

Marketing Communications Mix in Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

In a perpetually changing society, with ever shifting technologies and web instruments, the role of marketing becomes crucial. Realizing the importance of marketing in their daily activities, universities have started using it more and more, especially emphasizing the basic marketing mix (product, price, promotion, and placement). Marketing communication is also highly important, as it has the capacity to facilitate student-university communication. For the best results, universities must apply the tried and tested methods that companies have been using for decades. The present article starts by introducing the concept of marketing communication, along with its pitfalls, uses and current misconceptions. It touches on its brand-genesis capacities` and then underscores the importance of integrated marketing communications. Afterwards the communication mix proposed by Kotler is chosen as a point of reference and analyzed from the perspective of a higher education institution, with examples of how universities are using each and every mix element. In the final part, the importance of integrated marketing communication is reiterated and further expanded upon, after which conclusions are drawn about the uses and misuses of the marketing communication mix.

Keywords: Marketing Communication Mix, Higher Education Institutions

The Concept of Marketing Communication

Marketing Communication is one of the essential concepts, the most visible and, therefore, it is considered by non-marketing professionals as the very foundation of marketing art (although the foundation is market research, the premise-function) (Kotler, 1997).

As part of the conceptualization of the original marketing of the *four Ps* (Kotler, 1997), marketing communication was often misinterpreted and associated only with *promotion*, although it is a much broader term that can be defined by a multitude of concepts: public relations, word-of-mouth, viral marketing, buzz marketing, integrated marketing communication, advertising, corporate image, brand etc.

According to Kotler "Marketing communications are the means by which firms attempt to inform, persuade, and remind consumers—directly or indirectly—about the products and

brands they sell. In a sense, marketing communications represent the voice of the company and its brands; they are a means by which the firm can establish a dialogue and build relationships with consumers "(Kotler and Keller, 2012, p. 476). He goes on and states that, by inspiring loyalty, the marketing communication contributes to the total value of consumers for the company, and also to the brand value in consumers' minds.

Another marketing communication feature, according to Kotler and Keller (2012), is to create a link between corporate brands and other people, places, events, brands, feelings, emotions. Marketing communication not only helps consumers understand how to use the product and why, but also *which other people are using it*. This is the most interesting perspective, because it offers a partial explanation for premium prices.

Given the multitude of messages issued by competing organizations, it is necessary to differentiate the company's message from others so that it is noticed and easily remembered; therefore, a simple, clear and concise language will make it easier to understand. Moreover, the increasing number of communication tools that are available requires that companies design more complex communication programs. Within this frame of reference, ensuring the consistency of sent messages is paramount. As a result of these requirements, the concept of integrated marketing communication came into being, a notion popularized through the paper *Integrated marketing communication: Pulling it together and making it work* (Schultz et al., 1993).

A known definition of integrated marketing communication is "a process of analysis, planning, organization, execution and control, which aims to develop as a sole unit the different sources of internal and external communication and to present a consistent image of the target groups of enterprise's communication " (Bruhn, 2001).

Within this context, integrated communication has the following *characteristics*: *integration as an object of communication*, which enables a strategic positioning of the organization; *integrated communication as a management process*, the communication efforts being systematically planned, organized, implemented and controlled; *the unity of communication efforts and unified company image* - target groups can form a unified image of the organization and of the products/services offered, following a communication that is well-defined, credible and devoid of contradictions; *increased efficiency* as a result of integrating the communication efforts.

Marketing Communication mix of higher education institutions

According to Kotler (2012), there are 8 major elements of the marketing communications mix

1. Advertising — any form of general presentation and promotion of products (goods or services) and ideas through online or offline media.

2. Sales promotion — various incentives applied on short term in order to encourage testing or purchase of goods and services. The list includes promotions (e.g. samples, coupons), trade promotions and promotions for employees (e.g. contests, sweepstakes).

3. Events and experiences — activities and programs sponsored by the company in order to create occasional or extraordinary brand-related interactions with customers in the fields of sport, arts and entertainment, not only of a formal nature.

4. Public relations — various oriented internal or external programs which are designed to protect the company's image and product communications.

