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IMAGE MANAGEMENT OF ŻMUDŹ MUNICIPALITY

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The aims of this article are to present the theoretical aspects of image management, identify the key factors that have the most significant impact on the image of Żmudź Municipality, and also to analyze and evaluate image management in this municipality. This was achieved through research using theoretical and empirical methods. An analysis of the literature on the subject and also of data obtained in Żmudź Municipality was carried out. In 2024, a survey was conducted using the CAWI technique among 141 residents of Żmudź Municipality. The analysis of the survey results facilitated the formulation of recommendations for managing the municipality's image. The issues of the surveyed area are many times complex, so the paper analyzed selected aspects of image management.

A key role in shaping image is played by actions and communication, which are essential for building trust and loyalty. Based on the research, it was concluded that Żmudź Municipality has a number of assets that provide a solid foundation for building and maintaining a positive image. At the same time, it is important to constantly monitor the needs and expectations of residents, as well as to adapt communication strategies to respond to dynamically changing social and technological conditions³.

Keywords: image, image management, image crisis, territorial marketing, visual identification of the municipality, image of the municipality

1. INTRODUCTION

Image is a complex perception about an individual, institution or city, consisting of facts and emotions. Actions and communication play a key role in its formation. In the literature, image is associated with the effects of identity, organisational culture, and behaviour.

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There are several types of image. These include actual, mirror, desired and optimal image. These can influence people's decisions and behavior, and creating an image correctly is paramount in building trust and loyalty. Image management is a key element in creating a positive image of an organization, since by creating a favorable image, an organization can influence society and elicit desired reactions. However, effective management requires constantly adapting to new conditions and providing an effective response to change. Managing the image of a city or municipality is therefore a complex process that requires consideration of many factors, such as attitude, behavior, visual identification and communication with the public. Effective image management enables a local government unit to compete for customers and residents. Nevertheless, an image crisis can occur in any organization, and once such a situation appears, corrective measures like organizing, analyzing decisions and correcting mistakes should be taken. Image management should be undertaken responsibly both before and during the crisis, and in this, communication with the media and concern for employees are key to quickly regaining a positive image.

2. IMAGE MANAGEMENT – LITERATURE REVIEW

Image is a comprehensive collection of information about any person – a blend of facts and feelings – that reflects how an individual is perceived. It consists of a number of interconnected elements that must form a unified whole (Białopiotrowicz, 2009; Bronowicz, 2015). Image is the personal feeling of a single person towards other people, cities, institutions, cultural units, political parties or educational units (Kotnis-Górka et al., 2011; Golinski, 2020; Jędrzejewski, 2020). When speaking of image, it is worth quoting the definition given by Kurek-Ochmańska, according to which image is one of the central categories of the theory and practice of public relations, communications design and social communication. It also has its place in the research interests of sociologists, political scientists, media scholars and psychologists (Kurek-Ochmańska, 2015; Kulp et al., 2021). According to Stanowicka-Traczyk, image is the effect of the identity of a city (Stanowicka-Traczyk, 2008; Białecki, 2010). In turn, a city is a settlement unit that has a predominance of compact development and non-agricultural functions, or which has municipal rights or the status of a city defined by separate regulations (Glinska, 2009). For Szocki, image is a combination of identity and organizational culture. It encompasses the entirety of processes and phenomena occurring in a company. He regards organizational culture as an internal subsystem that gives people the opportunity to adapt to the company's environment, while the company's identity is closely linked to the identity system, accepted values and norms and also to history and internal rituals. The most important element that shapes a company's image is its behavior.

The sum total of the behaviors of those who serve in management positions is the management style (Jakubczyk et al., 2023; Grzyb, 2023). It can be socio-technical (getting employees to act the way management wants them to) and psychological (strives to meet the needs of employees). Companies often use an interaction policy. It is based on visual symbolic communication (e.g., company sign, logo, employee dress). Szocki distinguishes the following types of images:

- real – the one that people who come into contact with the company have, which corresponds to the actual image of the company;
- mirror image – which corresponds to the image of the company among its employees;
- desired – is the target image that the company would like to have;
- optimal – possible to achieve under the given conditions (Szocki, 2008).

