Applying Marketing in the Public School Setting

Deidre M. Pettinga, Ph.D., Assistant Professor
School of Business
University of Indianapolis
Indianapolis, Indiana

Azure DS Angelov, Ph.D., Associate Professor
School of Education
University of Indianapolis
Indianapolis, Indiana

David F. Bateman, Ph.D., Professor
Department of Educational Leadership & Special Education
Shippensburg State University
Shippensburg, Pennsylvania

ABSTRACT

Traditional public schools no longer have a guaranteed market share of students, or tax dollars, based on geographic location. Families with little to no options in the past about where their child would attend school, now have many. In response to the expanding options available to them— in the form of charter schools and vouchers—families today are no longer simply sending their students to the school assigned to them based on geographic location. Today’s public school employees need to understand why, when, where, and how to market their schools to continue to serve their communities in this changing educational climate. If public schools are going to thrive in today’s society, they must respond to a new operating environment. Due to the changing competitive landscape in education, it becomes vital to understand how families select schools for their children. To date, there have been a number of published books and articles calling for greater need for schools to market. However, we argue that the emphasis of the literature has not provided administrators with a solid foundation of marketing theory. Instead, too great a focus is placed on communication tips and techniques, which gives educators a mistaken understanding of the marketing process. This paper will address the principles of marketing and how they can be applied in a public school setting. It focuses on the elements of the marketing mix, in a context unique to the competitive climate in which today’s educators are operating.

INTRODUCTION

Public schools do many good things and play a vital role in our society. Unfortunately people don’t seem to know this part of the story. Public schools tend to have wider courses of study, more qualified teachers, guidance services, transportation, more extracurricular activities, social services, special education services and—due to their larger sizes—they often offer the students a richer experience which helps prepare them for life. In spite of this, administrators and teachers have tremendous difficulty making the local community more aware of the good things that are happening in their public schools—all the while recognizing that it is the positive facets of the public school system that help distinguish it in the face of growing competition. However, merely telling a good story isn’t enough. Public school employees are not helpless victims of today’s education policies; they are in fact, the valiant defenders of public education’s future. While it has not been a skill set traditionally or explicitly taught, public school administrators and teachers must become masters of their own destiny. Today’s public school employees need to understand why, when, where and how to market their schools to continue to serve our communities in this changing educational climate.

One of the biggest shifts in thinking that must take place is for public school employees to begin to see that in today’s society education is a product. Like it or not, they are now competing with others. This ideological shift is a difficult one to make and can initially leave passionate educators feeling defeated. If public schools are going to thrive in today’s society, it is necessary to recognize and respond to the current field of education.

One of the most important factors in marketing a school—or any product, for that matter, is understanding the customer. Due to the changing competitive landscape in education, it becomes vital to understand how families
Applying Marketing in the Public School Setting

Select schools for their children. No longer does the process simply entail enrolling the child in the closest school and hope all goes well. Families today are shopping for schools in a manner similar to the way they research a new appliance or automobile prior to purchase. Unfortunately, many public schools are unprepared to assist families in this decision-making process. Public schools have a tremendous opportunity to embrace marketing; however, it will require them to become aware of the changing dynamics of education, understand the reasons for telling others about what they do, and then work, using new media and old, to develop a comprehensive and coherent strategy for successfully marketing their program.

This paper will address the principles of marketing and how they can be applied in a public school setting. It addresses the elements of the marketing mix, in a context unusual to a competitive climate in which today’s educators are operating.

Understanding Educational Consumers

Previously, school shopping meant buying school supplies and uniforms, but in today’s world, school shoppers are taking a more consumer-like approach to the school selection process. School shoppers are becoming more savvy and growing in numbers. In 2004, the Washington DC Opportunity Scholarship Program gave choice scholarships to over 1,700 public school students whose families were navigating poverty, as a way for them to pursue a non-public education for their children (Wolf, 2010). The program has grown considerably and now serves more than 8,400 students. A study by Michigan Future Inc., (2012) found more than 71% of Detroit Public School families were shopping for or utilizing school alternatives for their children. Additionally, the Indiana Department of Education has more than two million students being homeschooled and growing in numbers. In 2004, the Washington DC Opportunity Scholarship Program gave choice scholarships to over 1,700 public school students whose families were navigating poverty, as a way for them to pursue a non-public education for their children (Wolf, 2010). The program has grown considerably and now serves more than 8,400 students. A study by Michigan Future Inc., (2012) found more than 71% of Detroit Public School families were shopping for or utilizing school alternatives for their children. Additionally, the Indiana Department of Education has

more than two million students being homeschooled and growing in numbers. In 2004, the Washington DC Opportunity Scholarship Program gave choice scholarships to over 1,700 public school students whose families were navigating poverty, as a way for them to pursue a non-public education for their children (Wolf, 2010). The program has grown considerably and now serves more than 8,400 students.

The changing landscape has forced administrators and educators to recognize it is not the only profession that has needed to embrace marketing as a means to grow. As the marketplace has changed, so must the behaviors of educators and administrators. As Borden explains, the competitive and environmental circumstances facing an organization are ever changing. Management can respond in a number of ways, including developing new products, expanding distribution outlets, changing pricing procedures, or utilizing aggressive promotions. While these may be day-to-day responses, the overall strategy represents the organization’s Marketing Mix.

Strategic planning for products or services encompasses three areas: planning for new products, managing programs for unsuccessful products (Cravens, 1994). Organizations must put in place systems for gauging a product’s performance. Performance can be measured in both a financial and non-financial manner. Financial metrics include revenues, costs and profit. Non-financial assessments include such things as customer awareness and satisfaction measurements. From a marketing perspective, financial metrics can make sense for schools including enrollment and costs. From a non-financial standpoint, there are many measures a school could use to its competitive advantage—parental satisfaction survey results, school performance rankings, enrollment and scholarship statistics, to name only a few.

Strategic planning decisions for product distribution must be consistent with the product and its positioning. A good distribution network can actually create a competitive advantage for a product. Organizations must be able to deliver the product in a manner that meets customers’ needs. Traditional businesses have a number of logistical issues to consider: maintaining inventory, and order processing. In addition, businesses must consider whether their distribution network will incorporate traditional brick-and-mortar locations, utilize a virtual e-commerce platform—or a combination of both. For schools, these same options are now available.

Where pricing is concerned, product managers must plan an effective strategy for the brand. In general, a product’s price quantifies the value of the exchange. Where complex purchases are concerned, price is considered synonymous with perceived value.
Applying Marketing in the Public School Setting

Deidre M. Pettinga, Azure DS Angelov, & David F. Bateman

Applying Marketing in the Public School Setting

Many schools are eager to add this platform to their social media to their benefit. The opportunity to become part of the conversation and utilize so...


