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INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION?

INTRODUCTION

Marketing approach is getting more and more common in Hungary nowadays, even in the non-profit sectors. Along with it, marketing communication also plays an increasing role in the management of organizations, institutions, associations and schools. From a certain point of view, these organizations are in *competitive situation*, where the rivalry is for attention, commitment, sponsorship, membership, etc. Universities and colleges must meet the challenge of the increasing competition in higher education. So they have to get acquainted with the *principals of marketing, communication* and public relations.

This study has the following *goals*:

- to analyze the communication of higher education institutions, give a general introduction and point out the shortcomings and difficulties;
- to draw attention to the necessity of an overall approach: integrated marketing communication;
- to give recommendations for remedying the problems – generally and also specifically.

The paper concentrates on Budapest Business School, College for Management and Business Studies (BBS-CMBS) since the available information was mostly on

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this institute. It is necessary to emphasize, that in many cases we introduce the viewpoints of students, because they are the most important target group of schools.

In our *previous studies* we examined the communication situation in higher education in Hungary on the one hand and marketing communication tendencies on the other. In this paper we combine these together with additional sources to give a wider perspective.

The paper's title is a question. The reason for this is that many institutions are still not applying marketing and communication theories in their everyday practice. The question is not whether it is necessary, but whether enough effort is being expended on it. In our opinion, institutions will be forced to act and communicate as competitors.

METHODOLOGY

The paper is based on several different sources. As we mentioned above, the basis is provided by *previous studies*. Two of them concern communication issues of higher education institutions [2, 3] and two the tendencies of marketing communication [4, 5]. For the two on higher education, we made 3 focus group interviews with students and 16 in depth interviews with teachers, administrators and exchange students. For the two studies on marketing communication tendencies we interviewed 10 professionals from different communication sectors – beyond the numerous secondary sources. For this paper we asked 55 more students from different faculties, classes, so *altogether 102 respondents* were interviewed.

Other resources, mainly *studies of related topics* were used to get a greater perspective. And of course as teachers of Budapest Business School, we get many *personal insights* from our everyday work at the College.

The study's goal is to draw attention to the importance of this issue and to give a comprehensive introduction to the topic. We concentrated on spontaneous recalls, personal (and group) opinions, ideas rather than concrete numbers. Our research was rather qualitative aiming to understand the tendencies, shortcomings, needs and possibilities; however, it provided a strong basis. There is no doubt that the problems mentioned exist, although practical solutions can differ in various institutions.

SITUATION ANALYSIS AT HIGHER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Universities and colleges as service providers

Until recent years, when new students entered a university or college, they found themselves in a strange situation. They had a right to an education, but they were not at the centre of their institution's attention. They found it very difficult to solve their problems, and the employees of the institution were not very helpful. Unfortunately the attitude is very similar sometimes even today.

But the situation is changing. In response to increasing competition, *schools are forced to behave more and more like business enterprises*. The number of schools, even those offering similar programs, continues to grow. At the same time, the number of total applicants is dropping and this tendency is likely to be continuing. (The number of applicants in the last few years was: 2004: 167 082, 2005: 149 828, 2006: 132 527, 2007: 108 854. [6]) Private schools are also stronger competitors for public universities and colleges. Potential students can choose amongst schools, as people

can choose, e.g., internet providers. This is most obvious in the case of post graduate courses and those requiring considerable tuition, but the situation is becoming the same in the case of first degree programs as well. (Another aspect is that in the new higher education system the number of applicants is a key factor in financing schools.)

As the market situation changes, market actors, such as *schools also have to change*. They have to compete for applicants, and to do so, *they have to become familiar with the principles of service marketing*. When we take a look at the 7Ps (Product, Price, Place, Promotion, People, Physical Evidence and Process, the key elements of service marketing), we can see that many factors influence the success of a service. Schools should bear this in mind. It is ironic that marketing, communication, public relations, etc. are taught in business schools – but not commonly practiced in all of them, yet.

The increasing competition forces schools to provide a wide range of programs. This is a way to better serve their students. However, it makes the administrative structure very complex, and with the new credit system it requires better organization and communication. *“A more flexible education system requires more flexible communication.”* [8]

Our research clearly showed: from the point of view of satisfying students, *communication is as important as the education itself*. When we asked students about their difficulties, they mentioned mostly administrative and communication problems. Students can only evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum after graduation, but how they feel while at the institution is based on such factors as how they get the information they need, and how effective the communication is between them and the school. We believe that the key is in the student centered attitude of the institutions.

