PLANNING OF AN URBAN IMAGE STRATEGY AND BARRIERS TO ITS IMPLEMENTATION

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Abstract

The aim of the article has been to characterize the planning of urban identity strategy as well as to underline some crucial barriers to its successful implementation. The author's own research shows that in most Polish towns and cities actions undertaken to shape a desirable urban image are consciously planned. The process of constructing and selling the image of a town is most often one of the major objectives for municipal authorities. However, plans dealing with the shaping of urban identity are typically short-term ones, and very few towns conduct surveys and studies on conditions underlying urban image strategies or the current perception of a town by particular target groups and their expectations as regards the town image. Insufficient knowledge of the market is one of the key factors which impede successful implementation of urban image strategies by towns and cities in Poland.

PLANOWANIE STRATEGII TOŻSAMOŚCI MIASTA ORAZ BARIERY JEJ REALIZACJI

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Abstrakt

Celem artykułu było scharakteryzowanie procesu planowania strategii tożsamości miasta oraz wskazanie najistotniejszych barier w jej realizacji. Z przeprowadzonych badań wynika, że w większości miast polskich działania mające na celu kształtowanie ich pożądanego wizerunku są świadomie planowane. Ustalono, że jest to jeden z najważniejszych celów w zarządzaniu miastem. Jednak plany dotyczące kształtowania tożsamości miasta najczęściej mają charakter krótkookresowy, poza tym w większości miast nie prowadzi się badań na temat uwarunkowań kształtowania strategii

tożsamości, aktualnego wizerunku miasta w poszczególnych grupach docelowych oraz oczekiwań odbiorców odnośnie tożsamości miasta. Związana z tym nieznajomość rynku jest jedną z istotnych barier realizacji skutecznych strategii tożsamości miast polskich.

Introduction

European integration within the EU common market has created new conditions for development of all entities in the European economy, including towns. It is obvious that large cities and agglomerations in Europe compete with one another to achieve the highest functions in the existing hierarchy. This is also the case of Poland, especially among large, internationally important cities. In the past no competition between towns in Poland existed, and but its recent emergence has been a consequence of the system transformation compounded by processes of integration with the EU. Inter-city competition is most often understood as struggle to gain various advantages, such as obtaining access to funds, attracting external investors, capturing and preserving capital in own region, establishing seats of state agencies and institutions, hosting and organizing international events, etc. In a broader sense, inter-city competition can be said to comprise struggle for social and economic development that will guarantee high quality of living conditions (KLASIK 2001, p. 23). In the light of growing globalization, competition for resources (which are being depleted) is becoming less essential, while a competitive advantage of one town over another more frequently stems from its subjective image perceived by the general population. Thus, in gaining a competitive advantage it is becoming increasingly important to be able to affect the image of a city by creating a desired urban identity. However, activities which aim at shaping a town identity cannot be single or incidental efforts as those will produce little effect. They should be carefully planned and monitored during their execution in terms of the aims they strive to achieve. Towns should realize a strategy of urban identity, which will constitute a complex plan of building a desirable image of a town.

The issue of building urban identity is largely unrecognized as far as its methodology is concerned, although in many towns mayors, councils and city managers have noticed its practical importance. Nonetheless, town authorities do not carry out studies on determinants of urban identity nor do they know all instruments which could be used for shaping a proper image of a town. The people in charge of urban policy and development sometimes fail to understand which of the identified determinants should be clearly exposed in a current urban identity strategy so as to attain a better, more positive view of their town. Moreover, they perceive the problem of building town identity as a series of short-term activities rather than part of a long-term strategy. Many councils

do not plan at all. As a result, activities which aim at shaping town image are often a series of incidental, chaotic and half-baked ideas.

The present article focuses on strategies for developing town identity, and aims to describe characteristic features of the process of planning such a strategy. The research completed for the sake of this paper has also identified the most crucial obstacles to implementation of identity strategy in Polish towns.

Basic terms related to the concept of creating a town's identity

The concepts of image and identity, both in literature and in practice, are often mistakenly interpreted and sometimes even thought to be synonymous. Thus, in order to avoid wrong interpretation of the results of this study, I will start with definitions of both terms. Identity of a town is a sum of all elements which identify this town by making it distinguishable from other towns or cities. It is a set of features typical of this town, which make it different from other urban communities, and these features can be expressed by various activities undertaken in this town, which together create its personality and character (ŁUCZAK 2000, p. 48). Identity is a set of characteristics or attributes of a town, through which the town wants to be perceived by surrounding world and which are a background or a context for communication with others (WIKTOR 2001, p. 183). The features in question are the so-called identity attributes – which should be exposed and communicated to surrounding world so as to shape the town's identity that will be clear and unambiguous and that will easily distinguish a given town from its competitors. Perception of the town identity by others will eventually create a certain image of the town.

