

The Experience of Positioning the University at the Educational Services Market

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ABSTRACT

The relevance of the problem under study is based on the necessity to find the most productive method of positioning a higher educational organization at the educational services market within the conditions of transfer from the centrally planned economy to a market economy and changing of the thinking format of the young generation. The purpose of the article is to develop a set of marketing actions for positioning a higher educational organization at the educational services market and its assessment. The lead method of studying this problem is modeling which provides the possibility to consider the problem as a process of results-oriented and well-informed managing of the process of development of a university as an educational system. The article contains a set of marketing actions aimed at positioning the university at the educational services market using the organization's own internal resources and consisting of the interconnected components, such as motivational-target, content-processing and result-assessing; their specific features are described and the algorithm of implementing this set is developed. The developed and assessed system is intended for promotion of the university as a brand at the educational services market, for strengthening and reinforcing its competitive positions and increasing the university's attractiveness for future students. The materials of the article can be useful for education specialists oriented towards marketing of educational services, for teachers who deliver a course of lectures in disciplines related to pedagogical marketing or marketing of educational services.

KEYWORDS

A set of marketing actions, educational services market, pedagogical marketing, positioning of the university

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Introduction

The system of higher education in modern Russia is facing certain difficulties. Constant reforming and modernizations of the system are under way, as well as searching for the best trajectory of development. Yet these problems appeared long before now and originated in the Soviet period. Professional and vocational education in the USSR was formed within the

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context of centralization of the state power, and all types of educational institutions were state ones. At that period the system of education was at a high level which is confirmed by a great number of indicators, the main of which are: high estimate of our specialists abroad, the fact that the USSR was at the front line of scientific and technological research, strong development of such sciences as mathematics, physics etc.

Due to the fact that in the Soviet period the state devoted close attention to the system of education it was the most stable element of the state system. To work in the education system was prestigious and, besides, the salary level was quite high. The state executed its functions through a strict planning system: a planned order was given to the system of education for producing specialists of certain professions. The Soviet higher education was practically an ideal for the planned economy in the USSR.

In the 1980s the well-known political events that led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union put the solving of education problems at the background of the state policy of the Russian Federation. The material and technical infrastructure of educational institutions became obsolete, and the state was in no condition to provide financing to educational institutions in the volumes they required.

V.S. Katkalo (2006) reviewed the stages of changing the strategic trends of higher educational institutions' development and highlighted the stage of non-systematic restructuring of the higher education system in order to survive (1992 – 2002) that was characterized by the transfer from the strictly-centralized model of managing higher educational institutions to the model of their "survival" in the situation of drastic reduction of state-provided financing. In the strategies that V.S. Katkalo (2006) calls "reactive" the idea of "preservation" prevailed over the idea of "development". The old education system was being destroyed, the quality and prestige of higher education declined. The research carried out by the National Research Institute "Higher School of Economics" showed that at the turn of the century less than 10% of Russian higher educational institutions implemented the strategy of "maximum quality" (Klyachko, 2002). The notion of "the economics of a higher educational institution" became the reality – its management mechanisms, as a rule, included only the increase of study-for-fee forms of education (at the expense of the quality), decentralization of the management system in several higher educational institutions (keeping a part of out-of-budget earnings at the level of departments with further independent distribution and spending) etc. Specialties and areas of training were updated very slowly, heads of universities tried to keep the staff and traditions without plunging in the market economy. Many heads of universities were not ready for that professionally. It was at that time that in the Russian education the idea of education marketing or pedagogical marketing emerged (Yegorshina, 2001; Astratova, 2007, 2008). There was complete misunderstanding of the principles of the market relations within the sphere of education. Before that universities used to have a stable state order for training of specialists and then they faced a totally different approach to choosing a future profession and the place to study for it from young people of the so-called "post-perestroika" period. Now a university had to fight for each prospective student. Positioning in order to occupy this or that place became not a theoretical chapter from a marketing course but a reality of life. In view of the problems with updating the material and technical infrastructure of



educational institutions many of them found it impossible to train specialists for high-technology industries which led to enormous number of training programs which required minimal technological level of the learning process. Among the great number of competing universities the issue of their positioning became extremely important.

