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REGIONAL MARKETING TO CHANGE REGIONAL IMAGES: THE EXAMPLE OF THE GRONINGEN PROVINCE CAMPAIGN

Abstract: An important element in the urban and regional development strategy of many local and regional governments is geographical marketing. The process of geographical marketing combines promotional, spatial and organisational activities, and can be aimed at various groups.

From 1989 onwards, the province of Groningen, in the northern part of the Netherlands, has pursued such a geographical marketing campaign. This campaign, which is still being carried on, has used various means of communication: advertisements in newspapers and magazines, and radio and television commercials. It has been aimed at entrepreneurs and at the general public as well.

An ex ante study of the public image of Groningen was carried out in 1988, before the start of the campaign. For this purpose, a random sample of the Dutch population was inquired by telephone. Since then, similar inquiries were carried out every 2 years, in order to measure the 'effects' of the campaign. In these inquiries, the image of the provinces of Friesland and Noord-Brabant (considered as 'competitors' in the place marketing arena) was measured along with that of Groningen, and used for reference. The data set now reaches up to the year 2005. The availability of this kind of data for a period of 17 years, measured at regular intervals, provides a unique opportunity to study the development of regional images through time, and to find suggestions for the best possible way to continue the marketing campaign.

In this paper, the data of the inquiries will be analysed. The first question to be answered in the paper relates to the pace and the nature of the changes in image, observed in all three provinces. The second research question specifically deals with the influence of the marketing campaign on the image of Groningen.

Key words: place marketing, Groningen.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Stimulating economic development is a basic element in the policy of many local and regional governments. Encouraging foreign investment is a common way to accomplish this goal. Perhaps less spectacular, but at least as important for the regional economy, are policy measures aimed at retaining existing economic activities in the area. Apart from companies, other groups are important for the regional economy as well: visitors, like tourists and shoppers, spend part of their income in the area. Permanent residents, including students, elderly etc., do the same, but in a more lasting manner. All these groups are therefore important as target groups for local and regional governments.

In all these cases, the success of the policy measures will depend on the willingness of people to come to and/or stay in the area. Their willingness to do so is based on the attractiveness of the area as determined by its characteristics. From a behavioural point of view, location decisions like migrating to or visiting an area are often based on incomplete and inaccurate information. Instead of being directly based on the real qualities of the area, they are based on the perception of these qualities. Seen from this perspective, images of cities and areas are crucial for the potential success of policy measures that are taken to stimulate their economic development.

Policy measures of the kind referred to, aiming to influence the location decisions of particular groups, can be considered to be part of a broader marketing strategy. Cities and regions have always competed with each other for companies, visitors, residents or just the attention of the outside world, applying geographical marketing, often referred to as 'place marketing', as an instrument.

Marketing is commonly associated with promotion, but promotion is just one instrument of geographical marketing. Other instruments are spatial activities and organisational measures (Ashworth and Voogd, 1990). While spatial and organisational measures are aimed at improving the actual situation in the place or region, the primary goal of geographical promotion is to change its image. The policy measures that we mentioned at the beginning of this paper obviously belong to the latter form of promotion.

Considering that the purpose of geographical promotion is to change the image of geographical entities like cities and regions, it is evident that its chances of success partially depend on the extent to which such images are subject to change. This issue will be examined more closely in this paper.

Images of cities, regions, brands, celebrities or anything else for that matter, are generally considered to be fairly stable. Important events or incidents may cause short-term changes in images, but in most cases these changes do not seem to be of a lasting nature. Shifts in images over a longer period of time are of more importance for geographical marketing, and therefore deserve special attention within the context of this paper. However interesting, research projects offering information of this kind are scarce. In boxes 1 and 2, two examples of

datasets including information about long-term change in regional images are shortly described.

The results of the research projects illustrated in boxes 1 and 2 seem to indicate that spatial images are rather stable and resistant to change, especially when there is no cause for change in reality itself. Within the context of this paper, the value of the two projects is limited however. Walter-Busch (2000) focuses on what might be called 'self-image' or 'internal image': the perception of areas by the people that have their roots there. Changes in the image of geographical entities, as seen through the eyes of others ('external image'), are not part of his research. Meester (2004), in his study of locational preferences, concentrates on just one aspect of the image of a location, relevant for just one target group: its suitability as a possible firm location. A more complete picture is needed, since image, being a mirror of reality, has as many aspects as reality itself, and the importance of each aspect is different for various groups in society.