The image of a city or town can be defined as a total of ideas, attitudes and impressions, which an individual or a group of individuals express about a given town (ŁUCZAK 2001, p. 83). The image of a town is a set of ideas, attitudes, feelings and experiences of a single person or many people concerning a given town, which is full of nuances, relatively permanent and easily communicable. The ideas can be objective or subjective, thus including also false or very emotional views (ŻYMINKOWSKI 2003, p. 7). It is an aggregate of rational and emotional attributes related to a given town. It is a collection of communiques concerning this town, and shaping its personality and reputation in the eye of surrounding communities (WEBSTER 1991, p. 297). The image of a city is a multi-dimensional structure of impressions we hold about it (DILLER 1992, 434). In short, it is a sum of positive and negative ideas which we associate with a given town, including our concept of its future development.

Such impressions are created as a result of activities undertaken by both municipal authorities and other entities which function in that town, undertaken consciously or accidentally. The image of a town is its vision created in the social mind, thus it is everything that particular subjects think about this town, the value they attach and attitudes they demonstrate to this town.

This paper focuses on an urban identity strategy, also referred to as a complex strategy of shaping the image of a town (ŻYMINKOWSKI 2003, p. 136). It should be added that a town image strategy is the first stage in the process of urban marketing – this term was imported from the USA to Germany in the 1950s (MARKOWSKI 2002, p. 13). It is a set of tools, planned in detail and supported by market research, which, by striving to the reach the aim such as formation of a town positive image, make it possible to realize other objectives set forth in the town's development strategy. The identity strategy is based on establishing the aim, i.e. desired image of a town, adopting directions of activities and allocating resources in a way that is essential for attaining the aim. The urban identity strategy is a planned set of activities and enterprises which aim at actively forming the town identity, communicating the image to surrounding world and influencing perception of the image. This is achieved with an aim of carefully selected tools.

It can therefore be hypothesized that town identity, through its strategy, shapes town image. The strategy of building a town's identity enables all entities involved in this process to shape purposefully the town's image, which is a product of decoding communiques (identity strategy tools) included in perceptions received via stimuli (URBANIAK 2003, p. 36).

Methods

The research was carried out among 206 town councils located all over Poland, in 2003-2005[1]. Towns for the survey were chosen by the layer random selection method. The whole group of towns was divided into layers according to two criteria: size (3 size groups[2]) and location (16 groups according to Poland's administrative division).

The basic research method for data collection was a categorized mail survey, which was sent to selected town councils, having first determined the most competent addressee of the survey[3]. In addition to this, telephone

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[1] The survey research was conducted in 2003. In 2004, a supplementary questionnaire was posted to towns which did not respond to the first survey. In 2005, the information was updated by the Internet.

[2] Small towns – population of10,000 to19,999; medium-sized towns – population of 20,000 to 99,000; large towns – population over 100,000.

[3] In larger towns those were persons responsible for marketing, promotion, town image creation

interviews were completed in order to gain deeper knowledge on certain subjects. The analysis of the survey results involved determination of stochastic independence of immeasurable features (quality traits) and a study on relationships between features of which at least one was quantitative in character. In order to find out whether the traits analyzed (particular elements) were correlated, Pearson's chi-square test of independence[4] was performed. Theoretical considerations related to the research were presented in a descriptive form.

Planning of how to build town identity

Each action, irrespective of its character or purpose, requires proper direction and structuring. Otherwise it will be haphazard and chaotic, thus making it less likely to be successful (BARUK 2002, p. 131). Strategic planning dealing with the shaping of town identity is a formalized process of decision making, during which a desirable future image of a town as well as means for attaining such an image are being elaborated (BUDZYŃSKI 2002, p. 89). While characterizing the process of planning of a town identity strategy in Polish towns, the first question asked to council officials was whether in their towns activities which aimed at shaping a town's desirable identity were undertaken in a premeditated and planned manner (which frequently meant a formalized fashion). The results, including the size of towns, are presented in table 1.

