thanking to the trust and support of new sponsors, and with direct involvement of the Valencia City Hall who has imminent interest in terms of international promotion, tourism, and overall economic impact for the city (Borao, 2013). The strategic steps were manifold, translated into clear marketing plans and concrete actions.

First of all, the name of the event has changed from the habitual ‘Marathon Popular de Valencia’ to the new ‘Divina Pastora Valencia Marathon’. While it is obvious that this change was inspired by rather opportunistic and commercial motives, it still evoked a symbolic association to the new image and new era of the event.

Regarding the participation growth and overall expansion of the marathon, the statistics were showing that the race reached a point of stagnation and alarmed that changes were necessary. The organizers, analyzing the potential weaknesses and external threats of what might cause the obstacle for development, reaffirmed two crucial factors influencing the runner’s behaviour. First, the number of weeks in the calendar year is limited, bearing in mind that all major marathon events are traditionally taking place during the weekend. Given the fact that there are far more marathon races around the globe than weekends available, it is obvious that many marathon events in different cities overlap and happen in the same day. Moreover, an average amateur marathon runner participates in one, maybe two marathons per year. As a result, a runner, especially a foreign runner travelling for this purpose, very carefully chooses his or her race, very often based mostly on the most convenient time and place during the year. Now, considering that the Valencia Marathon, taking place in February, more or less overlaps with races in Paris, London, Rome, Milan, Barcelona, Madrid and Seville, it reduces its chances to fight over runners’ attention and
commitment. Second, the ideal temperature for running a marathon, accepted by rule of thumbs, is approximately 15 degrees Celsius. This factor is particularly important for those running a marathon for the first time in their lives, and hence, respecting the magnitude of the challenge, are seeking for the perfect conditions for their first ever experience. Understanding these two aspects of the runner’s decision making process, the organizers reached a conclusion to move the date of the event from February to the second half of November. This decision has achieved both avoiding direct competition with other important marathons, and securing pleasant weather conditions that are characteristic for Valencia in that period of the year (Press Kit, 2013).

Another strategic and marketing decision that proved to be crucial for the emerging success of the event is connected with the modification of the race course. Namely, it has already been described that a marathon event represents not just an athletic challenge and achievement, but also a platform for social, cultural, interpersonal, and emotional experience. Runners, besides demanding a fast and technically sufficient course in order to reach their personal best, they are also seeking for a scenic atmosphere, appealing routes, and friendly ambient through which they can discover the city from a different ‘running’ angle (Borao, 2013). The decision and action taken to alternate the race map reached the desired goal and resulted with multiple benefits. Spreading mostly along the sea side with literally irrelevant elevation of 23 meters above sea level, the new course proved to pull off unprecedented fast times in Spain, at the same time ensuring scenery of both natural and urban landscapes. Moreover, inspired by the races in London and New York, the organizers work on motivating local citizens to fill the streets, participate, cheer, and support the runners. There are over 60 music and entertainment points covering the route strategically and giving an opportunity to the runners to enjoy every kilometre. Nevertheless, the magical touch that seems to secure an unmatched competitive advantage for the Valencia Marathon is the positioning of the start and finish line of the race. The City of Art and Science, situated in Valencia, has been regarded as a masterpiece of the XXI century architecture and engineering. This is the place which gives runners a unique experience and impression of running on water while passing the starting and finishing line, and fascinates the thousands of spectators around (Press Kit, 2013).

An additional aspect that was determined and implemented within the new innovative model was the incorporation of a 10km race as part of the marathon event. The reaction of the running community was again appreciative and brought along multiple benefits and positive effects. First, it gave chance to those not feeling prepared for the 42km distance, but wishing to be part of the festive happening, to take an active participation in the event. Indeed, more than 6000 runners took advantage to participate in this more attainable, but not less exciting and spectacular race than its big brother. Furthermore, the cumulative amount of runners at the start line achieved an impression of bigger spectacle and magnitude (Press Kit, 2013).

The chain of reforms can be closed with one last but not less important alteration that the organizers undertook. It is already a common practice that a marathon event is practically joined with a trade fair. These exhibitions, usually known as Sport Expo, are however not limited only to the sport business, but engage a wider spectrum of tourist, entertainment, gastronomy, and even less associative industries. Remembering the fact that the Valencia Marathon is co-organized by the City Hall, we can imagine the importance and the demand for this accompanying event to be successful. It is not of a big surprise the implementation of the ‘free entry’ system in order to attract visitors, something that is generally practiced around the World. Nor it is a big innovation the fact that every runner must personally visit the Expo in order to pick up his or her starting kit, a manoeuvre that secures guaranteed attendance and traffic. Anyhow, a small simple assessment the
organizers did once more proved efficient, that is to bring the Sport Expo again to the City of Art and Science and take full advantage of what this unique facility has to offer.

At the end, it’s worth mentioning the IAAF Road Race Label award that the event holds. Even though this recognition doesn’t seem to be among the focal points of the strategic transformation, the organizers don’t fail to include it in the marketing and communication tools, something that certainly contributes to the prestige and differentiates the Valencia Marathon on the map of World’s major road running events.

**Conclusion**

Both Prague International Marathon and Valencia Marathon are events that experienced evident success in the last years. This success is being perceived and measured by several various immediate or long-term results. For instance, the significant increase of the number of runners by each year confirms the fast growing popularity of the races, whereas the international promotion of the events contributes to the long lasting positive image of the cities.

It can be concluded that both events have lot in common. Both strive for quality and ultimate satisfaction of their core communities, something that can be translated in tangible terms through the IAAF Road Race Labels. Both have similar stakeholders recognized in runners, sponsors, spectators, or institutions, which makes their line of business influential for various related or less related industries. Both marathons handle and serve similar amount of runners, offering them not only a single day athletic challenge, but a much larger festive spectacle on the event day and continuous year-round platform for social interaction and emotional experience. At the end of the day, both organizations operate in a relatively emerging market with huge opportunity for growth, but at the same time a market that becomes increasingly saturated and competitive.

In any case, it can also be concluded that each organizer adopted and undertook bit different approach when it comes to corporate strategy and marketing goals. It seems not uncommon that the sometimes managerial decisions are being adjusted to the external opportunities or threats that these race organizers have to face. For example, the narrow streets in the city centre of Prague contributed to build an image of an exclusive and highly demanded race. In Valencia, it was the temperature, among other factors, that influenced the decision to change the date of the event. However, many other decisions are, of course, accredited to strategic analysis and management tactics. PIM has made a decision to expand geographically by introducing its new ‘one of a kind’ RunCzech project, a concept which is only at the beginning of its development but already brings fruits. On the other hand, the organizer of the Valencia Marathon concentrated its efforts to accentuate the appeal of their flagship race by alternating the start and finish of the race, improving the race course, or investing in accompanying and social events.

To finalize, the market offering of both organizers is something that is flourishing. They see the formula for surviving on the market in being innovative, modern, unconventional, and always remain runners oriented. Moreover, they operate in an industry and era which demands not only business philosophy, but also insists on progressive social intentions and actions.

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