The image is combined with the processes in the human mind presenting it as a psychological model. Szocki believes that image influences the decisions and behavior of the recipient, in whose mind the confrontation of external and internal stimuli takes place (Szocki, 2008; Rozwadowska, 2002). If the company's offer turns out to meet the buyer's expectations, the customer will perceive the image in a positive way, will therefore be satisfied. This buyer will consequently trust the company and become a loyal customer (fig. 1).

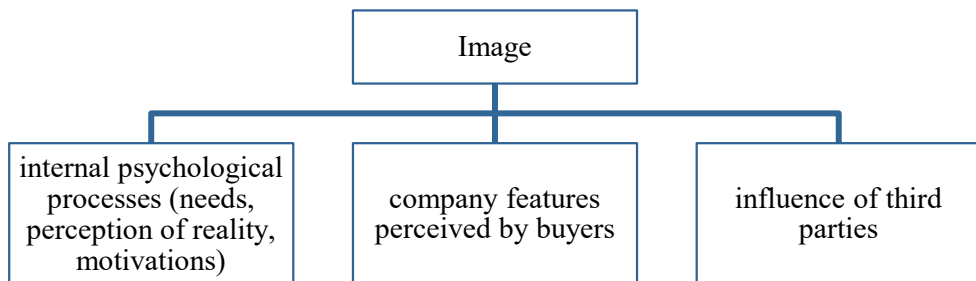


Fig. 1. Factors affecting image perception (authors' own study based on Szocki, 2008)

Image management is closely related to image creation, which is defined as a tool of social influence, and must be used very skillfully in order to achieve the planned effect (Altkorn, 2002; Szczepański, 2013; Szromnik, 2008). Thus, in order for an image to exist, it must first be created. According to Schmitt and Simonson, brands create an image. Building a brand goes beyond specific product elements by embracing the product as a single entity. Although the idea of creating brands and managing them emerged around 1930, it struggled for years. They authors link branding to the basic principles of planning and communication in marketing. They emphasise the necessity of adapting to emerging changes, media devices and the power of the media in branding. Attention is also drawn to the concept of aesthetics and symbolism in marketing, and how aesthetics create image value. The authors distinguish such areas as:

- image design;
- research on modes of communication;
- spatial design (Schmitt et al., 1999).

Nowadays, image management concerns every unit of social life. Creating a positive image provides opportunities for development (Bankins et al., 2018; Ghibanu, 2019; Gregor et al., 2020). The results of a company's future activities might even depend on it. It is also a powerful tool for influencing society, as it allows the desired reactions and behaviors to be evoked in society (Białopiotrowicz, 2009). In order to properly create an image, one must first know oneself and the environment. The easiest way to do so is by trial and error. Despite its disadvantages, this method provides ample opportunities for analysis, which later lead to rejecting a company's "bad habits" and thus steering towards development. It also gives new opportunities to consciously build interactions with customers and also provide them with a product tailored to their needs and requirements.

When a company is aware of how not to behave in the market and what not to use, it has the opportunity to raise its profile (Massey, 2016; Guze et al., 2022). It achieves this through appropriate product naming, logo styling, packaging, market information and behavior, making promises that the branded goods purchased will satisfy various customer needs (Pringle et al., 2008). Managers must be aware that the market is both increasingly competitive and problematic: any "wrong move" can significantly damage a company's reputation, which is why it is so important to protect the brand already built.