Table 1

Conscious planning of activities to create desirable identity of a town, according to the size of towns

Response	Population size			Total
	small towns	medium towns	large towns	
Yes	90.4	91.6	100	92.2
No	9.6	8.4	0	7.8
Evaluation of correlation	$\chi^2=4.96$; $p=0.083$			

Source: Own study

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and development strategy. In smaller towns, where no person was employed to deal with such matter, the questionnaire was addressed to mayors or persons they delegated.

⁴ The level of significance of difference was established at $\alpha=0.05$, which assumed certain degree of trust to the results obtained and is a typical significance level in research on social and economic matters. The zero hypothesis of independence between two traits (which implies a stochastic relationship between predefined elements) was discarded when $p=0.05$, (where p – probability of exceeding the calculated statistics of 2).

Although there is no statistically significant relationship between the traits analysed, the answer to the question posed seems rather clear. For the vast majority of the respondent towns, activities aimed at shaping desirable identity are extremely important. Over 90% of the surveyed group of towns planned such activities in view of an aim to achieve. Thus, it can be concluded that these towns engage in a planned execution of a strategy of building town identity (although in most cases, the realization of strategies is not formalized). In short, activities undertaken in order to shape urban identity are not incidental or haphazard. In contrast, they all serve the superior aim, such as the creation of the identity of a town. In large towns, up to 100% of the respondents declare that activities to shape urban identity are planned, which means that the awareness of the analysed issue is the largest in big cities. In medium-sized and small towns, 9% of municipal authorities on average do not pursue a planned strategy of building town identity – those communities do not have plans for shaping proper urban identity.

A starting point in building urban identity should be identification of its determinants and a study on the effects of an up-to-date strategy for creating the identity of a given town. At this stage, information is collected about factors which condition a town identity strategy, current image of a town among particular target groups and expectations regarding the identity of this town. The survey contained a question whether in the respondent towns studies were carried out to determine expectations of residents concerning desirable identity of their town. The results are given in table 2.

Table 2

Conducting surveys on inhabitants' expectations, according to the size of towns (% of towns)

Response	Population			Total
	small towns	medium towns	large towns	
Yes, regularly	6	5.3	21.4	7.8
Yes, but rather irregularly	14.5	20	39.3	20.4
Sporadically	30.1	48.4	32.1	38.8
No	49.4	26.3	7.1	33
Evaluation of correlation	$\chi^2=30.07$; $p=0.000$			

Source: Own study

Statistically significant correlation ($\chi^2=30.07$; $p=0.000$) exists between the analysed factors. It turns out that most of the towns surveyed either sporadically carry out studies on their inhabitants; expectations (38.8%) or do not undertake such studies at all (33%). Only 8% of the respondents said that in

their towns such studies were conducted regularly. Again, large towns dominated in the latter group – over 20% of cities run regular opinion polls dealing with urban identity, which then form a basis for creating the strategy of building urban identity. Most of medium-sized and small towns either do not carry out such surveys or run them sporadically. Slightly more than 5% of small and medium-sized towns survey their residents regularly. In conclusion, strategies of building urban identity in small and medium-sized towns involve activities based on intuition and ideas of persons responsible for those strategies.

A key stage in planning a strategy of urban identity development comprises determination of its aim. The main objective in that case is the shaping of a desirable image of a town. This aim belongs to the so-called psychographic objectives (ŻYMINKOWSKI 2003, p. 47). It is influenced by a very large number of factors, which makes it a multi-dimensional entity. As a result, some authors suggest that while creating an urban identity strategy one should determine the most important characteristics of the target image of a town (its attributes, i.e. identity distinguishing features), which will serve as a basis for shaping the desirable image of the town (ALTKRON 2000, p. 10). Selected, most essential characteristics of a town facilitate formation of a strategy of urban identity, which will in turn enable us to attain the set aim.

The survey conducted for the purpose of this article contained a question on the importance of a desirable image of a town for urban management. The replies are illustrated in figure 1.

It turns out that stimulation of economic activity is a key aim in urban management, as this response was indicated by 93.1% of the respondents. One possible way of attaining this goal is by increasing investment attractiveness of a town (92.6%). Investment growth will lead to greater production volume, higher employment rate, higher available incomes of the town's population and, as a result, increased consumer demand, which in turn stimulates the growth and development of the town and its surroundings and, from the viewpoint of the residents, raises their wealth and improves quality of living standards in the town (development of urban infrastructure, better access to a variety of services, appearance of new urban sub-products, etc.).

