

The Effectiveness of Marketing Communications Techniques Used by Private Higher Education Institutions in Botswana

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Abstract: The research sought to assess the effectiveness of the marketing communications techniques used by private higher education institutions in Botswana. Data was collected from marketing managers 5 private higher education institutions and 380 students. Percentage analysis was used to rank the marketing communication techniques according to students' rating. Institutional budget allocations were compared with the ranking of the marketing communications tools. The study found a mismatch between the marketing communications tools budget allocations. Private higher education institutions were allocating significant portions of their budgets to marketing communications techniques which were rated as inefficient by students. The study recommended that private higher education institutions have to allocate more funds to the development of technology-based marketing communications techniques.

Keywords: Marketing Communications, Advertising, Digital Marketing.

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

The participation of the private sector in tertiary education has created direct competition between public and private tertiary education institutions for students. Competition in the higher education sector is at both global and domestic levels (Mocan & Maniu, 2020). Institutions within a country compete directly against each other, and yet again face indirect competition from others in the international spectrum offering programs through virtual learning platforms. To survive in this highly competitive industry, higher education institutions are adopting effective marketing strategies to attract and retain students. Further, institutions of higher learning are continuously aligning their operations with the changing needs of the learners and the complexities of the sector at large (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2017). Botswana experienced rapid growth of its tertiary education sector from 2007 to 2014 mainly through an increased number of registered private tertiary education institutions. The government of Botswana has been heavily investing in the higher education sector through expanding the capacity of public institutions and funding students to study in both private and public institutions. Botswana views its tertiary education sub-sector as the backbone to knowledge creation leading Botswana's transition from a resource-based economy to a knowledge-driven economy (Education and Training Sector Strategic Plan-ETSSP- 2015- 2020). To date, there are 28 public higher education institutions and 20 private higher education institutions in Botswana. All these are eligible for enrolling students who are funded by the government as well as those who sponsor themselves. The higher education sector of Botswana has grown beyond the capacity to enable adequate enrolment for all institutions in the sector.

Statement of the problem

Research conducted by Moremi (2018) on the factors shaping higher education in Botswana observed that, before 2015, private higher education institutions were outcompeting public institutions in terms of attracting students for enrolment. The study also observed that private higher education institutions offered market-driven programs and they surpassed public institutions in the marketing of programs to potential students. However, from the year 2016, student enrolments in private higher education institutions began to decline. This research sought to evaluate the effectiveness of the marketing communications strategies used by private higher education institutions to attract students for enrolment.

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Research Objectives

The research sought to:

- Determine the marketing communications strategies used by private higher education institutions to promote their educational services.
- Compare marketing communications budgets with the marketing communications strategies they use by private higher education institutions
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the marketing communications strategies used by private higher education institutions-based students' rating

Purpose of study

Effective marketing communications builds up an institution's brand which is a key factor in interacting and retaining learners. Juan, Camio, Gabriel, & Lilliana, (2020) observed that students' choice of higher education institutions takes into consideration the reputation and ranking of institutions. Given the declining student enrolments in private higher education institutions, the research sought to assess the effectiveness of the marketing communications strategies used by private higher education institutions to attract students. The result of the study provides vital information for strategic marketing planning in private higher education institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Marketing communication techniques are the means through which organizations inform, persuades, and remind customers about their products and services (Kotler & Keller, 2016). According to the University of Virginia (2019), effective marketing communications create a positive perception about an institution that builds the institutional brand and its underlying equity. Quinn, (2013) observed that information and communication technology-based marketing communications tools are becoming common and acceptable with consumers. Traditional promotion techniques include advertising, sales promotion, events and experiences, and direct marketing. Technology-based marketing communications strategies used by higher education institutions include websites, social media, and direct short messages (Human Resources Development Council, 2018).

Advertising is any paid form of non-personal communication of ideas or products of an identified sponsor in the prime media e.g., television, the press, posters, cinemas, and radio (Kotler & Keller, 2012). Private higher education institutions advertise their programs through newspapers, magazines, and electronic billboards. The advantages of using advertising to promote higher education institutions and their products include the flexibility to target small defined segments such as potential post-graduate students. Advertising reaches many people at a low cost per person. It also allows the message to be repeated which enables the institution to improve its public image (Jobber, 2012). A study by Levitz (2018) on advertising and student recruitment strategies of public and private institutions in the USA found that universities and colleges spend approximately one-quarter of their budgets on traditional advertising, however, these promotional techniques only attributes a very small number potential applicant. Advertising through traditional media can build an institution's brand awareness however, it is no longer very effective in this generation of digital applicants (Andriana, 2019).

