CREATION AND COMMUNICATION OF THE BRAND OF AN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION

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Abstract: The current national context of the last 10 years has caused the Romanian education system to face a huge problem related to the number of graduates (of both types of secondary education). Adding to this context, the international one (in which, especially with the help of the Erasmus+ program) where more and more young people choose to leave Romania, the Romanian educational institutions must become more and more competitive and try to attract as many candidates as possible. This article aims to highlight the increasing role played by educational marketing, more precisely by the branding of educational institutions and its communication.
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1. Introduction

Starting with the academic year 2010-2011 when the video surveillance system of the exams was implemented both for the National Evaluation test (for the completion of the lower secondary studies) and in the case of the baccalaureate examination, the number of graduates was reduced to about half, so that at present we are witnessing a paradigm of both secondary and university education, namely: if 10 years ago there was an extremely high competition in terms of admission to educational institutions, today the vast majority of them must compete between them so that they wont face extinction, due to the low number of available students that can compete. Thus, educational marketing is of particular importance, but the literature does not offer a coherent and unitary approach to this concept. The present paper aims first of all to review the specialized literature on the concepts of educational marketing and especially those regarding the branding policy of the educational „product" but also that of its communication.

2. Literature review

As mentioned earlier, when it comes to educational marketing, but especially educational branding, there is no unilateral approach to explaining this concept. This is precisely why this article starts from identifying a conceptual basis for marketing, branding and communication in the online environment, in particularry based on Philip Kotler's theories, and then explaining the concepts of educational branding as part of educational marketing, which is also part of social marketing. While some authors such as W. Curtis, R. Abratt and W. Minor speak only of organizational branding in higher education, other authors like C. Chapleo, although they deal mainly with the same subject (academic branding), make numerous references to secondary education and its characteristics.

3. Conceptual basis for branding and communication in the online environment.

Marketing is a complex of economic activities (product design, price fixing, promotion and distribution), which aims to orient the flow of goods and services from producers / distributors to consumers or users.

Trademarks (brands) are made by all types of organizations and take many forms. The brand is defined as: "a distinct identity that differentiates a promise of relevant,

sustainable and credible value associated with a product, service or organization and indicates the source of that promise" (Kotler, 1995).

The Internet, through its unique characteristics, offers new ways of interacting with consumers, organizations and the wider space of the electronic market. It facilitates the dialogue between clients who are different targets, who present different types of behavior and who consider different benefits. For this, marketing decisions must be based on the knowledge of the processes and influences that dictate the buying habits of consumers, as well as organizations. This may involve collecting data on general needs, motives, attitudes and other ways of stimulating and shape behavior, or different variables such as time, which may determine the choices made (Kotler and Amstrong, 2008).

Of course, when talking about the behavior of the users in the online environment the previous concepts must be correlated with two key aspects of the online behavior that can be monitored and which help to evaluate the behavior of the customers:

• Explicit behavior is based on data provided by the user. This includes items such as a user profile, if registration data or membership status has been requested to access the website or make the purchase. An action recorded on a site, such as signing up for an e-mail or sending an order, will also be included.

• The behavior involved which is based on data extracted from the observation of the actions of a user, as he interacts with a website.

Understanding the consumer's decision to buy is a process that needs to be constantly upgraded and that is when a marketing strategy is adopted. If it starts from a simple understanding of a consumer need, it must be taken further and thought of from three essential perspectives in the online environment (Kotler and Amstrong, 2008):

➢ Brand awarnesss - given by the brand awareness and the whole branding process itself;

➢ Quantitative evaluation of information;

➢ Permanent improvement of the online shopping experience, as well as of the relationships with customers in the online environment.

4. The particularities of the university brand / education system

Being a part of social marketing, educational marketing aims to support the reform process in the field of education by increasing the degree of literacy, improving educational institutions and the conditions under which education is carried out (Avram, 2011).

The desire to bring branding accents to an institution first appears in the academic environment in the context of the economic crisis, which has favored the reduction of the number of candidates / students, the abandonment of studies during the academic years due to the impossibility of paying the tuition fees and a low interest for academic area. Thus, the highlighting of the quality of the study and research programs, the ways of teaching and interacting with the students, as well as a well-defined image of a higher education institution through branding techniques, based on the mission, vision and values of the respective educational institution are considered to be a good solution for revitalizing the academic area.

