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Abstract

The quest for competitive advantage and market share, once the preserve of the business boardroom, is now being talked about in the City Hall. This paper examines the role that strategic marketing can play in delivering the kind of people-based connectivity which we strive for in terms of creating vibrant, attractive and safe city centres.

Place marketing means designing a city centre to satisfy the needs of its target markets. It has little to do with promotional activity, but everything to do with the disciplines of sound business analysis and applying it in a creative way to city planning. The city centre marketplace is fast changing, competition is ever increasing and customers more demanding.

Almost every city in Europe over the past 20 years has attempted to reinvent itself. Much best practice is predicated on urban design and the creation of attractive and competitive spaces and places.. The work of Aberdeen City Centre Partnership in its approach to urban realm planning will also be briefly examined. The paper will show how differentiation, segmentation and product development theory can be applied successfully to town planning regeneration practice.

There is no difference in marketing a product or a service. Shoppers, visitors or residents want safety, choice, convenience, interest, information and cleanliness benefits. Creating vibrant places is a creative process.

All cities must learn to think more like businesses - developing products, markets and customers. Even the most successful companies are never satisfied with their achievements. They continuously seek new ways to understand the marketplace, design better products, stay ahead of their competitors and deliver enhanced customer satisfaction. Planners and urbanists must do the same.

Introduction

Almost every major city and town in the UK over the past two decades has attempted to reinvent or re-position itself. There are significant success stories and it is encouraging to see that many cities are moving beyond short-term cosmetic image building exercises and building on longer lasting strategies.

Most attention over the years has been given to marketing in the private sector, rather than public sector. However, as our society moves towards a more customer-orientated culture, increasing attention is being given to applying the techniques of strategic marketing to the public sector.
Nowhere is this more noticeable than in relation to city centre regeneration, town centre management and the design of the public realm. The city centre reflects the micro-organism of society as a whole and acts as a focus for economic, cultural and business exchanges. Connectivity is vital for customers’ expectations to be satisfied and the techniques and disciplines of marketing can add significant value to the work of the planner, urbanist and urban designer.

This has little to do with the common misconception of marketing as a promotional activity. Rather, it is concerned with the disciplines of sound business marketing and analysis and applying it in a creative way to city planning.

Cities in trouble
Recently cities have woken up to find that they are in an increasingly competitive marketplace. Health checks and surveys highlight issues such as intrusive traffic, deteriorating environment, uninviting streets and poor quality shopping choice. Modern cities in the same country compete with each other and with other cities in other countries. Multi national firms are mobile and can close down or relocate factories to different continents. This makes city planning more challenging than ever before.

Over the past few years, many areas have invested in city centre regeneration partnerships - either through town centre management schemes or other strategic partnership vehicles. In Scotland, these area-based projects were initiated by the then Scottish Development Agency’s programmes and have continued with Scottish and Local Enterprise Company projects, albeit with seemingly less and less emphasis on physical economic regeneration activity in recent years. That stated, significant project work has taken place in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Dundee over the past decade. The most significant and major regeneration projects are, however, currently taking place in England.

Much of this has been as a result of the Urban Task Force, chaired by Richard Rodgers, which reported in 1999 on the causes of urban decline and recommended practical solutions to bring people back into cities, towns and urban neighbourhoods. Its 100 key recommendations included:

- Introducing a new national urban design framework, disseminating key design principles and new best practice guidelines
- Make planning permission and funding for area regeneration schemes conditional upon an integrated spatial master plan
- Establish local architectural centres in each major city
- Local authorities to prepare a single strategy for their public realm and open space
- Setting up Urban Regeneration Companies

Urban Regeneration Companies were established following the Urban Task Force and subsequent Government White Paper. They were conceived as “powerful companies to act swiftly with a single-purpose delivery body to lead & coordinate regeneration.” A total of six were originally set up (Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield, Corby, Leicester and Sunderland) and this figure is now thirteen.
A main function of the companies and the whole urban renaissance movement they have subsequently spearheaded has been to re-assert the role of design skills within the planning and regeneration process. In Newcastle, award-winning development of the Quayside is being backed up by the Grainger Town programme in the heart of the city centre. It is a city where traditional industries have been on the decline and there has been a need to reinvent and diversify to create a new economic base. The recent opening of the Millennium Bridge across the River Tyne - which won the top UK architecture award, the Stirling Prize - and its link to a recently-converted derelict mill building, the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art – the UK’s largest of its type - have helped raise the profile of regeneration projects and place marketing in the media.

