
HIGHER EDUCATION STRATEGIC MARKETING FOR CURRENT AND POTENTIAL STUDENTS FOR EMPLOYABILITY AND SELF-PRODUCTIVITY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The high rate of unemployment and decrease in state and federal funding for higher education is contributing to the need for marketing institutions in Nigeria. To cope with these changes, institutions must adopt strategic marketing which will be applied to position or reposition institutions. This article discusses procedures for marketing higher education institutions based on analysis, planning and implementation. The interest of students in selecting institutions and programmes whose major concern is their employability after graduation was considered. The paper concludes on the place of marketing higher education institutions and recommendations on the professional tools and models for successful higher education marketing were offered.

There are numerous pressures and changes in the higher education landscape such as the decrease in government funding and striving to attract quality students in Nigeria. To cope with these challenges, higher education institutions must understand and influence their choice process among prospective students in order to remain competitive. In order to survive, institutions must adopt strategic marketing to develop a competitive advantage in changing higher education landscape.

Higher institutions should satisfy the needs of their customers by adding value. Institutions should provide more benefits to their customers than competitors if they want to stay competitive. Higher education institutions compete for students and staff but also for funding, Ketter, (2012) opined that marketing higher education institutions will enhance enrolment, attract high-quality students, attract high faculty and attract

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funding, grants and donors. Higher education institutions operate in a service environment and the language aspects of services marketing.

Strategic Marketing

Strategic marketing is the umbrella process for creating communication and delivering value to customers. Kotler and Fox (1995) formally defined strategic marketing as the process of developing and maintaining a strategic fit between the institutions goals and capabilities and its changing marketing opportunities. It relies on developing a clear instrument mission, supporting goals and objectives, a sound strategy and implementation. Such strategies follow institutions from identifying the demand to satisfying it. Marketing of higher education institutions is carried out through analysis, planning and implementation strategies.

Analysis for Strategic Marketing

Analysis is a strategic planning and market research for higher education clients. The analysis determines the place of image, product, audience and market. Analysis performs education market research and strategic planning assignments to determine the image of an institution held by various constituencies (high school students, parents, guidance counselors and buyers alumni and donors etc). Image is the sum of beliefs, ideals and impression people have toward a certain place (Kotler, & Fox, 1995). The two dimensions to image is to analyse whether it is rich or poor and negative or positive. The key factors to be used by high education institutions to occupy positions of distinctiveness are teaching research, science based vs. arts based, basic teachings vs. higher level teaching. Some tools are used for image analysis. Attitude survey questionnaires and focused group are designed to evaluate both informal and external awareness and perceptions. The identity of institution is meant to be activated and will also identify specific market opportunities and prioritize market channels. Media content analyses serve as information to be provided to students and stakeholders on product and services of institutions. This is a communication media and tool for developing a strong image.

Product analysis plays important role in strategic marketing of institutions. Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis is used for assessing product. It is a method for analyzing a business, its resources and its environment. SWOT analysis identifies the strengths, weaknesses of an institution and the opportunities and threats in the environment. Strategies are developed which may be built on the strengths, eliminate the weaknesses, exploit the opportunities or counter the threats (Dyson, 2002). The sampling of institutions through SWOT depends on academic reputation, faculty, student's facilities, technology and location. SWOT is

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also used to sample competition, academic cooperation, new departments and changes in the political, social, technological, economic, legal and environmental (PSTELE) landscape.

Another aspect of analysis in strategic marketing is target audience through consumer behaviour. This is a process and activities people engage in when searching for, selecting, purchasing and evaluating products and services so as to satisfy the needs and desires. This is based on what attributes the students consider for choosing institutions of their choice. Target audience analysis has the tools, techniques and experience to provide higher education institutions with the necessary information for a successful strategic plan. It employs student's needs assessment to determine course and curriculum feasibility and campus facility needs. What do students want, and how can your institution best meet their needs? Analysis utilizes methods that are both quantitative and qualitative in scope. It establishes a customer's (potential student) demand for specific area of study, especially in the area of career training, continuing education and academic services. The student needs assessments provide an independent assessment regarding how the institution can meet the educational needs of current and potential students. It will provide higher education institutions with information needed to make strategic decisions regarding development of new campus facilities or deciding how to meet the changing needs of constituent groups (i.e. sports facilities, distance learning centres and modern gathering and recreation areas) in order to serve the needs of today's diverse student bodies, market feasibility study, a campus planning project needs and a design of survey questionnaire to initiate familiarity with modern campus.

