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ANALYSIS OF MARKETING TOOLS USED BY REAL ESTATE DEVELOPMENT COMPANIES USING SECRET CLIENT RESEARCH – A CASE STUDY FROM KRAKOW

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the paper is to find out what marketing tools are used by development companies operating in Poland to attract customers and whether the impact of the Fourth Industrial Revolution on marketing can be observed. The secondary aim of the paper is to determine whether developers building investments in the area of the restricted use area (O.O.U.) use more marketing tools to convince potential customers to buy. For this purpose, a secret client survey was used and the research sample consists of four development companies and four of their investments in Kraków. The research conducted led to the disclosure of marketing tools used by developers. The survey shows that some elements of home branding, storytelling and banner ads, social media ads, ads on websites and portals and information brochures are being used. Through the use of virtual walks, housing visualization and the use of social media in advertising, the impact of the Fourth Industrial Revolution on marketing in the industry can be seen. The analysis shows that companies creating developments in the restricted use area are not using more tricks to attract customers. All developers selected for the study use a similar number of marketing tools.

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1. Introduction

Although many authors emphasize that the real estate industry is traditional and conservative in its functioning and that it does not rapidly adopt technological innovations (Baum 2020; Kania et al., 2020; Malkowska, 2020), researchers point out the increasing role in the environment and the relatively large number of so-called smart technologies in the real estate sector also used for marketing purposes (e.g. drones, virtual and augmented realities (VR and AR), Internet of Things (IoT) - (Ullah et al., 2018). It is important to note at this point that these technologies are directly related to the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Jeon & Suh, 2017), which is hugely changing the functioning of societies, economies and businesses themselves, which, in their marketing activities, are also largely moving away from traditional tools to digital ones (Danh, 2021). The aim of this article is to investigate what marketing tools are used by development companies operating in Krakow to attract potential customers and whether the impact of the fourth industrial revolution can be observed in this respect. The secondary objectives of the study are primarily to obtain answers to the questions of whether development companies building developments in an area of limited use (O.O.U.) use a different range of marketing tools to persuade potential customers to buy and whether the secret client survey will work as a method to investigate

marketing tools. The study is a qualitative, pilot study and is a prelude to quantitative research. The secret client survey, which was conducted in the first quarter of 2022, was used to meet the current objectives in the study. The study is based on four case studies from the city of Kraków (four property development companies and four completed developments within the city of Kraków).

The paper is organized as follows: section 2 reviews the literature on marketing tools used in real estate development companies and types of secret client research. Section 3 provides a brief description of the research samples and a description of the research conducted. Section 4 presents the results of the applied research. Section 5 presents a summary of the research and a proposal for its continuation.

2. Literature review

2.1. The Fourth Industrial Revolution

Currently, new digital technologies such as Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality and Big Data are shaping the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Industry 4.0 can be defined as a concept of organizational and technological change that includes the integration of value chains and new business models, smart products and services. These changes are driven by individual customer needs, digital developments, data integration and widespread internet access (Nosalska & Mazurek, 2019). The Fourth Industrial Revolution is resulting in a blurring of the boundaries between the digital, biological and physical realms (Krafft et al., 2020). Through the use of technologies - such as virtual reality or 3D printing, the customer can participate in the creation of a product at an early stage of work (Nosalska & Mazurek, 2019).

In the literature, a set of core marketing principles for the Fourth Industrial Revolution can be found (Nosalska & Mazurek, 2019). These principles are: (i) collaboration, (ii) conversation, (iii) co-creation,(iv) cognition,(v)connectivity. Translating these into the development company environment, it can be seen that they apply some of the above marketing principles when dealing with customers. They are open for cooperation and always ready to talk. The customer has the opportunity to monitor the emerging investment on an ongoing basis, and later, in a way, participates in its co-creation (by adapting the building to their own needs). Many developers do not close themselves off from the possibilities offered by social media and also use them to contact potential customers. They enable the client to get acquainted with an investment under construction by means of virtual walks or visualizations of flats. The use of virtual reality in real estate marketing is also noted by Siniak et al. (2018). They noted the fact of the occurrence of the Fourth Industrial Revolution in real estate and the fact that it requires many real estate companies to remake themselves in order not to be left behind. According to some research (Bondyra & Zagierski, 2019) the effects of the Fourth Industrial Revolution in Poland can also be seen in the real estate sector. Property developers are using both 3D printed mock-ups and VR and AR visualizations to present real estate construction projects.