Higher education institutions also use direct marketing which involves the distribution of products, information, and promotional messages to target customers through interactive communication in a way that allows response to be measured (Subramanian, 2017). Direct marketing has three distinctive characteristics which make it preferable by marketers, these are message can be prepared to appeal to the addressed individual, up to date messages can be prepared and delivered quickly and that it is an interactive method hence the message can be changed depending on the person's response. Private higher education institutions conduct career fairs in senior secondary schools. These career fairs are organized by secondary schools which invite higher education institutions to showcase their programs and directly respond to the questions raised by senior secondary school students. The Human Resources Development Council (HRDC) of Botswana also organizes career fairs in the three major cities of Botswana (Gaborone, Francistown, and Maun) to enable potential students to meet the tertiary education institutions and select the programs to enroll in. Direct marketing campaigns are also undertaken with the industry where higher education institutions appoint organizations to present their programs to the employees.

Institutions also sponsor activities and programs designed to create special branded related interactions. Key events undertaken by institutions of higher learning include research conferences, graduation ceremonies, the official opening of facilities, and commemoration of specific calendar days, open days, and new student orientation. Through these events, institutions will be seeking to achieve high publicity which is non-personal communication transmitted through mass media where the time or space provided by the media is not paid for or where there is no sponsor for the message. According to Isaacs (2017), university graduation ceremonies are key for spreading the good name of the institution which in turn attract students. Institutional events, if well covered by the media aids in the publicity of the

institution. As well research conferences are one of the key factors in university ranking and reputation. Universities that effectively organize research conferences attract international scholars, thus, boost their image through publicity.

Higher education institutions also use interactive websites which are frequently monitored to present their programs to prospective candidates. According to Quinn (2013), website interfaces are key components through which institutions present themselves to prospective students. Studies have revealed that potential students who have technology skills browse through institutions' websites before they decide to enroll. Therefore, universities must design their websites in such a way that students easily access information regarding the programs that they wish to enroll in. Universities now have actively monitored pages on Twitter, Facebook, Linked In, Google Plus + Instagram, and YouTube to improve the level of communications with existing and potential students. These social media networks are used by hundreds of millions of young people who are the target segment for universities. Through these pages, universities provide personalized feedback to inquiries made by potential students. Social media advertising enables institutions to provide immediate and personalized feedback to potential students. The accessibility of information's among those who are in each network makes them very efficient in reaching many audiences of similar characteristics. Natasa, Petrović & Aničić (2019) suggest that marketing through social networks offers relatively low campaign costs, fast feedback, increased traffic to the website, brand enhancement, the easy and quick launch of new programs, or services offered by the institutions. According to Kang (2011), there is a strong positive relationship between the number of students who visit a university's website or social media page and the likelihood of that student applying to this same university.

METHODOLOGY

A descriptive study was undertaken to explore the association between the marketing strategies of private higher education institutions and student enrolment. According to Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill & Bristow (2019), descriptive research involves the collection and analysis of data to understand the underlying factors to a given scenario. According to Loeb, et al, (2017), a descriptive analysis helps the researcher to explain why a scenario is as it is. Further descriptive research helps the researcher to generate the hypothesis that will guide practitioners and policymakers in addressing existing problems and similar scenarios that may arise in the future. This study was based on quantitative data collected from students through questionnaires. Further, a quantitative research design guarantees a measurable existence for the theoretical claims since the numerical data collected can be used for the verification of considered outcome possibilities.

The entire higher education sector of Botswana has 20 private and 28 public institutions. The research focused on the 20 private higher education institutions of which 3 were universities and 17 were colleges. Convenient sampling was used to select the five institutions which participated in the study. The five private higher education institutions were selected based on their willingness to participate and their reachability these were 2 universities and 3 colleges. The institutions had total enrolment of 10 006 students in the academic year 2019/20. The five institutions were named A to E to avoid use of actual names. The study considered 2nd-year students because 1st years would not have experienced much in the institution for them to assess the quality of services being delivered. The study could not target 3rd years and 4th years because some of these were out of campus for the work-based learning experience. Students who participated in the study were randomly selected according to their willingness to take part in the study. A sample of 380 students participates in the study. Gill, (2010) cited in Taherdoost, (2020) depicts a table that shows the population size and the required sample size to achieve accurate results at different degrees of confidence level. Accordingly, a population of 10000 items requires a sample size of 370 to achieve the desired accuracy at a 95% confidence level. Therefore, in this study 380 students and 5 Marketing Managers will participate in the study giving a total of 385 participants. The marketing managers gave information on the marketing communications strategies and budgets for their institutions. In the academic year 2019/20, institution A allocated above P2 million for marketing communications in 2020, institution B allocated a budget between P1million and P 1. 5million the same budget was set institutions C, institutions D & E allocated between P0.5 million and P1 million.