However, such physical and design-led regeneration projects, if they are to have the anticipated economic development benefits, must be firmly rooted in sound business and commercial acumen. It is here that we see the increasing use of the tools of business being used. The quest for competitive advantage and market share, once the preserve of the business boardroom, is now being talked about in the council chamber.

**Marketplaces are fast changing**

Like any private sector environment, the city centre marketplace is fast changing and customers are getting more demanding. Add to this the fact that the competition is constantly getting keener and we soon see that, to stay alive as an attractive location, cities must organise to meet those demands faster than their competitors. City Councils are finding that, given the choice of suppliers, discerning customers pick the suppliers who most completely meet their needs and that those best able to satisfy customer needs will become the most successful in the marketplace.

The Chartered Institute of Marketing defines marketing as “The management process for identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirements profitably.” Its central premise is that, if the key to business success today is a businesses ability to satisfy customers current needs, then the key to continuing business success is the ability to satisfy future customer needs. It is important, however, not to concentrate exclusively on the customer - if that happened, firms would soon go out of business. The competitor focus is equally important and with it, the concept of competitive advantage.

Marketing a place does not mean promoting a place. Promotion rather is a sub activity of marketing and is considered by many to be ironically one of its least important tasks. In terms of places, marketing means designing a city or town centre to satisfy the needs of its target markets and, as such, it has obvious and close links to planning and urban design.

Marketing approaches of a sort have long been used in city planning. Surveys such as housing, retail market analysis and visitor attraction development all depend on this. It is rare for this work however to be fully developed into a more rigorous marketing or business plan with clearly defined objectives relating to target market segments, differentiation and positioning et al.

**Market opportunities and the Planning Process**

The marketing plan, like a city development plan, is the fruition of all that has gone before it and the many facets of the marketing planning process are not dissimilar to...
the town planning process. The basic pre-requisite is the need to understand what actually drives markets. This is the same process be it for a manufacturing or public sector marketplace - and an awareness is required of issues such as scanning the total business environment, including economic, social and technological trends, as well as vitality indicators such as city centre investment yields, visitor perceptions and bed nights;

There are strong links between the traditional town planning process and the marketing or business planning process. When planning a public realm project, the following usefully summarises the marketing planning organisational procedures:

1. Place Audit - where are we now?
2. Vision and Objectives - where do we want to be?
3. Strategy Formulation - which way forward is best?
4. Action Plan - how will we get there?
5. Implementation and Control - how will we stay?
6. Monitoring and Evaluation

In terms of designing the public realm, the key aim is to design and deliver a place which satisfies the needs of its target markets.

**Segmenting and Targeting Customers**

Markets are not homogeneous groups of buyers, but are made up of customer groups with differing priorities. A marketing approach divides customers into segments. Within each city centre group of shoppers, residents or visitors, there will therefore be many different segments which distinguish and help explain their buying decisions. For instance, city centre users will include a large range of broad segments ranging from shoppers, visitors, retailers, office workers, residents and students et al. Assessing just one segment, tourism, in a UK context, this can be broken down into four generally recognised, distinctive markets as follows:

- Business Tourism (Overseas and UK)
- UK Leisure Market (e.g.: Short Breaks)
- Visiting Friends and Relatives
- Overseas Leisure

Within the short breaks market alone, there are many segment variables and these are classed by marketers into main categories, such as geographic, demographic, behavioural and psychographic (personality and lifestyle). Taking one variable, such as demographic, this can then be broken down into further market segments, for example, family life cycle, socio economic, age, nationality, and so on.

In planning and designing public realm projects, having segmented the market, the next stage is then to identify those segments which represent the most attractive targets and assess these against the size, growth potential and structural attractiveness of each segment. In terms of city planning, the city centre visitor market does not just comprise visitors but also hotels, tour operators, transport operators, travel agents and visitor attractions. All of these have implications for land use, as well as the public realm mix.

Targeting means matching your product with the needs of the segment. A large city will be able to cater for different tourism visitors segments. Smaller places may have
to concentrate on fewer segments and this often means reducing their appeal to other non-targeted customers.

