

INFLUENCER MARKETING IN BRAND COMPETITIVENESS BUILDING (CASE OF BALTIC NATUR PARK)

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Purpose: The objective of the paper is to assess the role of influencer marketing in effectively building and increasing brand competitiveness.

Design/methodology/approach: The paper was written on the basis of an analysis of the literature of the subject and it presents the case of Baltic Natur Park based in Niechorze, which employed the tools of influencer marketing to build the company's image and develop its brand on the market of tourist services in the coastal region, and which simultaneously managed to increase the competitiveness of its operations.

Findings: The implementation of influencer marketing in Baltic Natur Park has significantly affected brand development by increasing the quality and quantity of the orders the brand fulfilled. The results achieved by Baltic Natur Park demonstrate explicitly a positive assessment of influencer marketing in brand promotion.

Research limitations/implications: The analysis conducted further provides evidence that influencer marketing may constitute promotion not only of a brand itself, but also, when used in a broader scope, it may improve a region's competitiveness.

Practical implications: The study results are also a signal for all institutions and individuals, including managers, individuals managing a brand and a region, that the use of contemporary marketing tools for brand promotion, such as, inter alia influencer marketing, is an option worth considering.

Originality/value: The article presents a case study and can be an example and inspiration for other companies when taking innovative actions to build a competitive brand on the market. In addition, it can be used by scientists, business practitioners and students.

Keywords: marketing, influencer marketing, brand, competitiveness.

Category of the paper: research paper, case study.

1. Introduction

The diversity and the wealth of contemporary supply of goods and services forces companies to constantly compete in order to maintain their market position. Being competitive in relation to market rivals is a way for an organization to gain a competitive advantage. A competitive advantage on the contemporary market can, on the one hand, be ensured by the products and services offered, their functional properties, quality, price and brand, its perception and image among users. On the other hand, innovative activities spreading the knowledge about a company and its offer among potential buyers seem extremely important. The objective of this paper is to assess the role of influencer marketing in effectively building and increasing brand competitiveness. Therefore, an attempt was made to answer the question: whether and how influencer marketing can influence building and increasing the competitiveness of the brand?

The paper was written on the basis of an analysis of the literature of the subject and it presents the case of Baltic Natur Park based in Niechorze, which employed the tools of influencer marketing to build the company's image and develop its brand on the market of tourist services in the coastal region, and which simultaneously managed to increase the competitiveness of its operations. The paper features a description of the company's current operations related to influencer marketing as well as their results.

2. The significance of a brand for the competitiveness of an organization – theoretical aspects

Constant environment changes require the companies operating on the market and competing against one another to use many adaptive methods in order to maintain a competitive advantage. A competitive advantage allows an organization to achieve a significant, or even superior position in relation to its competitors, while at the same time it constitutes a result of the actions and strategies undertaken by a company in order to adapt to its clients' needs and expectations when offering specific products and services, better ones than those offered by competitors. A competitive advantage is given various definitions in the literature of the subject (Żabiński, 2000, p. 202; Moroz, 2003, p. 41). There is also no explicit view and classification of the factors that influence an organization's achievement of competitive advantage (Porter, 1990; Ma, 2000; Nowacki, 2015, pp. 446-462; Sołoducho-Pelc, 2016, p. 453; Nowacki, 2017, p. 155).

Organizations, in their long-term development strategies, try also to consider their long-term competitive advantage. They look for new, innovative, and at the same time efficient and effective ways, methods and tools that will enable them to raise their competitive position and competitiveness. The competitiveness of each enterprise results from market competition and it reflects the manner in which such an enterprise competes against other rivals. Similarly to the concept of a competitive advantage, in the case of competitiveness the literature provides multiple interpretations of that idea. Competitiveness may reflect a company's method of competing on the market, the ability to maintain its position on the market, the ability to grow, as well as the ability to benefit, to achieve profits and a competitive advantage (Zaorska, 1998; pp. 7-9; Abbas, 2000, p. 4; Nowacki, 2015; Szymanik, 2016; Kraszewska, Pujer, 2017, pp. 8-11).

