Marketing Practices in Secondary Education: A Focus on Private Secondary Schools

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Abstract: In the changing political, social, economical and technological environment in Mauritius, Private Secondary Schools are concerned about their survival prospect. This study is two-fold. First it attempts to identify the factors leading to low student inta ke in the Private Secondary Schools in Mauritius. Secondly, it aims to analyse the promotional tools used by these schools and the contribution of promotion to attract an increasing number of students. An exploratory study was carried out and in-depth interviews were conducted with Principals of the Private Secondary Schools in Mauritius. The results show that limited promotion is carried out in the schools surveyed. In most cases, Principals rely only on a single promotional tool although they recognise that a combination of promotional tools could have a positive impact on increasing the number of students. The study also shows that Principals of Private Secondary Schools in Mauritius do not recognise the importance of promotion as a marketing tool to remain competitive in this increasingly changing business environment.

Key words: Secondary Education, Marketing, Promotion, Private Secondary Schools, Mauritius

INTRODUCTION

Before the advent of free education in Mauritius, Private Secondary Schools in the country had to compete for the small proportion of students willing to join secondary education. It was then important for these institutions to promote their institutions to make prospective consumers aware of their product offer. The introduction of free education in 1977[21] has increased the number of students willing to join secondary education. Private Secondary Schools in Mauritius have been given grants by the Government through the Private Secondary School Authority. This has reduced the strain on Private Secondary Schools to market their activities to attract students and hence promotion has lost its importance in the overall strategy of Secondary Private Schools.

Marketing is becoming one of the most prominent features of competition-oriented school provision[24], however, little is known about marketing activities carried out in schools in Mauritius. Many of the Private Secondary Schools need to secure their survival as they are being faced with low student intake problems and are threatened to be deregistered. In some cases, they have also been closed-down. Private Secondary Schools in Mauritius are evolving in a competitive business environment and hence promotion can play an important role in attracting students in these privately run educational institutions.

This study aims to investigate factors which cause a fall in the number of students recruited by Private Secondary Schools in Mauritius. It also examines the role of promotion in marketing these schools.

The following research questions have been formulated to explore pertinent issues:

1. What are the factors that have caused a decrease in the number of students in Private Secondary Schools in Mauritius?
2. What are the marketing tools used to promote Private Secondary Schools in Mauritius?
3. Are the promotional strategies used effective to meet the challenges faced by Private Secondary Schools in Mauritius?

Literature Review:

School Marketing: The literature on marketing of schools has increased in recent years[3,5,19,22,29,30,31]. The marketing concept holds that organisations have to attract and retain customers by providing products and services which will satisfy their needs[16]. This argument also applies to the marketing of schools. Nowadays, marketing could be regarded as one of the core functions even for schools as the later would not be able to survive without effective marketing[28]. Schools provide services to its consumers, hence in today’s competitive climate, it is important for these schools to ensure that customer needs and expectations are met.

Marketing has been defined as a holistic management process aimed at improving effectiveness through the satisfaction of clients’ needs and desires rather than just mere selling of products or convincing customers to buy a specific educational program[12].

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From this perspective, marketing is defined as ‘the means by which the school actively communicates and promotes its purpose, values and products to the pupils, parents, staff and wider community’[9]. Marketing should be based on a dialogue between the school, its students and parents, and on how their different needs can be met most effectively[18]. However, due to the intangible characteristic of a service, it is very difficult for parents or students to evaluate the service to be provided by schools prior to consumption. Schools are able to ‘tangibilise’ their service offer through effective marketing.

Marketing and Parental Choice: The literature reveals that in order to attract students, schools are increasing their marketing efforts[24,25]. Promotional materials provided by schools disclose information about how the latter respond to the competitive environment[24]. Parents make the purchase-decision and choose schools based on the information available both though formal and informal marketing efforts. Parents compare schools according to what they think would be most appropriate for the development and success of their children.

Private Secondary Schools are generally promoted as superior choices compared to Public ones[7]. Hence, in the positioning of Private Secondary Schools, the emphasis is on individual attention offered to the student, tailor-made programs, safer environment, small classes, choice of religious instruction and less Government intervention in the curriculum[7]. Additionally, Private Secondary Schools also cater for low performing students since the latter will have personal attention due to caring teachers and lower teacher to student ratio. There is also evidence that parents also choose secondary schools based on the type and variety of subjects and facilities offered as well as academic rigour of the school[6,8]. Hence, the contribution of a school in developing children’s personal, social and academic development is important in determining the purchase decisions of parents.