**What makes the difference?**

One key marketing tool which is of direct relevance to city centre urban design is differentiation. By pursuing a strategy of differentiation, a city can give emphasis to a particular strength, which gives it a key edge over its competitors. It may aim to be the built heritage leader, festival, shopping, night life, sport or cultural leader. Sometimes cities benefit from historical legacy. Others have to work hard to create a market.

Differentiation is an important tool to use when attempting to define sub areas within city centres to help define their own image and character. Smaller areas can also be differentiated down to individual street areas by means of signage, street furniture, materials or street art.

In some cases, city centres are a mature market and the products well known and to an extent physically indistinguishable. It is a common complaint that many high streets have similar shops to be found in all parts of the country - or even in some instances, all corners of the world. Differentiation is particularly suited to this scenario where certain streets or quarters can have a different brand image from others. Some streets can specialise in food, others in cultural activities. The way the city centre is managed, and attention given to the shopper or visitor can help achieve this. Entry points into these areas should be distinct and celebrated.

By pursuing a strategy of differentiation, a city gives emphasis to a particular element of the marketing mix which, through market research, has been seen by customers to be important. This should in turn provide the basis for competitive advantage. Such differentiation should, however, be predicated on a sense of place and celebrated in cultural distinctiveness.

**The Overall Marketing Mix**

The term the ‘marketing mix’ relates to the variables which are within the control of an organisation - Product, Distribution (place), Pricing and Promotion and as such the ‘4 Ps’ of the marketing mix are well established in business disciplines.

*“Nobody buys drills ... they buy holes”* (Theodore Levitt 1963).

Customers buy holes, or at least the ability to make holes and if a more cost effective way of making holes comes available, people will turn to it. Extending this concept to city centre planning means trying to redefine the city centre product in terms of customer benefits. When we buy something, we seek a bundle of benefits. Diners experience not only food, but also the whole experience of the restaurant, including decor and service. Buyers of industrial commodities are not just buying products at a price, they want reliability, technical support and even personal relationships. Likewise, shoppers on the high street want safety, choice, convenience, interest, information and cleanliness. There is no difference to marketing a product and a service. A key aim is to add value to the core product by building round it a total benefit package.

All products experience a life cycle - launch, growth, maturity and decline - and cities are no different. The role of planning and marketing is to ensure that product is
continuously managed and that new initiatives come through. Some products (including city centres) do not simply decline - they reach maturity and simply drift without any real focus, until it is realised to late that they must wake up to market forces and what their competitors are doing.

**The Development of New Products**

Within industry, much new product development is carried out traditionally by technical staff who may give less emphasis to broader market awareness. The same can happen in city centres – often many public realm projects, such as pedestrianisation schemes, are led by engineers who may not be satisfying the real needs of the users of the city centre.

Creativity may be stifled and the client can lose sight of what the overall objectives of the project are. Marketing good practice shows that there is a need for a multi-layered disciplinary approach which retains a market awareness to prevent schemes from failing through insufficient attention to customer preferences and marketing considerations. This parallel processing approach is being used increasingly in regeneration projects. It takes time, but this attention to customer needs and quality is key to urban centre connectivity, vibrancy and vitality.

**Distribution and Pricing Channels**

The elements of the marketing mix pertaining to distribution and pricing relate to the processes of logistics, supply chains and consumer choices. In terms of land use in city centres we are faced with many examples of uses where the operator is acting as a conduit for a distribution channel. Take for example a high street tourist agent. When we book a main holiday we rarely deal with the airlines and hotels direct. Most visitors will arrive at a specific city centre destination after having booked the holiday through a conduit channel such as a travel agent. The importance of a well sited, conveniently accessed, customer friendly visitor information centre in the city centre, can not only make the visitor experience more rewarding but it can open up new markets for core city centre products by creating a market demand. Making your product more accessible than your competitors is vital.

To a buyer, the price is the value placed on what is exchanged. The keys to price positioning include market conditions - supply and demand and marketing objectives, such as positioning. Pricing is currently highly topical following road pricing initiatives with regard to car tolls for entering city centre zones. Whilst cities as diverse as Singapore, Oslo, Toronto and Melbourne have used congestion charging to improve the quality of life in urban centres, it is new to the UK.