When the competitiveness of an organization is analysed, the ability of supplying customers with goods and services they expect is doubtlessly an issue of importance, bearing in mind not only the application of such goods, but also the adaptation of such goods and services in terms of their quality, place and specific customers' requirements. When making final purchase decisions, buyers try to satisfy their needs and through shopping they try to overcome an unsatisfactory, to their minds, state of affairs (Schiffman, Wisenblit, 2015, p. 47). Simultaneously, the time spent on shopping, as well as the analyses of market offers of goods and services that precede the act of shopping ought to maximise the usefulness of the choice made. Consumers' behaviour is typically linked to the desire of satisfying one's needs, standing out against others, achieving a certain status, standard of living, or gaining prestige, relieving stress and using one's time in an optimal manner (Zalega, 2012, p. 26; Włodarczyk, 2013). Shopping behaviour is undertaken under the influence of various stimuli and it is shaped by multiple determinants. On the one hand, through market behaviour consumers fulfil their individual needs and wants, while on the other hand consumers are subjected to the influence of external factors. One of the factors that significantly shapes the behaviour of contemporary society is a brand (Solomon, 2006, p. 213; Schiffman, Wisenblit, 2015, p. 168).

According to P. Kotler (2006), a brand is not just a sign, a logotype, but it is also a promise and an assurance on the company's part that influences the strategy of its operations; a brand is perceived, in a nutshell, as communication between a company and its stakeholder. In the conditions of increasing competition and dynamic environment, building a strong and stable brand, one that is simultaneously perceived to be trustworthy by brand consumers, becomes a priority to those companies that wish to improve their competitiveness on the market. The following brand-building elements can be distinguished in companies' operations: customer brand loyalty; brand awareness; perception of brand quality by consumers; other customers' associations with a brand (i.e. brand image components) as well as other brand component properties (Witek-Hajduk, 2011, p. 52). Furthermore, wide-ranging marketing activities allow for brand value management (Doyle, 2003). The entirety of the operations conducted within the scope of brand value management is known as branding (Murphy, 1988).

Branding involves building a brand image and differentiating it against competitors as well as creating brand awareness among consumers. Relations with buyers are created through branding and at the same time the values that differentiate a brand are emphasised. Additionally, thanks to such activities, trust is built among customers and their loyalty is won (Kall, 2001; Urbanek, 2002, pp. 53-59; Kall, Kłeczek, Sagan, 2013, pp. 37-40; Skrzypek. Pinzaru, 2017; Kotarbiński, 2021).

The process of brand building is comprised of several stages occurring one after another. The first stage is an analytical one, the second stage – is conceptual, and the third stage – concerns implementation (Moroz, 2008, p. 37). During the first stage preliminary work on a brand is undertaken and the purpose of that stage involves defining internal and external communication conditions. As a result of the first stage a company's profile is specified along with the assumptions of a marketing strategy, and in particular the policy related to the brand, product range is planned, furthermore, competition and distribution capabilities are identified, a target group is determined. Therefore, the process of brand building starts with defining and approximating potential customers, developing a brand value and its mission. The second stage – a conceptual one, entails forming a brand identity, as well as creating its name and logotype. Brand identity is a form that the brand symbolizes. Within the scope of a brand identity it is possible to differentiate features and emotions that are assigned to the brand. The third stage – the one related to implementation, involves brand implementation and developing methods of brand presentation and communication strategy. The key components of that stage include: a logotype, an advertising slogan, and a colour scheme (Moroz, 2008, p. 37; Dolińska-Weryńska, 2015).

Therefore, as can be observed, a brand constitutes a significant marketing tool that an organization may use to build its competitive advantage. Effective activities related to branding enable developing a major company resource, and they constantly enhance the influence on customers' shopping behaviour. However, looking from the perspective of a contemporary consumer, a fairly substantial problem arises. Companies need to reach potential buyers in an effective manner through messages sent, but it is worth noting the fact that an average customer operates in a situation of information overload and has a broad range of products and services to choose from, which does not make decision-taking any easier. That is why organizations face a challenge of selecting a adopting communication channel for a potential customer. In this article the focus was placed on the role of marketing influencers in impacting buyers' behaviour as an important contemporary communication channel between an organization and a customer.

3. Influencer marketing

Influencer is a person who attracts a certain audience, people who trust the influencer, who share interests, and the relations that link them are strong enough for the recommendation of an influencer in a given group to be more effective than a low-budget advertising campaign (Kuczamer-Kłopotowska, Piekarska, 2018, p. 163). In the literature of the subject influencers are perceived as “influential opinion leaders who provide advantage over current promotional campaigns” (Wilusz, 2017, p. 251). In turn, seeking and promoting a brand by influencer in a given target group is called influencer marketing (Wilusz, 2017, p. 250).