Apart from the strengths and opportunities provided by schools, the purchase decision is also determined by negative perceptions of schools by parents. West, Davies, Ribbens[34] argue that parents will not opt for a school with a lack of discipline and bad reputation. Poor perceptions of parents affect the positioning of schools and hence reduce their effectiveness to recruit students.

Promotion: Promotion is an important marketing tool used to market organisations and their activities. The literature reveals that advertising, public relations (PR), personal selling, and written materials such as brochures[16,29], inform the market and persuade them to choose the service that is offered. Most of the marketing activities carried out in schools are classified as promotion and should be integrated in the marketing strategies and plan as well as the overall business plan of the organisation[27]. This argument is congruent with theory where it is stated that marketing contributes to decision-making through systematic design, collection, analysis and reporting of data about the organisation[9]. However, the literature shows that there is a lack of formal and systematic marketing in schools. In a study carried out by Woods[16], formal marketing was observed only through a SWOT analysis to determine the school’s strengths and weaknesses in comparison with its competitors. Bagley et al.,[2] stated that in another school, evidence of marketing was seen through the completion of a survey by parents to assess the reasons why they had chosen the school. A study carried out in Israel shows that informal conversations with teachers and parents in the evenings were the main source of acquiring information about parents’ needs and desires[28]. In USA, a study by DeZarn[11] reveals that one way that school use marketing is through the application of technology in its daily activities. Research shows that information and feedback is gathered through ad hoc ways by school staff through conversations with parents and parent associations meetings[14,35,2,28,4] stated that in some schools Principals did not have much knowledge of marketing and did not even realise that they were conducting marketing activities.

Several studies reveal that schools attempt to create a distinctive image in order to distinguish from competitors[3,20,26,27]. For a school to be effective, it does not only need to provide services to its customers but also has to convey a positive and strong image to parents and stakeholders. Hence, marketing plays a crucial role in the positioning of schools. Worldwide, most schools engage in press and non-press PR activities[4,11,33,20,27]. The most common are open days and evenings, parent assemblies and fund raising events. An important informal promotional tool is word-of-mouth communications[23], an element also indicated by school Principals[3,27].

Effective schools empower parents and staff in decision-making that directly affect school operations[10]. It is believed that they are in the best position to provide relevant feedback so as to effectively design practices that meet the needs, interests, and abilities of the students.

Previous studies carried out show few cases where advertisements were used as a promotional tool[22,3,27,33]. On the other hand, the use of logos and mottos was relatively common in the promotional materials of schools, especially in private schools. Gray[15] argues that the creation and promotion of a school’s mission
statement, the use of a logo, and careful public relations is of great importance to communicate the service offer. It will help the school develop a vision and strengthen its position in the competitive marketplace.

Methodology: An exploratory study was chosen to investigate issues pertaining to Private Secondary Schools in Mauritius. Research in this area is limited and therefore to gauge relevant issues, a qualitative methodology was chosen as it is concerned with understanding the social phenomena from the participants’ perspective(17). The individual face to face interview was identified as the most appropriate way to elucidate the research questions. Another reason for choosing the qualitative method is that it generates holistic rather than segregated data. According to Gerdes and Conn(13), a holistic perspective is developed based on allowing the participants to tell their own stories in their own words and from their own perspective. Hence, as this study is among the first of its kind to be conducted in Mauritius, this type of research design was deemed suitable. It enables the interviewer to probe deeper into the phenomenon under investigation and comprehend the issue related to the marketing of Private Secondary Schools.

Data was collected from Principals of Private Secondary Schools in Mauritius (PSSM) through individual face to face interviews organised in respective schools. Through the different perspectives and views of the Principals, the aim was to identify factors causing a decrease in the number of students as well as gather a holistic picture of the promotional strategies used by the educational institutions. Principals were selected as they were Key Informants on the topic. Due to their position in the institution, it was believed that they had the knowledge to comment on the marketing activities used by the PSSM and also had the ability to disclose such information.

Additionally, it was important to select Principals who share the same experience and were affected by the same set of circumstances on a daily basis. Thus, only Principals of PSSM who are facing a decrease in student numbers were identified to participate in the interview.