Organizations have an obligation to implement effective human resources policies. In this case, it is important to monitor employees and their progress regularly as well as activities related to protecting the company's good name, because even one incorrect e-mail can initiate a sequence of events damaging to the company (Pringle et al., 2008). The crucial aspect of image management is how it will be perceived by stakeholders (customers, investors, the immediate community, officials, employees, suppliers and intermediaries). Each interest group has specific expectations of the organization, but at the same time, the behavior of these groups affects the achievement of the organization's goals (Kotas, 2014).

Regardless of who they are exactly and the nature of their relationship with the company, stakeholders are the ones who will be called the most important, as they are the main source of opportunities. What follows is that they exert a major influence on the proper operation of the company. Thus, "stakeholder relationship management" provides to be just as important as image management.

Image management practitioners should take into account the fact that a company's image is not fixed in nature. Therefore, it should be subject to modification at the time of certain changes occurring in the company: in its formal policies, the rules of operation of internal elements or marketing communications and policies that the company pursues in a given period, but it can also be the result of changes occurring in its environment (Malara et al., 2011; Rho et al., 2015).

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The source materials used in the study can be broadly divided into two main groups: primary and secondary materials. The former includes empirical studies, i.e. data collected directly from respondents by means of surveys and through participatory observation. Among the secondary sources used in the research process, an important role was played by subject literature on image management, which also took into account the classic body of work in the field.

The aim of this thesis is to present the theoretical aspects of image management, identify the key factors with the most significant impact on Żmudź Municipality's image, and to analyze and evaluate this municipality's image management.

In the research process, the literature on the subject was analyzed, which made it possible to classify, generalize, describe and systematize the information collected.

Surveys were also conducted among Żmudź residents using the CAWI technique, which widened the survey's reach. The sample selection was purposeful, due to the need to obtain opinions from people directly related to the municipality in question. 141 respondents took part in the survey. The survey questionnaire contained 7 questions and was conducted from 16.01.2024 to 15.02.2024. The survey design aim to arrange questions in a logical whole. After collecting the questionnaires, the information was processed using MS Excel spreadsheet software. A five-point Likert scale was used to evaluate the diagnostic variables.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

The empirical research was conducted in Żmudź Municipality, which is located in the southeastern part of Chełm County. It covers approximately 7.6% of the county's total area, which is situated in the Lublin Voivodeship. Żmudź is an agricultural municipality with a total area of 144 km² (Gmina Żmudź).

The main economic activities in Żmudź involve the cultivation of root crops and cereals. A provincial road connecting the city of Chełm with Hrubieszów and leading to a border crossing with Ukraine runs through part of the municipality (with a length of 10.7 km), as well as several county roads. Żmudź is located approximately 23 km from the county capital, Chełm, 90 km from the regional capital Lublin, and 269 km from Poland's capital city, Warsaw. The nearest border crossing with Ukraine, located in Dorohusk, is 32 km away. The population of Żmudź Municipality has been steadily declining year by year. This trend may be related to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as to its aging population (Gmina Żmudź).

The survey was conducted from 16.01.2024 to 15.02.2024. The survey was conducted using the CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interview) method. The survey was anonymous, and a total of 141 randomly selected residents of Żmudź Municipality participated in it. Its purpose was to obtain information on the most

important factors influencing the image of the Żmudź Municipality Office and for residents to evaluate the image of Żmudź Municipality.

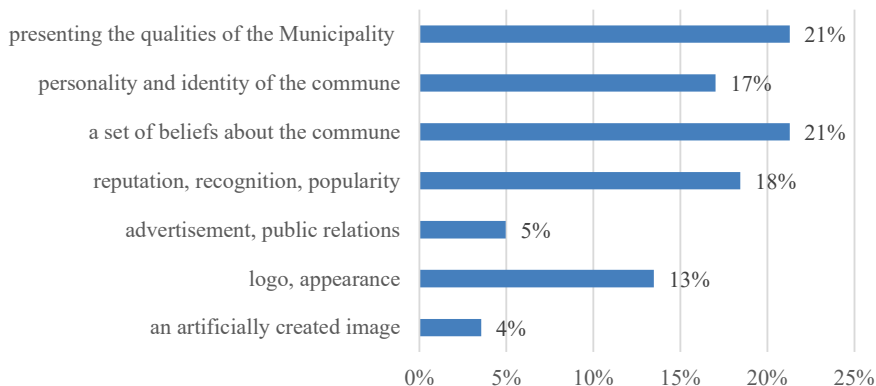


Fig. 2. Image in the opinion of respondents (authors' own elaboration)