So the first and most important factor for schools is the *attitude* of the administration and teachers to the situation, to competition, to everyday practice, to students, to colleagues and also to marketing and communication principles.

The important target groups

Defining and examining target groups are fundamental for competing companies. Schools usually do not define and analyze their target audiences, so communication can not be tuned to them. We would like to point out the three major targets: students, employees and potential students. (Besides these, of course, there are several other important groups, such as parents, competitors, sponsoring or other cooperating companies, politics and the media.)

Students, as the main target audience of schools should get special attention. Their satisfaction is essential, since they are very important opinion leaders: the general image of the school is formed by them, potential applicants get information from them, and, of course, it is much easier to work with pleased ‘clients’. We have to get feedback from them, examine their needs, and try to provide them with all the necessary information they need.

Employees are usually not considered as an important target audience at schools. This is a grave mistake, because they also have great influence on image. Teachers and administrative employees are in key positions, and as information providers, they also affect students’ attitudes. Employees have to be well prepared, so they can give adequate and sufficient information. Their everyday job requires

this, and also their overall satisfaction as an employee. Satisfaction is a key factor again, because of commitment and workflow. Like competing for students, competition for teachers will soon be an important issue for schools, too. (Shortly professors will be restricted to employment at a single institution.)

Potential students are in the center of external relations, but this is also a relatively neglected area of communication. This is a problem, because applicants (and other target groups) judge the institution by the quality of information given, and how easily they can get it from the school.

As we can see, communication is not sufficient in any relation, therefore development is needed.

Communication needs at schools

Practically it is impossible to collect all the communication needs, but we would like to summarize the most important ones, those that students mentioned most frequently.

Attitude. Probably the most important critique was the way students are treated by administrative staff and teachers. As we mentioned earlier, serious changes are needed in this area (schools are service providers!).

More opening hours. It is often very difficult for students to get in touch with the right person at schools (administrative employee, teacher). We got many recommendations on this topic, such as more opening hours or online forums for courses, teachers and administrative staff. We have to keep in mind, that opening hours can be extended easily through the internet, since it is open 24/7. In the case of competing companies, information has to be given when (and where) the user wants it. That is why companies run multi-channel contact centers whereby customers can reach the firm personally or by telephone, mail, e-mail, etc. anytime. In the case of schools, it should be the same.

Harmonization. Central administration, departments and teachers often give different information. This has to be harmonized by an effective central information system.

Central information system. Our interviewees did not define it clearly, but we got many suggestions pointing in this direction. Students recommended the improvement of kkf.hu (the official home site of BBS-CMBS), Kulker-Online (the student homepage), the Neptun (the administrative online system of class schedules, exams and grades) and the SharePoint (the file-sharing system of the school) – but the real solution would be a system that has all the relevant information in one place. (It is a problem with the current kkf.hu homepage that the information is not complete and up-to-date and it is very hard to find because of the linear structure: many documents should be reachable from different links.) A good idea is to store all the documents (such as regulations, official forms or even memos on meetings) in one site, and only put a link in circular e-mails. This will improve the performance of the system, save memory and can be reached later easily. Unfortunately the existing online system has many failures, and the Neptun brakes down in important situations.

New forms of communication. Students mentioned some new (mostly online and mobile) communication ways (e.g. forums, chatting, sms). With this, old channels (e.g. letters, notice boards) would lose their importance, since they cannot fulfill the expectations of the recent challenges. Non-personal communication is becoming more

and more important because of distance learning courses: „*the international education market is developing towards an unlimited time and place in education*” [8]

Two-way communication. It is very important for service-driven companies, but in schools, students (and employees) are rarely asked to give feedback. Continuous measurement of communication (and other areas) is elemental to develop the communication system and also to get suggestions and ideas. It was a good idea of the BBS-CMBS management to introduce an “idea-box”, where students can put their questions and suggestions.

More personal relationship. While communication is becoming superficial, students (and also teachers) feel the need for more personal contacts. Students suggested discussions, sporting events or excursions with teachers.

Other issues. Though not mentioned by students, there are some other points worth noting. Because of many foreign students, it is becoming more important to provide information in different languages. There is a new need for on-line/electronic exams, as well, and some courses or classes do not need personal contacts. These also lead us to the importance of online communication.