Academic reputation, faculty, students facilities, technology and location considerations are factors for sampling strengths and weakness of institutions. Competition, academic cooperation, new departments, changes in political, social, technological, commerce, legal and environmental campus safety and flexibility in course offering times were identified as additional factors by Espinroza, Bradshew & Hausman (2002). Arpan , Raney & Zwnuska (2003) identified academic rating, athletic rating and news coverage as factors for selecting higher institutions. Canadian Universities (2000) make use of six criteria to assist students in selecting a university; programme reputation, social reputation, friends, families, entry requirements, educational programmes and extracurricular activities. Punnarch (2004) added the famousness of the university, public relations and stability as factors.

Hoyt and Brown (2003) made use of twenty-two studies to identify the most important choice factors among the quality of facility, cost, reputable programmes, financial and job outcomes,. The twelve most important factors across twenty-two

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studies were variety of courses offered, size of institution, surrounding community, availability of graduate programs, student employment opportunities, quality of social life, class size, admission to graduate school, extracurricular programmes, friends, personal service, affiliation (with other reputable institution), admission requirements and attractiveness of campus facilities. Flexibility in course offering, times and delivery methods (night, weekend, and internet), academic reputation, quality of faculty and institution, location, scholarship offers, financial aid and student employment opportunities were used for sampling opportunities and threats in SWOT analysis for higher education institutions.

Strategic marketing considers factors responsible for student's choice of universities. Van Dinitrios (1980) identified media institutional accessibility, academic programmes and non-academic programmes as the main choice factors.

A survey of University of Haifa (2007) with 368 students found out that 79% of students choose the universities on academic reputation, 50% for ambience, 48% for proximity, 31% for prestige and 29% for economic consideration.

Another study by HO and Hung (2008) with 640 under graduate students in 14 Taiwan Universities reported that students choose high education institutions for employment, curriculum, academic reputation, faculty and research environment.

A survey of University of Haifa with 368 students by Ketter (2007) reported that 39% of students choose programmes for employability, 17% for faculty, 15% for interest and 13% for prestige. Bradshaw (2004) identified five main factors considered by students when selecting higher education institutions. These include: quality and responsiveness, research activities, social activities, economic consideration and size of institution.

A local South African Study found reputation, as the most important influential factor on the choice of an institution. The results also indicated that provision of superior sporting facilities have a greater influence on choice than scholarships, paternal study, fees or friends recommendation (Cosser & Du Tort 2002).

Strategic marketing requires higher education institutions to make analysis of the market trends to clearly understand the possibility of students increased competition between institutions, value for money (VFM), master programmes and higher education branding (Huang, Binney, & Hede, 2008). The customer value analysis (CVA) distinguishes products and services to unlock your full market potential. CVA provides

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remarkable insight as to how your institution is positioned against competitors on the attribute that drive positive image and perceptions of Polytechnics, Colleges of Education, Universities and their programmes. CVA provides for more accurate and usable information for brand evaluation and strategic planning, marketing and positioning purposes.

Branding institutional identity requires an institution to find out and communicate in relevant terms how its institutional identity shapes its educational experience in ways that meet market needs. As you do so, you may find that your branding of your institutional identity provides for you, a market position that will be advantageous as you compete against institutions that lack an identity, focus. Branding can be seen as part of both product policy and promotion policy and it has specific characteristic in the higher education sector. When talking about branding in higher education, the relationship between concepts such as brand, reputation and image has to be considered. Branding and reputation share common grounds, but they are not identical. Reputation is seen as something that is more naturally built over time while a brand is more constructed (Nicolescu, 2009). Branding is associated usually with the creation of images, with the purpose of increasing sales. In higher education, the purpose of developing brand is not to sell products and services, but to communicate “corporate identity” in order to promote attraction and loyalty (Bulotaute, 2003).