In the process of brand promotion influencer marketing involves using the strength of an influencer’s impact on the influencer’s audience via electronic means of communication and encouraging them to shop for products and services (Jaskra, Gomoła, Werenowska, 2019). Three types of influencers can be distinguished within the scope of influencer marketing (Wilusz, 2017):

- a) nanoinfluencers – they attract fewer than 1000 followers in their social media channels, they gather around a rather small audience and the definition usually encompasses individuals known in a given region,
- b) microinfluencers – they have between 1000 and 100 000 followers in their social media channels, they use effective hashtags, they have a defined group of target audience and they know very well how to communicate with it, they reply to messages and comments on their own,
- c) celebrities and megainfluencers – social media superstars, they are people who have more than a million followers in their social media channels, they are public figures liked by most of the public. Musicians, politicians, actors, sportspeople and celebrities dominate in that group.

Brands can choose among the influencers who enjoy substantial popularity and trust among followers and undertake cooperation with them in the capacity of the so-called brand ambassadors. A brand ambassador is a person who thanks to their recognisability increases both the recognisability and sales of products or services of a brand. A brand ambassador ought to identify with the brand, through their appearance, behaviour, values and ethics. Through long-term cooperation with an influencer, a brand strengthens its relations with customers, and in the era of information society any actions related to influencer marketing gain in importance (Jin, Muqaddam, Ryu, 2019). Influencers are an opportunity for strengthening brand image, they effectively affect their followers by sending messages to potential customers (Tworzydło, Życzyński, Wajda, 2019).

According to the literature of the subject, several stages of influencers' activities can be distinguished. In the initial stage they inspire their audience and provide information about a brand. The second stage involves customers' deliberations and shopping decisions, followed by the third stage – a shopping reaction, which ought to be satisfactory to the customer (Stubb, Nystrom, Colliander, 2019).

As already mentioned, influencer marketing has been constantly gaining in importance. According to Influencer Marketing Benchmark, the value of the marketing influencer sector by the end of 2021 grew to 13.8 billion dollars in relation to 9.8 billion figure of the previous year (www.influencermarketinghub.com). The Nielsen Company, a global research company based in New York, forecasts that in 2022 the value of the marketing influencer sector will exceed 15 billion dollars (www.nilsen.com).

Cooperation with influencers provides a chance for strengthening brand image and value, it brings many benefits, including above all: activating followers in the social media, increasing followers' involvement, creating authentic content, increasing trust in the brand and its products, establishing contacts with the audience during various mass events (e.g. a fashion show, fairs), reaching a target group quickly and precisely (a brand ambassador), creating brand image and value through values (a brand ambassador), promoting a brand as innovative and modern, increasing brand authenticity, ensuring increased liking of the company and greater trust in brand services and products (Stopczyńska, 2018).

4. Baltic Natur Park – case study¹

For the purpose of this paper, in order to demonstrate the effectiveness of influencer marketing in raising brand competitiveness, an analysis of Baltic Natur Park company operations based in Niechorze in the West Pomeranian Province was presented.

Baltic Natur Park is a comfortable resort located in Niechorze on the coast. The brand has been operating on the market in the tourist sector since 2018. Its houses and apartments with a park view are located next to Lake Liwia Łuża nature reserve. The resort occupies the surface of 13 000 m². The main offer comprises: accommodation and relaxation close to nature, which also features a fishing pond, a heated swimming pool, a wellness and spa zone, places of relaxation giving opportunity of bird watching and nature reserve observation, a playground, a beach volleyball court, a bike and quad rental, a café and drink bar, a mini zoo. The main brand values include: celebrating slow life, sustainable development, contact with nature as well as healthy and active lifestyle.

¹ Elaborated on the basis of the data provided by Baltic Natur Park and Agenza.

For the purposes of the study the following activities of Baltic Natur Park were specified for analysis:

- assessment of the outreach that Baltic Natur Park brand had in its social media channels prior to using influencer marketing, during its course and after concluding cooperation with influencers,
- assessment of advantages and disadvantages of employing influencer marketing in the operations of Baltic Natur Park resort.