Box 1

Images of Swiss regions, according to army recruits, in 1978, 1987 and 1996

A large data set that lends itself to provide some insight into long-term change of regional images, has been collected by Walter-Busch (2000). As part of his research, surveys on the regional quality of life were carried out among Swiss recruits in 1978, 1987 and 1996. In each survey, an entire cohort of recruits was interviewed, providing a wealth of data on, among other things, their perception of the quality of life in their home area. The respondents had to assess the community where they had passed most of their life-time, on dozens of scales, that were subsequently used as 'quality of life' – indicators.

The results of these inquiries are highly stable. A comparison of 43 indicators at the level of the 26 cantons, shows that more than 9% of the correlation coefficients for two consecutive inquiries are higher than 0.6. The lowest correlations are found for indicators of 'objective' factors like unemployment and the presence of certain types of facilities. These low correlations may point to changes in the real world. On the other hand, the 9 criteria constituting the attractiveness profile, representing polarities of a more 'subjective' nature, like calm/restless, beautiful/ugly and progressive/backward, show very high correlation coefficients (0.8 and more). The stability of the results is also demonstrated by the degree of self-similarity: each single canton resembles its own profile in the previous inquiry more than that of any other canton (Walter-Busch 2000, p. 35). The results for smaller geographical areas like regions, towns and neighbourhoods, are somewhat less stable, but this is partly due to the smaller numbers of respondents per area that are involved.

Box 2*Image of Dutch cities, according to entrepreneurs, in the 1980s and 1990s*

Analysis of the data on locational preferences of entrepreneurs, collected by one of the authors of this paper (Meester, 1994, 2004), provides another opportunity to study possible long-term change in spatial images. A first inquiry was held in 1983, asking company managers to rate a number of locations in the Netherlands on a five step scale, thus expressing the favourable character of each location as a possible location for their particular company. A second inquiry was held in 1993. Similar inquiries were also held in 1986 and 1997, with only the northern part of the Netherlands as research area. The results of a comparison in time show that in both research areas the general patterns and structures did not change very much during the decade between the inquiries. Principal component analysis and other techniques reveal strikingly similar patterns. Most of the changes that did occur relate to details. In the 'national' inquiries of 1983 and 1993 only 9 out of the 70 locations show a significant change in rating, and in the 'northern' inquiries 6 out of 34. Some of the changes in the mean ratings correspond to changes in perception. The perceived importance of infrastructure as a locational factor, for example, appears to have increased. Other changes appear to be related to changes in reality itself. The lower rating of the densely populated western part of the Netherlands, for example, can be explained by the increasing traffic congestion and the relative scarcity of land in that area.

2. GRONINGEN PROMOTION

A data set that is more adequate in this respect is offered by a series of surveys, carried out by the authors of this paper, in the context of a marketing campaign promoting the Dutch province of Groningen (Meester *et al.*, 2006).

Groningen, in the northern periphery of the Netherlands, has been confronted with a negative perception by both the general public and Dutch entrepreneurs. Measures to improve the situation seemed to be necessary and useful. Against this background, an organisation called GPO (Groninger Promotie Overleg) was founded in 1987. GPO represents the province of Groningen, the city of Groningen, other municipalities in the province, the Chamber of Commerce, the regional development corporation NOM, and a number of large companies located in the area. Within the GPO, the need was felt to improve the image of Groningen by means of a promotion campaign. The campaign was to be concentrated on entrepreneurs as well as the general public.

The campaign started in 1989, its most important manifestations being advertisements, television commercials and radio commercials. Initially, only national media were used. Subsequently, regional media in Groningen were used as well, in order to improve the internal image. Recurring elements in these promotional activities are the slogan 'Er gaat niets boven Groningen' and the logo of the campaign. Currently, cultural manifestations, sport events etc., are used as additional means of promotion.

In order to give the campaign a solid basis, an *ex ante* study of the image of Groningen was carried out in 1988. RIN (Research International Nederland) investigated the perception of the province by the general public, our Faculty concentrated on its perception by entrepreneurs. To determine the impact of the campaign on the image of Groningen, additional inquiries were carried out at two-year intervals, with only one interruption (in 1998). The Faculty conducted these surveys, which concentrated on the general public. The method and the questionnaire were basically the same as those of the survey carried out by RIN in 1988, an approach that was necessary to ensure a maximum degree of comparability.

