



Benchmark Hospitality Amsterdam

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Context

During the last few years, Amsterdam gradually ranked worse on aspects such as hospitality, courtesy and attractiveness, so indicated various researches. Together with the corporate community, the municipality wants to change this. The so-called 'Red Carpet', the fact that Amsterdam welcomes its guests cordially, should be omnipresent and tangible again. Amsterdam has to become more hospitable (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2006: 4-5, translated by the author).

Amsterdam is known worldwide. Not only tourists from all-over but also international companies come to visit the city or to settle their European headquarters in it. The Dutch mentality of entrepreneurship has a lot of advantages: the Dutch speak their languages fluently; they are open-minded and very tolerant. But there are also a few remarks to make about this mentality. One of them is the Dutch bluntness. Dutch people are very direct and say what they think. 'Amsterdammers' the inhabitants of Amsterdam are not different. As residents of the country's capital they behave sometimes even more direct than the inhabitants of the Northern and Southern provinces and cities. Illustrative for Amsterdam, taxi drivers refuse to take passengers for short trips; cyclists overrun visitors who are usually not used to the number of cyclists; shopkeepers do not serve their clients properly etc. For foreigners this is not always pleasant and it is even regarded as rude. In a world that becomes smaller and smaller, with an overwhelming offer of destinations to visit, it is important to pay more attention to pampering the visitors: (international) tourism is an important source of income to the city.

Since 2006, there is a special program, the 'Welcome program', which is set up to improve the hospitality of Amsterdam. This program focuses especially on visitors who spend a limited time in Amsterdam. Next to facilities or activities set up for short-stay visitors, there are also facilities for long-stay guests such as expats, another important group of visitors with a slightly different perspective than tourists. Since 2008 there is a special Expatcenter that assist expats settling in Amsterdam and its surrounding cities.

Image 1 Expat center



Source: I Amsterdam.com

Both, tourists as well as expats belong to the target groups Amsterdam wants to attract; Amsterdam is well aware of the fact that both groups offer important sources of income and therefore should be treated well and welcomed in the city. Amongst others, the welcome program and the expat center are activities that are all part of a more extensive city marketing program¹ that is focusing on attracting specific target groups.

In this benchmark study the prime focus lays on tourists and visitors of Amsterdam.

¹ City marketing is a complex policy process of various, mutually linked activities focusing on the retention and attraction of specific target groups whereby different stakeholders with different interests are involved.(A. Lombarts, 2008)

Actions

Since 2003, Amsterdam has every year a special theme year:

The use of theme years contributes to sustainable innovation and further increases the number of visits to the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area. The tourist industry can respond to the theme year by creating package deals, or by offering their attractions or cultural facilities. The 2011 theme year is Dutch DNA. The 2010 theme was Amsterdam Water Sensations; in 2009 it was Amsterdam Art City (ATCB, 2009b, 2011; NBTC, 2009)

Personal inquiry at the ATCB learns that there is no theme foreseen for 2012. In 2013, however, there will be a year full of festivities as most museums that have been closed over the years will be re-opened or re-opening (Scheepvaartmuseum, Rijksmuseum, Stedelijk Museum, Van Gogh). Next to that, there is the 400-year anniversary of the Canal Ring; the 125th anniversary of the Concertgebouw (concert hall) and the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra; the 225th anniversary of Felix Meritis; and the 175th anniversary of Artis Royal Zoo (Amsterdam Partners, 2011; Gemeente Amsterdam - Dienst Onderzoek & Statistiek, 2011).

Next to the special themes, the ATCB started the Amsterdam Festivals campaign in 2008: 75 yearly cultural events are held in Amsterdam. The ATCB gathered them under one single umbrella and promotes them under a new brand image. The information is found on their website www.amsterdamfestivals.nl

Image 2 Amsterdam Festival Logo



Source: ATCB.com

Another promotion to attract or please visitors is the introduction of the renewed '*I Amsterdam City Card*' the key to Amsterdam. This offers reductions to numerous museums, free public transport and a canal tour. Several restaurants and bars offer a 25%-off on meals. The card is valid in Amsterdam and its surroundings.

Image 3 Amsterdam City Card



Source: ATCB.com

And last but not least, the above-mentioned 'Welcome program' in Amsterdam. This program that started in 2006 exists of two activities. On the one hand 35 volunteers, inhabitants of Amsterdam, are trained to welcome guests during the tourist season that runs from April to September. Volunteers easily recognizable dressed in red t-shirts with 'I amsterdam' printed on it provide visitors with information.