THE PROBLEM OF MULTI-CHANNEL COMMUNICATION

The *number of communication points is almost uncountable* and untraceable at schools. In our previous study we summarized the possible ways of reaching the students at Budapest Business School, College for Management and Business Studies. (This table is not complete, since many other communication sources exist, such as management, outside groups, policy makers, etc., but contains the most important possibilities. It concentrates on students, but there are other important directions of communication, such as teacher-administrator, management-administrator, management-teacher, potential student-administrator, etc.)

Maybe the most important problem is that there are too many connections, but there is no *central information spot*. Student Information Service (HISZ) answers usually only general questions, and in many cases students are sent to different places (from central administration to teachers or to departments and back and forth). The situation is about the same online, where the central home site can not give all the necessary information and other information sites exist besides it, as we saw earlier. A *central database* would be necessary, where all the important information is filed (or linked), and *can be reached every time from everywhere easily*. In the case of companies, off-line information desks use the same online database to avoid inconsistency. Of course in a system like this, delegation of work, data recording, and authorization is fundamental to success. (With a central, well functioning, easy-to-reach online database the significance and frequency of face-to-face information would drop dramatically – which makes the system more efficient of course.)

The opportunity for users to get information is only one side of the problem. The other is when the *information provider wants to reach its target groups*. In these cases it is not necessary for the target person to search the information actively (such as in the case of notice boards, homepages, etc.). Nowadays one can be reached by many ways (such as telephone, mobile, sms, mail, e-mail). Telephone is a relatively costly method and is not useful in mass targets. Mailing is very expensive and slow – and gives no feedback. Sms is relatively cost effective, can reach

mass audience, but developing the system needs investment. The best choice should be e-mails, but it is essential to get the everyday e-mail addresses of the recipients.

*Table 1
Communication channels and information sources concerning students*

Channel	Source						
	Teacher	Departmental administration	Central administration	Student Info Service-HISZ	Student organizations	Students	
Face-to-face dialog	x	x	x	x	(x)	X	A
Face-to-face group discussion	X	(X)	(X)		X		P
Personal information for private e-mail	(X)	(X)				X	P
Group information for private e-mails	X	(X)				X	P
Mail	(x)	(x)	X				P
Telefax		(x)	(x)	(x)			A
Telephone	x	x	x	x	x	X	P
Sms						X	P
Official homesite (kkf.hu)	X	X	X		(X)		A
Student homesite (Külker-online)	(X)	(X)			X	X	A
Student homesite forum	(x)				(x)	X	A
Department or teacher homesite	X	X					A
Student magazine (Kanyar)		(X)	(X)		X		A
Printed material, handouts	(X)	(X)	X	(x)			P
Departments notice boards	X	X			X		A
Central notice boards, posters			(X)		X	X	A
Neptun (central online administration system) messages	X	(X)	(X)				P
Sharepoint	X						P

Notation:

X: automatic information channels – those students should follow constantly
x: non-automatic information channels – where activity is needed from students
(): not typical but existing methods

Empty fields: not typical communication methods

A: active / this channel requires activity from the audience

P: passive / this channel does not require activity from the audience

Internal communication is in a minimum of 2-3 year lag behind the potential communication possibilities and necessities. (E.g. paper based communication forms are still frequently used instead of online solutions.) *New communication methods* (such as online notice boards, forums, chats) are being adopted very slowly.

The goal should be to *reduce the communication channels* (especially active channels), so students can get every information from one source (ideally online), and can be reached by one channel (ideally at one private and active e-mail, in urgent cases by sms). This means that *real-time updating* of the central database is essential where every participant has the right and possibility to change the information connected to him or her. (One such system is Coospace: www.coospace.hu. It is very flexible, and with necessary arrangements most information could be published by it. [1])

It can be seen that simplification is necessary to operate an effective communication system. But this does not mean that every decision has to be supervised, or made by principals. Total centralization is very hard to achieve because of the complex organizational and course structure. The tendency at companies is also against total centralization and hierarchy. The goal is a *well established decentrally updated system*, where every participant knows his or her competency and can make decisions upon the established principles.

INNOVATION IN MARKETING COMMUNICATION

After reviewing the concrete situation of the College, it is worthwhile to take a look at the international *marketing communication tendencies* [4, 5]. As we will see, these changes in communication principles are related closely to the problems mentioned above, and can provide answers to the questions.

