THE USE OF MARKETING COMMUNICATION IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract
Marketing communication in public universities is not a common topic in Romanian literature. If solid theoretical perspectives have been formulated on the marketing communication in private companies, the public sector has not received the same attention from the theorists. Thus, this paper aims at clarifying some of the concepts of marketing communication in public universities and setting the theoretical background for future research. The findings indicate that public organizations, and more precisely universities, apply their own marketing techniques, but are making efforts to align to the marketing strategies used in private companies.
INTRODUCTION. PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS VERSUS PRIVATE COMPANIES

Marketing emerged as an activity and, later, as a science precisely because of the need of economic entities to adapt their pricing, product, distribution and communication strategies to the needs of the markets they address. Due to the increased competition on various market segments, companies and products have become more individualized and specialized, and the market has been divided into smaller units in order to generate higher profits. As a result, marketing has become a valuable asset not only for the corporate companies, but also for nonprofit organizations (e.g. government agencies, public education institutions, state-owned companies, hospitals, non-governmental organizations, foundations, etc.).

Every society needs a public sector, whose main function is to define the principal guidelines of society (Florescu, Malcomete & Pop, 2003). The second role of the state administration is to provide public services of vital importance to the public interest, such as the defense and organization of the army. Central and local governments consider that they should deal with the provision of essential public services, such as maintaining law and order, extinguishing fires, park maintenance, library administration, land use planning, electricity supply, sanitation, road construction, unit development, education and health care etc. (Kotler and Lee, 2008). The third role is to provide the necessary public services that neither the private companies nor the non-profit organizations want or cannot provide with existing resources. Thus, administrations usually provide assistance to the poor independently or together with non-profit institutions.

It is clear that the public sector needs to improve its image and work to increase public confidence and satisfaction (Zaharia, 2001; Popescu, 2003). In order to improve their activity, public institutions could try to adopt the tools used by the private sector, so that they can conduct their activity more efficiently (Zaharia, 2001; Popescu, 2003). Some of these tools are: strategy based on customer needs, visionary leadership, constant planning and evaluation of activity, incentives and payment system based on performance, cost-benefit and cost-effectiveness analysis, subcontracting, electronic information and administration.

Nonetheless, even with the implementation of the tools mentioned above, there are opinions arguing that the activities of the state administration are inherently different from private business. The call for efficiency and renewal of government institutions seems unrealistic to many citizens, as they find too many discrepancies between governmental and business organizations (Sander, Stevenson, King, & Coates, 2000). For instance, government organizations are often monopolies, whereas companies operate in competitive markets. The state administration is meant to serve the citizen interest, while companies aim to maximize investor profit; political leaders are the result of the electorate, reflecting its interests; and business leaders are accountable to boards of directors. Also, the financial and administrative activities of the state administration are usually carried out in public and benefit from a special attention from the media, while the activities of companies are largely hidden from the eyes of the media and are not brought to the attention of the public, the government and the media. In addition, public institutions depend on governmental funds, whereas private companies rely on their own financial resources.

All things considered, public organizations, as well as private companies, face new challenges every day, which may require restructuring the organization or facing its disappearance. Like private companies, public institutions need to understand the market dynamics and technology evolution should be guided by a coherent strategy, should innovate and apply new, more effective tools (Kotler and Lee, 2008).

The use of marketing communication in public institutions

One of the most misunderstood and poorly used areas in the public sector is marketing. Marketing tools and techniques can be used to create, evaluate, distribute and communicate the value of the public sector offer (Blythe, 2005).

Marketing is not equivalent with advertising, sales or communication and should not be perceived as manipulation. Marketing integrates all of the mentioned above and it involves a customer-centered approach. Marketing should encompass a systematic approach, which requires a coherent strategy: conducting research, setting objectives, market segmentation, brand positioning, choosing a strategic combination of marketing tools, planning the budget, risk management and establishing evaluation instruments.

Public institutions can benefit from marketing communication if they follow a coherent strategy. They can use specific marketing tools to accomplish institutional objectives such as: increasing the incomes, increasing the use of service, increasing the service purchase, decreasing the costs of providing services, improving customer satisfaction and attracting public support.

The use of marketing communication in universities

Without doubt, public sector needs marketing, and can use it to achieve organizational goals. But how does this theory apply to higher education
institutions? The literature argues that marketing theories and concepts that have been proven to be effective in the business sector are gradually being introduced in universities (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006) in order to create competitive advantage.

