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The Need for A Well Thought Customer Relationship Strategy in the Marketing of Institutions of Higher Learning in a Hyper Competitive Environment

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Abstract

the study followed many others in other jurisdictions, one of which was carried at a private university in Nigeria, which made interesting revelations. First that a 1% shift in relationship marketing will result in 81.1% shift in customer satisfaction. Secondly, that more so, a 1% shift in trust will result in 72.2% shift in customer satisfaction. Lastly, that the R² value of 0.604 reveals that competence and long term relationship jointly account for 60.4% of the variation in customer satisfaction. The study concluded that relationship marketing has positive relationship with customer satisfaction, and therefore influences customer satisfaction to a great extent. Among other areas suggested by most findings for further study were the one under this study. The methodology of this entirely exploratory study involved prompting the internet on the following key words: service quality, customer orientation, customer relations, commitment, communication, shared values, loyalty, changing nature of higher education, e-learning, relationship marketing and relational drivers on the internet. Apart from confirming much that has been established by other studies, specific revelations were made about Africa. Whereas enrolment at universities averaged annual growth rate averaged 13 percent between 1985 and 2002, in some countries it grew between two and four times this. Identifying and seizing opportunities, entrepreneurs have invested heavily in the sector, and the number of institutions is in some cases growing geometrically. To meet the challenges of the arising hyper competition, universities are strongly advised to the application of the marketing concept and perfect their customer relations management (CRM).

Key words: customer, satisfaction, relationship, strategy, university, competition, SERVQUAL

Introduction

Every society strives to provide educational service to its citizens. Efforts to ensure that citizens get good education stem from the public view on education as a society leveller and instrument that can be used to close the gap between the haves and have not in the society. With global organisations like UNESCO and governments worldwide embracing universalisation of education, the resultant expansion in the primary and secondary school population today poses demand for the establishment of more institutions of higher learning to accommodate leavers of the lower level schools seeking higher educational qualifications (Murtala, A, T, 2019). Identifying and seizing opportunities, entrepreneurs have invested heavily in the sector, and the number of institutions is in some cases growing geometrically. In Africa, for example, Ethiopia witnessed phenomenal growth, with the number of public universities growing eighteen fold from a mere two in 2000 to thirty-six in 2015 (Nega & Kassaye, 2017). In Uganda the number of public universities is rising fast as each region demands for at least one, aligned to science and another for other disciplines. A similar trend is being experienced in other countries. The number of private universities is growing at even greater rate. Africa's average annual growth rate between 1985 and 2002 was 13%. For some countries the growth rate far exceeded this.

Table 1 Africa's average annual growth rate in enrolment at universities between 1985 and 2002

Country	Growth rate percentage
Rwanda	55
Namibia	46
Uganda	37
Tanzania	32
Cote d'Ivoire	28
Kenya	27
Chad	27
Botswana	22
Cameron	22

Source Materu, 2006.

Higher education play increasingly important role in contemporary „knowledge

society“. There is growing demand for higher educated experts on labor market. In order to fulfill labor market needs and requirements, higher education institutions need to constantly work on improving their service quality in different ways: study process improvement, adaptation to changes in the labor market, financial, mobility and career development support for students are some of the most important issues. Market trends and environment changes are key elements to be followed in order to keep and improve the higher education service quality. Higher education service quality of the institution should be constantly monitored and adapted in order to satisfy both students and labor market needs and requirements (Helena, Š and Mirna, Š 2012)

Methodology

The exploratory nature of this research necessitated and the ever increasing adoption of digital applications in marketing and delivery of educational services in general, e-relational model in an e-learning context literature review was carried out. In particular this was effected by prompting on the following key words: service quality, customer orientation, customer relations, commitment, communication, shared values, loyalty, changing nature of higher education, e-learning, relationship marketing and relational drivers on the internet. This was supported by the researcher's own observations and experiences of higher education as an academic. Extensive literature interrogation beefed the study and a qualitative descriptive approach is adopted in presenting the findings of the research. The sections have been crafted into a coherent, comprehensible and seamlessly interrelated whole. The study gives an overview of the evolution of the marketing concept and philosophy, followed by why it is necessary to understand and lay strategy for customer satisfaction in a business setting. This is followed by explaining differences between marketing of services compared with tangible products, thus the need to approach marketing mixes differently, with emarketing and delivery of particularly, educational services elucidated. This is logically followed by the need for nurturing customer relationship and satisfaction in a university setting. The study further develops the narrative by advancing elements of managing relations to survive in the hyper competitive setting. Factors driving forces of competition and changes education service delivery at universities are explored. Conclusions are made.