5. Direct Marketing — using the communication media (mail, e-mail, fax, telephone, Internet) to communicate directly, requesting a response or dialogue from customers or prospective customers.

6. Interactive Marketing — activities and programs in the online environment created in order to attract current or potential customers and to increase brand awareness, to improve the image or to increase the sales of products and services, either directly or indirectly.

7. Word-of-mouth marketing or buzz marketing — the whole verbal, electronic or written communication between people on the experience (positive or negative) of purchase or use of a product/service.

8. Personal selling — personal interaction with one or more potential buyers in order to make presentations, answer questions and get orders.

Next, we will analyze each of the 8 elements of marketing communications mix in higher education sector, considering the fact that academic marketing has become more pronounced in recent years (Hanover Research, 2014).

1. Advertising

Many universities know and use this tool. Various institutions of higher education can be found in both indoor and outdoor advertisements.

Brochures and leaflets are another tool used in a large measure by universities, usually advertising them among interested high school students and parents.

2. Sales promotion

Universities are usually present at fairs and exhibitions, such as the Romanian International University Fair, where universities from other countries come on a yearly basis in order to attract Romanian students.

3. Promotional events

Student unions organize many events sponsored by the university, most of which are open to the public. However, it should also be taken into account that some events are sponsored by companies to a greater or lesser extent.

It is also a common practice for universities (in America) to have a day or a weekend of sightseeing where potential students and their parents can make a detailed tour of the campus. In Romania at least some universities have a day where anybody can visit the campus.

Universities such as Northwestern, Harvard, University of Alaska and many more enjoy the presence of a museum, which is still a form of promotional event, attracting both students and high school students, parents and people with a penchant for art, in general.

Universities also organize charity events, such as the Winchester prom organized by the Faculty of Law within the University of Winchester (The University of Winchester, 2015).

4. Public Relations

Universities have a number of rituals rooted in their organizational culture, including the opening of the academic year. This opening is at the same time a promotional demonstration and a tool for public relations (because it relies on speeches).

Furthermore, summer schools and various workshops can be organized by universities as a hybrid between the promotional events and public relations tool.

Some universities have press kits, but in the academic environment they are less used. The most often used tools are publications and university magazines. Some of these are very successful outside the academic world (e.g. Harvard Business Review, MIT Technology Review etc.).

Regarding the process of branding a university, this may not be possible, according to Wæraas and Solbakk (2009), even though universities have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars for such an identity (The Exponent, 2011) or even millions (Woodhouse, 2016). An emerging technique in the sector of higher education, concerted branding campaigns, has begun to be used in the last 5 years (Mulhere, 2015). American universities are investing a lot of money in these campaigns, as well as time. The same study reveals that 66% of respondents have invested between 9 and 15 months from research to the initiation of branding campaign.

Donations are another area where universities tend to be less active, as most of them (even the State-owned universities) rely on sponsorships and donations in order to round up their budgets.

5. Direct Marketing

Though not used in Romania, in America parents of high school students receive letters from various universities which their children can attend; at the same time, after graduation, they receive letters in which they are asked kindly to donate to the welfare of their alma mater (but the whole student experience and hence the organizational culture is different compared to Romania; it creates a stronger emotional bond (Broz and Passini, 2016)).

6. Interactive Marketing

In this digital age, "cradle of digital natives" (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008), the website, presence on new social media platforms and activity within the preferred communication environments are criteria by which prospective students assess a university (Shaw, 2013).

Massive open online courses (MOOCs) are both a challenge and an opportunity for universities. They can be seen as a threat or can be used as an additional promotion tool if the university is launching its own free MOOCs (promoting the university and creating potential students in traditional programs) or paid (generating an additional source of revenue and increased visibility).

The website remains a very important marketing communications tool between the university and its various stakeholders, but one should focus on the compatibility with mobile devices (Maslowsky, 2013). As far as effectiveness in attracting new students, a study (Hanover Research, 2014) reveals that the Open Gates Day and other similar events are the most effective marketing communication tools, despite the increasing importance attributed to digital media. In a study (Ruffalo, 2015) about 77% of young high school students have answered that a university website has a significant impact on their perception of the higher education institution.

