

A wave of enthusiasm for Hamburg

The success of the Elbphilharmonie – and what city marketing has to do with it

Hamburg, April 2017: Just three months ago, the Elbphilharmonie made Hamburg shine in the most literal sense: on 11 January 2017, the concert hall celebrated its grand opening with a euphoric event – an exterior light installation and a live stream of the opening concerts from within the building. The opening festival stretched over three full weeks, and tickets for the festival sold out quickly – and so did the 500,000 tickets for the first season.

Following ten years of construction, the “Elphi” – a fond nickname even national media have come to adopt – outshines the River Elbe and St Michael’s Church, as well as critics and the ballooning costs. National and international media coverage is simply overwhelming: the daily newspaper Die Welt calls it “a stroke of luck” for Hamburg and Germany and refers to the Elbphilharmonie as “Hamburg’s new landmark” (Die Welt, 12/01/2017), and Der Stern magazine publishes a eulogy to this “dream castle” that, according to the editors, turns Hamburg into a world city (Der Stern, no. 49/2016). As for the international press: they come in large numbers, they marvel, they report, and they praise the beauty and the symbolic strength of this new philharmonic concert hall.

“Make the most of the opportunities this building offers. Then, the Elbphilharmonie can become what many people in Hamburg envision: the hallmark of an outward-looking and culturally diverse city, and a jewel in Germany’s crown as a country that values culture,” said the former German President Joachim Gauck in his welcoming address during the opening festival. And as Mr Gauck officially praised the Elbphilharmonie in front of 2,100 invited guests, Hamburg residents and non-residents, celebrities and just about everyone were flooding the digital channels with a wave of enthusiasm. Record highs were recorded for interactions on social media platforms and the media response on the opening alone generated nearly 8 billion contacts worldwide.

In his piece on the construction of the Elbphilharmonie (Städte als Marken, pp. 184), Tom R. Schulz accurately and critically describes the opportunities and challenges of this new landmark – and diagnoses a paradigmatic shift in city marketing. And yet the following questions remain unanswered: How was it possible to successfully market the Elbphilharmonie and to achieve the transition from problem child to symbol? And what role does Hamburg’s city marketing play in this context?

Orchestrated agency work for an architectural miracle

Commissioned by the City of Hamburg and in collaboration with HamburgMusik gGmbH and Hamburg’s Ministry of Culture, Hamburg Marketing GmbH set up a powerful agency-based model aimed exclusively at communicating the

Elbphilharmonie. Following an international tender, the selected lead agency Jung von Matt launched its campaign eight months prior to the opening date. In cooperation with its PR partner agency achtung! as well as ten additional agencies from 14 countries, the campaign was rolled out in the targeted world regions of North America, Asia and Europe. From their campaign hub in Hamburg the team distributed content, stories, pictures and footage relating to the Elbphilharmonie and Hamburg, created opportunities for coverage and orchestrated the ever-increasing international buzz.

One reason for the Elbphilharmonie buzz was the choice and coordination of partners, and another reason was the development of a communication strategy that captures Hamburg's very essence. In every way, the campaign's leitmotif – the Elbphilharmonie as Hamburg's symbol for a sustainable future – was and is based on the concert hall's key role and draws on the idea of reciprocity as it makes the Elbphilharmonie the core medium of Hamburg-related communications, while at the same time making Hamburg the core marketing object. This strategy confirms that Hamburg was indeed aware of the Elbphilharmonie's potential for positioning Hamburg nationally and internationally and for providing Hamburg with a distinctive face, i.e. with a landmark.

Because one thing is for sure: as much as we love our Alster Lake and our St Michael's Church, their recognition value beyond Hamburg is close to zero. The Elbphilharmonie, however, is different. The Elbphilharmonie's strategic messages stand for themselves ("an all-embracing music experience", "a house for everyone") and for the city ("Shaping a future based on contrast"), and for detailed perfection, and for a symbolic overall appearance. The Elbphilharmonie finally provides Hamburg with an icon that makes the city unique.



Picture: Hamburg Marketing GmbH/Ralf Larmann

Spectacular light installation during the Elbphilharmonie's opening on 11 January 2017

City marketing as campaign driver

In its role as leading and coordinating unit, Hamburg Marketing became the driver of this innovative Elbphilharmonie campaign – serving as commissioning party for the agencies, as a continuous provider of impetus, and as the organisation in charge of project coordination, overall dramaturgy and budget, international PR, as well as media relations and roadshows. Equipped with a miniature “Elphi”, Hamburg Marketing organised roadshows e.g. to Paris, London, Shanghai and Tokyo, and invited its partners to join dedicated events for disseminators. In addition, Hamburg Marketing launched a testimonial campaign featuring international artists aimed at boosting not only the Elbphilharmonie's appeal but also that of Hamburg. The New York Times placed Hamburg 10th in their “Places to Go in 2017” ranking, referring to Hamburg as a “haven for architecture and design” while stating the Elbphilharmonie as a prime example.