The evolution of the marketing concept and philosophy

Whatever aspect of marketing one deal with, appreciation of what the marketing concept or philosophy is key to success. Customer relations management presupposes an understanding of the marketing concepts overall.

Building relationships with customers represents a real challenge that requires knowledge and understanding of marketing concepts as well as their practical use.

The evolution of the concept or philosophies is summarized in table below.

Era	Philosophy	Remarks
1850s, through to the 1900s	The Production Philosophy	The production philosophy is premised on the assumption that consumers will favor product that are available and highly affordable
1900s and continued to the 1930s.	The product philosophy	It presumed that consumers will prefer product based on its quality, performance and innovative features
1930 and stayed in widespread use until about 1950.	The selling philosophy	The orientation of the selling concept was that the company can sell any product it produces with the use of marketing techniques, such as advertising and personal selling.
From the 1950s and continues until the twenty first century	The marketing philosophy,	The key assumption underlying the marketing philosophy is that a market should make what it can sell, instead of trying to sell what it has made. The marketing concept focuses on the needs and wants of the buyer rather than the needs of the seller and the product.
It emerged in the 1970s and has since overlapped with the marketing philosophy.	The societal marketing philosophy and	The concept assumes that there is a conflict between consumer short-term wants and society's long-run interest, and that organizations should focus on a practice that ensures long run consumer and societal welfare
21 st century	The holistic marketing philosophy.	The holistic marketing concept is 21st century business thinking. It is based on the “development, design, and implementation of marketing programmed, processes and activities that recognizes their breadth and interdependencies. The holistic marketing concept suggests that the 21st century business firm needs a new Set of belief and practice toward business operation that is more complete and cohesive than the traditional application of the marketing concept.

Source: various researchers and academics.

The evolving concepts of marketing that has emerged over the years are a manifestation of different business philosophies aimed at addressing customer needs at different time period. In progression they are production philosophy; product philosophy; selling philosophy, marketing philosophy, societal marketing philosophy and the holistic marketing philosophy. The evolution of the marketing concept could be considered justifiable because different business needs have been addressed by varying business thoughts over the years. Similarly, emerging business needs might call for appropriate business philosophies in future. Marketers must be aware

and expectant (Keelson, A, S, 2012). Managing the commercial activity of an institution with marketing principles as the leading philosophy is called marketing management. The goal of marketing management is to identify and satisfy customers' needs through managing stable relationships with them, and its basic task is to meet this goal as effectively as possible. Thus, marketing management as the science of choosing target markets and creating profitable relationships.

Understanding strategy for customer satisfaction in a business setting

An entity's marketing strategy, for this matter a university, consists of defining which customers it will focus on and how it will create value for them. As a first step, the university must decide which customers it will focus on. It is innately not possible to serve all its potential customers well. It must therefore select the customers it can attend to well while also making a profit. This necessitates what in marketing is called, market segmentation, that is dividing the market into groups/types of customer. The entity then must decide how it will serve its target customers. In other words, how it will differentiate itself and position itself in the market. Achieving this requires that the university must define its value proposition, which are the set of benefits or values it promises to provide for its customers to meet their needs. The value proposition is what differentiates one brand from another. A clear, strong value proposition enables a company to gain a competitive advantage in its market; because it offers something that others do not, or offer the same product or service in a different way. A marketing strategy is a way to give marketing orientation to a business by deciding to position a product or service in terms of buyer needs and wants. The strategy interrogates the macro and micro environment and takes a long-term view of the investment. For lack of experience, investors often make decisions based on what they like or want, leaving the customer out of the picture. In a marketing orientation strategy the customer into the center of the picture. In an educational institution setting a question arises who that may be. The parent or guardian, it may be thought is the client. However, it is the student who experiences the service delivery at source and directly. In this case both the parent or guardian and student are customers. But of different categories. They must be valued, by creating a customer relationship arrangement. Even if a student is willing to a study at a particular institution, the parent may not afford the cost. The parent may dislike the philosophy an institution represents, for example on the basis of faith. Either or both of them may not be convinced about the programmed the institution offers. Both are therefore target of the marketing of offers from the institution. Effort to retain the student should be equally targeted. The key to creating long-term relationships with customers is to create more value and satisfaction for the customer, because a satisfied customer is a loyal one. Attracting and retaining customers is a hard task, because they usually have a large variety to choose from. Normally, they will choose the offering with the greatest perceived value: customers assess the difference between the cost and benefit obtained, comparing it with competitors' offerings. Consumer satisfaction depends on the perceived performance of the product in relation to the buyer's expectations