The real estate market should become a focal point of future socio-economic development plans. The fourth industrial revolution in the real estate market manifests itself, among other things, in the pursuit of more flexible spaces, on the principle of co-working spaces, and in the flexible planning and financing of real estate (Kasprzak, 2021). Providing a sense of security in times of change should to be associated with property ownership, as it is clear that it correlates positively with social and political participation in a society that does not feel excluded (McCabe, 2013). Transformation 4.0 will mainly take place in large cities, so this requires governments to support local and metropolitan communities and to address urbanization issues arising from the influx of people into larger cities (Kasprzak, 2021).

2.2. Secret client research

The methodology of secret client research has evolved over the years, with researchers adapting it to the research they are conducting. Therefore, in the literature we can find very many different approaches to this research. The most common types of secret client research have become: (i) mystery shopping, (ii) mystery mailing, (iii) mystery calling and (iv) mystery visitors. Mystery shopping can be defined as a form of observation that uses researchers to act as customers to monitor the quality of the service provided and the entire process of providing it (Wilson, 1998). After visiting a particular establishment as a mystery shopper, the person fills in pre-prepared question sheets designed by the researcher and the researcher determines their overall feelings about the visit.

Mystery mailing is a survey conducted through email. The research starts by selecting specific individuals or institutions that will be the best sources of information for the researcher about the phenomenon selected for the study. Due to the fact that mystery mailing does not involve high costs, it is possible to significantly enlarge the research sample,

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as this study is not even limited by the problem of geographical distance (Karwowski, 2016).

Mystery calling involves checking the quality of customer service over the phone. The employee working on the hotline must provide quick information, so the researcher is able to check a minimum of several institutions in one day. This research, similarly to mystery mailing, is not capital-intensive, and thus can be performed frequently. From the point of view of the owner of a given company (who can commission such research) the results can provide him with realistic information regarding the strengths and weaknesses of his personnel. The data obtained in such a way can help the employer/manager improve human resource management (Jackel & Heitler Lehoczky, 2013).

Mystery visitor is a study in which the researcher wants to investigate to what extent employees comply with customer service standards in a particular company. Therefore, a so-called mystery visitor is sent to companies and often interviews the employee, but in such a way that the employee is unaware of it. After the survey, the mystery visitor fills out (usually in descriptive form) a questionnaire previously prepared by the researcher (Gębarowski & Siemieniako, 2015). This survey is most often used at all kinds of fairs (e.g. job fairs) or at business presentations conducted at conferences.

2.3. Marketing tools used by development companies

Marketing tools can be used in various sectors of the economy, including real estate management (Figure 1). A good example of using different marketing tricks is real estate development companies. This is because they sell a product that has not yet been developed (Smyth et al., 2019). Developers focus on giving their future customers the best picture of their investment.