According to figure 2, the highest percentage of indications was given to the answer presenting the qualities of Żmudź Municipality (21% of the total) and image is a set of beliefs about the municipality (21%). A significant group of respondents (18.8%), indicated the answers reputation, recognition, while 18% of respondents chose the answer that image is personality and identity. 13% of respondents selected the response that image is logo, physical appearance. The fewest respondents chose the idea that image is advertising, public relations (5% of respondents), and an artificially created image (4%).

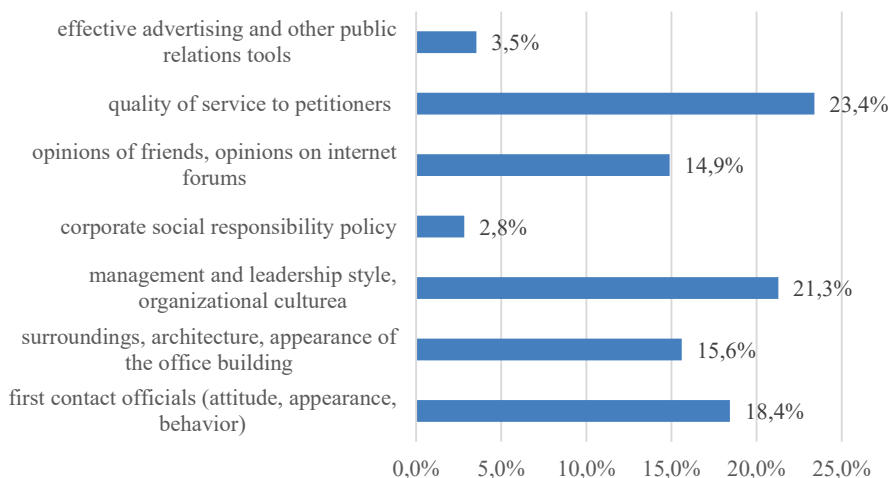


Fig. 3. Factors that have the most significant impact on the image of Żmudź Municipality (authors' own elaboration)

According to the respondents, the factors with the most significant impact on the image of Żmudź Municipality Office are the quality of service to petitioners (23.4%), and management and leadership style, organizational culture (21.3%). A significant group of respondents (18.4%) indicated the answer first contact officials (attitude, appearance, behavior, competence). The image of Żmudź Municipality Office is also influenced by the environment, architecture, appearance of the office building (15.6%), as well as the opinions of friends and those on Internet forums (14.9%). The fewest respondents selected the options ‘effective advertising and other public relations tools’, namely, 3.5% of respondents, and corporate social responsibility policy (2.8% of respondents) (fig. 3).

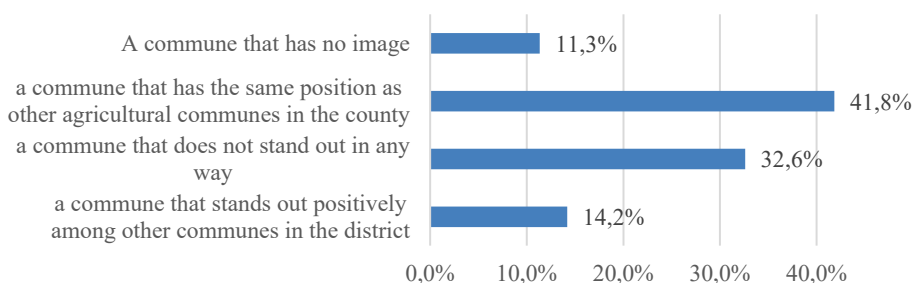


Fig. 4. Assessment of the image of Żmudź against the background of other municipalities (authors' own elaboration)