The most important new principles of marketing communication are – according to our previous study [4]:

- Strategic approach
- Integrated communication
- One-to-one communication
- Customer relationship management (CRM)
- Extensive communication channels
- The growing role of internet and mobile
- Guerilla-, virus-marketing and other new forms of communication
- Others, such as global and local approach at the same time, the growing role of corporate social responsibility (CSR), word of mouth, (online) communities, entertainment and research.

Our research of the communication situation of higher education showed the *necessity of applying these principles*. People expect more and more from companies, and with higher expectation levels, they want more from schools as well.

Strategic approach means “big-picture” thinking, accurate situation analysis, long term planning, and strategy making before tactical steps.

The long term strategic key factor in communication success is **branding**. Companies, products without brands are hard to sell for consumers. Many experts believe brand is of greater value and importance than the product itself or the company’s concrete properties. Yet, we can not speak of (conscious) brand building in the case of

most schools. In BBS, very little effort has been made concerning corporate identity, image, or reputation, and a program is just starting to change this situation.

Integrated marketing communication is a concept, where the organization integrates and coordinates the different communication channels to give clear, consistent and convincing messages for the different target groups to gain maximum efficiency and effectiveness. This needs a strategic approach, clearly defined objectives, good budget allocation, constant feedback and, of course, cooperation of every participant.

One-to-one communication has an increasing role in the (direct) marketing discipline. With new technical solutions (such as computer systems, developed data bases, e-mails, sms, etc.) it is possible to address a mass audience one by one. Companies have discovered the different needs of various clients and try to satisfy them in a personalized way. With the complex educational programs and with the credit system students have various problems – so the solutions have to be varied, as well.

Besides one-to-one communication, ‘one-to-some’ is also very common these days, where the target audience is a special group with the same special needs. (In the case of schools it can be a seminar group or specializations, for example.)

Customer relationship management comes from the recognition, that it is much easier to keep a client than persuade a new one. So CRM tries to build customers’ commitment to the company through continuous communication, and follows a person through a longer time period (from being a potential client to being an active client and even after). CRM has not been a relevant issue for schools so far, but changes in conditions will likely change this, too.

- Students can choose a university after finishing college, so they have to be convinced to stay at the same institute.
- Schools also offer post graduate/paying courses, where the potential applicants can be the alumni students.
- Graduated students are a very important target group for schools, because they remain opinion leaders concerning the institute, they can be a good public relation opportunity (e.g. lobbying), and also alumni students at different companies can help the school with offering cooperation (trainee programs, presentations, etc.) or financial support (sponsoring).

The *growing number of communication channels* and solutions is a possibility and also a challenge for companies and for schools. It is more and more difficult to choose the right medium to reach the target audience, and of course institutions have to be familiar with the latest (and possibly the most useful) methods. Home-pages, e-mails are not new forms of communication nowadays, but sms, online forums, group chatting, blogs or RSS are still relatively unknown at schools.

Other issues are also important, but we would like to concentrate on the most relevant aspects.

Last but not least we have to talk about **budgeting**. Communication is not primarily a question of money, but obviously the development of a new system requires some expenditure – besides a lot of work. With a good functioning new system, the investment is returned in the quality and efficiency of communication (better transparency and organizing, less but more effective work).

REASONS AGAINST INTEGRATED COMMUNICATION AT SCHOOLS (SUMMARY)

From the above information we can see that integrated communication is a good opportunity for schools to improve their communication, and with it their service. However, there are several factors that make it complicated to establish such a communication system. The difficulties are as follows.

Approach. There is no cultural background of systematic and user-driven communication in Hungarian schools. The system is sender-centered and it is hard for the receiver to get the information.

Structure. In a complex organization structure, with complicated decision making processes and centralization, the adoption of new ideas can be very difficult.

Participants. Everyday work usually fills in employees' working time, so additional tasks are not welcomed (even if the everyday work would be easier afterwards). Concrete tasks unfortunately overpower global assignments, and the motivation of employees is low for new ideas (low salary – minimum work). There is fear from changes or new methods; there are no experts and experience in this area.

Budget. Financial investments are necessary (systems have to be set up), and it is not easy to measure the efficiency of the new system.

REASONS FOR INTEGRATED COMMUNICATION AT SCHOOLS (SUMMARY)

Despite the difficulties, integrated communication is still a preferable idea for schools. We summarize the necessities that led us to it.