The analysis was conducted for the period of 2020-2022. The analysis took into consideration data from social media channels as well as the number of visitors to the website of Baltic Natur Park brand, which was using influencer marketing in the period lasting from 01.01.2021 to 31.12.2021 in order to promote the brand and the region. The obtained results were compared to analogous data from the periods before influencer marketing was used (year 2020) and after it was concluded (year 2022).

As was previously mentioned, the brand of Baltic Natur Park has existed since 2018. It started cooperating with a marketing agency Agenza from Gryfice in the West Pomeranian Province in 2020. Before commencing the cooperation with the agency, Baltic Natur Park used to run channels in the social media through which it communicated with its customers. The most frequently selected forms of marketing included: paid promotional advertising in the social media, SEO positioning and outbound marketing in the summer season. The first step of the cooperation undertaken with the specialized marketing agency involved specifying more precisely the brand profile. It was assumed that the profile would remain unchanged during and after the period of using new tools of brand building and promotion. Moreover, it was agreed that the services rendered by the brand would be of premium quality. It was established that influencer marketing would be a new instrument of promoting the brand of Baltic Natur Park. Following that, the method of selection of influencers for cooperation and brand promotion was examined. The choice of influencers was made by Agenza marketing agency on the basis of an analysis of the Chief Statistical Office's data regarding changes in the demand for tourist services (for 2016-2020) and the agency's own study regarding changes in the structure and hierarchy of consumers (study from 2018, 2019). According to the agency's study it was found that a group of target clients for Baltic Natur Park brand include people interested in aesthetic impressions, following fashion, valuing brand products and quality and being sensitive to opinions about themselves. 721 influencers replied to the agency's advertisement for the promotion of Baltic Natur Park brand. Out of that group six influencers were chosen, and eventually cooperation was proposed to four of them. The criteria for choosing influencers required cohesion between brand values and influencers, as well as the brand profile (content) (Table 2). The following influencers decided to cooperate with Baltic Natur Park brand in 2021:

- Gosia Kurek – a representative of high-quality products, of healthy life style and nutrition, an expert on the subject in a morning TV programme „Pytanie na Śniadanie” (“A question for breakfast”), who runs an Instagram profile: gohfitfan (had the outreach of 15 200 thou. followers in 2021);
- Katarzyna Węgrzyn – a bestseller author of “Gdzie w Polsce na weekend” (“Where to go in Poland for a weekend”), a connoisseur of interesting, high-end and niche locations in Poland, who has an Instagram profile: gdziewpolscenaweekend (with an outreach of 90 000 followers in 2021);
- Tomasz Torres – a drummer of Afromental band, with an Instagram profile: tomektorres (37 500 followers in 2021) with his wife Paulina (Instagram profile: pinalaba - 27 200 followers), who create profiles promoting a healthy lifestyle, quality products, living in harmony with nature, work-ideal-balance. They are finalists of “The Power Couple” programme and ambassadors of “Poznaj Polskę” (“Get to know Poland”) campaign - travelist.pl - 2021.
- the Lastowicz spouses – trip advisors – Izabela and Grzegorz, who created an Instagram account: lastowicze - (47 300 followers in 2021); winners of the best Rainbow partner statue in 2021, Starway’21 Tourism Award - 2021.

Inviting influencers to cooperate with Baltic Natur Park brand in 2021 changed the marketing techniques employed by the company (Table 1), but at the same time it enabled maintaining the company profile adopted since its beginning. The company continued to operate in the areas of: catering, accommodation and comfortable relaxation, promoting slow life, healthy life style, healthy food, work-life balance and contacts with nature.

Table 1.

Marketing techniques used by Baltic Natur Park brand in 2020-2022

Marketing techniques	Before using influencer marketing Year 2020	During cooperation with influencers Year 2021	After ending influencer marketing Year 2022
Optimization of the website SEO	Yes	Yes	Yes
Running social media	Yes	Yes	Yes
Branding	Yes	Yes	Yes
Marketing outbound	Yes	No	No
Paid promotion in the social media	Yes	No	No

Source: elaboration on the basis of the data provided by Agenza.

The cooperation with the influencers was at its core based on the fact that the brand was running the same profile of activity both before using influencer marketing, during and after concluding cooperation with the influencers. Moreover, the services rendered were maintained at a premium level. It is worth emphasising that during the examined period, along with the restrictions related to the COVID 19 pandemic (year 2020) and the transfer of many planes of activity into the virtual world, by using influencer marketing (year 2021) the brand noted a record number of orders and new followers in the social media. Furthermore, alongside the development of cooperation with influencers, the brand opened up to not just new marketing techniques, but it also initiated B2B cooperation.