Pedagogical marketing includes comprehensive studying of the society's order for education, of possible degree of demand for various knowledge, for the required level of training of students, forms of training and education and the possibility to improve them. The main principle of the marketing of educational services is in its philosophy and focuses not on requests and needs of producer of goods and services but on requests and needs of consumer (Yegorshina, 2001). Yet this would not be implemented if the fulfillment of this basic principle were not being the focus of other marketing principles (Pankrukhin, 1995).

Materials and Methods

Research methods

The following methods were used during the research: theoretical (analysis, synthesis, specification, generalization, method of analogies and modeling); empirical (studying the experience of educational institutions, the standards and methodology documents); methods of mathematical statistics and graphic display of results.

Experimental base of the research

The experiment base of the research was the Russian State Vocational Pedagogical University.

Research stages

The problem was studied in three stages:

At stage 1 we performed theoretical analysis of the existing methodological approaches in economic, psychological and pedagogical scientific literature, dissertations related to the problem and theory and methodics of pedagogical research; we highlighted the problem, purpose and methods of the research and drew up a plan of the experimental research;

At stage 2 we developed a set of marketing actions to effectively position a higher educational organization at the educational services market, singled out and justified the set of pedagogical conditions for effective positioning of a higher educational organization, carried out experimental work, analyzed, checked and specified the conclusions obtained as a result of the research;

At stage 3 we completed the experimental work on implementing and testing the set of marketing actions to effectively position a higher educational organization at the educational services market, specified theoretical and practical conclusions and generalized and systematized the obtained results.

Results

Structure and content of the set of marketing actions to effectively position a higher educational organization at the educational services market

While carrying out the experimental work we developed and tested approaches to determining segments of the educational services market available for development. Based on the analyzed approaches to determining the educational services market segments and competitive advantages of the Russian State Vocational Pedagogical University we developed a set of marketing actions to effectively position a higher educational organization at the educational services market and possible management decisions regarding this process that are related to the strategy of the university's development. The set of actions includes transfer from the classical education process that focuses on the number of classroom hours and retranslating of learning materials by lecturers with minor inclusions of educational cultural events to the process of creating an education environment focusing on forming practical skills of students through their involvement in activity of student organizations of different types. This shift of focus is accompanied by active implementation in students' minds the commitment to the adopted logo. The set of marketing actions on creating and promoting the Russian State Vocational Pedagogical University as a new brand is characterized by distributing official brand merchandise, active participation of students in regional and federal educational events and shifting the positive experience of developing a students' self-governance system to school self-governance.

Stages of implementing the system of positioning the university at the educational services market

Implementation of this system included the following stages of the experimental work:

- to define the initial level of the awareness of the Russian State Vocational Pedagogical University brand within the regional educational services market using the methods of testing, questionnaire, pedagogical observation and self-observation of teachers, as well as statistical processing of the research results;
- development and implementation of scientific and methodological support contributing to successful functioning of the system of positioning an educational organization at the educational services market;
- to define the level and reveal the dynamics of increasing the university's rating at the educational services market.

Recording stage

The research covered the total of 1,000 people at the age of 17-18 years enrolling in a higher educational institution on the base of which the research was carried out. When submitting an enrollment application the candidates were asked to answer about the source of information from which they had learnt about the university. We also took into account the number of educational institutions to which candidates had also applied for enrollment, as well as the fact of submitting the original copy of the document on the previous level of education. The analysis of the questionnaire's results allowed us to conclude that in 2013 about 45% of the prospective students deliberately applied to enroll in the Russian State Vocational Pedagogical University and in 2016 this number increased to 74% (Figure 1).