The higher education sector is defined by two major characteristics that influence the marketing strategy. First of all, higher education in most countries is a non-profit sector, therefore the marketing concepts applied to this sector do not work like in the business sector, where the main objective is to generate profit. Secondly, higher education is a service, therefore all the particularities applicable to the marketing of services can be transferred to higher education.

Considering the target markets in higher education, it is accepted that this sector involves multi-targets, as students, employers and society are perceived as the main beneficiaries of higher education services (Maringe, 2006). Although the notion of students as customers attracts criticism (Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana, 2007), they represent direct and immediate customers of higher education services. Employers also benefit from the outcomes of higher education, as they use the skills and competencies that graduates have acquired throughout their studies. Some have called graduates “products” of higher education, while employers were seen as customers (Conway et al., 1994), but the author will consider that both students / graduates and employers are consumers of higher education services. While students are the primary target, employers can be seen as secondary or indirect target of higher education services. Finally, society as a whole benefits from the results of higher education. The three categories are seen as the main stakeholders.

Customer behavior in our case refers to student behavior, as they are the primary audience. Aspects such as student expectations and student choice are seen as a valuable source of information (Sander et al., 2000). Similarly, knowing the reasons why candidates choose universities and specializations help universities develop their positioning (Maringe, 2006). Higher education candidates are not passive consumers; they have become informed consumers who make rational choices about specializations and institutions of higher education (Baldwin and James, 2000; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006).

However, the specificity is that most students are single consumers, as opposed to the business sector, where repeated buying often takes place. This results in differences in consumer behavior in the two sectors and possible different strategies for approaching consumers.

One strategy could be positioning. The key of positioning is the differentiation from competition (Chapleo, 2004). This is not easy to achieve in higher education, as academic products are seen to be relatively similar in the UK (Chapleo, 2004) and differences between universities are not considered decisive in Finland (Kantanen, 2007).

Thus, positioning in higher education involves more the concepts of reputation and public image, as well as public perception. (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). Despite the similarity of products in higher education, key factors have been suggested (Chapleo, 2004) to be used by universities to occupy differentiating positions: research versus teaching; sciences versus arts; elementary teaching versus high level teaching. But even those factors cannot guarantee the differentiation between universities. Therefore, there are limitations regarding the use of real positioning (differentiation) in the higher education sector.

Branding is another concept that has begun to be used in higher education institutions. Branding can be seen as part of both product and promotion strategy and has specific characteristics in the higher education sector. When talking about branding in universities, the connection between concepts such as brand, reputation and image must be taken into account. Branding and reputation share common features, but they are not identical. Reputation is generally seen as something built naturally over time, while a brand is more elaborate (Chapleo, 2004). Reputation is seen as a collective presentation of an institution’s public images over time, while the image (and based on it, the brand) is the immediate set of meanings associated with a particular institution (Kantanen, 2007). Reputation is also seen by universities and their leaders as reflecting reality better than the brand (Chapleo, 2004). For universities, reputation is their very existence and what they sell every day. Therefore, reputation, more than branding, is a more appropriate concept for the higher education sector.

Branding is usually associated with creating a public image in order to increase sales. In higher education, the purpose of brand development is not to sell products or services, but to communicate corporate identity to stimulate attraction and loyalty (Bulotaite, 2003; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). What is more, the branding challenges come also from the high uniformity of the sector and implicitly the difficulty to differentiate and create unique representations for most universities (Arens, 2002). The fact that universities have multiple audiences involved makes branding efforts much more complex, and thus an integrated perspective is recommended.
THE MARKETING MIX IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

The marketing mix or the model of the four Ps (price, product, placement, promotion) is a marketing concept used to a limited extent in higher education. Pricing and promotion strategies are seen and used as concepts (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006), whereas the product strategy is intensely used in higher education institutions (program portfolio, quality programs, product branding). The distribution strategy is not used, as it does not apply to this sector.

The product strategy in higher education entails the services provided by the institutions. The educational services and the support services associated are the main product (Kantanen, 2007). The basic guidelines of service marketing apply to higher education organizations as well. For example, both internal and external marketing are equally important because the interaction between the consumer and the contact employee (in this case the contact between students and teachers, as well as support employees) usually affects satisfaction. Therefore, relationship marketing is very important in universities (Arnett, German and Hunt, 2003) as staff (teachers, secretaries, administrative staff) must be receptive to the needs and expectations of students.

Distribution is more often ignored, as it has too little applicability in the higher education sector. The promotion strategy focuses on marketing communication and the dissemination of information. This type of activity that emphasizes the use of communication tools (such as advertising, public relations, personal selling) to attract students can be compared to the sales strategy from private companies. Subsequent efforts to ensure an optimal student experience through valuable teaching experience and quality support services, as well as preparing students for their profession (Maringe, 2006).