Image 4 Welcome teams



Also during special events or big festivals such as the departure of the Giro d'Italia, during conferences in the RAI, and at the Passenger Terminal Amsterdam (PTA) when cruises arrive, the volunteers are present to give additional information. On the other hand, during the last 5 years the program provided training to organizations working in the tourist sector or service industry to improve the quality and mentality of Amsterdam hospitality. As the governmental program that provided the funding for these trainings ended, the program stopped. Actually, the ATCB provides trainings for specific tourism programs in the city such as the six cityscapes, a program that promotes different parts of the city. They also look into the fact if they can continue the above trainings themselves in close cooperation with a training office.

Focus on special groups

Gays & lesbians

For gays and lesbians Amsterdam is one of the most attractive cities in Europe. Nowhere in the world you will find so many gay attractions per square meter as in the city center of Amsterdam. Today, Amsterdam continues to reign as one of the world's top destinations for gay and lesbian travel. Yearly many tourists come to visit the Gay Pride and its Canal Parade I Amsterdam.

Image 5 Gay and Lesbian



Source: ATCB.com

Family & kids

Amsterdam is a top destination for families. It welcomes families and kids with all kind of activities such as canal cruise, visiting working windmills and outdoors activities like biking and boating. There is a special science museum for kids, there is the famous Madame Tussauds and there is the Amsterdam Dungeon. One can bike on the canals with the canal bikes or take a trip with the pancake boat.

Conference delegates

Amsterdam hosts a lot of conferences and meetings. In 2009 there were 515 meetings and conferences of which 29% were non-corporate². Although the non-corporate conferences are in the minority they have an average of 497 participants/event whereas corporate meeting have an average of 109 participants. This causes that 65% of all conference delegates is participating in a non-corporate event. 2010 was a top conference year for Amsterdam with 114 international conferences, resulting in an 8th position amongst the conference cities worldwide.

Image 6 Amsterdam's biggest conference centre



Source: Amsterdam RAI

Others

ATAS

In every big international city with a lot of tourists, there are unfortunately pickpockets active. ATAS provides a special service to tourists who are robbed or otherwise victimized while visiting the city of Amsterdam. Established in 1991, ATAS is an independent organization. It aims to protect the interests of victimized foreign tourists in Amsterdam, by providing appropriate support and information. The police will refer the victim to ATAS, once a police report has been made. Most tourists are victims of simple theft or pick pocketing.

² Non-corporate is defined as organised by a governmental organisation or an association (ATCB, 2011:13)

Tourists who have been a victim of crime usually lack their normal social network and they can feel alone and vulnerable. At ATAS the assistance will consist mainly of practical help and mediation. ATAS will try to assist the victim in such a way that the tourist will experience no further hardship and will be able to continue or finish your holidays in the best possible manner.

A panel of over 30 volunteers, dedicated without any personal interest to the service of those afflicted by crime, will offer help and support. These counselors are specially recruited and trained. They are experienced in solving the specific problems tourists may encounter. The funding of the organization is shared by the municipality, police, tourist trade and business interests

Touring Car Stewards

As in every tourist city, a lot of tourist busses drive in the city center of Amsterdam. With the relatively small streets and the canal in the city center, there is not a lot of space for touring cars to park. A pilot started early 2011: at specific car stops, the busses are allowed to drop off and to collect their tourists. They have to park at the designated bus park lots. A team of special touring car guides is set up to assist touring car drivers to help them to off-load their tourists smoothly and to find their way to the parking.

The funding of the touring car stewards is shared by the municipality and five companies from the tourist trade (Frankfurter, 2011). As the pilot was successful, the municipality and the business are investigating how to continue with the touring car stewards.

Taxi Stewards

The taxi stand at the Central Station and the Leidseplein (Leidse square) are the busiest taxi stands in the city. Special stewards take care of an orderly process at these stands. Tourists are helped to get a taxi that is delivering them to their requested destination.

Staff

Above is already commented on how staff is recruited and trained. Also the staff working at the VVV³, the tourist information outlets in the city receives specific trainings around special themes such as six cityscapes or on the yearly themes (see above).