The most frequently selected response was that ‘a municipality that has the same position as other agricultural municipalities of the district’, with 41.8% of respondents choosing such an answer. Another group of respondents, 32.6%, selected the answer that Żmudź Municipality’s image is not distinctive. Conversely, the response stating that Żmudź’s image is one of a municipality that distinguishes itself against others in the district was indicated by 14.2% of respondents. The fewest respondents selected the answer that the municipality has no image – 11.3% of respondents (fig. 4).

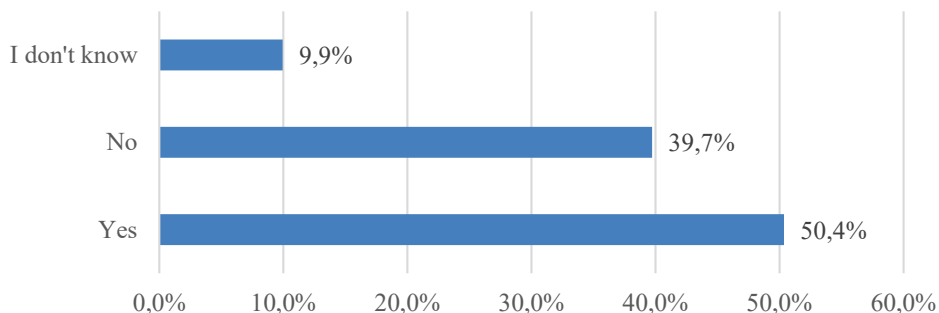


Fig. 5. Availability of information regarding Żmudź Municipality (authors' own elaboration)

As can be seen from the distribution of responses presented in the table and chart, the response ‘yes, it is easy to access information about Żmudź Municipality’ was the most frequently selected by the respondents. Among the respondents, 50.4% chose this answer. Another group of respondents (39.7%) selected the response that it is not easy to obtain such information. The least number of people chose the answer ‘I don’t know’ – 9.9% of the respondents (fig. 5).

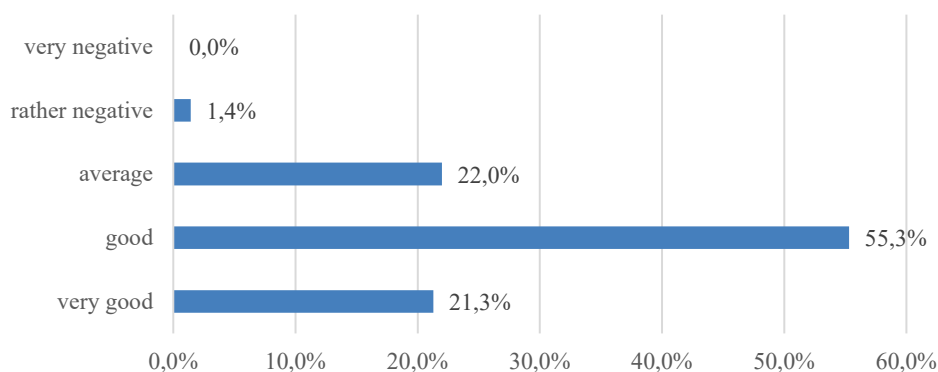


Fig. 6. Website and community (Facebook) of Żmudź Municipality (authors' own elaboration)

As can be seen from the distribution of responses presented in figure 6, the answer good (55.3%) was most often selected by the respondents. 22% indicated that they rated Żmudź Municipality website very good, while 21.3% of the respondents selected the answer ‘very well’. The fewest respondents chose the response that they rate this media rather negatively (1.4% of respondents). None of the respondents rated these sites very negatively (fig. 6).