The data collected through this line of inquiries, measuring the perception of Groningen by the general public, offers interesting opportunities within the context of this paper, due to a number of characteristics: the number of inquiries (nine including the *ex ante* study), the regularity of the intervals, the length of the period covered by the series as a whole (17 years), and its consistency with regard to the method that was applied and the questions that were asked. Additional value stems from the fact that the data set is not limited to one province: in all inquiries, the image of the provinces of Friesland and Noord-Brabant was measured along with that of Groningen, for the purpose of reference to other regions, that may be considered as 'competitors' in the place marketing arena.

3. MEASURING CAMPAIGN EFFECTS

In this paper, the data of the inquiries will be analysed, focussing on changes in the regional images that might be noticed. The two principal questions to be answered are:

1. What was the pace and the nature of the changes in image of the three provinces that have occurred between 1988 and 2005?
2. To what extent can observed changes in the image of Groningen be attributed to the influence of its promotion campaign?

The inquiries of the general public were held in 1988, 1990, 1992, 1994, 1996, 2000, 2002, 2004 and 2005. In each case, a random sample of the population was inquired by telephone, each province being represented by about the same number of respondents. In case of a refusal, an alternative number was called. In the first three inquiries, there were about 300 respondents each, in the other ones 600 each.

It should be noted that the long period covered by the inquiries has affected both the response rate and the demographic composition of the response group.

The response rate, initially between 65% and 69%, has dropped sharply after 1994. Since 2000, the response rate has remained more or less stable at a level between 45% and 52%. The decreased response, possibly caused by an increasing aversion of the public against direct marketing by telephone, implies that the results of a comparison in time should be interpreted with some caution. The possibility that people who are not familiar with the research area, are now more inclined to refuse cooperation than they were in the past cannot be ruled out.

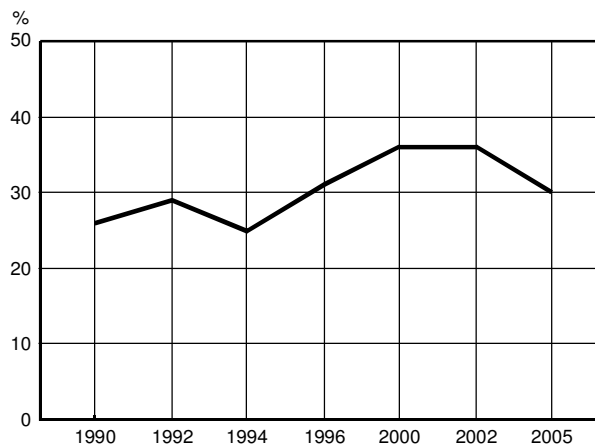


Fig. 1. Campaign awareness

During the research period, the demographic composition of the response group has also changed. In 1994, 33% of the respondents were at least 50 years old. The share of this group has been rising gradually to 50% in 2005. Partially, this increase reflects demographic changes in the population, but the increase of the proportion of the corresponding group in the research population (Dutch adults) during this period has been much smaller: from 36% to 42%. The decreasing number of young people in the response group, especially in the category between 20 and 30 years old, is probably also due to the fact that nowadays many of them can be reached by cell phone only, and cell phone numbers were not used in the inquiries.

In the samples, as mentioned, every province has the same weight. The results shown in this paper however, are based on the average Dutchman. To accomplish this, each respondent has been weighted by the number of inhabitants of his home province.

Recurring themes in the inquiries are campaign awareness, knowledge of the area and appreciation.

4. CAMPAIGN AWARENESS

Questions about campaign awareness have been asked in all inquiries since the campaign has started. The proportion of respondents familiar with the promotion campaign of Groningen, has been gradually increasing during the first 10 years of the campaign (figure 1). The differences between two consecutive inquiries are not always significant, but the general trend is obvious. Questions about the campaign manifestations that people have noticed prove that television commercials have been the most successful means of communication in this campaign. That also explains the dip in 1994, when television commercials had not been broadcasted for more than a year.

Since 2002, the situation seems to be different. The level of familiarity with the campaign has dropped significantly, in spite of a new series of television commercials. Additional statistical tests show that this drop can not be explained by changes in demographic composition. Apparently, the campaign in its present form does not attract as much attention any more.

Another interesting point to note about the awareness of the campaign is that it decreases as distance from Groningen increases. Even during the first years of the campaign, when only national media were used, this was the case. People seem to be more receptive to messages about items they are already familiar with.