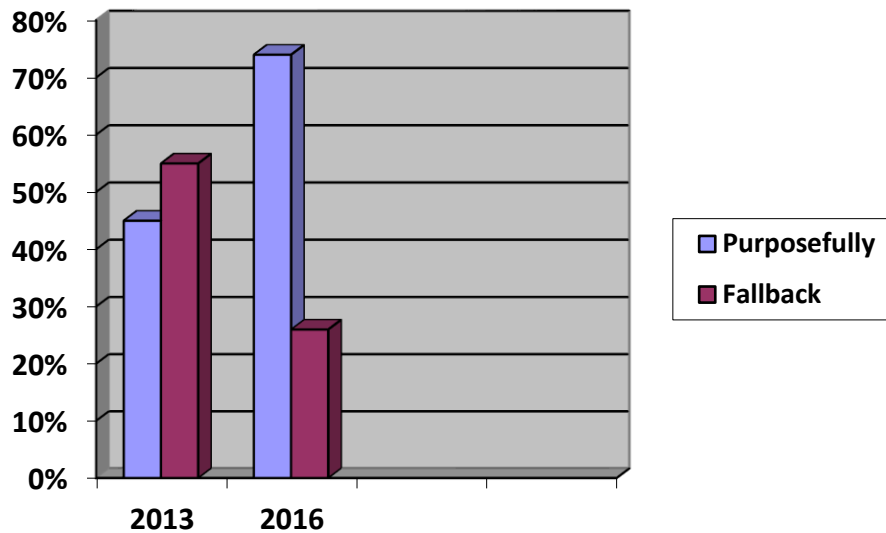


Figure 1. Correlation of the deliberate choice by prospective students of the university

Low indicators of the deliberate choice of the educational institutions at the early stage of the research are the result of poor informing of potential consumers of educational services regarding the services rendered by the educational institution, as well as to poor awareness of the Russian State Vocational Pedagogical University as a brand in the education services market. The most commonly encountered source of information about the university was opinion of relatives and friends who remembered the initial name of the university. The Internet was a less significant source of information.

When studying the processes related to formation of the internal corporate style and corporate identity of all the university members, as well as the forms and methods of advertising and promoting the university, we identified the drawbacks of the concerted effort of services responsible for advertising and promoting the Russian State Vocational Pedagogical University as a brand. We also identified the rejection by university staff of the market relations doctrine in education and of the necessity to create and support the positive image of an educational institution even at the level of “minor” things. Within the university there was no understanding of active promotion, first of all, of the graphic image of the university in order to create a visual associative flow in people’s conscience.

Formation stage

According to the classical theory of marketing there are four main “coordinates” of marketing planning: product (service), price, promotion and location (promotion channels) (Levitt, 1959). As the first two elements are economical, the promotion and location of the university were of great interest. Implementing the set of actions of pedagogical marketing determined the structuring and systematizing of activity of the structures which had previously been disconnected, as well as creating a new department responsible for extra-curricular activities. We studied and analyzed the experience of organizing

admission of prospective students, pedagogical and methodological support of students and employment of graduates. As a result we compiled a technological action plan aimed at improving the market awareness and attractiveness of the university for prospective students and strengthening its position at the educational services market.

The first step was to increase the extent of students' participation in regional and federal education events. Within 2013-2014 students of the Russian State Vocational Pedagogical University twice participated in the events of the All-Russia School of personal growth and development of students' self-governance in Penza, Russia, organized by a team of experienced professional coaches and social technologists. The first experience of students' participation in such event provided them with a possibility to compare their knowledge and competencies with similar knowledge and competencies of students from other regions of Russia. Besides, students obtained new knowledge, tested new approaches to organizing students' self-governance received from the well-known experts in this field. This also gave the students the opportunity to establish a wide network of acquaintance with their peers from various regions of the country. As a result of participating in such education event, a students' core group was created in the university aimed at forming motivated team of students who are able to solve various tasks and implement prospective projects. 250 1st-3rd year students took part in the events of the All-Russia School of personal growth and development of students' self-governance. The students' core group was organized by 15 senior students who were the most motivated. Thus, the system of professional education in the university developed qualitatively and quantitatively.

