

Promises, promises...

Linking promise, expectation and consumer behaviour

The recent press reports about the likely surge in international recruitment activity by UK universities means that the issue of balance in recruitment strategies is, once again, a hot topic.

Just how reliable are the emerging markets? How much faith should universities and colleges place in the market trend reports and what might happen if planned expansion doesn't quite work out as expected?

Recent sector projects, however, have highlighted other preoccupations for universities and colleges that could have an impact for all organisations, whether large or small.

THE "PROMISE, EXPECTATION AND DELIVERY" EQUATION

Contextual market forces are conspiring to place the "promise, expectation and delivery" equation high on the critical list for a number of UK institutions. Increasingly, strategic project results report significant gaps between the "promise" that organisations communicate to potential stakeholders via marketing activity (in terms of standards, T and L quality and appropriateness of delivery methods and teaching styles, plus student experience and institutional infrastructure, for example) and the practicalities of the delivery upon that promise in terms of the stakeholder's received experience.

A CHANGING MARKET CONTEXT

The current market context provides a heady cocktail of sub plots all conspiring to make render an organisation's ability to deliver on its promised proposition increasingly significant within profile and reputation management.

For example, the surge in international recruitment activity places effective support, care and tailored teaching delivery methods for students in the spotlight. What has the institution promised? What kind of cultural and social mix will it deliver? Some institutions plan to double the proportion of international students on site within three years: the impact of this will intensify the scrutiny they face in terms of delivering upon the marketing promises that can justifiably make.

Shifts in population balance inevitably have a significant impact on student experience for all cohorts within an institution, whether domestic or international, students or staff, and universities will need to adjust and "index-link" their marketing carefully to ensure that both strategy and practical activity reflect a constantly changing proposition.

Increased international competition and the shift towards greater transparency in higher education recruitment, admissions and evaluation processes all raise the temperature of current debate. Similarly, the tuition fees debacle has caused institutions to consider how to deliver on the relative return on the investment made by students, at whatever level.

DECISION-MAKING BEHAVIOUR

At the centre of the mix, of course, sits the potential student. Or, rather, at the centre of the mix sits the potential student plus anyone or anything that may have an influence on their decision-making behaviour. The potential impact of tuition fees, for example, has been much considered: what needs to be flagged, now, is the way in which any perceived gaps between organisational promise and practical delivery (through "experience" of an organisation or its services) can influence buyer behaviour, both up and down the decisionmaking process chain.

THE "FIFTH ELEMENT"

Decision-making is composed of five identified stages:

- [1] The "recognition of need" or an awareness of a problem that needs to be solved (for example, "I need to follow a course of study to enhance my career prospects").
- [2] A search for information.
- [3] An evaluation by the individual making the decision (and any factors/individuals that may influence them) of the various alternatives, based on the information gleaned.

[4] The practical decision or choice.

[5] Finally, based on the reality of the subsequent experience (i.e. post enrolment), the **"post-choice evaluation"**. For example, does the reality of experience live up to the expectation generated via the promises made by the organisation (through its information, marketing materials, behaviour, culture etc)?

It is easy to see that marketing has a major role to play in each of these stages, but it is the fifth stage of the process, the post-choice evaluation, where things can begin to come unstuck.

When students complain to organisations regarding their experiences, infrastructure or support, it is disappointment, driven by the failure of **"real experience"** to live up to marketing or organisational promises, that can present the principal problem for dissatisfied stakeholders.

RISK FACTORS

The risk factors for institutions occur when the ripples of this dissatisfaction are mapped. Influences on selection or buyer behaviour are well documented and include the following parameters:

- Who is important in the selection decision?
- How do they select or choose?
- What are their choice criteria?
- Where do they choose or select?
- When do they choose or select?

The first factor has far-ranging implications: inevitably, third parties or other factors of influence are involved in decision-making, so, to be effective, marketing needs to understand both the identity of these influences and the level of influence they may exert. If post-choice evaluation produces a negative response for a stakeholder, this will not only be communicated to peers making similar choices, but also to influencers, too, who by definition, may have a wider and longer term sphere of impact.

BREAKS IN THE SUPPLY CHAIN

The concept of bad news travelling faster and further, in marketing terms, than good news, is well known and is a particularly critical issue in student recruitment. This is especially the case when positive advocacy is known to be such a key influence in encouraging **"supply chain"** or repeat business applications, for example, from pools of potential students relatively predisposed towards an institution because of the trickle-down, reported positive experiences of satisfied stakeholders. This is well documented in international student recruitment markets where successful and positive alumni are key to an organisation's ability to manage and maintain its reputation among potential students and their advisers.

INFLUENCES ON CONSUMER SELECTION BEHAVIOUR

Influences on consumer buying or selection behaviour are divided into two main categories, described as personal and social influences:

[1] **Personal influences include:**

- Information evaluation
- Motivation for actions
- Beliefs and attitudes
- Personality
- Lifestyle
- Stage in lifecycle

[2] **Social influences include:**

- Culture: current and aspirational
- Social class
- Geodemographics
- Reference groups: i.e. peer influences, benchmarks for success, failure etc

Peer pressure is widely recognised as a major influence on choice, especially so with regards to **"high involvement"** purchase decisions (i.e. decisions that are weighty, or of long lasting implication). Strategic project reports demonstrate that students as consumers are highly involved in the choice/selection process to the point that they may evaluate the consequences of a decision, in part, by how it might be viewed by others within their peer group.

Within this context, the risk involved for organisations not living up to their promises is far reaching, as negative attitudes to organisations have the potential to spread through peer groups and their influencers. For example, any organisational mismanagement of the response to tuition fees will not only affect the decision-making of UK students, but will, inevitably, also affect the institution's reputation and standing.

MARKETING AS "CONSCIENCE"?

With such imperatives as a backdrop, being agile and proactive in marketing effort will not be enough. It is possible that, increasingly, marketing will be called upon to act as the **"conscience"** of the organisation, making sure that the delivery of service and experience really can live up to the promises made. While this would seem to place extra demands on the marketing function, it serves to illustrate the critical role that marketing must play in broader corporate planning.

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