Outreach is an important indicator of any marketing activity conducted on-line. Outreach constitutes a total number of viewers of a website or particular content (a post) in a given social media channel. This indicator demonstrates the number of individuals whom a given profile or a mentioned post has reached. The increase in the outreach of Baltic Natur Park brand in the social media channels in 2021, taking into account the periods during which influencer marketing was applied, is presented in Table 2.

Table 2.

Monthly outreach of Baltic Natur Park in selected social media channels in 2021, indicating the periods during which influencer marketing was used

Year 2021	Outreach on Facebook (number of individuals)	Outreach on Instagram (number of individuals)	Description of the effects of the activities undertaken by the marketing agency for Baltic Natur Park
January	72 400	330	Development of the company profile on Facebook Development of the company profile on Instagram
February	162 400	599	Development of the company profile on Facebook Development of the company profile on Instagram
March	184 300	615	Development of the company profile on Facebook Development of the company profile on Instagram
April	93 100	638	Development of the company profile on Facebook Development of the company profile on Instagram
May	115 000	996	Development of the company profile on Facebook Development of the company profile on Instagram
June	236 200	7500	Development of the company profile on Facebook Development of the company profile on Instagram Influencer marketing (Gosia Kurek - Pytanie na Śniadanie; Gdzie w Polsce na Weekend Katarzyna Węgrzyn)
July	31 200	1100	
August	191 900	2200	Development of the company profile on Facebook Development of the company profile on Instagram Influencer marketing (Tomek and Paulina Torres; Lastowicze Izabela and Grzegorz Kałb-Sieleccy)
September	154 100	2900	Development of the company profile on Facebook Development of the company profile on Instagram
October	7 000	900	Development of the company profile on Facebook Development of the company profile on Instagram
November	9 100	556	Development of the company profile on Facebook Development of the company profile on Instagram
December	76 400	1200	Development of the company profile on Facebook Development of the company profile on Instagram

Source: elaboration on the basis of the data provided by Agenza.

The results of the use of influencer marketing by Baltic Natur Park brand may be presented not just on the basis of schedules of its outreach in social media channels, but also on the basis of the outlays made on additional advertising. And so, in the presented company in 2020 before influencer marketing was used, average monthly outlays on advertising were relatively high. In 2021, when Baltic Natur Park initiated its cooperation with influencers, and when the number of followers rose substantially, additional monthly expenditure on advertising was only 10% of the amount spent the year prior. In 2022, despite already concluded cooperation with existing influencers, the number of Baltic Natur Park followers in the social media grew, while advertising spending increased to 20% of the amount of 2020.

The use of modern brand promotion tools additionally affects a rise in the number of website visitors. In the case of Baltic Natur Park the employment of influencer marketing was further reflected in the number of the company's site views (figure 1).