The second most important objective implied by municipal officials was the creation of a town's desirable image by pursuing a strategy for building town identity. Nearly 90 per cent (87.7%) of the surveyed towns suggested that this was one of the major objectives in urban management, as it was perceived as another possible means of attaining the main aim such as stimulation of the town's economic activity.

The respondents chose growing satisfaction of inhabitants derived from living in their town as the third most important aim in urban management
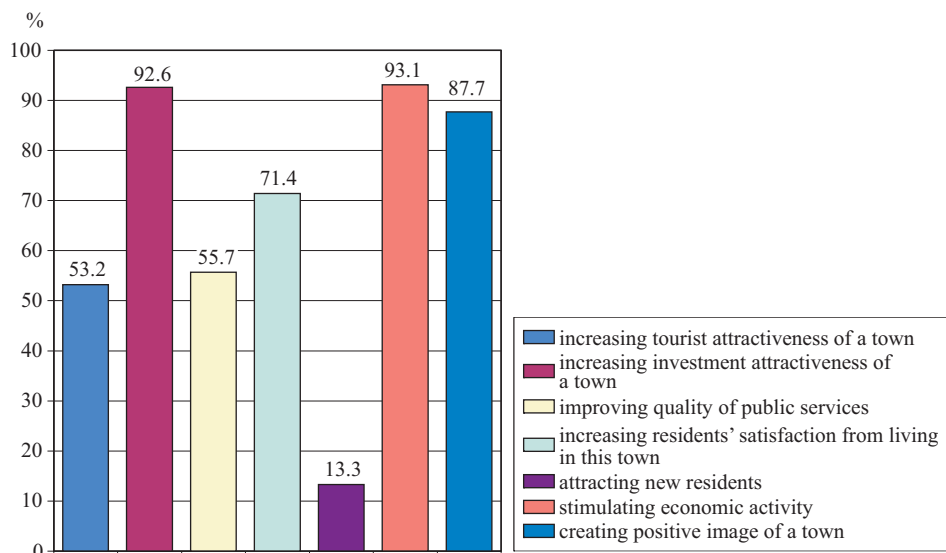
Fig. 1. Position of a desirable image in the system of primary aims of towns
Source: Own study

(70% of the surveyed population chose this aim). In addition, every other town questioned also suggested that better quality of public services and improved tourist attractiveness were important objectives in running a town. In contrast, nearly 90% of the respondents did not feel that attracting new residents was an important objective related to the creation of a desired image of a town. Recapitulating, although formation of a proper image of a town is one of the main objectives from the point of view of institutions and individuals involved in urban management in Poland, it is not considered to be a leading objective or a top priority.

While considering the formation of town image as an objective, the following three types of identity strategies pursued by towns in Poland were distinguished:

– maintaining the current image (image maintenance strategy),
– partial modification of the obtained image (improvement strategy),
– radical change of the present image (strategy of change).

The results of our studies within this area are shown in figure 2.

An identity maintenance strategy is declared by 28% of the surveyed entities. Such a strategy is preferred in towns which are satisfied of their identity and its perception outside – the current image is in accord with the desired one. In that case, the identity strategy relies on maintaining the town attributes in an unchanged shape and on the same level of distinction from
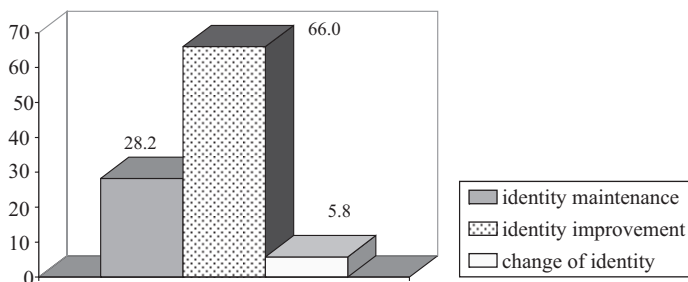
Fig. 2. Types of identity strategies including a desired image

Source: Own study

other towns. An identity maintenance strategy does not mean that "nothing is being done" regarding the town identity and image. The positive image of a town is not given once and for all – conditions around each town change and they all need to adjust to those changes. One of the advantages of an image maintenance strategy is that a town which follows it knows well which of its attributes are certain and should be exposed or strengthened so as to achieve positive perception among surrounding communities. However, in order to implement an identity maintenance strategy it is necessary to conduct research on the town image among particular groups of people who take advantage of the town's offer. Lack of such research may lead to erroneous interpretation of reality and unsuccessful realization of a town identity strategy that has not been modified on time.