Governance

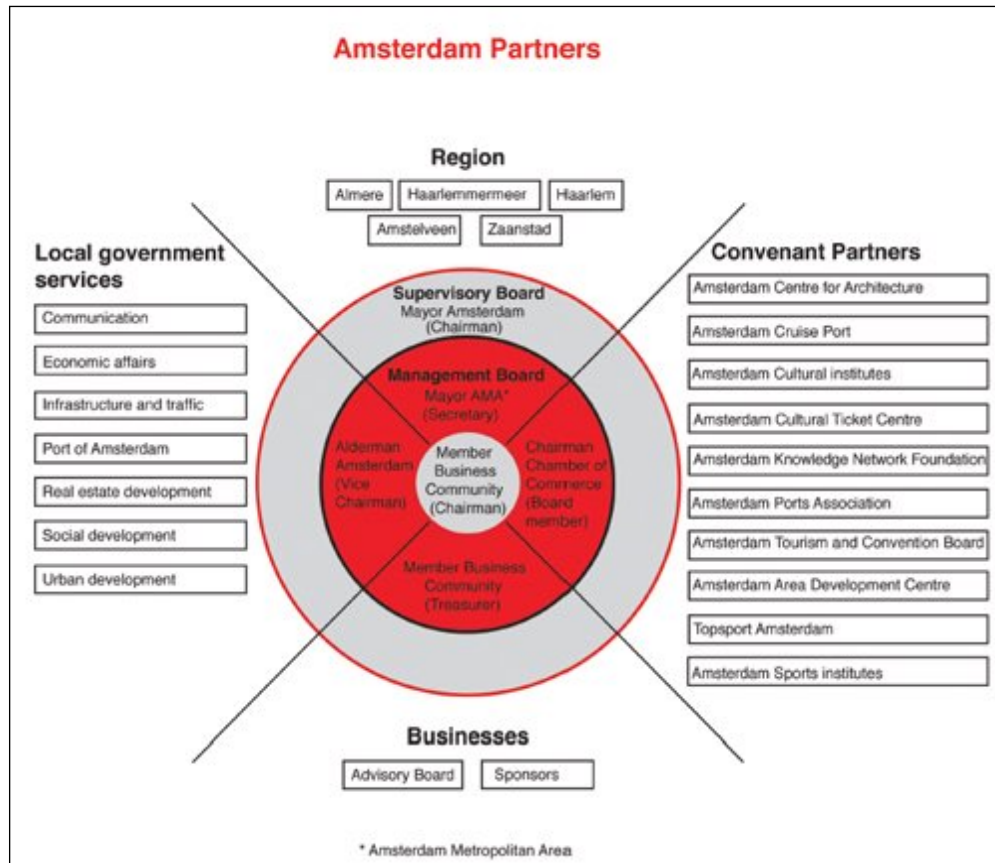
The above activities are mostly organized by the ATCB. Since 1883 Amsterdam has already a tourist office, the precursor of the actual ATCB, still the main organization for the tourist promotion and marketing of Amsterdam. However, in 2003 the alderman of Economic Affairs concludes that the promotion and marketing of Amsterdam is very fragmented. Several organizations, among others the ATCB, take care of the promotion and marketing of the city, sometimes overlapping each other in activities, sometimes neglecting necessary promotional activities. Next to that, the alderman discovers that since the year 2000 Amsterdam's competitive position among the world capitals is under pressure and its former top ranking is in decline. Therefore Amsterdam starts a city marketing organisation: in 2004 the public-private partnership Amsterdam Partners, sees the light.

The alderman is seen as the initiator of the process but it is widely recognised that both public and private partners have to take their own responsibility in this process and have to contribute to city marketing. Therefore a public-private organization is set up. As shown in Figure 1, the public-private partnership Amsterdam Partners contains of four groups of partners: the local government services, the region, the covenant partners, and businesses. The local government services are departments of the city municipality and therefore they belong to the public partners. The regional partners are the surrounding municipalities who want to be associated with Amsterdam. The covenant partner's group exists of public-private organisations that are already busy with the promotion and marketing of Amsterdam. As said before, the Amsterdam Tourism and Convention Board (ATCB) for instance is responsible for the marketing and promotion of the city as a tourist destination. The majority of these

³ VVV= vereniging voor vreemdelingenverkeer i.e. the tourist information offices

covenant partners are strongly dependent on government subsidies to able to operate. Last but not least there are the business partners. In fact, this group consist of companies from the business field but also of organizations such as universities and hospitals (Angelique Lombarts, 2011).

Figure 1 Organogram of Amsterdam Partners



Source: <http://www.iamsterdam.com/en/amsterdam-partners/about-us/organisation>, November 28, 2011

As from April 2011 a new City Marketing Officer (CMO) started. Aim is to have one marketing office for the city as from January 1, 2012 with the name 'Amsterdam Marketing⁴'. The marketing employees from the ATCB, AUB and AmsterdaminBusiness will all work out of the Amsterdam city marketing office hence strengthen the marketing activities for the city. The organizations will all keep their own sales or promotion staff but thanks to a one-stop office on marketing affairs the overlaps will be reduced and the success most probably will increase.

The city marketing process was and still is a complicated process. It also is a very political process. Governance-wise this also complicates the process. Actually, it is the municipality - in the person of the alderman of Economic Affairs- that is funding extensively both the city marketing organization and the ATCB. Inherently they are also in the steering position policy-wise for both organizations.