5. KNOWLEDGE OF GRONINGEN

A second group of questions has served to test people's knowledge of Groningen. In all surveys except the one of 2004, the respondents were requested to name companies, persons and events they associated with this province. The average number that a respondent mentioned in each category, has been less than one in all inquiries.

Perhaps more interesting from a geographical point of view is the perception of the size of the city of Groningen. The general underestimation of its size has instigated the city of Groningen to emphasise its metropolitan character in

advertisements, starting in 1991. Since 1992, the request to estimate the number of inhabitants of the city of Groningen has been part of the inquiries. During this period, the actual number of inhabitants of the city has been growing from 170,000 to 180,000. Estimates of 150,000 or less are considered here to be low, and estimates of more than 200,000 to be high.

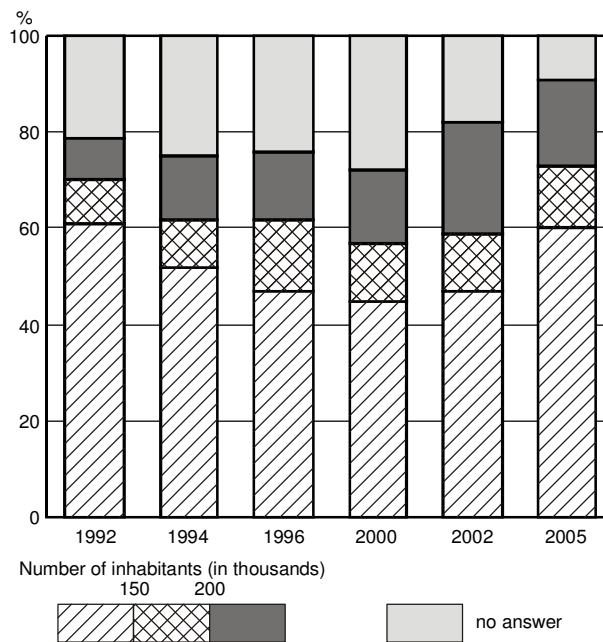


Fig. 2. Estimated number of inhabitants of the city of Groningen

The size of the city has been underestimated in all inquiries, but initially the situation was gradually improving in this respect. The proportion of the respondents underestimating the number of inhabitants has been decreasing from 61% in 1992 to 44% in 2000 (figure 2). The process of change is comparable with that of the campaign awareness, mentioned above: the difference between two consecutive inquiries is not or hardly significant, but the difference between 1992 and 2000 certainly is ($p < 0.001$), and the trend is obvious. In 1992, the proportion of respondents underestimating the number of inhabitants was seven times as large as the proportion overestimating the city's size, and in 2002 it was only two times as large. The advertisements in the early 1990s may have contributed to the observed shift in estimates, but it is hard to determine its exact influence.

Like the campaign awareness, the trend has reversed recently. In 2005, the proportion of respondents underestimating the number of inhabitants was 60% again.

5. PROFILES OF PROVINCES

The more 'subjective' side of images is highlighted in the inquiries by a third group of questions, or, to be more precise, a compound question consisting of an introduction and a set of propositions that the respondents have to reply to. Each proposition refers to a particular aspect of image.

In posing the question, three provinces were mentioned to the respondents: Groningen, Friesland (a neighbour and rival of Groningen) and Noord-Brabant (in the southern part of the Netherlands). For those respondents who did not live in any of these three provinces, another one was added to the list: their home province. Subsequently, a number of propositions was mentioned, one by one, each proposition referring to a particular aspect of attractiveness. For every proposition, the respondent had to tell to which of the three or four provinces just mentioned it did not apply, and to which it applied very well. The respondents were free to name just one province, more than one or no province at all.

The propositions that have been used in all inquiries are the following ones:

1. It is easy to find a job there.
2. It is easy to make contact with people there.
3. It offers facilities for active recreation.
4. It offers many educational facilities.
5. It is a beautiful province.
6. It offers a lot of cultural facilities.

The answers given by the respondents have been converted to two indices. In order to do this, a distinction was made between three groups of respondents, for every possible combination of province and proposition:

- those who mentioned the province in a positive way by stating that the proposition applies to the province very well;
- those who mentioned the province in a negative way by stating that the proposition does not apply to the province at all;
- those who did not mention the province in answer to the proposition.