It is also essential to determine the time perspective when a desired urban image should be achieved. Obviously, town image cannot be created in a short time as it involves a long-term process of shaping the awareness of customers. Thus, a desired image of a town is considered to be a strategic, long-term aim. For the purpose of reaching such a strategic aim, a bundle of operational aims must be formulated, which will support the pursuit of the image-directed target (e.g. aims within particular marketing activities are set up).

The time perspective of activities planned to build town image has also been examined. The results, according to the three size groups, are presented in table 3.

There is a statistically confirmed relationship between a time period for which urban image strategy is planned and size of towns. The highest percentage of towns plan urban image shaping activities for a short period of time, i.e. 2-3 years. Such length of time was indicated by over 40% of the respondents. Nearly 30% of the respondents chose a 5-7-year-long planning time. One in four towns suggested that they planned their image shaping strategies for longer periods of time.

Table 3

Time period of identity strategy planning according to size of towns (% of towns)

Time period	Population			Total
	small towns	medium towns	large towns	
	n = 83	*n* = 95	*n* = 28	*n* = 206
Short time period (2-3 years)	55.4	31.6	28.6	40.8
Medium time period (5-7 years)	21.7	31.6	35.7	28.2
Long time period (over 8 years)	16.9	28.4	32.1	24.3
No planning	6	8.4	3.6	6.8
Evaluation of correlation	χ^2 = 13.69; p = 0.033			

Source: Own study

As regards the size of towns, it was observed that small towns tended to realise short-term urban image strategies – one in two small towns chose a time period of 2-3 years. These towns implement operational plans, which implies activities and tools that will be used in the nearest year. In medium-sized and large towns long-term strategies dominated – one out of three towns claimed that their image building strategies covered over 8 years. In conclusion, larger towns have strategic plans for shaping a desired urban image.

Prior to delineating specific actions and tools used in an urban identity strategy, one should precisely define who those actions and tool are directed towards, i.e. identify urban offer customers (selection of a target market), a step which is preceded by market segmentation. The next stage involves determination of tools for shaping the strategy (identity-mix). The following steps in building an identity shaping strategy comprise identification of persons and institutions responsible for execution of particular tasks and then preparation of a timetable and budget. The final stage is the evaluation of the effectiveness of the strategy. Monitoring (and if necessary measurement of performed tasks) should follow completion of each essential stage and task. Depending on the results of such monitoring activities, the current strategy can be modified.

Barriers to the implementation of urban identity strategy

The present study has shown that although towns plan their identity building strategies, they not always pursue them. On the one hand, town authorities are aware that the building of a desired image is an important

objective. On the other hand, they come across certain obstacles which make it impossible to undertake planned activities. The most important obstacles are specified in table 4.

Table 4

Barriers to implenetation of urban identity strategy (%)

Barriers	Population			In total
	small towns	medium towns	large towns	
Number of surveyed towns	83	93	28	204
Lack of knowledge of marketing principles	9.6	9.7	7.1	9.3
Lack of marketing-orientated management structure	32.5	22.6	17.9	26.0
Underestimating need to conduct activities to build urban identity	28.9	31.2	35.7	30.9
Activities dispersed among various departments and individuals	39.8	44.1	57.1	44.1
Activities incidental in character – lack of systematic and continuous action	43.4	26.9	39.3	35.3
Cliche activities, limited number of original marketing forms, means and techniques	19.3	11.8	7.1	14.2
Lack of full recognition and complex information about town resources, strengths, opportunities and threats in the town's surroundings	8.4	7.5	17.9	9.3
Small budget	89.2	84.9	78.6	85.8
Lack of support on behalf of local community	27.7	32.3	14.3	27.9

Results do not add up to 100% as several responses could be chosen
Source: own study

Shortage of funds which could be allocated to implementing an image strategy is the largest barrier. Over 85% respondents pointed to narrow budget as a significant barrier, which made it impossible to realise a chosen strategy for building the town image. In over 80% of the surveyed towns, the budget for creating urban identity is established according to "available means" and those means turned out to be rather limited. As a result only some of the activities that would be useful for shaping a desired identity of a town are performed. This more often happens in small towns, of which 90% suggested that small budget was a limiting factor in implementation of an identity strategy (in large cities the percentage of respondents choosing this answer was 78.6%).