Allocation of promotional budget to promotional activities across institutions

| Institution | Newspapers | Radio & TV | Billboards | Institutional Materials | Website | Social Media | Roadshows & Career Fairs | Direct calls and SMS |
|-------------|------------|------------|------------|-------------------------|---------|--------------|--------------------------|----------------------|
| A | 10% | 10% | 0 % | 40% | 10% | 10% | 10% | 10% |
| B | 10% | 10% | 30% | 10% | 5% | 5% | 20% | 10% |
| C | 10% | 20% | 30% | 10% | 10% | 10% | 5% | 5% |
| D | 20% | 30% | 10% | 10% | 5% | 5% | 10% | 5% |
| E | 10% | 10% | 40% | 10% | 10% | 5% | 20% | 5% |

Table 1 depicts the institutions’ budget allocations to the various promotional strategies they used reach out to potential students for enrolment.

The main primary data collection tools used were questionnaires. According to Saunders et al (2019), a well-constructed questionnaire is an excellent instrument understood by respondents so that they may provide answers to specific research questions. Questionnaires have the advantage that participants provide their responses confidentially. The questionnaire had 2 sections A and B Section A solicited students’ demographic information. Section B had 8 institutional promotional tools listed for students to indicate whether each was ‘*not efficient, efficient or very efficient*’. Reliability test of the questionnaire gave a Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.634 which suggests a considerable level of consistency on the questionnaire items. According to Schrep (2020), for descriptive studies, a Cronbach alpha coefficient above 0.5 depicts an acceptable degree of reliability of test items on a questionnaire.

Data Analysis

The Percentage Analysis was calculated on SPSS package to determine the most preferred marketing communication by students. The results were compared with the institutional budgets on each technique. The marketing communications techniques were ranked according to order of effectiveness as rated by the student’s responses. Institutional budgets and the ranked marketing communications techniques were then compared to establish whether institutions were spending funds on strategies that would boost their enrolments. This led to conclusions on whether the institutions were effectively spending on marketing communications techniques that effectively reached the potential learners.

RESULTS

The students rated the marketing communication tools according to the levels of efficiency from their perspective. Three options were given “*not efficient, efficient or very efficient*”. The student responses to the 8 marketing communications tools were as analyzed below.

| Marketing Communications Technique | % efficiency rating by students | Institutions’ budget allocations range % |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| Road shows & career fairs | 95 % | 5% ≤ 20% |
| Social media | 89% | 5% ≤ 10% |
| Institutional websites | 86% | 5% ≤ 10% |
| Direct short messages | 85% | 5% ≤ 10% |
| Institutional materials | 80% | 10% ≤ 40% |
| Television and radio | 70 % | 10% ≤ 30% |
| Newspapers & magazines | 60% | 10 ≤ 20% |
| Billboards | 50% | 0 ≤ 40% |

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

HRDC career fair was rated the best marketing communication tool by students followed by senior secondary school career fairs. The HRDC organizes the career fair every year bringing all tertiary education institutions under one roof to showcase their programs to the potential students under one roof. The learners found the career fair to be very informative as they get an opportunity to compare what different institutions offer and ask institutional representatives about the career prospects of the programs, they are intended to choose. The HRDC road show and senior secondary schools career fairs provide an interactive platform through which potential learners can ask questions. The fair also attracts regional and international institutions. Due to Covid -19 pandemic, the HRDC turned the fare into a roadshow through which institutions representatives move from one city to the other displaying and explaining their programs to the potential students. The senior secondary school’s career fairs are organized by individual institutions either on invitation by the senior school or on request. Senior school career fairs are usually conducted during the second term each year to give secondary school information on possible courses they would do when they complete secondary school. The study established that 2 institutions spend up to 20%, 2 institutions spent up to 10% whilst I institution spent 5% of the marketing communications budget on HRDC and senior secondary schools career fairs.

Digital marketing communication tools which include Facebook and Twitter, institutional websites, and direct SMS were ranked 2nd, 3rd, and 4th respectively. The study found that institutions had Facebook and Twitter pages through which they post promotional messages to attract students. As well, students confirmed that they use digital tools to search for universities and colleges. A study by Diraditsile and Samakabadi (2018) on the use of social media by University of Botswana students revealed that 98% of students had active Facebook accounts which they use for communicating with friends and searching for any information they want. All the five institutions allocated not more than 10% of their budgets to digital marketing communication techniques. Salem (2020) observed that universities that have adopted

digital marketing have strengthened their competitive positions through the continuous presence in the eyes of their target market (the youth). According to Shaheenb (2019) organizations are now promoting their products through websites, however many of them only design and launch websites but do not allocate funds and time required for maintenance and monitoring of the websites.

