UNDERSTANDING THE RELEVANCE OF MARKETING FOR MALAYSIAN SCHOOLS

Suriani Abdul Hamid & Khalip Musa

Fakulti Pengurusan dan Ekonomi, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris,
Tanjong Malim, Perak
suriani@fpe.upsi.edu.my

Abstract

Education is a basic need that every individual must own to survive in today's society. However, the specific type of education a person requires may be different. Hence, school must meet the needs and wants of parents and students, and in a wider scope the government, industry and society. It should be stressed that marketing is not simply about selling, promotion or advertising. Marketing is a holistic management process which includes mission, strategies and operations in which the whole ethos and purpose of the organization is focused on the needs and wants of its clients, partners, customers and stakeholders. The concept of marketing for school has been introduced throughout the 1980s and 1990s. However, it is not been extensively introduced and studied in Malaysia context. Thus, it is the aim of this paper to give some thought and understanding about the concept of marketing for school. The paper discusses about the interpretations and perceptions about marketing in school, and introduces the concept of marketing mix/tactics and market orientation. It is hoped school leaders in Malaysia understand the concept of marketing and how it operates, therefore could incorporate it as part of school culture.

Keywords   *education marketing, marketing for school, secondary school, Malaysia*

INTRODUCTION

Organizations are established for the achievement of a set of goals and objectives. School is an organization in the society established to achieve a widerange of objectives set for them by their many stakeholders, notably the government which provides the funding.

Thus, effective leadership is essential if schools are to achieve this (Bush, 2011). The success of a school deeply depends on the quality of its management and leadership. Bush (2010) reviewed school leadership in both developed and developing countries, and argues that in many parts of the world there is increasing recognition that school requires effective leaders and managers if they are to provide the best possible education for their students. Other educational leadership research also showed that leadership behaviors, practices, and responsibilities of high school principals can directly impact and/or indirectly influence student achievement (Cotton, 2003; Leithwood, Seashore, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, K 2004).

A crucial management function that should not be ignored by school leaders to survive in today's competitive environment is marketing. However, the literature on leadership has not paid sufficient attention to the market or marketing and explored their implications for school especially in Malaysia. Foskett (2002) pointed out that marketing is considered as a holistic management process. It is another managerial philosophy derived from the ideal relationship between school and the community (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2007). Kotler and Fox (1995) defined education marketing as the analysis, planning, implementation, and control of carefully formulated program to bring about voluntary exchanges value within a target market to achieve organizational objectives. The concept of marketing for school is not new. Education marketing has been introduced into compulsory education in many Western countries throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Oplatka, Hemsle-Brown & Foskett, 2002).

There is a wide range of interpretations of marketing among principals in high schools, where the terminology is new to most and alien to many (Foskett, 1998). They were confused with selling and marketing with an emphasis on advertising, promotional activities, public relations, glossy messages, poaching and persuasion (Foskett, 1998; James and Philips, 1995; Oplatka et al., 2002). Foskett (2002) stressed that marketing is not simply about selling. It has goals other than recruiting students. For example, in oversubscribed schools, little effort is directed to recruitment but more effort needs to be directed to the management of the quality of education provision and responsiveness to partners, stakeholders and community (Foskett, 2002). He further suggests that marketing is about meeting the organisational needs for survival and success.

There are positive and negative perceptions about marketing. Some school principals in James and Philips's (1995) study see marketing as crisis management to ensure the survival of the school as opposed to ensuring school meet the needs of their clients. Two studies conducted in England by Grace (1995) and Oplatka et al., (2002) found principals and teachers argued that education could not be marketed like business services or products. In Oplatka et al. (2002) study, they investigate - teachers' perception and attitudes towards competition, marketing and education, their awareness of the marketing activities of their schools, the teachers' role in marketing the school and the perceived impact of the market upon teachers' well being. They found two voices of the teachers. The first voice shows a moderate level of competition among schools and the need to market their school although they are uncomfortable with the concept of marketing which they regard as conflicting with educational values. However, this group of teachers recognises that their roles of marketing activities are emerging through their obligation to promote effective teaching.