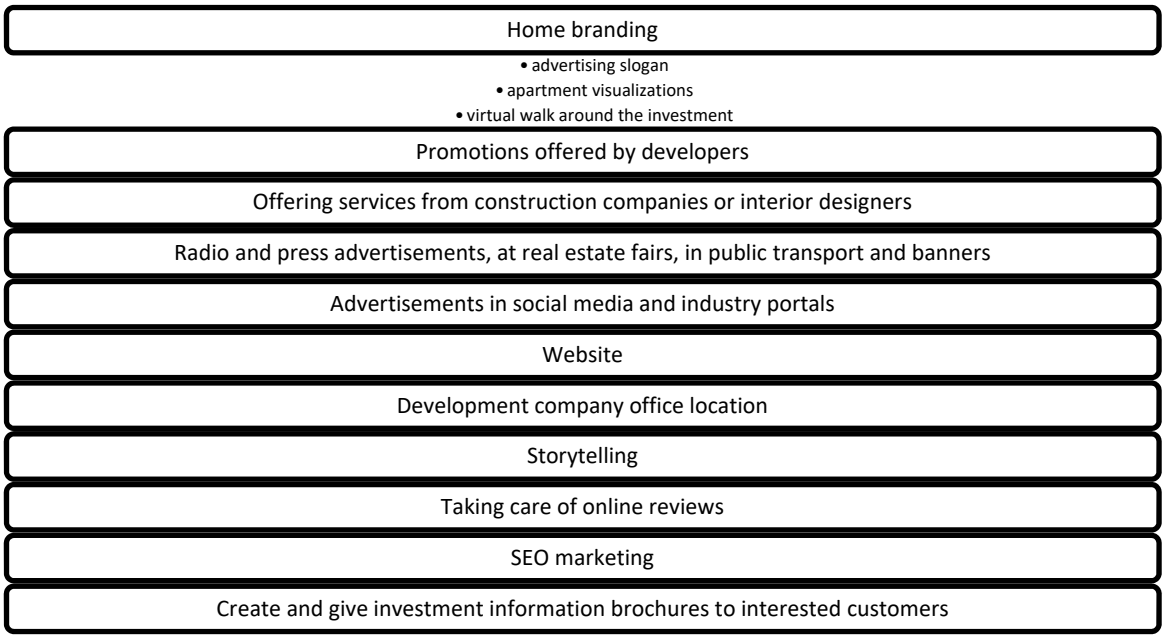


Fig. 1. Marketing tools used in real estate management. *Source*: own elaboration.

In recent years, home branding (Ouwehand & Bosch, 2016) has become the main marketing tool of real estate development companies, which is the construction of a personal brand, a set of activities designed to induce a potential customer to buy. One of the first activities is to create an advertising slogan of the investment being carried out by the development company, intended to be memorable to potential customers and to evoke positive feelings associated with the property. Home branding in marketing uses elements of psychology, focusing primarily on what people associate home with. This is most often home warmth, which explains why slogans frequently refer to it (Ouwehand & Bosch, 2016). An element of home branding is also the creation by developers of visualizations of apartments, thanks to which the customer can better identify with a given interior than seeing only white, empty walls. A more and more common method is to show clients around the property remotely, so that, when they watch a video, they feel as if they are part of the property. This tool is used in the case of investments that have

already been created. These elements are placed already at the stage of announcements on advertising portals in order to distinguish the investment among many other announcements. This type of audiovisual material is a very good and effective marketing tool (Selvi et al., 2021).

Additional promotions are also a frequent marketing tool used by developers. Their examples can be, for example, parking spaces in the price of the apartment, the first 12 months of the mortgage paid by the developer, vouchers for finishing the apartment or a storage room in the price of the apartment (Mazurkiewicz, 2017). In addition, it has become an increasingly popular procedure for the developer company to provide its customers with the services of construction companies or interior designers, of course at bargain prices. This is intended to induce the potential customer to choose an apartment from that particular developer, as they have a chance to save money intended for finishing the flat. Still, the marketing tools are information brochures (Shaibu & Taiwo, 2015), advertising at housing fairs, radio advertising, advertising in newspapers, any outdoor advertising (advertising banners in the streets or on transportation (Sui Pheng & Siang Hoe, 1994)). However, in the 21st century, the most important element of marketing in real estate is definitely the website of the developer's investment (Martyniak, 2015). Its construction is important, which in the case of real estate development companies looks very similar and fits into this scheme:

- stages of construction of the investment,
- information about credit counseling,
- information about investments planned by the developer,
- sometimes information about prices per square meter of particular apartment properties,
- sometimes technical projects of the real estate made available,
- contact data.

Such a website design definitely makes it easier for a potential customer to get acquainted with a given developer investment (Martyniak, 2015).