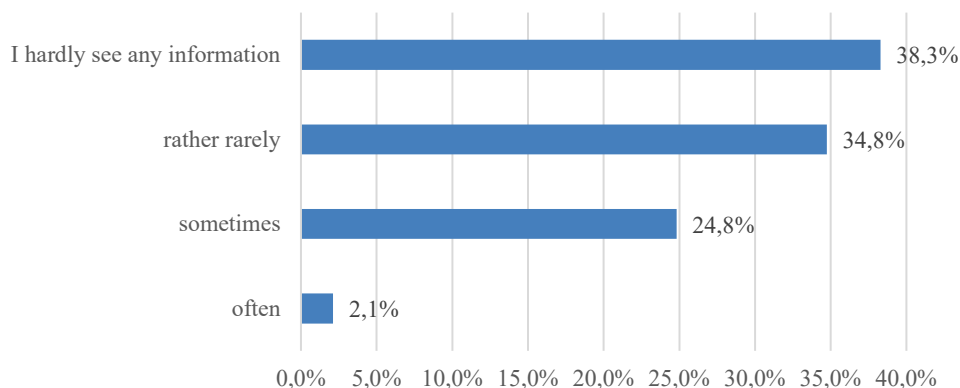


Fig. 7. Frequency of the appearance of information about Żmudź Municipality in the media (newspapers, television) (authors' own elaboration)

As can be seen from the distribution of responses presented in figure 7, the answer ‘I hardly see any information’ was the one most frequently selected by respondents, with 38.3% of the total selecting such an answer. Another group of respondents, 34.8%, chose the answer that they rather rarely see information about their municipality in the media. The answer ‘sometimes’ was indicated by 24.8% of respondents, while the fewest selected the response that they often see information about Żmudź Municipality in the newspaper and television – 2.1% of respondents (fig. 7).

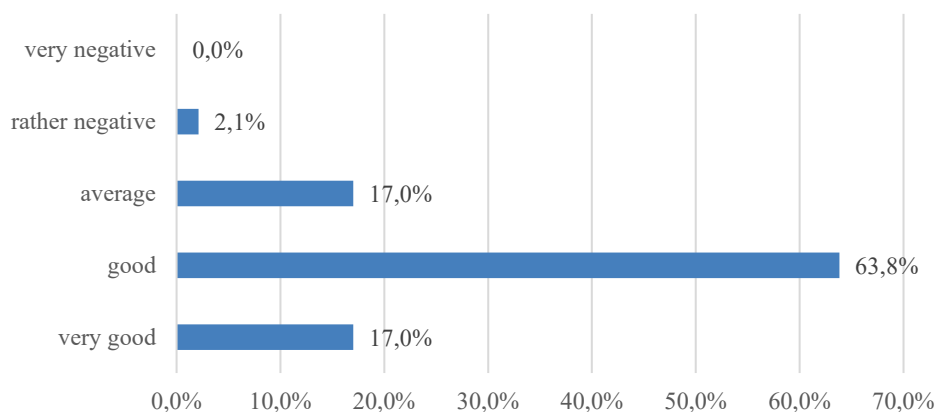


Fig. 8. The perception of the image of Żmudź Municipality by its inhabitants (authors' own elaboration)

As can be seen from the distribution of responses presented in the chart, the answer ‘good’ was selected most frequently by respondents, with 63.8% choosing this answer. The next groups of respondents chose the answer that the municipality is perceived very well from outside (17%) and moderately (17%). The fewest respondents selected the response that Żmudź Municipality is perceived rather negatively, that is, 2.1% of respondents. None of the respondents answered ‘very negative’ (fig. 8).