The other voice argues that there is no competition among schools and argues that teachers job is to teach, and marketing schools is perceived as conflicting with educational values and ideologies. Similarly another study by Birch (1998) found English principals claimed that a school is not another business to market, but a place of teaching and learning processes. Principals in Oplatka's (2007) study had a different perception. They realised the significance of marketing as a managerial function for the survival and success of their school provided that it delivers only real and honest messages

Most research on school marketing was conducted in the 1990s, an era of school marketization in education system worldwide (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2004). However, the topic has been receiving increasing attention in recent years (Havey & Busher, 1996; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2004; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2007 and Li & Hung, 2009;). The existing literature among others discussed parents' satisfaction (Friedman, Bobrowski & Geraci, 2006), consumer choice (Harvey & Busher, 1996), market orientation in school culture (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2007), choice process and factors (Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2001), the impact of parental choice (Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995), how school present themselves in marketplace (Hesketh & Knight, 1998), the mediating effect of school image on marketing tactics and parents' loyalty (Li & Hung, 2007).

However, in the Malaysian context, very limited literature was found. The existing studies on school choice were mainly conducted by postgraduate students for their master thesis. Among the studies include school choice at an international school in Malaysia, where survey questionnaire and interview were conducted with parents (Marcea, 2006), parental choice of a private Islamic secondary school using a survey questionnaire to parents (Kiong, 1998) and parental choice and satisfaction in a private school in Karambunai Electoral Zone, Sabah by using a survey questionnaire with parents (Hui, 2008). Publised articles on school choice includes parents' choice on pre-school education (Dahari & Ya, 2006) and Malay parents choice in Chinese primary school (Sua, Ngah & Md Darit, 2013).

MARKETING MIX

Marketing strategies are effective in building school image and thus increase parents' loyalty (Li & Hung, 2007). Thus, marketing of services such as school should utilises and blends a set of tools called the marketing mix i.e. product, place, price, promotions, processes and people (Evans, 1995; Gray, 1991; Harvey& Busher, 1996, James & Philips, 1995). There were some inconsistencies on the seventh tool. James and Philips (1995) suggested proof while other authors such as Harvey and Busher (1996) and Foskett (1998) suggested physical evidence.

Product

A product is any physical good or services that is capable to satisfy the needs and wants of the customers. The most significant part of a school product is the service of educating students. This includes the curriculum itself, its range of options, its delivery and the extra-

curriculum activities (Walters 1993 as cited in Evans, 1995). School principals in James and Philip's (1995) study viewed product as including the caring environment they nurture, ethos and academic standards. The benefit of the school's product should be consistent with needs of the students, parents and other stakeholders.

Place

Place refers to how the product is distributed (Evans, 1995). This includes not only the physical environment of the school, its classrooms, facilities, building and ground but also the timetable and class size (Evans, 1995). Some schools in Malaysia, such as the high performing schools have practiced flexible timetable. The look of the facilities ought to be considered. School managements in England improved the facilities and made the reception area more welcoming (Bell, 1999; James & Philips, 1995). A school in Bagley (2006) study had undergone an extensive process of refurbishment to improve the interior appearance of the school. The look of the building and classrooms has impact on the student learning experience and the learning atmosphere. In addition, the facilities and environment in the school must create a feeling of security. Class size is another important element that needs to be considered since the quality of education is very much dependent on the size of the class. If the class is too large, students are unable to get teachers attention but if the class is too small, pupils will lack in social interaction.

Price

School fee is not the only price element that should be considered, as education is free for government school. There are other hidden costs that must be considered. As cited in Harvey and Busher (1996), Sttot and Parr (1991) perceived that in education context, price can be seen in terms of effort that required to gain or access to school such as how far a customer has to travel to study in a good school or the entry qualification that students should met.