A marketing tool that is rarely mentioned in the marketing category is the location of a developer's office. Not only the properties sold by a development company are judged by potential customers based on location, but also the developer's offices. A client arranging a meeting with a developer about an investment is sure to pay attention to the distance he has to travel to have such a meeting. Whether the office is located in the city center or on the outskirts. If he is a motorist, he will also pay attention to whether there are parking spaces near the office and whether there is convenient access (Shaibu & Taiwo, 2015).

Another interesting marketing tool is storytelling. It is designed to emotionally entice a potential customer to purchase a property. It involves focusing on family values and operating on emotions. Working around the words family – home – neighbors – backyard – close, it builds warm and pleasant associations in the potential recipient. The initial step of this tool are billboards, which do not contain much information, mainly a short, emotional slogan and photos of the designed investment. Once the developer has gained the interest of the recipient, the potential buyer starts looking for detailed information on the Internet, and it is at this point that the customer is taken over and is immediately surrounded by special interest. Such a procedure instills a sense of security in the potential customer and attaches them to a particular development company. When interviewing clients and presenting the property in small talk, developers create a special bond with them by telling them about the advantages of the property and creating a pleasant atmosphere (Bickmore & Cassel, 1999).

Due to the fact that we live in an online era, a very important element of a development company's marketing strategy is social media advertising. Such advertisements can take the form of sponsored ads (displayed when browsing social media) or be based on the creation of a fanpage of the company that regularly publishes new content about the developments (Belniak & Radziszewska, 2019). In addition, the company can also use SEO-marketing (Lin Su & Sun Bo, 2008). This allows the visibility of the company's website to be increased in search engines which helps to reach investments by potential customers. It is also important to take care of online reviews. More and more people leave their opinions about a given company/person on the so-called Google business card. This tool can be accessed by anyone with access to the Internet and Google is the most widely used web browser. Therefore, the developer company should try to ensure that the opinions there are mostly positive, and if there are any negative ones, they should be commented on by the developer company in a diplomatic way (certainly it should not be left without comment). When you add the other mentioned marketing tools, the developer company that uses them has a really good chance of get a client.

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3. Data and Methods

This article contains research conducted in Q1 2022 on four research samples (i.e. four real estate development companies operating in Kraków). The research began with a review of the literature on the subject in order to determine which study would best illustrate the research problem of the article.

This article is based on the Turkish research (Selvi et al., 2021) dealing with marketing tools used by developers in Turkey. The article was also inspired by Karwowski's Ph dissertation (2016), in which he describes the secret client method in the university library environment. Among other things, the types of secret client survey and the idea of a questionnaire for each type of survey were extracted. Furthermore, in Karwowski's dissertation, the research author himself was placed in the role of the secret client, which is also the case in this article.

Next, it was then necessary to select a research sample for the pilot study for investments from Krakow. It was decided that two development companies and two developments they carried out in the Balice limited use area (developer III and developer IV) and two development companies and two developments they carried out in any location within the city of Kraków (developer I and developer II) would be surveyed. The selection of the analyzed development companies was made in a targeted and homogeneous manner (Ćwiklicki & Urbaniak, 2019) based on the following criteria: (i) activity in the area of the city of Kraków (including in the area of limited use), (ii) creation of residential developments, (iii) developments with housing still available for telephone interviews and meetings with developers. Two developments in any area of the City of Kraków were multi-storey, multi-family buildings. Unfortunately, the other two developments, due to the local development plan in force around the airport, could not be the same buildings as the previous two. It was therefore decided to have two similar developments in the area, namely terraced houses, which were also intended for multi-family households.

The next step was to personalize the selected survey for the problem investigated in the paper. For this purpose, a secret client survey and three methods within this survey were selected, i.e. mystery online shopping, mystery calling, and a mystery visitor. The mystery online shopping method was used to check the websites and advertisements of the developers/investments. The mystery calling method was used to evaluate the telephone customer service. The mystery visitor method was used to check the course of the meeting with the developer and to assess the appearance of the construction site, investment location. For this purpose, a site inspection of selected investments and four meetings with each developer were conducted to check the veracity of the information provided by them. For each method four separate questionnaires were constructed, which were filled in by the secret client, in this case this was the author of the article herself. The final phase of the research involved drawing conclusions from the collected opinions and answering the research questions.