In parallel we implemented the second stage aimed at improving the market awareness of the university as a brand. A special department developed and presented to staff a new concept of the university's logo and merchandise. From the design point of view, the logo becomes more modern and meets the necessary requirements on understanding, the associative flow is expanded (Figure 2).



Figure 2. The new logo of the university

The new logo started to be used at all advertising and information materials. The approaches to creating advertising materials were completely changed, first of all, as regards the materials used during the admission campaign and events to attract prospective students.



The geographical expansion of the student core group's participation in education events, as well as creation of own area for forming the students' active position allowed us to increase the number of newsworthy events mentioning the Russian State Vocational Pedagogical University. Due to this it became possible to carry out the third stage of implementing the model of positioning the university at the educational services market – promotion on the Internet. This stage included usage of web search query optimization tools in order to increase the occurrence of links to the website in case of typing several key words. As a result of these actions, the number of unique visitors of the university's website per 24 hours increased. Using the new colour palette and the new logo together with optimizing the website architecture allowed to make it more compact and informative. According to the visiting statistics, within the period from September 2013 to May 2016 the average number of unique visitors per day increased more than three times, from 326 to 1,080 people. About 60% of visitors used direct links and the rest came to the website by cross links from other resources.

Development of students' self-governance bodies during the recording period also produced substantial results. In September 2013 there were two official students' organizations in the university – the union of students and post-graduates and students' pedagogical groups, and by May 2016 the number of official students' organizations increased to 13. These include restored students' councils of education departments, volunteer organizations, a students' sports club and other organized students' groups (Dorozhkin, Zaitseva & Tatarskikh, 2016).

Thus, only three years later the university was able to offer to the various groups of prospective students the opportunity for self-development and self-actualization. As a means of distributing the information about the wide circle of these opportunities, according to our system, two main channels were used. The first channel was traditional live communication of senior students with prospective students in various schools at thematic events, excursions etc. The second is a more modern way related to using the social networks. It is characterized by the increase of the number of communities in one of the most popular social networks in Russia that translate the official information about the university from 1 in 2013 up to 6 in June 2016. Besides, each of these communities has its own target audience based on the specifics which allows to cover more niches in the information field.

Control stage

At this stage of the experiment, in order to determine the degree of deliberateness in choosing a higher education institution by 2016 prospective students, diagnostic assessment was carried out according to the same methods as during the recording stage. The check-in data showed changes as compared to the initial data by all criteria.

The prospective students' opinion was studied on a yearly basis during the admission campaign before and during the experiment. The dynamics of results' change according to the control parameters was rectilinear which proves the correctness of the experiment, and its analysis gives us the reason to believe that the implementation of the developed system provides the possibility to

substantially increase the effectiveness of positioning the Russian State Vocational Pedagogical University at the education services market.

Discussions

The theoretical issues related to methods of pedagogical and socio-pedagogical activity are covered in the works by E.M. Dorozhkin & E.F. Zeer (2014), E.M. Dorozhkin, E.V. Zaitseva & B.Y. Tatarskikh (2016), A.G. Kislov (2014), O.K. Philatov (2002), I.P. Podlasy (2000), G.M. Romantsev (1997), V.A. Slastenin (2002), V.A. Fedorov (1999, 2001), V.I. Zagvyazinsky (2015) and many other scientists. The issues of using the foundations and principles of marketing in pedagogy and education are described in the works by K.A. Saginov (2003), S.I. Plaksiy (2006), G.A. Astratova (2007, 2008), A.Yu. Pleshakova & V.A. Chupina (2013), N.K. Shemetova (2012, 2015), N.A. Spirina (2015), M.A. Dremina, G.A. Gorbunova & V.A. Kopnov (2015).