The population was all the PSSM with less than 1000 students who were selected as they were the ones facing the low student intake problem. Convenience sampling was used to select the PSSM to be included in the survey. Only PSSM which were easily accessible by public transport were surveyed. PSSM from all four Education Zones in the country were selected. Table 1 shows that 20 out of 24 Schools were identified from Zone 1, 11 from Zone 2, 15 from Zone 3 and 8 from Zone 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zones</th>
<th>Number of Schools</th>
<th>Sample</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zone 1</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zone 2</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zone 3</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zone 4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>54</td>
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The 54 selected Principals were first approached by phone where they were informed about the purpose of the study. They were also ensured that the results would remain confidential and that their names and that of their Schools would not be identified. Out of the 54 selected participants, only 10 responded positively. A date and time was identified based on the convenience of the Principals for appointments to conduct the interviews.

A pilot interview was conducted prior to the final interview sessions. Following this exercise, some questions were rephrased and technical marketing jargons replaced. Additionally, it gave an indication about the amount of time needed per interview, thus improving the interview techniques to optimise the time to gather relevant information. Additionally, to establish a friendly, unthreatening rapport during the interview, the researcher used the national dialect, Creole instead of French or English. It was also important to avoid leading questions as it would affect the genuine response of Principals. Audiotapes were used to ensure the flow of information and concentrate on conducting the interview rather than noting answers on paper.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For presentation of data and with a consideration of confidentiality and fluency of discussion, the Principals are identified using code names i.e. Principal A. The Principals are unanimous that they are facing a decrease in the number of students enrolling in their schools. They agreed that the emergence of Public Secondary Schools have a direct impact on the decrease in the number of students in their schools. The rise in the number of Public Secondary Schools is a threat to their survival and this was identified by Principal F and J as being the only factor impinging on the growth of PSSM. Principal H mentioned that PSSM cannot compete with State Secondary Schools as they do not have the Government’s support or the elaborate infrastructure and facilities provided by State Secondary Schools. According to this Principal, this results into parents perceiving that Public Secondary Schools have better facilities and services than PSSM. This leads to Public Secondary Schools being parents’ first choice for secondary institutions. Principal A mentioned that another reason for low number of students is that the number of pupils taking the Certificate in Primary
Education, which is the national examination that students need to take to gain entry to secondary schooling, is falling year after year thus resulting in less students going to secondary schools. Principal B raised the point that the number of children in a family is decreasing, thus the logical drop in the number of students in secondary schools in general.

The Principals agreed that there is a lack of communication between the school and prospective students and parents. The latter are unaware of the benefits offered by PSSM and hence PSSM are unlikely to be included in their pre-purchase information search and purchase decisions. The Principals identified two main ways that PSSM differentiate from Public Secondary Schools. According to them PSSM offer a higher level of education, students are more disciplined, they have a wider range of extra curricular activities, individual attention from teachers due to a lower teacher to student ratio. Other Principals highlighted better academic performance of students.

Only 70% of the Principals interviewed showed a firm belief that marketing is an important aspect of their institution. The other Principals were pessimistic about this issue. Principal D stated that parents make their decisions regarding the choice of a school well beforehand and no one can influence them in this decision. He showed a high degree of pessimism through his comment ‘I do not give much importance to promotion since I believe that we cannot compete with State Schools’. The other Principals mentioned that they only felt slightly threatened at the moment and would go for marketing if they were more threatened through future drastic decrease in their number of students. Through most of the interviews, it was felt that there was a lack of understanding among Principals of the importance of marketing. Hence, the answers related to the importance of marketing and the types of marketing tools/strategies used in these organisations have been quite vague.

The findings reveal that PSSM did not give much importance to formal marketing tools. 70 % mentioned that they had never made use of formal promotional tools. Principal B clearly mentioned that no one is bothered about promotion in his school as they are busy in the day to day running of the school. On the other hand, Principal I came up with a strategic plan to attend and participate in the interview. Principals expressed that a good relationship with the staff can help overcome resistance regarding involvement of staff in promotional activities to be carried out. Principal C mentioned that a change in Management had brought a drastic change in the mentality of the staff and he highlighted that there are ‘talks’ (word-of-mouth) amongst parents that teachers are becoming more hardworking and responsible.

Word-of-mouth (WOM) is referred as the most credible way of promoting the schools. Although 3 Principals were not favourable to formal promotional tools, all the Principals recognised the importance of WOM. For most Principals, it is the least costly way of communicating with potential customers. Principal E did not agree since according to him, it required some investment. It was found that there is a reliance...
on WOM among the PSSM. Principal D mentioned that parents of students have been to PSSM. This Principal who does not believe in formal promotion says that he keeps the promises made to parents so as to ensure there is positive WOM.