Hayces (2007) reported that strategic marketing will be used to effect enrolment, academic planning, market assessment, communication, research, philanthropy and donor recruitment and alumni in higher education institutions. Strategic marketing for alumni provides image for ambassadors, employers, advance studies, donors and stories of success of higher education institutions.

Planning for Strategic Marketing

Planning for strategic marketing in higher education institutions starts with product planning. Product policy in higher education refers to the services the sector offers. Education services are the main products and support services as associated services and the three main activities of Polytechnics, Colleges of Education and Universities as services are; teaching, research and sector services (Paremes Warron & Glowaeaka, 2010). The nature of services in general and then specific characteristics affect higher education services and their marketing.

Product planning is aimed at matching the demand with appropriate supply. The planning is done in accordance with the preliminary analysis on performance and importance matrix. The importance of Matrix and performance will be analysed to

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determine whether they are high or low. When the importance is high, the institutions concentrate on them and keep up the good work. Institutions product planning in higher education is based on demand like employability, master's programmes, academic reputation, and dynamic curriculum. The supply of institutions is also based on practical programmes, increased supply, facility and research of new programmes, (Pampaloni, 2010).

Unique selling proposition must be planned to market higher education institutions. What makes your University, Polytechnic, and College of Education unique, different and better. The proposition will either be me to us or only me to indicate uniqueness of the institutions. The sample of unique selling proposition is based on product, accessibility, price, service and customer's experience.

Higher education branding plays a vital role in planning for higher education strategic marketing. Brand identity reflects the strategic vision, culture and image of an organization. The image of the institution is bridged with the identity. An educational brand is often equated to an institutions academic reputation. The brand, according to Black (2008) is where the institutions values and constituents expectations intersect in this paradigm, the brand become the filter through which everything is vetted (e.g. strategic directions, resource allocation, using decisions and curriculum development).

The brand stakeholders include faculty students, administrative staff and the local community. A value based focus does not mean however that we can afford to ignore what our constituents expect from institutions. Ultimately the value of brand is determined by those the institution serves. It is worth only what students and parents are willing to pay for it, donors are willing to give to support it and faculty staffs are willing to contribute to make it real. The higher education branding is promoted and delivered on the promise of the brand. The brand promise is determined by unified interaction and quality. Unity across the organization and consistency of message are crucial factors for success in higher education branding. To effectively shape how constituents view an institution, you must begin first by understanding the promise inherent, the existing brand or the brand the school aspires to have (Black, 2008).

Implementing the Strategic Marketing Plan

Strategic market planning is new to most educational institutions at all administrative levels. Multiple external and internal factors that have confronted institutions of higher learning within the last decade will prompt educational administrators to adopt for profit management tools. They should rely on consultants and/or top administrative committees to formalize a strategic marketing plan. The

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excitement generated by almost every strategic plan as pointed out by Noel (2004), soon dissipates if the gap between what is proposed as presented in the strategic plan, colludes with the reality of how it is to be administered. A college focused by a marketing driven strategic plan cannot effectively realize its desired future within a formal, rigid and centralized decision process because such lengthy and cumbersome processes prohibit the institution from competing effectively in the rapidly changing environment.

The successful implementation of strategic marketing plans by higher educational institutions will depend on the concepts or brand management and portfolio analysis (Kotler & Fox, 1995). The brand management concept has long been widely used. Structural system organizes the marketing effort and assigns total responsibility to one person for managing a product line, a category of products or services or a brand. Educational institutions offer programmes that possess many of the marketing characteristic and fundamentals typical of various profit products or services.

Depending on the level of autonomy, many Polytechnics, Colleges of Education and Universities division administrators or college deans may be considered the brand managers of higher education. The corporate title of brand- manager is assigned to a middle-level executive who has marketing strategy responsibility, and some level of authority to implement tasks to achieve their pre-arranged strategies (Townsend, & Poh, 2008). The same responsibilities are inherent with those college administrators and deans who are held responsible for the selection of targeted student markets and the proper blend of program offerings, tuition, program promo and locations as well as for daily internal management tasks. The lack of authority and responsibility to implement any real programme marketing mix reduces the role of the dean or the program administrator to that of a supervisor who has little or no incentive to provide senior administration with strategic expectations and goals. Product port folio analysis helps management understand how to move effectively, bridge the managerial gap between the independent actions taken by the brand manager and the desired long range goals of the strategic plan. Kearney (1995) recently reported that port folio analysis when practiced by top administrators restores a degree of authority to the brand manager because it provides him or her with the funds and resources necessary to execute the plan (Craven, 1994). Managers in higher education institutions can benefit from the use of port folio analysis to make the relocation of resources more rational than it has been. However, before port folio analysis can be instituted to make rational allocations of resources, a programme management system needs to be installed. The juxtaposition of existing programme allows members of senior administration to assign the responsibilities and the appropriate authority to implement individual programmes plan