5. RESULTS ANALYSIS

The image management of Żmudź Municipality is characterized by both clear strengths and areas that require attention and greater focus of activities. It is important that this municipality is perceived in a positive way by external sources, as this can contribute to attracting new residents, investors or tourists. Another important aspect is the role of modern technology in communicating with residents and stakeholders. The website and the presence of Żmudź Municipality on social networks are evaluated positively, which proves the effectiveness of these

channels in informing about current events, initiatives and services offered by the municipality. Such openness and availability of information are crucial for modern image management and building trust among residents. Żmudź Municipality is also counting on energy development by focusing on the introduction of renewable energy sources such as biogas plants and windmills, and is working towards sustainable development by engaging in modernizing agriculture, improving road infrastructure and converting agricultural areas into investment areas. This has a positive impact on both the development of the municipality and its residents' quality of life. Despite many positive aspects, there are also areas that do not affect the municipality in a very positive way. One of these is access to information, which, despite positive assessments, can be problematic in some cases. The challenge is to both improve communication channels and make them more effective in reaching all sectors of society. Another negative aspect is the low visibility in traditional media, which can affect how the municipality is perceived by residents and others outside the municipality. Therefore, Żmudź Municipality should consider strengthening public relations activities to increase its presence in the traditional media. Another of its weakness is the existing scope for increasing residents' involvement in community and municipal activities. It is possible that there is a lack of initiatives or programs that fully address the needs and interests of residents, or might not be communicated appropriately. A final but key image problem is the residents' perception of the municipality as a typical, unremarkable agricultural municipality, which may be a challenge for local authorities in the view of the need to construct a more distinctive and recognizable image. Żmudź Municipality has a strong foundation in image management, effective at organizing cultural and sports events, which integrate the community and attract outside interest. It is also distinguished by its promotion of tourist values and social activity built on traditions, which translates into it being perceived as a friendly place with a rich cultural and entertainment offering, fostering the integration of the local community. Energy development, which contributes to improving residents' quality of life, is also a major image plus. In addition, social and tourism investments support the development of the local economy and the region's attractiveness as a tourist destination. The municipality should therefore continue its activities while taking care to maintain and strengthen its identity and reinforce recognition. However, there are areas it needs to pay attention to. These include:

- providing access to information – there is an emerging need to improve access to information about the municipality's activities and offerings; reported difficulties in this regard suggest the need for further development and integration of communication channels, so that information is not only easily accessible, but also communicated in a way that is accessible and attractive to different audiences;
- boosting interest among a larger part of the population in municipal events, despite many positive opinions, a significant problem is how municipal events are

evaluated as not very important for part of the population; such a situation indicates the need for an in-depth analysis of the local community's needs and expectations, which will allow for better adaptation of the cultural and recreational offer to meet the diverse interests of residents; the solution may be to organize a wide range of events that respond to diverse interests, as well as to promote these initiatives more actively to boost their visibility and attract more participants;

- strengthening internal communication – better internal communication would not only heighten residents' awareness of municipal activities, but also enable more active community participation in decision-making processes and local projects;
- making websites more attractive and functional – Żmudź Municipality could develop communication platforms in such a way that they become more interactive, offering residents a space for dialogue and exchange of opinions; although communication through websites and social media is evaluated positively, difficulties are reported in obtaining detailed information on certain aspects of municipality life;
- introducing regular meetings with residents – these will enable an open exchange of opinions and ideas about the future of the municipality and also give residents a sense that their voice is taken into account in decision-making;
- promoting community involvement – can contribute to a greater sense of belonging and satisfaction with life in the municipality;
- increasing the involvement of residents – despite the many activities of circles, associations and officials of Żmudź Municipality, only relatively few local residents are involved in its life; therefore, measures should be taken to increase the number of communities actively giving for the municipality;
- promoting Żmudź Municipality as an attractive place – in order to present this municipality as a good place to live and do business, it should be shown that it is open to innovation and supports entrepreneurship and local initiatives; thanks to these actions, the municipality will be able to attract new residents and investors;
- active participation of the local community – this is only possible through involving both municipality authorities and all residents;
- enhancing visibility in local newspapers and radio – by increasing the visibility of Żmudź Municipality in the traditional media;
- improving cooperation between the municipality and its residents – this is essential for effective image management and building a strong, integrated local community.