Another important barrier to an identity strategy is the fact that tasks and activities it involves are scattered among many departments and individuals. Although 80% of the towns declared that their councils comprised a separate unit responsible for execution of an identity strategy, in reality it is impossible to pursue all the tasks within one organisational unit.

It seems advisable, for the sake of proper execution of an urban identity strategy, that the activities involved be dispersed – this way, sub-strategies within the overall identity strategy are created. However, a resulting problem is lack of uniform and well coordinated execution of the planned tasks[5]. This problem concerns larger towns (nearly 60%) rather than small ones (less than 40%).

Yes another obstacle suggested by many respondents is that actions undertaken within a the town identity strategy are unsystematic and lack continuity. Although 90% of the towns surveyed suggested that they pursued actions shaping urban identity, in reality many plans were abandoned and the actual actions were accidental in character. One possible reason is that actions aimed at shaping town identity are often underestimated – this barrier was pointed to by over 30% of the respondents. Nearly 30% of those who answered our questionnaire said that a town identity strategy could not be fully implemented due to lack of complete and stable support on behalf of local communities for activities undertaken by city councils and authorities. Besides, the management structure of a typical town lacks market-oriented organisation – even though city councils have been reoriented towards market economy, which meant they opened to needs and expectations of local communities, the fact that they are still unable to respond fully to market demands causes dissatisfaction among local residents, and this in turn means that local residents do not support activities pursued by mayors and councillors. This problem appears particularly strongly in small towns, where over 30% of the respondents pointed to lack of market organisation in town management (in large towns the analogous percentage was 17.9%). Nearly 30% pointed to lack of full and stable support of local communities for activities undertaken by town authorities as another barrier (in large towns the analogous percentage was only 14%). Nearly 20% of small towns suggested that identity building activities were cliche and the marketing forms, techniques and means were limited. Only 7% of large towns pointed to this factor as an obstacle.

Other barriers in the pursuit of urban identity strategies were insufficient knowledge of marketing (9.3%) and lack of complete recognition of and complex information on a town's strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats on the surrounding market (9.3%). The latter problem appears mainly because marketing research is undervalued in urban management – this is mainly the case of large towns (18% of responses).

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[5] The conclusion was based on several interviews carries out at city councils after the written survey.

Conclusions

1. Creation of urban identity in Polish towns is not formalised although the actions undertaken for this purpose are not accidental, chaotic or ill-considered. They are all subordinated to one aim, such as a desired town image (which is perceived as one of the major objectives in urban management in Polish towns). It is therefore possible to speak about rational shaping of identity strategies in towns and cities in Poland;

2. In most Polish towns plans concerning formation of desired identity are short-term in character. Town image cannot be created in one year – this means that an urban identity strategy should be designed in a long time perspective. Then it is possible to plan activities that will be uniform and will correspond directly to a common goal.

3. Another essential element in the process of shaping an identity strategy is regular market monitoring. Strategies based on intuition and ideas held by persons who create a town identity strategy will not necessarily lead to attaining a set aim. At present, studies on residents' expectations regarding a desired identity of their town are carried out irregularly or else are not undertaken at all. As a consequence, the market surrounding a given town is largely unrecognized, which appears to be one of the major barriers to implementation of successful identity strategies.

4. In order to plan successfully an urban identity strategy, it is necessary to search for new sources of funds, as the financial means available to most of municipal authorities in Poland seem insufficient.

5. Another significant obstacle in shaping town identity in Poland is the fact that activities involved in identity strategies are dispersed among various organisational entities or individuals. As a result they are unsystematic and lack continuity. This happens even though most towns plan activities aimed at shaping urban identity, but the actual actions undertaken are sporadic. One possible reason is that local communities do not fully support activities initiated by municipal authorities. Another cause lies in the fact that urban management lacks marketing-orientated structure.

6. Urban identity strategies planned by towns often remain incomplete. On the one hand, persons in charge are aware of the importance of town image. On the other hand, the barriers mentioned above hinder activities undertaken to create a town's identity and image. Therefore, most towns declare that they pursue a current town image improvement (partial modification) strategy. The activities they undertake are expected to gradually change the current image of a town – this aim was indicated by most Polish towns when asked about objectives of their identity strategies.

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