Therefore, "the brand image of a university plays a crucial role in the attitude towards this institution and towards the sector as a whole". Studies conducted on this topic, quite a few in number, relevant but well documented on the subject, say that "every university needs a brand and an image that can be trusted and that will differentiate it from the others" (Chapleo, 2011).

The importance of shaping an image and a brand structure is actually the way in which that institution will be perceived by potential candidates, their parents and generally by the national and international academic environment.

A distinct image will determine the future student to want to apply to that university and be part of a certain academic environment.

Firstly the transposition of the branding components from the commercial to the university environment might seem inappropriate. However, the image of the universities that chose to position themselves in the academic environment through branding techniques is appreciated, and in the literature it is mentioned that ”it is necessary for each university to know what makes it capable of developing more connections. good with all categories of audiences and with the community” (Chapleo, 2011).

If a university offers very good academic programs, efficiently integrated into the labor market and completes the academic activity with a useful research both to the academic environment, the community from which it originates, and also for the benefit of the international research and development community, then that university already has the necessary basis for developing a brand identity. This will latter highlight that all these programs and will place them favourably in the minds of potential candidates, who may be students, teachers or researchers. But these apply not only for the academic environment, but also for the whole educational system as well, with all of its institutions.

In the institutional environment, such as the university one, branding has begun to find its place in recent years, the educational environment being regarded as a ”quasi-commercial industry”. The empirical studies in the field of marketing speak about the importance of marketing communication for universities, but also about the importance of promoting in the online environment in building a brand for a university. A university brand is based on quality services and programs, a close emotional connection with students and a unique set of communication values for the services offered. The willingness of universities to use branding tactics and techniques is not random. This phenomenon has begun to increase in the context of globalization and student mobility.

It is natural that any educational institution that offers valuable educational programs wants to educate also students from other countries as well. A good management strategy based on branding techniques will facilitate attracting of students, both from the home country and from international level. As a result, ”higher education institutions have started marketing activities to position themselves on the world market, analyzing their strengths and weaknesses and identifying their unique selling points”. Many authors believe that students give first importance to the university as a whole, when they want to choose the institution to which they will study, and only then will they choose from its educational programs. We can translate the same principle when it comes to the Romanian secondary educational system, where educational institutions from urban areas are likely to be preferred by children, and where educational institutions from rural areas are on the verge of extinction (Csintalan, 2014).

Some authors believe that universities, and other educational institutions, unlike all other types of companies that produce goods and services, have a higher potential for brand creation and management. Based on a unique identity, properly communicated, they are able to develop much stronger feelings of connection between the services offered (educational programs) and clients / students (Maringe and Gibbs, 2009).

The feeling of institutional belonging of the graduates is given by the image transfer that is made between the educational institution and its graduate. The image of the institution itself can represent an excellent business card for a graduate of a university well placed in international ratings. Moreover, in the case of universities, the image of the institution, projected both through the existing means of communication and through the

students, is important especially for external clients such as parents, friends, industry, etc., which have an influence on the decision. of choice of students.

Therefore, the image is a top tool for strengthening a university brand. As universities are complex institutions, which sum up a multitude of fields of activity addressed in the programs they offer and which come into contact with many categories of individuals, coming from different backgrounds and cultures, they must establish very clearly what their directions of action are, and what way they want to be perceived by all the categories of public they come in contact with (possible candidates, current students, parents, researchers, teachers, auxiliary staff, etc.).

Branding, as a strategy, does exactly that, establishes which will be the communicated image about the university, emphasizes its reputation, establishes the directions of approaching its relation with its public and clarifies the position that the university has in the competitive structure with the other higher education institutions.

If the success of commercial brands requires three major components– "an efficient product, a distinct identity and added value" - then the success of a educational brand should have the same elements. Universities in the United Kingdom, for example, understood this very early and initiated such programs. Thus, in the United Kingdom, it was the government that considered necessary to grant funds so that universities across the country develop their own institutional rebranding, precisely because it "established a clear and competitive identity for British universities, in order to attract more international students" and to differentiate English higher education institutions from their main competitors in the US and Australia (Maringe and Gibbs, 2009).

However, another part of the literature argues that for an educational brand many more components are needed to be implemented, due to the fact that these institutions are way more "inherently complex than conventional the ones that require brand management techniques and that the concepts regarding branding of an educational institution are similar to ones regarding companies in this market, being borrowed from the business sector, but not concepts regarding them must be adapted" (Maringe and Gibbs, 2009).