4. Results

Some elements of home branding are used by selected development companies. Two of the surveyed developers offer a virtual walk-through of the development on the website and interior design visualizations of the apartments. Only one of the surveyed developments has an advertising slogan, but it is not convincing. A promotional price is offered by only one development company and it concerns the service of an interior architect (table 1).

Only one development company promotes itself with street banners using storytelling. The poster features a family and a slogan referring to a family house and creating a family atmosphere. However, when it comes to information banners on construction sites, two of the four investments had the above mentioned banners (Table 3).

Only two of the four selected developers have Facebook fanpages, but only one of them uses the so called sponsored ads, which are linked to searches in a web browser. On the other hand, every developer has a website and all the websites follow the pattern adopted in the article. All sites are fairly intuitive; the only problem the mystery shopper encountered was finding a virtual walk-through in two of the four selected cases (only two companies offer a virtual walk-through of the development). Three out of four surveyed developers have apartment ads on classifieds portals. The ads contain more information than is found on the developers' websites, while only in the case of one development can visualizations of the apartments be found (Table 1).

Table 1

Results of mystery online shopping

	Developer I	Developer II	Developer III	Developer IV
Developer's website	✓	✓	✓	✓
Website dedicated to investments	✓	✓	✓	✓
Website in accordance with the above-mentioned scheme	✓	✓	✓	✓
The website is intuitive	✓	✓	✓	✓
Virtual tour	✓	✗	✗	✓
Advertising slogan	✗	✗	✗	✓
Promotional price or professional service	✗	✗	✗	✓
Announcements on advertising portals	✗	✓	✓	✓
Visualizations of apartments	✗	✗	✗	✓
Social Media Ads	✓	✓	✗	✗
Care for opinions on the Internet	✗	✗	✗	✗

Source: own elaboration.

Table 2

Results of mystery calling/mailing

	Developer I	Developer II	Developer III	Developer IV
Polite and professional conversation	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sent investment materials	✓	✓	✓	✓
Possibility of online meeting	✗	✗	✗	✗
Approval of the proposed date of the meeting by the mystery shopper	✓	✓	✓	✓
Fast (up to 24h) response to an e-mail	✓	✓	✓	✓

Source: own elaboration.

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The mystery shopper became familiar with three of the four locations of the developers' offices, as one meeting took place at the construction site (Table 3). The office of developer one was located in the city center, thus it was very well connected. The second developer's office was located in a gated community, which made it difficult to get to the meeting. The office of the third developer was on the outskirts of the city, in a poorly connected neighborhood, and therefore access was slightly difficult. In each case, there was a problem with the lack of parking spaces (Table 4)

Informational brochures and technical drawings of the premises and surroundings were handed out by each developer to the mystery shopper during the meeting (Table 4). In addition, prior to the meeting, just after the phone call, each developer sent promotional materials that were requested by the mystery shopper (but only two of them did so immediately after the call) (Table 2).

Only two of the four companies selected for the study have online reviews on a so-called Google business card. Developer two has mostly positive reviews, but there are too few to consider this a representative sample. Developer one has a much higher number of reviews, but the vast majority of them are very negative. Both developer one and developer two do not refer to online reviews and do not comment diplomatically on customer statements (Table 1).

Table 3

Results of mystery visitor – site inspection

	Developer I	Developer II	Developer III	Developer IV
An easy-to-find investment	✗	✓	✓	✓
The building agrees visually with the design on the website	✓	✓	✓	✓
Construction secured correctly	✓	✓	✗	✓
On the investment site there are advertising banners	✓	✗	✗	✓
Advertising banners are aesthetic	✗	✗	✗	✗
On the construction site you can find the developer's logo	✓	✗	✗	✗
Extensive infrastructure in close proximity to the investment	✓	✓	✗	✗
Elements of the investment location in accordance with the developer's description	✓	✗	✗	✗

Source: own elaboration.

