

Positive and Negative Perceptions on School Marketing: A Case Study in three types of School in England

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Abstract

This study examines school leaders' view about school marketing in three different types of school in England. Using case study approach, the schools involved are a faith school, an academy and a local authority school. Through semi structured interview with leaders in these three schools, the study revealed positive and negative perceptions about school marketing among school leaders. Some leaders view marketing narrowly, while some have a more comprehensive view about school marketing. As previous studies, similar trend was found in this study where a coherent marketing plan to understand the market was absent. Overall, the schools are market oriented in some ways but lack a competitor orientation. This study adds to our understanding about school marketing following increased decentralization in English school environment.

Keywords: school marketing, decentralized school system, faith school, academy, local authority school

Introduction

The Education Reform Act 1988 has created competition among English schools. Schools compete for students, and the budget delegated to each school is determined by the number of students. In order to survive in this competitive environment, schools have to maintain or improve their market share. The school system in England currently consists of different types of school, giving parents more choice, and as a consequence, each school has to market itself to attract new students and retain the existing ones. Fosket (2002) suggests that marketing a school is not only about meeting the organisational needs for survival and success but also involves meeting the needs and wants of society for high standards of education. Marketing is considered as a holistic management process (Foskett, 2002) and should be seen as integral to the management role in an organisation (Bowles, 1989). Therefore, marketing is a management function that should not be ignored by school leaders seeking to thrive or to survive, in today's competitive environment (Oplatka's, 2007). The concept of marketing for

schools is not new and was introduced into compulsory education in many Western countries throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Oplatka et al., 2002).

According to Davies and Ellison (1997), the principal who adopts marketing practices is expected to implement a strategic marketing analysis which involved activities such as market research, strategic analysis and planning, and implementation of those plans, which includes implementing the marketing plan and evaluating the marketing process. However, there is a wide range of interpretations of marketing among principals in high schools, and there are also positive and negative perceptions about school marketing. This includes confusion between selling and marketing, and emphasising on advertising, promotional activities, public relations, glossy messages, poaching and persuasion (Foskett, 1998; James and Philips, 1995; Oplatka, 2002), instead of a holistic management process (Foskett, 2002). Marketing was also seen as crisis management to ensure the survival of the school as opposed to meeting the needs of their clients (James & Philips, 1995), and the concept of marketing was regarded as conflicting with educational values (Oplatka et al, 2002). Previous study also found that school is not another business to market, but a place of teaching and learning processes (Birch, 1998). Principals in Oplatka's (2007) study realised that marketing is a managerial function for the survival and success of their school provided that it delivers only real and honest messages.

Since the Education Reform Act, many studies have been conducted to understand school marketing (Foskett, 2002; James & Philips, 1995; Oplatka, 2007). However, fewer studies have focused on different types of schools, following increased decentralization. The current study examines school leaders' views about school marketing in three different types of school in the East Midlands. The three case study schools are a faith school, an academy and a local authority school. The faith school serves Catholic families within the local authority and the adjoining county council. Most students in the faith school are of British heritage, while the rest are predominantly from the Catholic community of Poland. However, there are also children from other faith backgrounds and other Christian denominations, despite its status as a Catholic school. The academy is comprehensive and non-selective, where most of the students in the academy are white British and come from middle class families. The demographics for the local authority school are rather different, with a high proportion of students from a range of minority backgrounds and one third of the pupils are eligible for free school meals. Only the academy is oversubscribed, while the faith school is undersubscribed for year 7 but fully subscribed for the other year groups, and the local authority school is undersubscribed, with about 40 spare places across the school. The academy is a high achieving school, compared to the other two schools which have more modest examination results. The OFSTED inspection rated the faith school as good, the academy as outstanding and the local authority school as good, from inadequate in the previous inspection.

Methodology

The research approach for this study was a multiple case study with three different types of school. For this case study, the issue of school marketing was explored through semi structured interviews. Access to all the schools were negotiated during the summer term of 2014. Fieldwork was conducted from September 2014 to October 2015.

Interviews were conducted with leaders in each school. All the interviews were semi-structured and took approximately one hour. The interviews were transcribed, coded and organised into themes. To address the validity of this study, multiple sources of evidence were used, leading to methodological triangulation (Bush, 2007). For the interview, the draft case

study report was reviewed by the participants; member checking (Bush, 2007; Creswell, 2005). To address reliability in semi structured interviews, due to the deliberate strategy of treating each participant as a potentially unique respondent (Bush, 2007), a case study protocol suggested by Yin (2009) was used.

Findings

The data are structured into five main themes – responsibility and involvement in marketing, understanding the marketplace, the importance of marketing, school marketing concepts, and market orientation.

Theme 1: Responsibility and involvement in marketing

The responsibility for marketing is different in all the school types. In the faith school, the principal and the assistant principal are the main people directly responsible for marketing the school, and they are assisted by the principal's personal assistant. In the academy, the marketing responsibility is centralised under the academy trust. In the local authority school, marketing is a team responsibility which involves a number of people and is overseen by the head teacher. The head teacher stressed that it is a team effort.