Promotion

Promotion refers to any activities which communicate the benefits of the services to potential customers (James & Philips, 1995). These includes advertising, sales promotions, personal selling, publicity and public relations. Based on the review of literature, some of the secondary schools had become proactive in their promotional and marketing activities in the form of open days, day visits, improvement of physical appearance, prospectus formulation, brochures, service development, and public relations (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2004; Oplatka, 2007). Event like open evenings give schools the opportunity to market themselves as some parents chose a certain school based on the teachers' replies to their questions during the event (Oplatka, 2004). Targeting key primary schools for promotional visits (Bagley, 2006) and designated primary school liaison officers

(Herbert, 2000) were also successful strategies. Woods et al. (1996) provided examples of cooperation between secondary and elementary schools in which the former give the latter an opportunity to use their facilities as an integral part of attracting prospective pupils. Herbert (2000) identified the key priority of gaining and retaining the allegiance and support of elementary school principals in Wales. Word of mouth has also found to be effective in Herbert's (2010) study. However, English principals were quoted to feel negative emotions toward advertising which was considered to be incompatible with ethical and professional codes (James & Philips, 1995).

People

People refer to all human factors that play a part in service delivery and thus influence customer's perception (Harvey & Busher, 1996). This includes teachers' ability, skill, knowledge, experience and care for students. To achieve this, internal marketing is important (James & Philips, 1995). Internal marketing means the principal should market their school to the staff first who in turn market it in partnership to the marketplace (James & Philips, 1995). The problem arises when the staffs do not carry the same messages to parents and other customers outside the school, and did not push any good news in the school to parties outside the school (James & Philips, 1995). The importance of internal marketing has also been highlighted by Hartley (1999). The implementation of internal marketing at one school in New Zealand has contributed to great success to the school (Stachowski, 2008).

Process

Process refers to the procedures, mechanism and flow of activities by which the service is delivered. Process management is important as it assures service availability and consistent quality. As mentioned earlier, the education system as a whole has the same curriculum, but the teachers serving the pupils are different. Therefore, without sound process management, the quality of the teaching and learning can be questioned (Evans, 1995; Harvey & Busher, 1996 and Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler, 2013).

Proof

Proof is the actual evidence to confirm that customers have received service appropriate to their needs (James & Philips, 1995), for example the qualifications obtained by the pupils. This element also involved the physical evidence that supports the service delivery in schools and any physical items that may go with the service. Failing to understand this element of marketing mix will result schools to view marketing from narrow perspective. This is evident in James and Philips (1995) study where schools were unable to articulate aspects of their practice that revealed evidence of the services they provided, because they view marketing solely as promotion or public relations.

Physical evidence

Physical evidence/facilities refers to the environment in which the service is delivered and where the organization and customer interact, as well as any tangible components that facilitate performance of the service (Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler, 2013). Though customers cannot see the service, they can see various tangible clues such as the facilities, equipment, signage, communication material, objects, employees, other customers, price etc. (Shanker, 2002). In school context, physical evidence involves quality and ambience of the classrooms and uses of open resource-based learning (Bowles, Furse & Tomlinson, 1989), sports facilities and the common room (Foskett, 1998).

Understanding the marketing mix or tactics concept discussed above may help school principals and their management team in Malaysian schools to understand how marketing operates. Schools are encouraged to incorporate these as part of the school culture. By doing so it may help school to maintain or upgrade its image.

MARKET ORIENTATION

It should be highlighted that schools need to do more than just conducting marketing activities as discussed above. The literatures suggest that schools need to be market oriented (Drysdale, 1999 and Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown, 2007). Evidence from commercial and service sector organizations found positive impact of market orientation on organizations (Cervera et al., 2001 and Guo, 2002 as cited in Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown, 2007). Market orientation is the implementation of the marketing concept which puts the customer's needs at the centre of the organization (Drysdale, 1999). Drysdale (1996) further suggests that an organization can be market oriented only if it completely understands its market. It was evident in Bagley (2006) study that a school that conduct environmental scanning and understand the needs of parents and students (market) managed to increase its position from undersubscribed school to first choice school. Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown (2007) propose the following three related components of market orientation that may help school administrators, managers and teachers to understand the school and its environment:

a. Customer orientation. School members are presumed to understand the school's target market completely, and be capable of creating and providing outstanding value. A teacher who employs this approach would collect information about their student's environment and suit their teaching methods to accommodate students' particular needs, be attentive and responsive to parents' interests and points of view. Through this approach, it would then be possible to be more innovative and implement improvements for future students based on their anticipated needs.