Due to the difficulties during the first years of the city marketing the 'Amsterdamse Alliantie', a collaboration of various associations of entrepreneurs, the Amsterdam Chamber of Commerce, the city marketing organization and the tourist information offices started in 2006. This private-public organization consisted of the following organisations : ACI , Amsterdam Partners, Amsterdam Tourism & Convention Board (ATCB), Chamber of Commerce Amsterdam (KVK), Koninklijk Horeca Nederland Regio Amsterdam, MKB Amsterdam (KHN), Oram Ondernemersvereniging

⁴ Personal communication with the new CMO, December 5, 2011.

Regio Amsterdam, Vereniging Amsterdam City VNO-NCW West. It was set up amongst others to improve the city hospitality and was the initiator of the before-mentioned 'Welcome program'.

Communication

First of all there is a lot of digital information. Since 2011, the Amsterdam Tourist & Convention Board (further ATCB) started a cooperation with ArrivalGuides.com, the biggest network worldwide of free travel guides. ArrivalGuides.com and 140 international airline companies and other travel companies such as Air Berlin, Avis and lastminute.com. offer a travel guide with which travellers can start to plan their city break already at home.

Image 7 Arrival Guides



Source: ATCB.com

Next to this planning tool, the Internet portal Iamsterdam.com offers a load of information. Again, the city marketing perspective is clear as the website offers information on various aspects that are not only informative for visitors. One can find for example information on 'visiting' (for tourists and visitors), 'what's on' (additional information, not only tourist info), 'living' (for inhabitants) and 'business' (for companies based or willing to settle in Amsterdam). In addition to the Internet portal, information is given via hyves, facebook and twitter.

The tourist information offices (VVV) are situated at three different locations, two in town and one at the airport. Furthermore there are several other partners in Amsterdam and surroundings who work as a 'VVV' office. They work in a sort of franchise construction. Apart from information these offices sell visitors various products and services.

On top of this, the VVV service center handles also the complaints of visitors in the city.

Results

The department Research & Statistics of the local government provides figures about Amsterdam. There are various benchmarks reports about Amsterdam, comparing the city with its competitors in Europa and beyond.

Although there is a huge financial crisis, Amsterdam cannot complain about the numbers of tourists it is attracting. For instance, the MasterCard Index of Global Destination Cities indicates that Amsterdam belongs to the top 20 cities of international travelers (Mastercard Worldwide, 2011). The number of hotel nights increased with 13, 6 %, the highest increase in a European city in 2009-2010.

Table 1 Top Ten European Cities – Overnights, 2010

	Hotel nights in 2010 (x 1 mln.)	growth 2009-2010 (%)	growth2008-2009 (%)
London	48,7	3,5	-7,4
Paris	35,8	5,7	-3,4
Berlin	20,8	10,2	6,3
Rome	20,4	9,1	-2,6
Madrid	15,2	11,4	-1,9
Barcelona	14,0	9,6	1,1
Prague	11,9	6,4	-7,9
Vienna	11,7	11,0	-4,2
Munich	11,1	12,4	0,6
Amsterdam	9,7	13,6	3,0

Source: (Statistiek, 2011: European Cities Marketing, Tourmis)

Also as a conference and meeting city Amsterdam is also very popular: in 2010 Amsterdam ranks for the fourth year in a row in the top ten of international conference cities worldwide (Gemeente Amsterdam - Dienst Onderzoek & Statistiek, 2011).

Table 2 Conferences registered by ICCA in European cities, 2001-2010

	2001	2005	2009	2010	ranking worldwide 2010	ranking Europe 2010
Vienna	63	139	160	154	1	1
Barcelona	71	133	135	148	2	2
Paris	93	127	131	147	3	3
Berlin	66	103	129	138	4	4
Madrid	52	67	87	114	6	5
Lisbon	46	80	98	106	8	6
Amsterdam	58	95	98	104	9	7
London	57	90	83	97	14	8
Copenhagen	77	79	103	92	15	9
Stockholm	64	72	102	89	17	10

Source : (Gemeente Amsterdam - Dienst Onderzoek & Statistiek, 2011: ICCA)⁵

The ATCB also executes research and benchmarking year around for both the (local) government and business as well as for their own marketing & promotion activities. For benchmarking purposes, the ATCB collaborates with the European Cities Marketing (ECM). The ATCB participates actively in various boards and committees of the ECM responsible for data collecting and benchmarking (ATCB, 2011: 12). In 2011 the ATCB held a visitor survey amongst 10.000 visitors.

⁵ The figures given above do slightly differ from these figures: this is due to the methodology used by ICCA.

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