“We do not have a PR or marketing person. We have a number of people who are responsible for different aspects. We have somebody on the senior leadership team responsible for press engagement. We have somebody responsible for community events, somebody else with the transition. So, there are persons that have different bits of it. So it is really a team effort” (Head teacher, Local authority school).

In all the three schools, most of the teachers are indirectly involved in marketing, such as in the transition process, prospective parents' evenings and parents' open evenings. The trend is similar in all schools. The indirect involvement of students in marketing the school is also observed in all three schools, during the prospective parents' evening and the year 7 parents' evening. They guide prospective parents to tour the school, share their experience in a slot during the prospective parents' evening or assist parents at the reception during those evenings.

Theme 2: Understanding the market place and the customer

Consistent with previous studies (Bell, 1999; James & Philips, 1995; Oplatka, 2012), a very limited effort was conducted to understand the marketplace and the customer. All the case study schools did not have a marketing plan and did not undertake any market research.

“We don't have a marketing plan, but we do review the strategies and we do try to measure the impact of the strategy against initial cost.” (Principal, Faith school)

A similar stance was provided by the director of operations at the academy and the head teacher at the local authority school.

“What we have is a calendar, more than a plan. Because in a school like this, where results are exceedingly high, defined catchment, external students coming in, no real strategic development in marketing is required. We never spend in marketing which we believe is not

required. So for a school like this, what I have is a cyclical calendar” (Director, Operations & Communications, Academy)

“We don’t have a marketing plan. What we have is an eye on the fact that we need to make sure that we get enough students each year to support what we do at school... We don’t do market research and I think what we have done is trying to pick up what’s happening in the community. We have staff and parents, so they are really good sources of information. We have governors that oversee [link with] the parents and we have links to the primary schools... So it is quite good to hear what they have said about the school” (Head teacher, Local Authority School)

Theme 3: The importance of marketing

For most of the interviewees, marketing the school is important. The principal at the faith school stressed it is important for both prospective and existing parents, while the director of transition at the local authority school emphasized the importance of marketing in a competitive English environment. The various reasons why marketing the school is important was explained by the director of operations and communications at the academy:

“In a competitive marketplace with academization, it becomes absolutely critical because student numbers have an effect. For example, a school with 1650 students has more economic freedom than a school with 600 students. In the school with 600 students, you have restrictions in terms of staffing, in terms of developing the school, in terms of physical materials, buildings etc. When you grow your numbers, it then gives you the freedom by just pure economies of scale because the school has fixed cost that you can’t escape... the more students, the more freedom you have in funds. In that, this school can invest heavily in extra-curricular activities, support students who are at the low end of the economic spectrum, to support students with particular educational requirement, and also to start investing in infrastructure and the fabric of the building” (Director, Operations and Communications. Academy)

The head teacher at the local authority however, has a different opinion. She is very positive about the future demand for places in her school, thus feels the school does not have to market aggressively. The parent governor at the local authority school also has a different view about school marketing:

“The reason why I hesitate is because it is a maintained, it’s a local authority school... although the council says there are no catchment areas, but there are... they will put on the list but the list will be long... they will take the local student first... there is little chance to get in” (Parent governor, local authority school)

Theme 4: school marketing concepts

There are varied attitudes about school marketing concepts. The principal and assistant principal in the faith school see marketing as merely promoting the school and not as a holistic process. The principal is also not comfortable in using client terminology which also suggests a narrow definition of marketing:

“Well, as regards to client orientation, I worry about using such terminology. They are children, they are our parents we aim to provide the best possible education for them. In business terms that is a service not a product. I worry about using such terminology because I do not want to dehumanise what we try to offer and we are not selling cars, we are not selling clothes, we offer an education” (Principal)

He also expressed the view that the teachers’ job is to educate not to market. Along the same lines, the director of transition at the local authority school perceives conflict between marketing and educational values.

“I think we know that we have to market. I’m a teacher, I’m not a marketer. You know I want the best for our children. There’s a conflict for me with that. Marketing is crucial, but do you think we should market?” (Director of transition, local authority school)

Unlike the earlier views, the director of operations and communication at the academy, and the head teacher at the local authority school have a broader concept about school marketing. Marketing was seen by the director of operations and communication at the academy as comprising those activities that can attract students or parents to choose the school, including teachers’ professionalism.

“That their (teachers’) professional pride is always to ensure that, when parents come to visit their classroom, it is tidy, it is full of activities and looks great... they don’t know that is marketing, but that is marketing... So they should just be professional, focused, hardworking, they market themselves, they do my job” (Director, Operations & Communication, academy)

The head teacher at the local authority school sees marketing to include promotions, and is closely related to reputation and image. She used words and phrases such as “people’s perceptions”, “demonstrated behaviour”, and “impression”, numerous times during the interview when talking about marketing. In addition, she also sees marketing as customer relationship and delivering what has been promised.

