INTERNAL MARKETING COMMUNICATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to analyse how internal marketing communication activities are managed at public universities in the Czech Republic and identify best practice solutions in this sphere. This paper concentrates on the relevant organisational and motivational functions and their impact on internal marketing communication within universities. This paper is based on qualitative research, summarised in written and diagrammatical form herein, whereby management and communications staff working for marketing departments at higher educational institutions were questioned by way of a pre-prepared, structured interview. The qualitative research showed that there are several issues which could be substantially improved upon including: unclear organisation structures; insufficient use of non-financial incentives; unclear determination of faculty autonomy. This paper suggests appropriate solutions on the basis of the best practice submitted by participating universities. It further proposes a set of best practice non-financial motivational incentives for the improvement of internal marketing communication.

Key words: internal marketing communication, higher education, organising, Czech Republic.

JEL Classification: M31.

Introduction

Competition among universities in the Czech Republic is continuously increasing. It is predominantly caused by the high number of universities. But there are several other forces that drive higher educational institutions to make necessary reforms such as: Internationalisation, globalisation but also very specific reasons, such as the decreasing number of students coming from secondary schools; negative prognosis of demographic trends; austerity caused by the economic crisis; changes in university funding or for instance increasing emphasis on quality in educational and scientific areas. All of these factors mean that universities are seeking out new organisational schemes and types of internal marketing communication strategies between head offices and faculties. Good relationships among staff working in marketing departments play a key role in managing the marketing communications of the whole university.

Literature Review

The definition of education marketing was created by (Kotler & Fox, 1985) in the following form: “The analysis, planning, implementation and control of carefully formulated programs designed to bring about voluntary exchanges of values with a target market to achieve organisational objectives.”

The conception of a client in the tertiary education sphere was one of the main topics in 1990s. For example, (Conwey, 1994) highlights that there are two perspectives of approaching a university client. In the first case, the clients are students who are offered study programmes by universities. In the second notion, the clients are employers and companies to whom students present the product of the university.

(Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006) assumes that in the second half of the 1990s the marketing of universities was approached more closely and resembled marketing communication. The scientists focused on applicants for universities and hence did a research concerning printed materials meant for potential candidates of universities (Gatfield, Barker & Graham, 1999) (Hesketh & Knight, 1999).

Students are one of the main target groups of universities and suitable marketing communication lead to meeting their needs and expectations.

(Russel, 2005) investigates which factors affect foreign and native students’ satisfaction and how relevant they are for designing appropriate marketing communication.

Some authors focus on individual tools within the scope of marketing communication mix. Websites enjoy great interest especially due to the fact that they serve as one of the most common sources of gaining information. The matter of improving the quality of websites and searching for suitable methods for assessment is dealt by (Castro et al., 2004) or (Vaughan, Farrow & Tims, 2006). (Panopoulou, Tambouris & Tarabanis, 2008) focus on defining framework for a website evaluation. (Hackett & Parmanto, 2005) investigate accessibility of university websites to disadvantaged students. These authors conclude that the higher complexity of websites decreases their accessibility to disadvantaged students.
According to experts, promoting a university brand and image is considered another key factor in relation to attracting new students. (Pelsmacker, Geuens & Bergh, 2003) emphasise that organization identity is bound with a brand, product, distribution and communication oriented to the target groups. The university brand and identity are dealt by (Goonawardana & Hemsley-Brown, 2007) who focus on the cooperation between rectorate and individual colleges while forming a successful university brand.

The university brand and identity is further investigated by (Lowrie, 2007). He describes how two diverse fields – university mission and marketing approach affect identity of these institutions. (Chapleo, 2010) deals with the key factors which influence and form successful brand of a university. Among these factors, there is a clear vision, highlighting leading position, participation of employees on forming a successful brand etc.

A number of authors deal with appropriate marketing strategy in the area of university education. (Hammond, Harmon & Webster, 2007) focus on strategic marketing in connection to university performance and highlight the importance of marketing planning. What their research results imply is that awarding prizes in the education field, science, services etc. prove marketing strategies of universities with economic specialisation in the USA and enhance university efficiency remarkably.

(Ivy, 2008) focuses on searching for an appropriate marketing approach to students. He advises that it is necessary to view this target group more complexly and forms a seven-factor model of marketing mix. He adds that a classic, four-factor model is not in the university environment effective enough.

Russian authors (Saginova & Belyansky, 2008) emphasise the importance of strategic marketing focused on innovations for further development of universities on the background of transforming Russian economy. They view the cooperation between the university and the private sector as a convenient innovation concept.