Despite universities' transition into digital world, very few universities have online learning programs made in a rigorous way (Hanover Research, 2014). The same study states that interactive tools, the *flipped* classrooms and the introduction of game elements make their presence felt in the academic environment.

7. Word-of-mouth Marketing or Buzz Marketing

This type of tool is fundamentally linked to social media because it is essentially a content creation technique with the purpose of having this content forwarded until it becomes a viral phenomenon.

In higher education examples are rare because most buzz marketing campaigns rely on humor or shock element, two things that universities are reluctant to try in order not to tarnish the academic image of seriousness/rigor.

8. Personal selling

In higher education we cannot talk about the salesforce, but about the *staff*. It is one of the most important factors in measuring the quality of services, because the staff is delivering the service, contributes to the environment in which the service is delivered and is the main interface between the institution and students.

In education, the staff is divided into two categories: academic and administrative/non-academic. The administrative staff falls within the broad definition of *personnel* treated by most of the books on services' marketing. Professors, on the other hand, are a special category for the following reasons:

a) The teaching staff enjoys a high autonomy, both in terms of course contents and teaching methods.

b) University professors usually remain in higher education their whole lives. In America this is covered by the so-called *tenure* whereby a teacher is guaranteed a job for life at the respective university.

c) There are no standards for evaluating teachers beyond the student's feedback at the end of the semester; an admission test before hiring is one of a very small number of formal evaluations administered to a professor (not taking into account the research indicators, which are not an indicator of quality teaching services).

For these reasons, professors are different from the regular personnel of the companies. *Change Management* is a notion without much success in universities, and student orientation is an attribute which, if it doesn't come naturally, is quite difficult to develop.

The teacher-student dynamic, which in many cases is viewed as a one-sided information exchange, is another reason why professors are not student-oriented.

Moreover, recruiting professors is not an easy task. Depending on the ratio between professor supply and demand of certain countries, replacing a professor who does not fit the organizational culture can be either simple or difficult; even where good teachers are available, the university management is restricted during the semester or academic year as a teacher change in the middle of a semester can harm students' satisfaction.

In conclusion, although the staff is the critical factor in delivering a service, the staff in higher education has a special status and is not as malleable as staff in other service areas, which may harm the student satisfaction and service quality levels.

As far as the integrated marketing communication in the university is concerned, Smedescu (2016), in several interviews with marketing experts from higher education institutions, concluded that university marketing communication must be synergistic, no matter the channel, in order to be successful and must not create false expectations regarding service quality.

Conclusions and Future Research

In both theory and practice, experts agree on the benefits brought by an integrated approach of the communicational effort, considering integrated marketing communication as having a crucial role in running any organization's activity. However, at the operational level, managers still face problems in understanding the concept of integrated marketing communication and the implementation of such communication programs. The biggest problem that managers are facing starts right in the planning stage and, most times, they try to achieve this integration after the components of the communication mix were chosen. Basically, a market segmentation is provided and communication is made separately for each segment, which is why communication efforts are established and implemented on each previously defined segment. Don E. Schultz proposes a new approach, starting from the individual's level, studying his behavior and the way they communicate and also his perception regarding the marketing communication activity of organizations. After 30 years of study and promotion of the integrated marketing communication concept, Don E. Schultz concludes that the tools and communication channels integration is not a matter of communication, but a management problem, from top to bottom and not vice versa (Schultz, 2015).

The impact that an integrated marketing communication campaign using online tools because "in the virtual environment there are no international boundaries" (Stoica, Orzan, 2011), is a lot higher than the sum of the efforts of some individual communication campaigns, as the coherence and consistency of transmitted messages may be affected (Percy, 2008). "In addition, the Internet offers the possibility to analyze the results much lower costs, no shipping cost, no cost needed for the implementation of the focus group". (Stoica, 2011) The concept of synergy in marketing communication was rather less studied, so future research may consider how to form synergies as a result of the simultaneous use of various communication channels, which can even be applicable in the higher education institutions.

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