This study also raised the issue of the use of Information Technology in promoting PSSM. The idea of having a website created much enthusiasm about Principals. Principals F said that he already has a website for the school. Principal E mentioned that they have been thinking about it over a long time. Principal H mentioned that this is a way to remain competitive and not lag behind. According to Principal G, one of the reasons that her school does not have a website is because the employees at Management level are not computer literate. Most of them favour the idea of promoting their institution through the internet and a website. According to them it will result in a positive relationship between management and prospective students and parents. It will also help enhance WOM.

**Discussion:** It was found that the emergence of Public Secondary Schools has negatively affected the recruitment of students in PSSM. However, PSSM did not seem to be reacting actively to this threat as there was a lack of effective marketing strategies to attract prospective students. Although a few schools carried out promotion, it was on a short-term basis just before and during the period of admission. Sporadic promotion is not sufficient to disclose the right information to parents in order to influence their purchase decision and convince them that the school has the right features for the development and success of their children. The perceptions of a few Principals indicate they do not have much knowledge about the role of marketing and its benefits for schools. There seems to be no distinction between the day-to-day running of the organisation and its long-term survival. Principals do not appear to realise the long-term benefits of marketing such as image building and repositioning of the institution which they do not cater for in their business strategies. There also seems to be lack of understanding regarding the appropriate stakeholders from their educational institution perspective. The institutions consider only parents and to some extent staff as stakeholders. Instead they should have included past, present and future students, media, administrative staff, government, families, employers and industry, educational authorities. PSSM are not making optimum use of information technology which would have been an effective way of communicating information about the school, students, activities and other strengths and opportunities available at their institutions.

The promotional activities carried out in PSSM are congruent with empirical evidence where many schools use staff to gather information through conversations with parents[14,35,2,27]. Research has acknowledged the importance of the employee as an internal customer who needs to be satisfied so as to give good service [10]. Many PSSM empower their staff so that they can effectively contribute to the promotion of the schools. Another finding which is in line with the literature is the importance of WOM which has been accepted by the majority of Principals as the most credible promotional tool. This finding is similar to studies carried out worldwide[3,27]. However, the PSSM are not doing a systematic follow-up to determine if WOM generates positive or negative comments. In the survey, reference has been made to discipline in PSSM which is higher than State Secondary Schools. This is an asset on which PSSM should capitalise. Such a message should be passed through appropriate promotional channels as there is evidence that parents prefer well-disciplined schools[14].

It was noticed that over the Principals do not seem to be aware of the concept of scanning the external business environment and reacting accordingly by marketing their institutions. As per the literature, it is clear that the education sector has evolved and attracting students is becoming increasingly competitive [24,25]. Soutar and Turner[32] have described education as being one evolving in a highly marketised and competitive environment. The scenario in Mauritius seems to be contradictory. Before the advent of free education, PSSM gave much importance to marketing. However, with free education, it seems that the PSSM believe that they cannot compete and hence have abandoned themselves to their fate. With the changing business environment, PSSM should have reacted as secondary schools have to compete for students in the recruitment markets. Instead, PSSM were found to be rather passive in the face of competition. The Principals show clearly that they are not in a position to assess the strength of their institutions which could be used in promoting their institutions. The transmission of information through marketing efforts is increasingly important. Since marketing is a core management aspect of any organisation[16,12,28], the passivity of PSSM in promoting their organisations underpins the development and success of many of these organizations.

**Conclusions:** This study has explored the factors that have caused a decrease in the number of students in PSSM. It has also identified the marketing tools used to promote these institutions. For organisations involved in providing educational services, it is important to make use of a multitude of marketing tools available to them and understand their contributions. The investigation showed that there is not much conviction
from the part Principals as to the usefulness of marketing. It has been observed that there is a certain degree of pessimism among Principals concerning the use of Marketing in promoting PSSM and its role in their survival. The concept of management needs to be reviewed by PSSM as they should be aware of the management tools available to them in order to successfully operate their organisations. Through the Association of PSSM, Principals need to be well versed with Management tools and their benefits. There is a need to develop marketing strategies which is part of their overall business plan where clear aims and objectives related to marketing should be well formulated. Integrated Marketing Communications seem to be a more plausible solution rather than isolated marketing activities in the face of increasing competition in this field.

The main limitation of this study was that the response rate was rather small. Due to its qualitative nature, several institutions did not participate in the survey as it was more demanding for them to take part in an interview. This research has focused on the Management’s perspectives regarding the role of promotion in marketing Private Secondary Schools. Future research could look at this issue from the perspectives of potential customers.

REFERENCES