The selected developers, pride themselves on their customer approach. Two of the three developers conducted a professional telephone interview with the customer. An advantage was undoubtedly the fact that each developer agreed to the mystery shopper's proposed appointment time. Two of the four developers contacted the mystery shopper prior to the meeting to remind them of the appointment (Table 2). Three of the four meetings were professional, with a detailed presentation of the development and answers to every question asked. Importantly for the mystery shopper, none of the developers were pushy during the meeting and two of the developers offered something to drink during the meeting, which from the mystery shopper's perspective was a sign of courtesy. Given the epidemic considerations and various other aspects, the lack of an online meeting was an undeniable disadvantage. In times of ubiquitous digitalization, it is also worth betting on modern solutions. As far as the subjective feeling of honesty towards the mystery shopper is concerned, it is worth mentioning that, in almost all cases, the location and appearance of the investment agrees with that on the website, with the exception of one developer, who showed in the visualizations that there are many green areas around the investment, which are not physically there. Each of the developers admitted at the meeting that there are no delays in the project, which is true (judging by the site inspection), but one of them failed to mention a very important thing, which is the inclusion of the project area in the restricted use zone. It is also noteworthy that two of the four developers mentioned the disadvantages of the investment during the conversation, whereas the other two developers only praised the investment (table 4).

Table 4

Results of mystery visitor – meeting with developers

	Developer I	Developer II	Developer III	Developer IV
The meeting started punctually	✓	✓	✓	✓
The meeting took place in the developer's office according to the request of a mystery shopper	✓	✓	✓	✗
Every question has found its answer	✓	✓	✓	✓
The mystery shopper did not feel the insistence of the developer	✓	✓	✓	✓
Additional materials about the property have been provided	✓	✓	✓	✓
It was easy to reach the developer's office	✓	✗	✗	✓
The developer was polite	✓	✓	✓	✓
The developer was honest	✓	✓	✓	✗

Source: own elaboration.

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5. Discussion and conclusions

The main objective of the article was to find out which marketing tools are used by developers to attract customers in Kraków and whether the impact of the Fourth Industrial Revolution can be discerned in this respect. Based on the above research, it can be concluded that the developers selected for the study use only a small part of the marketing tools offered by the market (Ouwehand & Bosch, 2016; Mazurkiewicz, 2017; Shaibu & Taiwo, 2015; Sui Pheng & Siang Hoe, 1994; Martyniak, 2015; Belniak & Radziszewska, 2019). The study shows that some elements of home branding, storytelling and information banners, social media ads, ads on websites and portals, and information brochures are used. It should be noted, however, that not all companies participating in the survey use the above-mentioned tools. Through the use of virtual walk-throughs, residential visualizations and the use of social media in advertising, the impact of the Fourth Industrial Revolution on marketing in this industry can be seen (Nosalska & Mazurek, 2019). This is particularly indicated by the advertisements and fanpages used by two of the developer companies surveyed. Social media plays a huge role in marketing, especially for those already born in the 21st century (Nhlabathiet al., 2022). The use of virtual walkthroughs of an investment refers, in a way, to VR technology, which allows the potential customer to walk around the investment. This is a very important marketing tool that interacts with the customer's senses. The side objectives of the article were to show whether development companies developing in a limited-use area are using more marketing tools and whether the secret client survey would work well in the study of marketing tools. The above analysis shows that these companies do not use more tricks to attract customers. All developers selected for the study use a similar number of marketing tools. The surveyed developers use the same or mostly similar marketing tools and these are websites, portal advertising and home branding elements. One developer uses more than two marketing tools to attract customers. The result of the above study shows that, with a small research sample size, the secret client study is a good method. With a larger research sample, on the other hand, the survey may no longer be as reliable. Therefore, with a larger research sample, it can be replaced by a survey. This study is the basis for conducting, in the next stage, quantitative research using questionnaire surveys on a representative group of developers in Poland. The result of the above study also encourages further research on this issue, but from a different angle. Another study, which could broaden the spectrum of the current one, could consist in checking how, to what extent (if any) all the above marketing tools actually influence potential customers of property development companies.

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