Marketing of services different from that of tangible products

Intangibility, perishability and indivisibility are key features that distinguish products and services. Services are experienced; they cannot be touched, say like a car or furniture. They are consumed as they are experienced. Thus they cannot be stored. A lecture is only consumed when it is being listened to, or action related thereto like a practical is being executed. A car has parts which can be separately sold. Each lecture, even if it constitutes part of a lengthy course unit is a whole. Indeed, even an interrupted lecture is a whole for the part delivered. Thus the indivisibility. These differences call for variation in the marketing mix for the two. Whereas for the products we had the traditional "four Ps", namely product, price, promotion and place, for services another two Ps, emerged. These were "process" and "people". Services are intangible and are delivered by way of processes, be it a haircut or accommodation at a hotel, and indeed education. The process aspect is being. Digitalisation has become a key feature of marketing, but more so for services. People are at the centre of service deliveries, either as means of providing the service or as recipients of the service, through a process. They cannot be separated from the service that is being delivered. It has been argued that higher education institutions should guide part of the development of their marketing actions in the management of identity as a

conducive way for the correct administration of the brand. In this regard, actions related to relationship marketing, innovation, and identity management will be the key so that, through lecturers, the image and corporate reputation of the universities can be improved, which will ultimately result in building a brand (Ledy Gómez-Bayona, et al 2024).

The personality and quality of lecturers, professors and other members of staff can promote the standing of the institution or, unfortunately do the reverse. In some institutions, a name can dominate the setting such that some or most of the student join the “person” and not the institution. As a process, delivery in the educational setting may be “personal to holder”. A revolution of education technology, often abbreviated as “EdTech,” is taking place. It involves the integration of technological tools and resources into the educational environment to enhance teaching and learning experiences (Calderón, et al, 2020). It encompasses a broad range of digital technologies, software applications, and online platforms that are utilized to support and supplement educational activities. Education technology can include interactive whiteboards, educational software, learning management systems, digital learning platforms, online assessment tools, virtual reality simulations, and various other digital resources designed to facilitate and improve the learning process (Sahin & Yilmaz, 2020). Electronic learning is a generic term for all mechanisms employed to aid learning and disseminate information through an electronic medium. But whatever e-learning strategy is employed to facilitate student learning they need to be employed in such a way that all students are fully embracing of such an approach and that e-learning is not simply employed to replace traditional teaching methods (Tahir Rashid and Razak Raj, 2006). In a climate of increased competition, reduced funding, possible drop in university applications, one way of increasing student numbers would be to develop e-learning courses as an extension or even replacement of existing courses (Sahin & Yilmaz, 2020). E-relationship components can add an extra layer of value in a relationship that is difficult to imitate. Value can be added in information exchanged that allows knowledge to be pooled for joint advantage, in close and dense communication patterns, in integrated businesses processes, through new products and services that are created or developed electronically and in bonding with consumers that create extra value in brands (O’Toole, 2003)..This dramatically changes the challenges and avenues of a marketer for an institution of learning’s marketer.