In summary, Żmudź Municipality possesses numerous assets that provide a solid foundation for building and maintaining a positive image. At the same time, it is important to constantly monitor residents' needs and expectations, and adapt communication strategies to respond to the dynamically changing social

and technological conditions. Further efforts should focus on improving access to information, increasing visibility in the media, and promoting community involvement in decision-making processes and municipality life. This will bolster strengths, contributing to further the development and improvement of Żmudź Municipality's image.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the study was to diagnose, analyze and evaluate the image management in Żmudź Municipality and, based on the analysis carried out, to indicate the directions of changes in the activities undertaken by the municipality. This objective was achieved by reviewing the subject literature, as well as on the authors' own research conducted in Żmudź Municipality. As a result of these studies and research, the following final conclusions can be drawn:

- image management is an integral part of any organization's activities; Żmudź Municipality has a strong foundation in image management, with a particular focus on the effective organization of cultural and sports events; it also focuses on tourism development through the use of natural attractions, thus attracting tourists and fostering local community growth;
- in order to manage the image effectively, it is necessary not only to create a positive image, but also to constantly monitor the situation, adapt to changing market conditions, and respond appropriately to crisis situations;
- as a crucial role in image management is played by social media, Żmudź Municipality is seeking to actively cooperate with local media in promoting its achievements and events;
- challenge for the municipality is to stimulate economic activity and create conditions conducive to retaining residents and attracting new investors;
- a key role in coordinating and supporting the implementation of the tasks assigned by the head of the municipality is played by Żmudź Municipality Office;
- local activity plays an important role in building Żmudź Municipality's image.

It is worth emphasizing that the municipality residents evaluate its image positively, are satisfied with the access to information in the municipality and with the atmosphere prevailing there. However, there is a need to improve access to information about the municipality's activities in social media; further actions should focus on adapting communication strategies to changing social and technological conditions in order to bolster the positive image of Żmudź Municipality. In addition, image-building activities bring benefits in the form of improving the reputation and attractiveness of the municipality for residents and investors alike, which contributes to the stability and development of the local community.

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ZARZĄDZANIE WIZERUNKIEM GMINY ŻMUDŹ

Streszczenie

Celami pracy są przedstawienie teoretycznych aspektów dotyczących zarządzania wizerunkiem, identyfikacja czynników mających najistotniejszy wpływ na wizerunek gminy Żmudź, a także analiza i ocena zarządzania wizerunkiem tej gminy. Cele pracy osiągnięto poprzez proces badawczy z wykorzystaniem teoretycznych i empirycznych metod badawczych. Dokonano analizy literatury przedmiotu oraz analizy danych pozyskanych w gminie Żmudź. W 2024 r. przeprowadzono badania ankietowe za pomocą techniki CAWI wśród mieszkańców gminy. W sondażu wzięło udział 141 respondentów. Analiza wyników badań pozwoliła sformułować rekomendacje dotyczące zarządzania wizerunkiem tej gminy. Problematyka badanego obszaru jest bardzo złożona, dlatego w pracy przeanalizowano wybrane aspekty zarządzania wizerunkiem.

Kluczową rolę w jego kształtowaniu odgrywają działania i komunikacja, które są niezbędne do budowania zaufania i lojalności. Na podstawie badań stwierdzono, że gmina Żmudź ma wiele atutów, które stanowią solidny fundament do budowania i utrzymywania pozytywnego wizerunku. Jednocześnie istotne jest nieustanne monitorowanie potrzeb i oczekiwań mieszkańców, a także adaptacja strategii komunikacyjnych w taki sposób, aby odpowiadały one na dynamicznie zmieniające się warunki społeczne i technologiczne.

Słowa kluczowe: wizerunek, zarządzanie wizerunkiem, kryzys wizerunkowy, marketing terytorialny, identyfikacja wizualna gminy, wizerunek gminy