Durham has the UK’s first traffic congestion charging scheme which came into effect in 2002. The standard charge of £2 to access Sadler Street leading into the city centre during restricted times enables this World Heritage City to use cash from the scheme to fund a shuttle bus linking main car parks and rail station. Vehicles have fallen from 2000 to 200 a day. The most significant road pricing scheme however has been central London which introduced its £5 pricing policy in February 2003. With the scheme appearing to be a success so far, up to 35 other cities and towns in the UK are standing by to monitor the results with a view to implementation. The monitoring of economic indicators on retailers and businesses will also be critical to measuring the success of the project in terms of perception.
The Miscommunication of Promotion

Promotion (often called marketing communications) is the most high profile element of the marketing mix, but should also be treated with caution. It is concerned with communicating to target segments to maximise the effectiveness of the overall product benefits. It is critical that it is integrated with all other aspects of the mix as no amount of promotion will be a long-term substitute for real product benefits apart from and can mean misleading hype. The promotional mix relates to advertising, public relations, personal selling, sponsorship and exhibitions etc, and as such can nevertheless be a key tool in the design process for public realm projects.

It is encouraging that many recent promotional campaigns do have real product, distribution and pricing strategies behind them. The ‘Glasgow’s Miles Better’ campaign in the mid 1980’s is one of the best known and sought to change peoples perceptions of the city towards one of cultural renaissance. It wasn’t, however, all gloss and promotion. It was backed up with real and tangible projects and from a planning standpoint alone, Glasgow city centre has enjoyed a cultural renaissance with award-winning pedestrianisation projects and major architectural developments. Recent bids for European City of Culture status have also shown real integration of place marketing strategies based on service and product delivery benefits.

Communication models and buyer behaviour

The use of a communication strategy to aid the implementation of urban realm design can be developed through an analysis of the various communications models. It is worth the urban designer striving to understand the general theory relating to customers buying behaviour, before, during and after the actual purchase.

Communication models show that the communications process is a multifaceted process. Opinion leaders talk to their listeners and also each other. Much of human behaviour, and buyer behaviour in particular, is shaped by group influence.

Take the examination of the apparently simple act in the city centre of purchasing a convenience meal from a high street shop. Why buy the meal? Perhaps it is not quite as simple as ‘because the buyer was hungry’. The buyer was perhaps in a receptive state for food simply because of the time of day. Possibly a well designed shop front or window display acted as a stimulus to the customer, to remind him or her of food and arouse feelings of hunger, in the much the same way that caused Pavlov’s dog to salivate. Maybe the attractive shop front acted as a cue by triggering memories of previous experiences and which are stored in memory banks.

Lessons for the urban designer

What lessons do these models have for the designer? A teenager may prefer a certain brand of convenience meal because friends go there – the need to be accepted or loved. This relates to Hierarchy of Needs theory (Maslow) which provides a useful explanation of the way an individual’s needs work from basic survival and physiological needs (hunger and thirst), right up to self actualisation needs (self development and realisation).

Many convenience purchases are based on ‘purchasing time’ - buying a timesaving product or service which releases free time to do something else. But why go into shop “A”, as opposed to “B”? Familiarity with the brand, or trust in the brand name,
can influence choice. This can be aided by own experience or increased awareness, boosted by advertising - front of mind experience.

**Building Repeat Purchase Behaviour**

The choice of another group may be determined simply buy the maxim – location – offering the right goods at the right place at the right time and at the right prices. If this is supported by the right image – then the marketing mix has succeeded in capturing this segment of non-loyal sandwich buyers who have no strong preferred set of sandwich shop outlets.

Creating a safe, attractive and dynamic city centre is the goal of most city planning departments, with the ultimate goal being to build repeat purchasing behaviour, i.e., loyalty to the city centre. Customers now have increased choice to go to other town centres or travel to an-out-of town retail park.

Communication theory, which is used extensively in the promotional element of the marketing mix, has several complex models, such as black box or behaviourist (external variables, such as price, location, peer group pressure): personal variable models which look at attitudes and beliefs; and more complex model models such as from the cognitive school (what happens between stimulus and response) which attempt to include both internal and external variables in one large model.