However, the true achievement of and the key to this groundbreaking success lies far deeper than this: the wave of “Elphi” enthusiasm is not the result of short-term staging, but the pay-off for many years of hard work. From opposing interests, heterogeneous ideas and smouldering criticism circulating around the Elbphilharmonie, Hamburg's city marketing has been able to create a communication narrative that unites the city, thanks to the expertise it has acquired since its foundation in 2004 and its tireless communication at all levels. The foundations of public acceptance were thus laid at the

time when city marketing was initiated, in the strategic steps since then, and in the creation of an extensive formal and informal network of all stakeholders involved.

It was precisely this essence of experience and competence that prompted the campaign's leitmotif, messages, tonality and dramaturgy. The character of Hamburg has been laid out in this strategy, unfolds in the dedicated communication measures and turns the Elbphilharmonie into Hamburg's largest common denominator. As a "house for everyone", the Elbphilharmonie is a part of the public arena, and its programme and pricing policy indicate that it does indeed target the public at large. At the same time, the Elbphilharmonie is striving to become one of the world's top concert halls – and a landmark for a city that incorporates both the beautiful and the rough, a city that shapes a future based on contrast: Hamburg.

One for all, and all for one

In keeping with this strategy, Hamburg Marketing has been able to activate its powerful, heterogeneous network: stakeholders from private and public enterprises, culture and media, organisations and associations, the music industry, politics and the general public have all become allies and communicators. More than 40 Hamburg businesses celebrated the ten-day "Count-Town" to the grand opening of the Elbphilharmonie with an anticipation that not only radiated across all channels to the public sphere, but above all into the lives and hearts of Hamburg's locals. And thus once and for all, the former problem child turned into the city's golden child.

Looking towards the future, today's peak in attention will define the challenges of tomorrow. Hamburg will have to succeed in strengthening its profile in the long term, in presenting itself as a highly attractive city and in living up to the Elbphilharmonie's symbolic power beyond the sphere of music – without diverting the Elbphilharmonie from its original purpose. Or, as Mr Gauck put it: "This building aims to be everyone's Elbphilharmonie – that is a big promise, one that also creates many expectations. It is now up to all of you here in Hamburg to take on this challenge and to bring good ideas to life."



Picture: Franziska Kausch

Thorsten Kausch
Independent consultant

Born in Hamburg in 1973, Thorsten Kausch was managing director of Hamburg Marketing GmbH from mid-2006 and held the same position at Hamburg Tourismus GmbH from 2010 to 2013. Alongside his role at Hamburg Marketing GmbH, Thorsten Kausch developed the Hamburg Convention Bureau GmbH between November 2013 and September 2016. Up until he left the holding in September 2016 he was responsible e.g. for the strategic alignment of city marketing activities of Hamburg and the Hamburg Metropolitan Region and for developing Hamburg as an event location. For more than ten years, Thorsten Kausch was thus in charge of the systematic implementation and realisation of Hamburg's city brand strategy in cooperation with other stakeholders involved in marketing Hamburg. Since October 2016, he has been an independent consultant, providing strategic advice to both cities and institutions.

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Picture: Tim Oehler

Sybille Fischer

Independent communication consultant

On behalf of her clients and partners from the fields of business, media and social affairs, Sybille Fischer combines communication and contacts, as well as organisation and knowledge. Sybille Fischer holds an M.A. degree from the University of Erlangen, where she studied theatre and media sciences. She has worked as a television, print and online journalist and as an event and marketing manager in Erlangen and Hamburg. In 2014 she decided to establish her own business and expand her range of services by adding project management, fundraising and cooperation management to her portfolio. Her professional diversity is summarised by her guiding principle: "Words & Actions". Sybille Fischer lives and works in Hamburg.

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Picture: Hamburg Marketing GmbH/Ralf Larmann

"In years to come, the building will surely come to symbolise the city to the world, like the Sydney Opera House or the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco."

The Telegraph, 12/01/2017

"The guests were cheering, the programme and interpretation were convincing, and the conclusion had the joyous energy of New Year's Eve."

Spiegel Online, 12/01/2017

"Judging by the creative zest of the opening events, it is on track to incubate a musical culture as optimistic and striking as the building itself."

The New York Times, 13/01/2017

"And it really is a stunner of a building in a city that it's a joy to get to know."

The Guardian, 12/01/2017

“The Elbphilharmonie is a stroke of luck – for music, for architecture, for Hamburg, for Germany. And this is something that cannot be said about many contemporary buildings.”

Die Welt, 12/01/2017

“The Elbphilharmonie is also a stunning achievement that will make the Hanseatic city a must-see cultural destination.”

The Economist, 13/01/2017

“The masterpiece of the decade”

Le Point, 12/01/2017