The first index measures the number of respondents that have mentioned the province either way (i.e. the members of groups 1 and 2 combined) as a proportion of the total number of respondents. This index is referred to as 'profile index', since it gives an indication of the profile of the province, i.e. of its relevance with regard to the topic mentioned in the proposition.

The second index measures the number of respondents that have mentioned the province in a positive way, as a proportion of the number of respondents that have mentioned the province either way (group 1 as proportion of groups 1 and 2 combined). This index is referred to as 'relative value index'. It gives an indication of the way a province is perceived by those who do have an explicit opinion about the province with regard to the proposition.

This particular method of measuring images is not without flaws. One particular problem is that the results are highly sensitive to differences in the attitudes of interviewers, pressing more or less for answers (Meester and Pellenbarg, 1995). Nevertheless, the method gives a good impression of the image of the areas involved, and for the sake of continuity, it has not been modified.

The profile indices for the propositions are characterised by a wave-like motion, which was especially prominent in the period up to the year 2000, as shown in table 1. This motion is inherent to the method. It can be attributed to slight differences in the attitude of interviewers, as explained above, so fluctuations in profile indices should be interpreted with caution. The results of the inquiry of 1992 are hard to compare with those of the others, because of a different way of questioning, and are not shown in the table for this reason. Since 2000, the fluctuations have become smaller.

During the research period, the profile indices for Groningen, Friesland and Noord-Brabant have varied between about 40 and 85. The indices for the respondent's home province are clearly higher (about 60 to 90), meaning that the home province has a more pronounced profile than other provinces, as might be expected. In most cases, a respondent will have a detailed image of the province he is most familiar with, making it easy for him to indicate whether a certain statement is appropriate or not.

More interesting than the profile indices are the relative value indices (table 2 and figure 3). They represent the level of appreciation of an area with regard to certain aspects of its image. First, we will have a look at the general level of the indices, then we will pay attention to their development in time.

Of the three provinces that have been mentioned to all respondents, Noord-Brabant is unquestionably the one with the most positive image. It has a relative value index of more than 50 for all propositions, which means that its image is positive for all aspects involved. The image of Groningen has negative as well as positive aspects, and the same is true for Friesland. The most positive image is that of the 'home province': its relative value indices vary between 63 and 97. Obviously, we are dealing with a form of locational self-preference here: the tendency of people to rate their own environment higher than more distant areas (Meester, 2000).

The range of relative values for the northern provinces of Groningen and Friesland is large. The strongest point of Groningen's image is education, which can be explained by the existence of a university. The strongest points of Friesland are recreational possibilities and scenery. Its lakes and islands provide opportunities for sailing, windsurfing, etc. The absence of a university in Friesland explains its low score for education. Weak points of the image of both Groningen and Friesland are jobs and contacts. The chances of finding a job in the northern Netherlands are perceived to be small, and the fact that the inhabi-

tants of the north are supposed to be reserved and taciturn is reflected in the low scores for the contact proposition.

Particularly interesting against the background of geographical marketing are the changes in the relative value indices that have occurred. During the first decade of the research period, the relative value indices of both Noord-Brabant and the home province show a wave-like motion, similar to that of the profile indices but in the opposite direction (figure 3). This seems to indicate that a drop in the profile index, which corresponds to a drop in the number of respondents reacting to the proposition, affects the number of negative reactions more than that of the positive ones. In other words, the proportion of respondents in group 1 is apparently less subject to distortion than that of the other groups. An explanation for this is hard to give.

Table 1. Profile indices (%)

Specification	1988	1990	1994	1996	2000
1	2	3	4	5	6
Groningen					
Jobs	55	79	66	81	59
Contact	56	78	50	81	51
Recreation	48	75	50	76	58
Education	73	78	65	88	75
Scenery	46	81	52	83	59
Culture	51	68	49	76	62
Friesland					
Jobs	49	69	61	78	56
Contact	61	72	54	81	52
Recreation	61	72	60	86	69
Education	54	66	55	79	53
Scenery	60	74	64	87	64
Culture	46	63	47	71	53
Noord-Brabant					
Jobs	51	73	57	77	57
Contact	78	81	67	86	70
Recreation	66	71	46	75	58
Education	55	70	49	77	55
Scenery	71	82	62	86	61
Culture	48	69	51	71	54

Table 1 (cont.)