Whilst it is impossible to capture the human mind or nature in its entirety – psychological theory has played a large part in rationalising buyer behaviour in an objective way. Preferences and motivations affect perception. A driver faced with increased traffic delays as the result of a city centre development being built or a recently opened pedestrianisation project will screen out the benefits associated with the projects and think only about the discomfort caused by delays to himself and may contact the local authority to complain. A local trader may object to plans to pedestrianise a street, despite the potential down-the-line benefits. We see what we want to see, and so we may modify and distort the information that comes to us.

**Buyer Behaviour Attitudes**

Likewise, attitudes affect buyer behaviour. Attitudes can be changed, but only slowly. They can be broken down into three components ‘think, feel do’ or cognitive, affective and conative. The cognitive element relates to awareness or knowledge. The affective relates to the positive or otherwise feelings. The conative relates to the intention to purchase.

The importance of measuring all three should not be underestimated as an isolated element can be misleading. For example, many pedestrian priority projects when they are planned score highly on the cognitive and effective elements of the attitude in terms of awareness of best practice from other cities. However, the perceived disbenefits associated with not being able to park right outside a particular shop etc, often means that local residents or traders will not actually ‘purchase’ the proposal.

In most instances, pedestrianisation projects are received very favourably only when they are completed. When Stoget in Copenhagen was pedestrianised in 1962, it was done so after much debate and with considerable reservations - “We are Danes, not Italians”. Forty years later, it has one of the most extensive pedestrianisation areas in Europe.
The Role of Market Research

The market research process borrows liberally from the social sciences, anthropology and psychology and public participation is not new to the planning process. Market research, however, is much more than public consultation exercises – it is fundamental to understanding markets. Feedback loops should be involved so that the understanding of the problem becomes an iterative process which can be continually improved and refined.

Research can be used to define and measure a wide range of items in relation to designing the public realm.

- Patterns of Use. The way in which customers use services and changes or trends over time
- Types of users. Users classified into market segments.
- Competition. Potential or actual competition from, for instance, out-of-town retail.
- Perception of products and services, ranging from beliefs and cultural attitudes to expectations of benefits
- Attitudes towards products and services.
- Motivation – concerned with the relationship between needs and their satisfaction

Market research can play a significant part in product development. It is also fundamental to developing a database of key performance indicators for city centres – “if you cannot measure it, you cannot manage it.” Who comes to the city centre and why do they come? Where do they come from and what segmentation group can they be classified under? What motivates them and what are there needs? What attitudes do they have and how would they like to see the area develop? How much do they spend?

Aberdeen City Centre Partnership (ACCP) has used extensive market research to help define and shape its urban realm strategy.

An Examination of Aberdeen City Centre’s Strategy

Aberdeen, (pop 214,000), lies on the North-east coast of Scotland and since the discovery of oil in the North Sea in the late 1960s it has been acknowledged as Europe’s offshore oil capital and increasing as the energy capital. The third largest city in Scotland, it has a long history and a renowned architectural heritage of granite buildings and streets. The City Centre Partnership (ACCP) was formed in the early 1990’s at a time when a recently developed shopping centre was drawing shoppers and retailers away from the city’s main thoroughfare, Union Street. The key Partners include Aberdeen City Council, Scottish Enterprise Grampian, Communities Scotland, The Chamber of Commerce and the City Centre Traders Association

Being one of the first city centre focused regeneration partnerships in the UK at the time, the Partnership embarked on a series of high profile public realm and streetscape interventions. As time moved on, however, it was soon evident that city centre regeneration partnerships and city centre management initiatives were becoming the norm throughout the UK. Retaining its main developmental, environmental and promotional aims, ACCP began to develop a more rigorous approach towards place marketing, using the tools of strategic marketing management.
A business plan was produced which highlighted the role of the city centre as Aberdeen's prime asset at the heart of its economic, service and cultural life. It recognised that the prosperity of Aberdeen as a whole, and of North-east Scotland, was directly linked to the vitality of the city centre. The plan recognised the increasingly competitive nature of cities and that where once shoppers and visitors had in the past, tended to shrug off failings and deficiencies, they were now demanding higher standards. Moreover, the acceptance thresholds of the public are likely to fall.