b. Competitor orientation. School principals and teachers should fully understand the strengths and weaknesses, as well as the capabilities and potential, of competing schools. Awareness of the importance of competitor activity and monitoring the developments in competing schools can have a positive impact on decision-making, particularly through the development of new initiatives such as additional services for parents and students.

c. Inter-functional coordination. All members of the school should share and understand that creating superior value for target customers is very significant for school success in a competitive marketplace. This can only be achieved, through the integration and coordination of the school's resources. Attracting and sustaining student/customers should not exclusively the responsibility of school management, but is the responsibility of everyone in the school community. School staff should have full access to information such as the market environment, the community and so forth in order to achieve this.

Similarly, Drysdale (1999) had earlier proposed almost the same characteristics with two additional components, i.e. long term focus and market intelligence system as follows:

a. Customer focus. The key behaviors of customer focus include; researching customer needs, committing to students, providing services of value, concentrating on needs, focusing on student (customer) satisfaction, measuring and reporting satisfaction and augmenting existing services.

b. Competitor orientation. Benchmarking the school against other quantity programmes and facilities offered by other school as well as evaluate their offering would be advantageous to school. Key behaviours of competitor orientation includes open discussion of competitors, evaluating competitor behavior, assessing competitor strategies and examining opportunities for improvement.

c. Inter-functional Coordination. Key behaviours of this component include departments and teams working together to meet student needs, department and teams sharing market information, teams and departments integrating strategies, all sections working together to offer value to students and teams willing to share resources.

d. Long term focus. Long term is regarded as beyond a three-year cycle. Behaviours associated to long term focus include adopting long term focus in matters of growth and survival, attempting to service all customers (students, parents, agencies, suppliers, etc.) in the long run, aiming for effective organizational performance in marketplace, identifying and implementing new value added services and overcoming deficiencies in school services.

e. Market Intelligence System. Key behaviours of market intelligence system include systematic methods of organizing and retrieving of current information, an intelligence network who collect and share information with everyone in the organization, a systematic research approach to gather new market information through qualitative and quantitative methods and a process for analysing information for decision making purpose.

Studies showed that market orientation improve performance (Drysdale, 1999) and has positive impact on organization (Cervera et al., 2001 and Guo, 2002 as cited in Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown, 2007). Such outcome is possible as organizations that adopt market orientation put customers first, take into consideration the influence of competitors, establish inter-functional coordination, focus on long term and encourage the generation of intelligence. Thus, organization may gain competitive edge in competitive environment.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper gives some thoughts about the importance of understanding marketing as part of school management. It is not a selling activity nor only about recruiting students, it is a holistic management process. Marketing helps organisations such as school to serve their clients, namely the students, parents, community members etc. more effectively. This paper has discussed about marketing in school context giving emphasis on marketing orientation and marketing tactics/mix that schools in Malaysia could implement. Understanding these concepts and gaining the appropriate skills is essential in today's competitive environment.

REFERENCES

Bagley, B (2006). School choice and competition: A public-market in education revisited. *Oxford Review of Education*, 32(3), 347–362.

Bell, L. (1999). Primary schools and the nature of the education market place. In Bush, T.

Bell,L., Bolam, R., Glatter, R., & Ribbins, P. (eds.). *Educational management: Redefining theory, policy, practice* (pp. 59-75). London: Paul Chapman.

Bowles, G, Furse, J., & Tomlinson, H. (1989). Marketing and promotions: Aspects of marketing in schools. In Fidler, B., & Bowles, G, (eds). *Effective local management of schools* (pp. 36-57). Harlow: Longman.

Bush, T. (2011). *Theories of educational leadership and mangement*. Fourth Edition. London: SAGE Publication.

Bush, T., Bell, L., & Middlewood, D. (2010). *The principles of educational leadership and management*. London: SAGE Publication.

Cotton, K. (2003). Principals and student achievement: What the research says, *association for supervision and curriculum development*, Alexandria.

Dahari, Z., & Ya, M.S. (2011). Factors that influence parents' choice of pre-schools education in Malaysia: An exploratory study. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 2(15),115-128.