Theme 5: Market Orientation

Market orientation is discussed using three sub-themes; customer orientation and competitors’ orientation.

Customer orientation

There are two different voices when asked about school customers. The principal at the faith school is not comfortable in using the word client or customer as it is perceived to conflict with educational values. The other voices from the academy and local authority school, hold the view that the customer is their focus.

“The school is very much client oriented, and it is very important that the staff understand that well. Everything that the school does, every decision the school makes, has a basic question

which is 'does this improve the students at this school?' "(Director, Operations and Communications, Academy)

"Not enough as it needs to be... we listen more to parents now, we listen more to students now" (Head teacher, local authority school)

Despite the different views, there are similarities in that all three schools collect feedback from parents via a survey and a parents' forum, which they hold two or three times a year.

Competitor orientation

Participants at all the schools are aware of the competitive market but all of them feel that they do not have competitors.

"I am cautious about using the word competitors. Because it is quite clear that we don't even have one. I can tell you about other local schools" (Principal, faith school)

The principal mentioned the two schools which are non- faith schools. The researcher's analysis of the two schools revealed that School A is an academy, oversubscribed, rated as outstanding by OFSTED. School B is also an academy but not performing well, as rated by OFSTED.

A similar stance was provided by the director of communications and operations at the academy.

"We have none. There are other schools, but it is fair to say the attainment level at our school is higher than other local schools. Within the community, there are other schools but the education reputation is so low that they are actually not direct competition for this school. Very few parents are looking at those schools. The schools that might be our competitors are too far away" (Director, Operations and Communications, Academy)

Along the same lines, the head teacher at the local authority school feels that she is not in competition with other local schools because one of them is a faith school and another is a girls' school, while her school is a comprehensive local authority school which welcomes everyone.

Due to such perceptions, all the schools did not gather information about what other schools are doing.

Discussions

A number of positive and negative perceptions are apparent from the findings. First, a comprehensive understanding of school marketing, as suggested by Davies and Ellison (1997), and Kotler and Fox (1995), has not been established at all these three schools. However, two common views emerged. The first defined school marketing narrowly and linked marketing closely with sales, promotion and advertising, which is consistent with Foskett (1998), James and Philips (1995) and Oplatka (2002). There is also a negative attitude to the use of marketing-related terms such as customer and competitors. The second views marketing as

more customer driven, leading to realizing parents' needs and wants to a certain extent. They hold the view that marketing is an activity to attract students and parents which includes teacher professionalism in delivering effective teaching and learning, customer relationships, the school's reputation and image, and delivering what has been promised. Congruent with Oplatka (2002), this study also found a conflict between marketing and educational values.

Second, as in previous studies (Bell, 1999; James & Philips, 1995; Oplatka, 2012), a coherent marketing plan, market research and market analysis to understand the market, were absent. This includes the local authority school, which is in the process of repositioning the school. Comm and Labay (1997) argue that to lessen risk perception on repositioning, a school must first understand the important attributes which students and parents use to make their choice, and must understand how well it delivers satisfaction on these important dimensions, which seemed not to be happening here.

Each school has a different approach to responsibility in marketing. The faith school supports Oplatka et al. (2002) view that marketing is to be under the auspices of school management, mainly the principal and assistant principal. The strategic marketing in the academy is centralised within the multi-academy trust with certain parts handled by the school. While in the local authority school, a number of staff is appointed to be part of the marketing team. The dominant voices in this study agreed on the importance of marketing in the English competitive environment. However, the head teacher at the local authority school argues that aggressive marketing is not necessary because she is very optimistic the number of pupils will grow. Despite the diverse perceptions, all the schools' websites and prospectuses reflect the importance of marketing.

All the schools are market oriented in some ways, but lack a competitor orientation. A school which aims to fully understand its strengths, weaknesses, capabilities and potential should be aware of what their competitors are doing (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2007), which is absent here. Drysdale (1999) argues that schools must recognise their competitors and benchmark the school against others

Conclusion

As suggested by Davies and Ellison (1997), the principal who adopts marketing practices is expected to implement a strategic marketing analysis which involves activities such as market research, and strategic analysis and planning; and implementation of those plans, which includes implementing the marketing plan, the marketing mix, and evaluating the marketing process, which only exist to a limited extent at these schools.

While the schools appear to be customer oriented, they lack a competitor orientation. The absence of coherent marketing could be a possible explanation for why the schools are under-subscribed, except for the academy. For the academy, reputation for academic quality, and for student experience, appear to be the factors that make the school distinctive compared to other schools in the area, and thus become many parents' choice. To maintain a competitive advantage, delivering continuous quality service is the essence of customer satisfaction, leading to a positive reputation. Thus, due consideration should be given to adopting marketing as a holistic management process regardless of whether the school is over or undersubscribed.

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