Amongst the marketing tools which were used in drawing together the business plan was a review of marketing effectiveness. This is determined by the extent to which any organisation reflects the five major attributes of marketing orientation, namely:

1. a customer orientated philosophy
2. an integrated marketing organisation
3. adequate marketing information
4. a strategic orientation
5. operational efficiency

Not all were present within the partnership, but the process of highlighting any deficiencies enabled improvements to be made within the culture of the organisation.

**Assessing Opportunities and Threats**

The role of the SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) is a useful and simple tool in assessing the overall environment in which the city centre is operating. It can be used to identify opportunities etc at a local street level and become an important design aid. In putting together a picture of the major threats and opportunities, the aim is to arrive at a measure of the area's overall market attractiveness. Weightings can be added to induce more responsive models for the particular situation.

In Aberdeen City Centre, the opportunities centred around improving connections at street level, between existing sub areas and increased pedestrianisation.

Detailed competitor and customer analysis was carried out and this should be constant and ongoing. Tourism figures were analysed and visitor segmentation data from the local tourist board was used to determine the profile of visitors coming to Aberdeen. It was found that the second most popular activity for all visitors to the area was visiting and walking around the City Centre. A project for urban trails was initiated. Retailers took part in key project decisions. Business research highlighted the need for more pedestrianised areas, linkages and interpretation. Joint working on projects with the Tourist Board was strengthened and the population of the City centre doubled with many residential initiatives led by Communities Scotland.

Prior to embarking on public realm projects, ACCP increasingly carries out detailed economic appraisal to gauge market intelligence. This allows changes and impacts to be measured and evaluated. It also gives a much more detailed reasoning of why the project is going to be done and what the objectives are. This involves close working with local businesses and traders associations - who are all key customers and who can help give the city competitive advantage.
The Partnership has now implemented over 300 projects and received the Royal Town Planning Institute (Scotland) Award for Quality in Planning. However, there remains much to be achieved and improved and recent initiatives include:

◊ The preparation of an urban realm masterplan for the city centre, based on how the city can achieve better urban quality whilst building on its architectural heritage. This major study was presented in a three-week long exhibition in Aberdeen Art Gallery and attracted extensive customer feedback and endorsement. A key challenge is the detailed implementation of the strategy.

◊ ACCP is devising a system whereby credit/debit card transactions are analysed by Banks and credit card companies and the information is fed back to the Partnership. This, together with an analysis of in-store transactions by consumers, enables an indication to be given of whether or not the expenditure is being generated by visitors or local residents within certain areas.

◊ Market research, both primary and secondary, was used extensively in the Civic Pride promotional campaign “Our City”, which has was launched in 2002 and led by Aberdeen City Council. The project seeks to highlight to citizens how they can become ambassadors for the City. Research showed that visitors wanted the type of place where its own community respect and enjoy it. Focus groups also showed that the campaign should be fully inclusive with City wide support. It has now been rolled out to the private sector and community. The project has also been extended to cover public realm issues, such as the design and maintenance of shop fronts, safer car park projects, street furniture and interpretation boards. A pilot project “Older Voices New Choices – Listening to Aberdeen’s Older People” has also been rolled out to engage fully and proactively with the future planning of the City whilst at the same time the City Council has set up community planning groups which involve school children and young people.

Conclusions

There is a danger that over that over emphasis on business strategies and theories can cloud the realities of day to day civic governance. The truth is, however, that no amount of planning will save city centres which are in trouble unless these plans are aspirations are firmly rooted to the realities of the marketplace. This means that all cities and towns must learn to think more like businesses - developing products, markets and customers. Even the most successful companies are never satisfied with their achievements. They continuously seek new ways to understand the marketplace, design better products, stay ahead of their competitors and thus deliver enhanced customer satisfaction.

In terms of designing city centres at street level much can be learned from the application of marketing theory and applied in a multi disciplinary manner across strategic project teams.

For planning to continue to be seen as the driving force in centre regeneration, it is important that the profession continues to expand its horizons and its ability to embrace and integrate other disciplines - disciplines which are in many ways related to it and from which it borrows. A well-researched business marketing plan is an
essential tool to enhance this process. It is a long way from the common misconception of marketing and it is to be welcomed that more and more cities and towns are adopting this more rigorous approach which should give them a sustainable competitive advantage in the marketplace.

April 2003

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8 Tools and Techniques of Marketing