The use of these marketing-specific concepts in higher education institutions varies from country to country. In the United States of America, compared to Europe, the concept of marketing has been better assimilated because the United States of America crossed the cultural border from traditional academic values to market-oriented strategy 10 years earlier than Europe (Chapleo, 2004). Even inside Europe there are differences between countries, the United Kingdom being one of the first countries to introduce market-oriented approaches in higher education institutions. But in many countries marketing-related activities are still in their beginning, communication being usually the first step towards introducing a marketing orientation into the institution. One of these countries is certainly Romania.

Most of the marketing activities that universities carry out are focused on admission campaigns and candidates’ recruitment. Universities try to better communicate with potential candidates, in order to increases the number of students. However, marketing efforts should not focus entirely on admission campaign, but on consumer satisfaction as well (the student being the primary consumer). The price strategy has a number of peculiarities in the case of educational services. First of all, in the past years, in most countries (especially European) higher education was fully funded by the state, which meant that from the students’ point of view, education was free. Since tuition fees were introduced, they have taken different forms in different countries, but the government continues to play a major role in determining them. For example, in the UK, partial fees for undergraduate students have received higher limits from the government, which has generated quasi-equal fees for all higher education institutions. This illustrates how the application of this marketing concept has its limitations in the case of higher education, as the sector does not have the freedom to establish its pricing policy. This does not mean that the importance of price should be ignored. Price strategy (tuition fees, cost of living and facilities, scholarships) are of equal importance in the admission campaign (Duncan, 2002).

Promotion is the component of the marketing mix most easily adaptable to universities. Especially in Romania, the product and the price are difficult to control by universities, as they are subject to central regulations (Ministry of Education and Research, ARACIS, CNCSIS etc.). Therefore, Romanian public universities focus their marketing efforts almost entirely on promotion, in order to attract as many students as possible, and to communicate a more coherent brand image to all target audiences (Duncan, 2002).

Some peculiarities occur due to the intangible nature of the services promoted by universities. These particularities are mainly reflected in the various components of the organization's marketing communication tools. There are several elements that influence the marketing communication strategy: product nature, market features, target groups characteristics, product life cycle stage and promotional budget.

In the case of universities, the product nature is often an immaterial element (an idea, a behavior or a service). This involves a supplementary effort to design a different message, which can make the service more appealing to candidates (Maringe, 2006).

When it comes to market features, universities must address, at the same time, various target groups: senior high school students, their parents, people who already graduated and want to add a new specialization to their resume, employers etc. When
communicating with target groups, advertising and public relations are the most frequently used tools. In addition, universities must adapt their marketing communication strategy to product life cycle stage. When a product/service is introduced on the market, universities should design a communication strategy to raise target groups’ interest and to inform them about its features. In the growth stage, universities should increase the advertising budget advertising in order to reach more people in their target groups. When the brand is mature, public relations and advertising are used for persuasion, rather than information. In the stage of decline, the promotional effort is significantly reduced.

In the end, the marketing strategy depends fundamentally on the size of the budget allocated to these activities. The lack of financial resources can lead to less expensive and less effective promotion methods. In addition, aggressive advertising and public relations campaigns could affect universities’ brand image (Ali-Choudhury and Bennett, 2008).

When comparing private companies to public universities, some particular aspects of the use of promotional communication in educational marketing can be formulated: universities place a greater emphasis, compared to private companies, on personalized relationships than on mass communication, they use less expensive communication formulas and avoid the means of communication with a too obvious commercial character.

In case of higher education institutions, public relations are used to a large extent, cultivating a favorable attitude among those stakeholders that can support them or favorably influence their activity. Also, an important place is occupied by the free publicity that these organizations benefit from, due both to the media interest in education issues and to the public relations actions directed towards media (Soutar and Turner, 2002). In European universities, the most commonly used promotional materials are brochures and leaflets that are mailed to potential students or distributed by high school counselors. While these materials provided by universities may be less important than campus visits and parental influence, they play an important role in the decision-making process (Arnett et al., 2003).

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, public universities apply their own marketing techniques, using mainly public relations techniques, advertising and free publicity, but are making efforts to align to the marketing strategies used in private companies. Even if the public university system is influenced by legislative and organizational rigors, public universities can find ways to promote their educational offer and communicate a coherent and consistent corporate image. Marketing concepts and theories from business can be successfully applied to the public sector, and more precisely to the higher education sector, if taken into consideration its particularities.

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