The complexity of education institutions leads to a difficult perception of them among potential clients who are not familiar with elements such as teaching degrees, research and researchers, new academic programs, international relations and with the business environment, etc., fact for which "branding can simplify this complexity and bring attention and loyalty to the organization". In all this multitude of institutional aspects, the identification of those unique values of the institution that position it differently in the minds of consumers is quite difficult to materialize. Even in business situations, "identifying the elements that make a brand work is misleading, because there are no two brands that work the same" (Enache, 2013).

This is why branding of educational institutions tends to stand as a "proof of how an institution performs in its activity to meet the needs of customers" (Enache, 2013). Elements that could differentiate one educational institution from another are: the productivity of the research activity of the faculties, the students' grades, the admission / selection criteria, the starting salary of a graduate and finding jobs, the involvement of the students in curricular and extra-curricular activities, the methods of administration of the institution, etc.

What we need to keep in mind is that the branding of the educational institutions is "a manifestation of the characteristics of the institution that differentiates it from others, reflects its ability to meet the needs of students, builds confidence in its ability to exhibit a certain type and level of education and to help potential recruits make wise selection decisions" (Suciu, 2000).

5. Brand communication in education

The role of promotional communication is to facilitate direct or indirect exchanges, by informing individuals, groups or organizations and by influencing them, in order to determine them to use certain services, to purchase the products of the educational institutions or to support their activity. The wider purpose of promotion is to maintain a positive relationship between educational institutions and various groups in the external or internal marketing environment. Educational institutions must carefully plan, implement and coordinate the promotional sub-mix, in order to maximize the expected results.

The composition of the promotional communication sub-mix of an educational institution is influenced by several factors:

- The nature of the offered product. The product of the educational institution is, most of the times, an immaterial element (an idea, behaviour or a service) and in very few cases something material. This implies the creation of a specific message, as a way of presenting the product. In this context, the educational activity of the educational institution involves more imaginative efforts than are usually necessary for economic organizations.

- The particularities of the market. Educational institutions should address, at the same time, both members of the target groups targeted (students, their parents, employees eager to hone their knowledge, employers, etc.) as well as potential subscribers. In the direction of the target groups, all communication methods are successfully used, with an emphasis on advertising and public relations. Public relations and personal or personalized contacts are the most widely used ways of promoting subscribers.

- Promotional budget. The promotional sub-mix depends fundamentally on the size of the budget allocated to these activities. The lack of money - more often in the social field than in the economic one - can cause the educational institution to use less expensive but less efficient methods of promotion. In addition, the use of overly commercialized media (techniques for promoting sales or advertising campaigns too intense) could be at odds with the expectations of the target groups regarding the sobriety of the educational environment.

In contrast, the Internet is the main advertising medium, both due to the low costs and due to the suitability of the requirements of the target groups.

By making a comparison between what happens in the case of businesses and what happens in the case of educational institutions, we can formulate some particular aspects of the use of promotional communication in educational marketing:

- the educational institutions place a greater emphasis, in comparison with the companies, on the personalized relations than on the mass communication;
- the educational institutions use, in comparison with the companies, less expensive forms of communication;
- educational institutions avoid communication means with a too obvious commercial character.

In the case of the educational institutions, public relations are used to a large extent, cultivating a favourable attitude among those categories of the population that can support or influence them favourably, and help the activity of the organization: increase the number of subscribers, mass media interest etc.

An important place is also being occupied by the free publicity that these organizations benefit from, due both to the mass media interest for the education problems, as well as to the public relations actions directed to the media representatives, and also the social media platforms.

In contrast, certain classic promotional formulas are quite rarely present in the activity of these organizations, the motivation being linked not only to the predominantly

intangible character of the activity carried out by them, but also to the desire to detach from events of a too pronounced commercial character, which could have negative consequences on the image.

Similarly, classic advertising is not widely used, especially because of the high costs, but also because of its association with the commercial field.

In addition to the „classic" techniques of promotional communication, educational institutions may resort to a number of less used means by businesses, such as sending messages through artistic works (pleading for certain educational programs in television series). successful, for example) or by „licensing" the image (granting permission for companies to come and use the name of the educational institution in their promotional communication).

6. Conclusions

At present, the high competitiveness in the educational market involves the revision of the way in which the educational institutions choose to understand marketing. If in the past the concepts regarding the promotion of the institutional brand in education were familiar only to the higher education institutions, at present, due to the substantial changes in the number of lower secondary education graduates, as well as due to the increase of the number of private secondary education institutions, there are sufficient alternatives for students so that educational branding becomes a mandatory requirement for any educational institution.

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