Customer relationship and satisfaction in a university setting

Value creation in a relationship can be seen as a strategic choice or in the case of close relationships, as a strategic imperative (Xu & Gao, 2021). The overall objective of creating customer relationship should be the attainment of satisfaction. In an intensely competitive and constantly changing atmosphere, it takes a proactive and dynamic organisation or institution in any business-oriented industry to thrive. By its nature, university education is getting very digitalised and online offer for education makes the market intensely competitive (Sakharam, K, U et al 2022). A study in a private university in Nigeria revealed that a 1% shift in relationship marketing will result in 81.1% shift in customer satisfaction. More so, a 1% shift in trust will result in 72.2% shift in customer satisfaction, and lastly, that the R² value of 0.604 reveals that competence and long term relationship jointly account for 60.4% of the variation in customer satisfaction. The study concluded that relationship marketing has positive relationship with customer satisfaction, and therefore influences customer satisfaction to a great extent (Odunlami, B, I. 2016). Building customer relationship marketing is considered a very important goal that can turn into a genuine organizational competence. Universities usually underestimate the role played by sales forces, on the one hand, and marketing events, on the other hand. However they can assist in building a solid relationship, in the long term, with the customers. As components of integrated marketing communication, both sales forces and marketing events should be developed and supported by effective strategies and marketing tactics able to determine the competitive position of the university. Through marketing events, the sales force can achieve a number of specific objectives, such as: attracting new categories of consumers to the promoted products/services, interaction with the actual clients of the organization, knowing the profile of these clients, and so on. The role played by the sales force differs depending on the specific stage of development and implementation of the concept within the organization. Building relationships with customers represents a real challenge that requires knowledge and understanding of marketing concepts as well

as their practical use. Starting from relationship marketing, several authors aimed to capture the essence of this concept.(*Cruceru,A,F and Daniel Moise , D 2014*).

Managing relations to survive in the hyper competitive setting

Attracting student interest is becoming increasingly important for institutions offering higher education. Thus, the ideas of relationship marketing (RM) became a major concern in university management. The RM approach means that students' value creation is very important. The underlying idea behind relationship marketing (RM) is that the level of satisfaction of stakeholders with their relationship is very high. A research was conducted by examining the conceptual foundations of relationship marketing (CRM) in the higher education sector through an extensive search of relevant educational and business management databases. It confirmed this truth (Sugiharto, N, A, 2023). The success of a CRM strategy depends on the right balance between three key organizational resources: people, technology, and processes. Only by working effectively with these three resources can companies use CRM to achieve high levels of customer satisfaction, retention and loyalty (Glavee-Geo et al., 2019; Mahakittikun et al., 2021). The marketing strategy of a university is a kind of programme of its activity on the education market and the contents contained in it will constitute a direction for strategic and operational actions on the market and inside the school, as well as working out long-term and short-term plans of these activities No two universities are exactly alike. However what is common for all is the importance of monitoring the implementation of strategy. It can happen that due to substantial changes in the environment (for example new regulations concerning education) marketing strategy will require major modifications (Białoń , L, 2015).

Management's ability to create a positive rapport with its target market and meet the wants and demands of its customers is greatly enhanced when relationship marketing is incorporated into the University's overall strategy. As a result, relationship marketing takes on a pivotal role as a primary motivator in establishing long-lasting, mutually beneficial connections with customers that contribute to their overall happiness. Relationship marketing's primary focus is on fostering connections between businesses and their clients at every touch point. That's good news for both the businesses and the customers. Overarchingly, the goal of relationship marketing is to retain customers by recognising and addressing the elements that influence their relationships with businesses. The pleasure of the company's customers is a major factor in the potential risks and returns of the stock price of the company. With relationship marketing as a cornerstone, the marketing industry has gained a fresh perspective and placed greater emphasis on meeting consumer demand. (Sakharam, K, U et al 2022). Strategies of educational marketing are to create and facilitate customers-consumers, in this case students, to be able to interact in participatory learning situations inside and outside educational contexts, with the conviction that learning is an experience process that leads to reflection, discussion, analysis and interaction (Khoshtaria et al., 2020). Relationship marketing has evolved throughout history, and it not only focuses on an audience but it also evaluates all stakeholders to identify the best strategies to generate better added value. From an educational perspective, higher education institutions must continue evolving in specific aspects such as their brand, attention and social networks, which are the most visible variables that the internal and external community has to know about the university (Gómez-Bayona, 2018 et al). Entrepreneurs in for-profit online higher education need to improve student retention. When for-profit higher education leaders improve retention rates, they may improve their profitability and sustainability to continue to provide educational opportunities. These outcomes could potentially improve students' lives who graduate, and graduates may have increased career opportunities to positively improve personal wealth, development, dignity, and ability to contribute to their communities and the economy. In efforts to develop and sustain strong customer relations the following recommendations are made (a) capturing