Institutional hard copy printed materials which include calendars, diaries, brochures, prospectus, and flyers to communicate their educational services were ranked the 5th. Up to 80% of the students indicated that institutional materials were an effective marketing communication technique. The main advantage of printed materials is that they provide detailed information regarding the cost, duration, and mode of delivery of the course. As well, a considerable number of potential students in Botswana come from rural areas where they do not access digital forms of communication before they enroll in tertiary education institutions. According to the Botswana Demographic Survey Report (2017), cities and towns carry 20.9 %, peri-urban villages carry 43.0% whilst rural areas carry 36.1% of the population. This shows that a considerable population of the country stays in the rural areas. Therefore, printed institutional materials which are placed at shops in townships, clinics, police stations, and schools for potential students in the rural areas to access them was regarded as an efficient marketing communications tool. One out of the five institutions spent 40%, whilst the other four spent 10% of the marketing communications budgets on institutional materials.

The radio and television advertising were rated as the 6th most effective marketing communications tool in terms of reaching the potential students. Up to 70% of the students rated radio and television as effective marketing communication tools. The access to radio frequencies through mobile cell phones has improved the potential audience reach effect of this communication tool. As well the establishment of private commercial radio stations which rely on advertisements has improved the message content delivered through radio which is why it remains prominent as a marketing communications tool. Television advertisements are one of the most expensive marketing communications tools, it cost not less than P5000 (approximately USA\$470) to air a single slot of advert for less than 30 seconds. Out of the 5 intuitions, 3 spent 10%, 1 spent 20% and the other 1 spent 30% of the marketing communications budget on television and radio advertising. Television advertising provides an opportunity for institutions to show their services and facilities to attract potential students for enrolment. However, there is a belief that the youth does not tune into the local TV stations these days because of the international entertainment channels like the DSTV and Netflix.

Newspapers and magazines were rated second from last in terms of efficiency as marketing communications tool. Up to 60% of the students regarded newspapers and magazines as an efficient marketing communications tool for attracting students. In Botswana, there is one freely distributed newspaper (the Daily News) which charges considerable rates for advertisement and is distributed across the country. Other newspapers target different news segments like business, politics, and economic developments in the country. The challenge with newspaper advertising is the determination of the type of newspaper that can effectively reach the target audience. Newspapers are now offering both hard copies and online versions of their publications. Institutions sometimes present their programs in newspapers through full pages, half pages, and quarter-page advertisements. Newspaper advertisement offers an opportunity to give programme details like the admission requirements, duration, and cost of the program. Out of the 5 intuitions, 4 indicated that they spent not more than 10% of their budgets on newspaper and magazines advertisements and 1 spent up to 20% of the budget on newspaper and magazines.

Billboards were rated the least effective marketing communications tool for attracting students, 50% of the students indicated that billboards are an efficient marketing communications tool placed mainly at road intersections in the city to catch the attention of those who will be passing. When using electronic billboards, it is not possible to convey adequate information about the programs offered but to just create institutional awareness. Despite the low rating of billboards by students, institutions are still using them for advertising their programs, the study found out that 20% of the institutions spent up to 30% of their budgets on billboards and 40% spent 20% of the budgets on electronic billboards, thus 60% of the institutions spent at least 20% of their marketing communications budgets on billboards. Accordingly, the budget allocations show that considerable funds are spent on billboards, yet students do not see them as effective in reaching them.

CONCLUSIONS

Some of the marketing communication techniques used by private higher education institutions were rated by students as effective whilst others were rated as not effective. The HRDC road show and secondary school career fairs were considered the best followed by digital marketing communications means (social media, websites and, direct calls and SMS). However, institutions were not spending considerable portions of their marketing communications budgets on these two which were well-valued by learners. Digital marketing communications techniques were allocated only 5% - 10% of the budgets in all institutions which demonstrated that private higher education institutions had not fully embraced digital marketing as their key marketing communications tool. It is evident from the study that private higher

education institutions in Botswana dedicated less effort and resources towards the most efficient marketing communications tools. Institutional printed materials, television and radio advertising and billboards which were allocated up to 40% of the marketing communications budgets by other institutions were not highly rated by students. There is a mismatch between the rating of marketing communications techniques by students and institutional budget allocations. Majority of the institutions are spending considerable resources on less effective marketing communications tools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Private higher education institutions in Botswana ought to review their models for marketing budget allocations. Some of the marketing communications techniques used by private higher education institutions were regarded by students as not effective yet institutions were allocation significant portions of their budgets to those strategies. It is recommended that institutions carry out continuous surveys to assess the effectiveness of the marketing communications tools they use to make informed budget allocations. Institutions should explore ways to effectively use technology-based marketing communications techniques. Traditional marketing communications tools like radio and television advertising, newspaper and billboards advertising were not highly rated by students therefore institutions must reduce their budget allocations to such technique.

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