Drysdale, L. (1999). Marketing vs market orientation, What's the difference, Prime Focus *The Professional Journal for Australian Primary School Leaders*, April, 28-29.

Drysdale, L. (2000). Market centered leadership. *The Australian Council of Educational Administration International Conference*, Hobart, September 2000.

Evans, I. (1995). *Marketing for schools*. London: Cassell.

Foskett, N. (1998). Schools and marketization. *Educational Management and Administration*, 26 (2), 197-210.

Foskett, N. (2002). Marketing. In Bush, T. and Bell, L. (Eds) (pp. 241-257), *The Principles and Practice of Educational Management*. Paul Chapman, London.

Foskett, N., & Hemsley-Brown, J. (2001). Choosing futures: Young people's decision making in education, *training and career markets*. London: Routledge-Falmer.

Friedman, B.A., Bobrowski, P.E. & Geraci, J. (2006). Parents' school satisfaction: ethnic similarities and differences. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 44(5), 471-486.

Gewirtz, S, Ball, S.J., & Bowe, R. (1995). *Markets, choice and equity in education*. Open University Press, London.

Gray, L. (1991). *Marketing education*. Open University Press, Milton Keynes.

James, C., & Phillips, P. (1995). The practice of educational marketing in schools, *Educational Management and Administration*, 23(2), 75-88.

Harvey, J.A., & Busher, H. (1996). Marketing schools and consumer choice. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 10 (4), 26-32.

Hartley, D. (1999). Marketing and the 're-enchantment' of school management. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 20(3), 309-323, DOI: 10.1080/01425699995281.

Herbert, D. (2000). School choice in the local environment: Headteachers as gatekeepers on an uneven playing field. *School Leadership & Management: Formerly School Organisation*, 20 (1), 79-97, DOI: 10.1080/13632430068897.

Hesketh, A.J, & Knight, P.T. (1998). Secondary school prospectuses and educational markets. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 28(1), 21-35.

Hui. (2008). *Parental choice and satisfaction in private school in Karambunai Electoral Zone, Sabah.* Unpublished masters thesis, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia.

Kiong. (1998). *Parental choice of Islamic private secondary school.* Unpublished master thesis, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Kedah, Malaysia.

Kotler, P. & Fox, K.A. (1995). *Strategic marketing for educational institutions.* New York: Prentice-Hall.

Li, C.K., & Hung, C.H. (2007). Marketing tactics and parents' loyalty: The mediating role of school image, *Journal of Educational Administration*, 47(4), 477-489.

Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (2000). The effects of transformational leadership on organizational conditions and student engagement with school. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 38(2), 112 – 129.

Leithwood, K., Seashore Louis, K., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *Executive summary: How leadership influences student learning.* New York, NY: The Wallace Foundation.

Marcea, I. (2006). *Spheres of influence: Understanding international school choice in Malaysia.* Unpublished master thesis, Queens University, Canada.

Oplatka, I., Hemsley-Brown, J., & Foskett, N.H. (2002). The voice of teachers in marketing their school: Personal perspectives in competitive environments. *School Leadership and Management*, 22(2), 177-196.

Oplatka, I., & Hemsley-Brown, J. (2004). The research on school marketing: Current issues and future directions, *Journal of Educational Administration*, 42(3), 375-400.

Oplatka, I., & Hemsley-Brown, J. (2007). The incorporation of market orientation in the school culture: An essential aspect of school marketing, *International Journal of Educational Management*, 21(4), 292-305.

Shanker, R. (2002). *Services marketing: The Indian perspective.* New Delhi: Excell Book.

Stachowski. (2008). Managing internal marketing in a New Zealand language school: Some important lessons for all educational Leaders. *Management in Education*, 22(4), 31–38.

Sua, T.Y, Ngah, K., & Darit, S. (2013). Parental choice of schooling, learning process and inter-ethnic friendship patterns: The case of Malay students in Chinese primary schools in Malaysia. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 33(4), 325-336.

Zeithaml, V.A., Bitner M.J., & Gremler, D.D. (2013). *Services marketing.* 6th Edition, Mc Graw-Hill.