Competition. Overall rivalry of schools is present in the field of communication, too. Some (usually smaller, newer, private) schools put greater emphasis on communication: they use new methods (such as information in sms, online solutions, etc.) and ask for feedback regularly.

Increasing needs. Target groups (students, employees, applicants, etc.) have different and increasing needs, so schools also have to satisfy higher communication expectations.

Role of communication. The importance of image or reputation is even greater these days. The amount of information grows dramatically nowadays, and the situation is the same with schools. The complexity of the organizational system requires sufficient communication structure. These facts lead to the increased role of communication. It is also important to integrate the different functions, such as marketing, communication, public relations, human resources, etc. – and it can be done with the help of communication.

Fragmentation. Fragmentation is present in the following fields:

- very complex structure of the institution with many information senders and receivers;
- many target groups with different needs;
- uncountable communication channels and methods.

These make it necessary to coordinate communication, and to engage in an integrated communication system.

Return on investments. Though building a new communication system requires mainly commitment and work, certain investments have to be made. But after building the infrastructure, we are convinced that it produces good ROI in middle and long term.

So the adoption of integrated communication (and other communication principles) is not a choice but an absolute necessity for higher education institutions which want to compete for students, professors, supporting companies, etc.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The communication of the Budapest Business School *has to be treated as one coherent system*. This approach will show the contradictions, inconsistencies, and shortcomings of the communication system. It will improve communication effectiveness or even efficiency.

Professors in many cases are consultants, managers, directors at companies or have their own enterprises. They are familiar with the practical problems of an organization. Their knowledge can be used to improve the school's management decisions – even in communication. With this, we would avoid the typical problem: “We teach it – but we do not practice it.” An *advisory board, regular consultative meetings* or preparing studies (such as this one) can improve achievements and efficiency of the organization.

The School has economic, financial, technical, IT managers and even a TQM consultant – but it does not have *marketing or communication managers*. Without this, a coherent, efficient communication system cannot be developed and run.

With appropriate coordination, an expert team could *lay down the fundamental principles of communication*. It would give sufficient background for everyday work and provide help to the communicators. A corporate communication and corporate design handbook (or more importantly, its easy-to-reach online form) should be developed, which contains the basic communication elements (e.g. logos, fonts), actors, procedures of communication systems and easy-to-use solutions for communicating, such as formats, formulas, visual elements, sample mails, etc.

A *central communication system and database* is essential, where all the important information is reachable. This must be updatable easily by authorized persons whenever necessary. A well organized, high standard, fast and stable homepage has to be connected to the central database. The system has to be easy-to-use, endowed with a highly efficient search capability, so that every user can find the needed information relatively fast. Besides the information given, links should be provided to other relevant data sources (such as other homepages). With this overall system, the unnecessary information circulation in e-mails and mails can be reduced dramatically, the administration becomes much easier and the system becomes more transparent therefore the control will be much easier, too.

In the case of BBS, the Sharepoint system can be a solution, but unfortunately it is not as multi-functional and easy-to-use as it should be. The CooSpace system can be a solution to the problem, but it does not yet substitute every online information page. However, its advantage is that users can see automatically all the relevant information they need in one place. Developing a new central (electronic)

messaging system is also fundamental, where all the important persons (mainly students, teachers and administrative colleagues) can be reached by e-mail (or even sms).

Besides the reduction of communication channels *new communication forms* (such as online chat, forums, online notice boards, etc.) are needed.

Two-way communication is another key factor, where all the target groups are asked regularly, and with the feedback the system can be constantly improved.

But these arrangements do not reach the goals without the *commitment of leaders and also employees*. Orientation meetings, trainings are necessary to achieve this.

CONCLUSIONS

The focus of this study was the necessity of integrated communication, but it also dealt with other important marketing communication issues, such as strategic approach, (one-to-one marketing, CRM), the complexity of communication channels, and the increasing role of internet and mobile communication. Other principles, such as global and local approach at the same time, the growing role of corporate social responsibility (CSR), word of mouth, (online) communities, entertainment and research will also be important issues soon. [4]

It is essential for schools to adopt these principles in their everyday practice, if they want to survive the intensifying competition. Developing a complex, but flexible and easy-to-use communication system with a qualified leader is the most optimal way to improve the effectiveness of communication practice for schools.

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