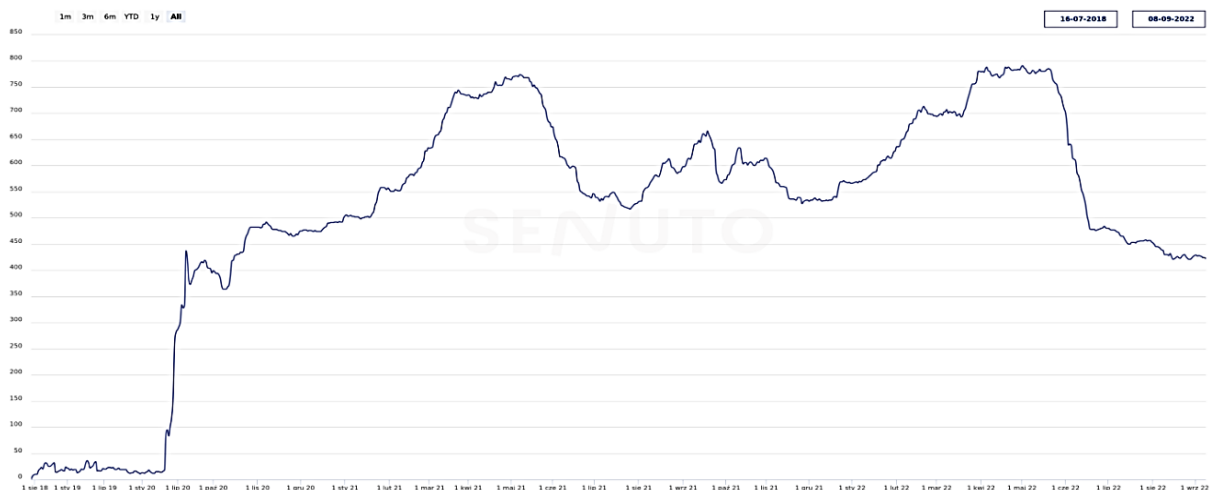


Figure 1. Number of views of Baltic Natur Park brand site between July 2018-September 2022.

Source: elaboration on the basis of the data provided by Agenza.

On the grounds of the data presented in figure 1, an increased interest in Baltic Natur Park websites can be observed during the months when influencer marketing was being employed. However, it is worth adding that, when the interest in the company's website was observed, one could notice that interest to have been growing since early 2020. After the first two years of independent operations, the company decided to take advantage of the assistance of a specialized marketing agency. From the start of the cooperation with Agenza not only did the number of visits to the website increased, but so did the previously mentioned outreach. Table 3 contains individual tools that were employed by the marketing agency for the promotion of Baltic Natur Park brand since 2020 and the stage of shaping the present brand, demonstrating at the same time the change in its outreach on Facebook and Instagram.

Table 3.

Stages of shaping Baltic Natur Park brand in the years of 2020-2022 and the change in its outreach on Facebook and Instagram

Stage	Cooperation with Agenza – actions undertaken for brand building	Outreach on Instagram (number of individuals)	Outreach on Facebook (number of individuals)
Stage I – year 2020	Cooperation initiation 04.2020 rebranding <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • making the image more cohesive in brand components • company papers • website – change and development • logotype • visual identification • social media channels • creation of a target group • development of company fan page on Facebook - 08.2020 	113 000	0
Stage II – year 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • running the social media • running the company’s website • branding services • cooperation with influencers 	889 400	13 400
Stage III – year 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • running the social media • running the company’s website • branding services • cooperation with influencers 	1 000 000	40 000

Source: elaboration on the basis of the data provided by Agenza.

On the basis of the information featured in Table 3, it may be concluded that conducting influencer marketing for the purpose of brand promotion must be preceded by other steps, which in time will enable comprehensive promotion of a cohesive brand image. The second crucial conclusion is the fact that the introduction of influencer marketing alone will not yield the desired results if it is not consistent with the operations previously conducted by a company with respect to brand promotion. Yet another issue that seems of importance in the case of implementing influencer marketing regards consistency and repeatability of the activities undertaken in that respect.

A schedule of the data for the years of 2020-2022 for Baltic Natur Park demonstrates a gradual increase in the brand’s outreach and its competitiveness. Thereby, it was confirmed that the employment of modern marketing techniques is justified and necessary for the purpose of brand promotion and improvement of its competitiveness. The analysis of the data additionally enables presenting the strengths and weaknesses that influencer marketing involves in the process of branding. Its advantages include improvement of the brand outreach in social media channels in a relatively short time, with relatively lower financial outlays made on other, less effective forms of promotion. A disadvantage of influencer marketing, considering the experience of the described brand, in Baltic Natur Park chiefly involved technical problems related to the organization and implementation of a new tool, and thereby the need to entrust such types of activities to a professional company, having the experience of such operations on the market.

5. Summary and conclusions

The implementation of influencer marketing in Baltic Natur Park has significantly affected brand development by increasing the quality and quantity of the orders the brand fulfilled. The results achieved by Baltic Natur Park demonstrate explicitly a positive assessment of influencer marketing in brand promotion. The analysis conducted further provides evidence that influencer marketing may constitute promotion not only of a brand itself, but also, when used in a broader scope, it may improve a region's competitiveness. The study results are also a signal for all institutions and individuals, including managers, individuals managing a brand and a region, that the use of contemporary marketing tools for brand promotion, such as, inter alia influencer marketing, is an option worth considering. An important indicator is the fact that organizations wishing to develop should also open up to cooperation with external marketing-branding agencies, specialized in that regard, benefiting from their experience and giving them freedom to act.

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