(Ho & Hung, 2008) specify a suitable marketing mix and strategies for institutions of the tertiary education. Their work focuses mainly on the market segmentation. Stemming from their own research, they identified five main groups of university candidates for whom they defined suitable marketing strategies.

(Ramachandran, 2010) investigates how the university management tries to improve the quality of services for students in the marketing context. He also describes how implementation influences and modifies the communication with students. He emphasises that a student’s relation to the school varies from a typical client-business organization relation and that an extensive implementation of managing marketing from the private sector impairs entitled privileged position of university students.

(Heyez, 2007) deals with the future of university marketing. He emphasises the importance of integrating strategic planning and marketing and more detailed processing of an integrated marketing communication and forming a successful university brand.

(Chen; Wang; Yang, 2009) who formed an evaluation system based on the analysis of index figures from Europe, the USA and Taiwan. The system was divided into 18 dimensions and 78 indicators. The advantage of this system is the fact that the university is able to carry out its own efficiency evaluation.

Other authors who deal with methodology measuring students’ satisfaction with the quality of services are (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2007) or the above mentioned authors (Gruber, Fuß, Voss & Glszer-Zikuda, 2010) who formed their own methodology based on the five-point evaluation scale of the Likert type.
Factors affecting foreign students’ decision on selecting a university are studied by (Cubillo, Sánchez & Cerviño, 2007) who identified five main fields – personal reasons, prestige a image of the country, image of the city, image of the university institution and evaluation of the study programme.

(Rotfeld, 2008) brings a very interesting point of view of universities, which warn that universities should not see students only as client who want to buy their courses or publication. A university evaluation by students should not be based only on popularity of individual courses or classes, because in the end, these techniques lead only to degradation of quality of education.

(Hayez, 2007) deals with the future of university school marketing. He highlights integration of strategic planning and marketing, more detailed processing of integrated marketing communication and creating successful brand of a university.

(Světlík, 2009) concentrates on the marketing of higher education institutions in the Czech Republic. He emphasises the need for the interconnection of all marketing communication elements in one process with joint management. The integrated marketing communication approach increases its efficiency based on synergies.

Research Methods

In the first stage, the authors of this paper identified the main areas for further investigation. These areas are:

- the main problems of marketing communications at higher education institutions
- the system of marketing communications management at higher education institutions

In the second stage, three experts specialising in the field were interviewed. The first person was a marketing specialist who does research into the marketing of higher education. The second and the third people are marketing specialists previously working in the private sector and currently responsible for the marketing activities of entire universities. Those experts were given the above mentioned areas and were asked to describe a contemporary situation regarding the MC of HE according to their experience and define more precisely the aspects within each area which further research should focus on.

On the basis of the interviews with the three experts mentioned above, the authors decided to concentrate mainly on the issues related to co-operation between head offices and faculties. The following set of questions were finally worked out:

- What are the biggest problems you have to deal with in terms of marketing communications?
- What does the marketing organisational chart of the university/faculty look like?
- What is co-operation between university and faculty like?
- Does marketing department organise any motivational programmes for its staff? Are there any other motivation tools for marketing staff except financial rewards?

In the next part of the research, 20 people responsible for marketing communications activities at universities or faculties from eight different universities were questioned by using the above mentioned set of questions. The individual interview method was used.

Results of Individual Interviews

Question No.1: What are the biggest problems you have to deal with in terms of marketing communications? The most frequent answers were: Academic staff are not willing to participate in marketing communications project of university/faculty; the lack of professionalism – professional specialists from the private sector should be more involved in the marketing communications of universities and faculties; unclear distribution and determination of competences; bad communication between a head office and faculties; a lot of activities are done intuitively without any planning or the use of any rules; students who participate in the marketing communications of universities/faculties are not well-trained for these activities and cause many ambiguities, duplications and in some cases even do more harm than good to the representation of their institutions.

Question No. 2: What does the marketing organisational chart of the university/faculty look like?

These three figures below represent the most frequent marketing organisational structures of the university (head offices). Figure no. 3 contains two versions.
Figure 1. The marketing organisational structure of the head office No. 1

Figure 2. The marketing organisational structure of the head office No. 2

Figure 3. The marketing organisational structure of the head office No. 3 – two versions
The figure below represents two most frequent marketing organisational structures of faculties.