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and goals based on their programme portfolio management system, the budget. Programme portfolio management using the profit performance centre approach considers the budget process as a communication tool. To implement the marketing strategy as well as providing fiscal authority and responsibility to lower levels of management, senior administration envisions the budget process as an opportunity to allow programme managers to develop and present short and long term goals and tasks non commitment with the institutions strategic plan. In addition, all costs both direct and indirect are assigned to the programmes budget as are the revenues generated.

In the application of strategic marketing in higher education institutions, marketing mix activities or the 4p's model (product, price, distribution and promotion) has limited extent with its different components being paid different levels of attention in the sector. Institutions have to produce what consumers need and want based on information gathered through previous activities. Such products that satisfy the needs and wants of students are to be marketed using the basic marketing mix activities (product, price, distribution and promotion). Pricing and promotion policies are used more in higher education as marketing concepts (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006); product policy not always being defined as such, is highly used in higher education. Institutions (programme portfolio, product quality, branding), while distribution is not considered at all, as not being applicable to the sector. The nature of services in general and their specific characteristics affect also higher education services and their marketing. Service marketing principle also applies to higher education.

Conclusion

Strategic marketing of higher education is essential in the modern market place in Nigeria. The three major components of strategic marketing are analysis, planning and implementation. The professional tools and models are the keys for successful higher education marketing.

Recommendations

Although the field of marketing higher educational institutions in Nigeria is new, the following recommended strategies can provide successful keys to marketing for employability and self-productivity.

1. The first step toward marketing higher education is to establish a strategic marketing plan that considers two overarching concerns: (a) your position in the competitive market place and (b) how you will implement and support your strategy on a day-to-day basis. It is essential that a college or university know what it is, whom it serves and who the competitor is. Likewise, it is important that the day-to-day operations, including budgets and personnel, be able to

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support the market strategy that is created. Having an extensive plan with no means to support it is pointless.

2. A strategic marketing plan begins with a marketing audit which is a tool for analyzing an institutions internal strengths and weaknesses and matching them with external opportunities and threats. Simply put, a marketing audit is a self-assessment applied to the market. It asks what you do well and to articulate your strengths and cite evidence to support what makes you strong in those particular areas. Likewise, it asks you to evaluate your weaknesses, both relative and by comparison. Are you able to identify external opportunities in the market that you currently use and those you could better explain? What about your threats? Who are your competitors, both immediate and distant?
3. The ability to classify strengths and weaknesses and to assess opportunities and threats satisfies organizational effectiveness that communicates a strong identity: the development of an effective market and communications plan that “melds the capability to effectively respond to those opportunities identified through an integrated marketing effort”. Although true integration is a lofty goal, it is critical in today’s noisy market place because the more integrated and consistent an institution’s marketing and communications activities are, the more likely it is to realize significant gains in its visibility and reputation.
4. Successful market orientation requires innovative ideas; organizational culture that supports good internal communication policies and internal marketing practices are more likely to foster organizational values that promote innovative practice of which marketing and strategic planning can be a major part. Marketing orientation that is clearly communicated and accepted across an organization’s central units is most likely to communicate values that are at the core of the institution’s identity and can then be communicated to external audiences.
5. The process by which prospective students arrive at a decision to attend a college, polytechnic, or university varies substantially, but certain actions that students take demonstrate their interest and eventual decision regarding enrolment, requesting more information, visiting campus, and applying for admission. Your marketing plan should follow them every step of the way as you anticipate their needs, answer their questions, respond to their needs, and demonstrate your good fit.

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