student needs and developing personalized, customized experiences; (b) using strategies designed to engage the online customer; (c) aligning the company structure and resources to support a student-customer in an end-to-end experience and; (d) measure and understand the impact and value of student retention to business profits and revenue (Khosravian S, 2015). Conway et al. (1994) from their literature review on the role of students in

higher education (HE) concluded that the student is perceived as the customer and the product is seen as the course/programme. However, from their own exploratory research of eighty-three HE institutions mission statements they discovered that only half the institutions implied a customer orientation in their planning and only one institution clearly identified the dual role of the student as a product and as a customer. **Tahir R and Razak R (2006)** conceptualised a model and proposes that indicates that in order to develop relationship with students in an e-learning context service quality, customer orientation, experience, trust, shared values, communication, commitment and loyalty are important variables. When a community of people will meet together regularly by participating in newsgroups, chat forums at the university web site, a type of social bond that builds relationship between the university and its students can be expected. Furthermore, the availability of chat rooms, bulletin board system as well as voice and video conferencing facilities on the Internet will also provide the chance for universities to have online meetings or conferences with their students, no matter geographically where they are. As a result, understanding and implementation of these variables will enable universities to enhance student loyalty during and after their course.

Improved service quality a must for successful positioning by universities in the face of fierce competition.

Development of the knowledge society in the 21st century is characterized by broadening the boundaries of knowledge, shortening of the knowledge life cycle, and the emergence of new knowledge at a very fast pace (Helena, Š and Mirna, Š **2012**). Realising the opportunities thus created , entrepreneurs have been attracted to the sector in big numbers. This has generated growing competition between higher education service providers since the market is increasingly privatized. Private Service providers, especially in higher education are playing an increasingly important role (OECD, 2010). In such circumstances, higher education service quality becomes a key word for the service providers. Increasing competition on higher education market makes quality a key word for creation of competitive position of every institution. The research has indicated that quality of work of both teaching and non-teaching staff makes a significant part of the overall perception of higher education service quality, which could be improved at all three institutions. Nevertheless, some other aspects of higher education service quality can be introduced or improved: life-long learning program, better linking of formal, non-formal and informal learning in the curriculum, cooperation with labor market (Helena, Š and Mirna, Š **2012**). In recent years, international and national university ranking exercises have become commonplace, serving a host of stakeholders and beneficiaries including students, institutions, and governments. Not surprisingly these rankings have drawn increasing scrutiny from academics and other observers, many of whom have called into question the integrity of the methodologies employed, and thus the outcomes of the process. By contrast, relatively little attention has been paid to largely external factors that can affect a given institution's ability to compete within a given ranking exercise, such as their corporate status, geographic location, and/or access to resources. Hewitt, W. E. (2021). Nevertheless customer retention management at these universities has remained the lynchpin of their survival and growth in the face of competition.

Conclusions

In this era of the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) , with a contemporarily fiercely competitive business environment, universities need to develop relationship with students in an e-learning context characterised by service quality, (SERVQUAL) customer orientation, experience, trust, shared values, communication, commitment and loyalty are important variables. Survival, growth and profitability of these universities will depend on recognising this and taking it as a priority. Market trends and environment changes are key elements to be followed in order to keep and improve the higher education service quality. Higher education service quality of the institution should be constantly monitored and adapted in order to satisfy both students and labor market needs and requirements. With activities getting increasingly digitalised , education included, it is necessary to develop relationship with students in an e-learning context. Attention needs to be paid to service quality, customer orientation, experience, trust, shared values, communication, commitment and loyalty as important variables. When a community of people will meet together regularly by participating in newsgroups,

chat forums at the university web site, a type of social bond that builds relationship between the university and its students can be expected.

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