![Marketing organisational structure of faculties](image)

**Figure 4.** The marketing organisational structure of the faculties – two versions

**Question No. 3: What is co-operation between university and faculty like?**

**Head Office Staff Responses:**

Positive: Faculties start to be interested in head office training concerning the use of the uniform corporate identity manual, PR issues, decision making in critical situations and other specialised services; faculties' marketing staff are aware of the need to improve internal communication with head offices; some faculties understand that identification with the university brand means getting a unique advantage in the higher education market.

Negative: Faculties have very high autonomy – in practice they can practically do whatever they want; a lot of faculties do not observe the rules laid down in the uniform corporate identity manual; duplicities arising because of insufficient communication between faculties and head office; faculties often promote only themselves even if they are a part of the whole university.

**Faculty Staff Responses:**

Positive: Head offices provide us with services such as monitoring project possibilities, marketing surveys of prospective students relating to university selections, staff training in marketing communication etc. However, it is necessary to point out that it is not common for each university; at present we have sufficient freedom to make our own decisions in terms of marketing communication activities.

Negative: We do not precisely understand the rules of the uniform corporate identity manual; head offices want to reduce our autonomy, which can cause us a lot of problems; head offices do not sufficiently understand enough that each faculty has specific needs because of their different situations. It is not always possible to use the same marketing communication procedures for, for example, economics and chemistry faculties.

Some head offices organise regular meetings with marketing communication staff from their faculties. The frequency of those meetings differ, but are usually held once or twice per month. Both staff from the head office and staff from faculties admit it is very beneficial in terms of clarification of further steps and eliminating misunderstanding. However, it is necessary to point out that there are universities which do not organise such meetings.

**Question No. 4: What are the motivational tools for staff working in marketing department? Are there any other motivation tools for marketing staff except financial incentives?**

The following table contains the most frequent motivational tools according to respondents' answers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Motivational Tool</th>
<th>Financial</th>
<th>Non-financial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The fixed part of the salary</td>
<td>Training courses for staff – professional growth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal financial assessment</td>
<td>Teambuilding to ensure better relationships in a team</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial rewards for success in one-off projects</td>
<td>Informal meetings for socialising - (sports, cultural and other entertainment events)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1.** Motivational Tools for Marketing Staff
It is necessary to emphasise that a lot of universities use only financial incentives as motivational tools.

Discussion

In terms of question no. 1 a lot of answers relate to organisational and motivational issues. For example, academic staff are not willing to participate in marketing communications projects of their university/faculty; unclear distribution and determination of competences; bad communication between a head office and faculties. Therefore it is highly important for university head offices and their faculties to find an appropriate organisational structure, communication style, motivational tools etc.

The organisational structure of the university and its faculty has to be clear and if possible should avoid duplications of management. Therefore the organisational structure in figure 1 and in figure 4 (the version with two vice-deans) seems not to be appropriate. Above all, it seems that the institutions of tertiary education use organisational structures with too many management levels. It can be argued that in, for example, figure 3 the head of the marketing department should report directly to the president. However, a lot of respondents think that marketing communications have a unique position within universities and therefore there should be appointed their own vice-president for the management of this area. Moreover, the president is usually very busy with other duties.

The most important problem is the relationship between the head office and the faculty. Even if the head offices are not satisfied with the high autonomy of the faculties, the authors of this paper suggest that this higher autonomy of faculties is advisable because they best know the needs of their stakeholders. On the other hand, the uniform corporate identity manual plays a key role in marketing communications activities of the whole university so faculties should observe the rules listed in this manual and keep them in mind when communicating with their stakeholders that they are a part of the whole university. Only this method will ensure effective promotion as the faculties can benefit from the fact they are part of a prestigious university.

The best practice of using motivational tools plays a key role in internal marketing communications of higher education institutions. The research results imply that it is advisable for universities and their faculties to use both financial and non-financial motivational incentives.

Conclusion

The authors of the paper suggest, on the basis of the research results, that it is worthwhile for Czech universities and faculties to use clear organisational structure with only one vice-president or vice-dean e.g. figure 2 or figure 4 (on the left side) which ensure the avoidance of ambiguities. It is beneficial for universities and their faculties to place more emphasis on non-financial motivational tools. These should include training courses, teambuilding and informal meetings and other external activities e.g. sports events. The authors further recommend: sufficient autonomy of faculties; the obligatory use of the uniform corporate identity manual by faculties; support services provided by head offices to faculties such as monitoring potential project possibilities or marketing surveys of prospective students relating to university candidate selections; regular formal meetings between head office and faculty staff. All the above recommendations resulted from this paper’s research and the authors conclude that their implementation will ensure the improvement of marketing communication management across the higher education sphere.

References