1	2	3	4	5	6
Home province					
Jobs	75	87	80	89	85
Contact	49	84	64	88	70
Recreation	67	80	68	85	74
Education	75	82	80	87	80
Scenery	75	91	71	92	79
Culture	67	81	71	86	78

Explanation: profile index = ('applies' + 'does not apply') / ('applies' + 'does not apply' + neither); relative value index = ('applies') / ('applies' + 'does not apply'), where 'applies' means the number of respondents stating that the proposition applies to the province very well and 'does not apply' means the number of respondents stating that the proposition does not apply to the province at all. Propositions: (1) It is easy to find a job there; (2) It is easy to make contact with people there; (3) It offers facilities for active recreation; (4) It offers many educational facilities; (5) It is a beautiful province; (6) It offers a lot of cultural facilities.

Table 2. Relative value indices (%)

Specification	1988	1994	2000	2005
1	2	3	4	5
Groningen				
Jobs	20	23	42	33
Contact	18	42	53	65
Recreation	67	73	76	85
Education	93	89	90	96
Scenery	52	69	83	91
Culture	73	74	79	91
Friesland				
Jobs	11	20	36	25
Contact	16	29	41	56
Recreation	89	90	91	94
Education	36	20	35	45
Scenery	79	89	91	94
Culture	59	57	65	79
Noord-Brabant				
Jobs	66	51	74	71
Contact	89	94	92	94
Recreation	77	85	86	88
Education	72	86	80	89
Scenery	95	89	88	92
Culture	84	80	74	87

Table 2 (cont.)

1	2	3	4	5
Home province				
Jobs	79	64	84	74
Contact	83	83	89	89
Recreation	92	94	90	96
Education	91	88	89	92
Scenery	82	79	84	97
Culture	92	93	88	92

Explanation: as table 1.

In both Noord-Brabant and the home province, the relative value index for job opportunities is the only one that does not follow the general trend. It shows a curve with a low in the mid 1990s and a high in the first years of the present century.

The picture for Groningen and Friesland is a little more complicated. The wave-like motions do occur in these provinces, but other types of change can be noticed as well. Outstanding is the positive trend in the indices for contacts. Small increases in the index, in most cases without significance, add up to a considerable, and significant, increase during the period in its entirety. The positive trend in the indices for the scenery of Groningen is also worth mentioning. The indices for jobs in Groningen and Friesland show the same kind of curve as in Noord-Brabant and the home province. Other changes in the indices should be interpreted with caution, since most of them can be traced back to the fluctuations that are typical for the method.

The next question is what these changes represent. Are they related to changes in reality or to changes in the way it is perceived?

The general wave-like motions, as mentioned above, are inherent to the method and they can not be taken to represent changes in either the perception or the reality in the four provinces concerned. Attempts to relate these motions to the economic cycle fail.

An additional possibility that has been checked in this context, is that these motions reflect a general state of mind. The Dutch CBS (Central Bureau of Statistics) publishes an index that represents public faith in the economy. This index has followed a curve with lows in the early 1990s and in the beginning of the present century, and a peak in between. The relation between the relative value index and the CBS-index is not significant for any combination of proposition and province, not even for the job proposition.

However, for at least one of the aspects of image that were analysed, a connection to reality can be proven to exist: the development of perceived job

opportunities closely follows the unemployment rate. The relation between the relative value index for jobs in a province on one hand and the registered unemployment in the Netherlands on the other, yields negative correlation coefficients that are larger than 0.7, and in spite of the small number of measurements involved, the results are significant for all four provinces ($p < 0.05$).