Marketing as the philosophy of participants of market relations is not a philosophy of notions or schools of thought. It is not a system of knowledge as such, nor a tool to create shared vision of market participants. This is an element of forming their minds corresponding to the life style in the market.

For producers of goods and services including in education the degree of propensity to marketing as the market philosophy is implemented in the degree, steps of transfer from production and sales orientation of an institution to a marketing orientation.

The main differences between these types of orientation for educational institutions are the following (Yegorshina, 2001).

In case of a “production” orientation:

1. Only those services are rendered which are traditional for an educational institution or which are assigned to it by the authorities of the education system or due to regional requests.

2. The assortment of the regional educational services market is quite narrow, traditional and slow in updating. The educational processes themselves and technologies of producing educational services in regions are not flexible and are difficult to readjust.

3. Prices for rendered services are formed on the basis of the standard costs approved by superior authorities, as well as the approved plan of admission and actual limits of financing. Profit-making is not a priority for institutions of further education, they focus only on reimbursement of the cost of services production.

4. Advertising and other means of communicating with consumers and possible intermediaries when promoting services in the regional education market are under-developed.

5. As a rule, educational institutions are managed by specialists in a certain area who have no potential and experience of work at the regional education and job market.

6. Scientific and pedagogical research is poorly related to needs and specific features of certain groups of potential consumers of educational services.

The market orientation of an educational institution has quite opposite features and solutions regarding the listed aspects of its activity:



1. Only (mainly) those educational services are rendered (produced) which are and will be (taking into account the time costs for service rendering) in demand in the regional market. According to this, the potential and the whole work system of an educational institution are adjusted.

2. The assortment of the regional educational services market is quite wide and is constantly updated according to the requirements of the society and the scientific and technical progress. Processes and technologies of service rendering are flexible and easy to adjust, accordingly.

3. Prices for education services are formed under substantial influence of the regional market, competitors and the effective demand. The core component of the price policy of the educational institution is not the selling price of an education service as it is but together with the forecast effect and required additional costs of consumers on using a service including the processes of mastering.

4. Regional communication is active and is aimed at specific target groups of education service consumers, as well as at possible intermediaries. Promotion and sales of education services are decentralized.

5. In the management of an educational institution the strategic decisions are prepared and taken by people who are competent in business conditions of the educational service market and the issues of regional economy.

6. Scientific and pedagogical research is carried out both in the scientific area of the institution and in the sphere of examining and forecasting the conditions of the educational service market including in the respective area.

7. Within the organizational structure of an institution there is a department (group) for marketing which is responsible for commercial success and the image of the institution and authorized to control and effectively ensure implementation of its recommendations by functional and other departments of the institution.

The fundamental principle of the educational service marketing is in its philosophy and focuses not on requests and needs of producer of goods and services but on requests and needs of consumer. Yet this would not be implemented if the fulfillment of this basic principle were not be the focus of other marketing principles.

The process of forming an image of a higher educational institution includes the following stages: identification of a higher educational institution as a real object; positioning of higher educational institution, visualization of the image, symbolic presentation of a higher educational institution. These stages are implemented through target-oriented actions aimed at creating from a real object - higher educational institution its symbolic image (Makarets, 2009).

Conclusion

We have stated that the process of positioning a higher educational institution at the educational services market requires simultaneous inclusion in the activity of various activity areas and makes extremely relevant even the minor events of the university's life. The modern approach to selecting an educational institution for further education by prospective students, along with evaluating the educational potential of the institution in general and evaluating a specific educational plan in particular, is also based on the informational

activity of an organization in those sources of information distribution that are available to a prospective student and accepted as having sufficient authority.

The materials of the article can be useful for education specialists oriented towards marketing of educational services, for teachers who deliver a course of lectures in disciplines related to pedagogical marketing or marketing of educational services.

During the research new issues and problems have emerged that need solving. It is necessary to continue research on developing the organization models of the vocational system and organization of students' self-governance based on the principles and active implementation and promotion of the brand of the Russian State Vocational Pedagogical University.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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