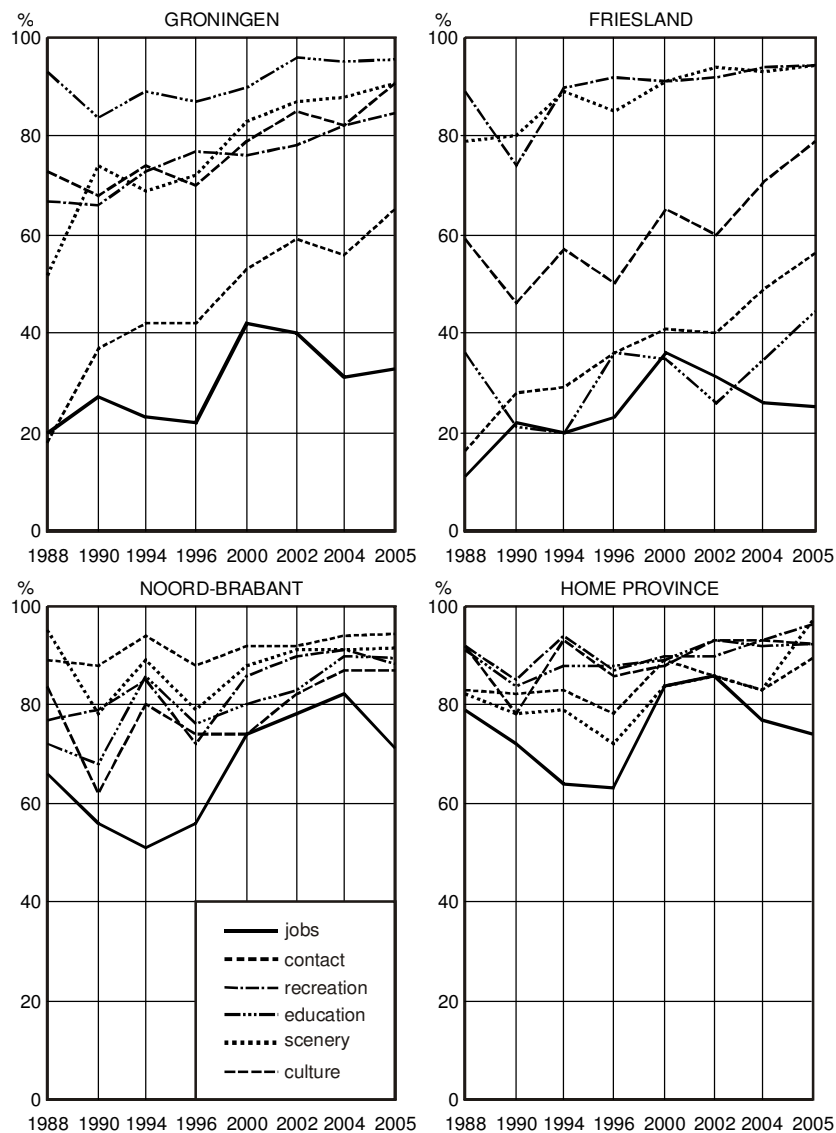


Fig. 3. Relative value indices (%). Explanation: as table 1

The increase in the relative value indices of Groningen and Friesland for the contact proposition is of a different nature. It can not be linked to changes in reality. There is no proof of a substantial change in the character of the people in these provinces during the last decades, and such a change is not very likely either. The trend in the index therefore points to an actual change in perception: the image of the reserved and silent northerner seems to be gradually disappearing. The increasing appreciation of the scenery in Groningen falls in the same category: a substantial improvement of reality can not be proven, it is the image that is getting better.

Another indication of the improving image of Groningen is given by the answers to a question that has been asked in 1988 and 2000 only. Through this question, the respondents were asked to state their willingness to live in the province of Groningen. The proportion of respondents giving a positive answer to this question has increased considerably, from 13% in 1988 to 35% in 2000 ($p < 0.001$). The change in proportion is significant in all major areas of the country outside the north (Meester and Pellenbarg, 2000).

This immediately raises the question what the contribution of the marketing campaign of Groningen to the positive changes in its image has been. Great caution is required in this respect. The campaign may have had some influence, but the fact that the image of the Frisian people is changing along with that of the inhabitants of Groningen, while there has not been a similar promotion campaign for Friesland, indicates that the campaign of Groningen can not be appointed as the single cause of the improving image of its inhabitants. Apart from that, it is difficult to separate the effect of the campaign from the effect of events that have occurred in the area, and from more autonomous developments.

The data of the inquiries allow us to make a distinction between the images held by the respondents who are aware of the campaign, and of those who are not. The value of this distinction is limited, however, because of selective perception: the respondents who are already familiar with the region are more likely to notice the campaign than others, and at the same time, because they know the area, they are more inclined to appreciate it. In other words, higher ratings by respondents who know the campaign do not prove that the campaign is successful. The respondents that appreciate an area are simply more likely to know its campaign.

6. CONCLUSION

The results of the inquiries that were carried out to measure the effect of the marketing campaign of Groningen demonstrate that certain aspects of the image of geographical entities like cities and regions do change, but slowly. In some

cases, small short-term differences add up to considerable medium-term shifts. Some of the changes in image can be attributed to changes in reality, others to changes in perception.

The impact of the marketing campaign on the image of Groningen cannot be proven beyond doubt.

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