Marketing Communication Strategies Focused on High School Graduates. Case Study: The School of Marketing of the Academy of Economic Studies from Bucharest

Abstract: The major goal of the paper consists in designing new communication strategies for the School of Marketing of the Academy of Economic Studies from Bucharest, Romania. This strategic approach is focused on the communication strategies with the high school graduates who are the future candidates to the status of university student. The paper emphasizes the relationship between the university and the future high school graduates due to the fact that a real bond between these parties does not exist before the moment when the candidates enroll for the admission examination for the first year. In addition, another significant reason is the fact that high schools and their students represent important stakeholders from the perspective of a higher education institution.

Key words: Marketing; communication strategies; survey; higher education

JEL Classification: M30, M31, M39

The strategic marketing approach of the marketing higher education should start with the core of the marketing philosophy. Some of the nuggets to be discovered and valued by the universities, in general, and the School of Marketing, in particular, are the following: relationship with the customer, proactive approach, differentiation and positioning in the educational market, communication strategy.

1. The competition in the Romanian market of marketing higher education

At present, in Romania, the marketing university education is marked by the existence of a significant number of suppliers, respectively twelve public institutions and nine private institutions. Out of the twenty one universities, only two have a marketing school with undergraduate and graduate curricula, eighteen have only a marketing specialization at the undergraduate level within a school of economics and one has only a master program in marketing (but not a marketing school or undergraduate specialization).
In Romania, the Academy of Economic Studies of Bucharest has a leading position in the marketing higher education. It is the first that created a school of marketing which is accredited by the Ministry of Education and Research. The Romanian market of marketing higher education is in the early growth stage. This statement is supported by facts such as:

a. *gradual increase in the number of providers* of marketing higher education diplomas;

b. *low level of innovativeness and differentiation* reflected by the name and content of the curricula, many of them resembling heavily and being conceived according to models promoted by the Academy of Economic Studies from Bucharest;

c. *relatively narrow range of marketing disciplines in some universities*, as a university diploma in marketing may be earned by graduating a four-year curricula with a number of ten disciplines (the case of “Babes-Bolyai” University from Cluj Napoca and University from Oradea), at the opposite end being the number of twenty-eight marketing disciplines (the case of the Academy of Economic Studies from Bucharest and Romanian-German University from Sibiu);

d. *relatively low level of development of the communication strategies*, only 52% of the twenty-one universities providing online information (even only limited) about their offering and the curricula of the undergraduate and graduate specializations in marketing;

e. *the majority share held by the public universities* in the field of marketing higher education, respectively in the total number of institutions that provide undergraduate and/or graduate marketing higher education programs, trend that will probably change due to the further recognition of the importance and attractiveness of marketing by the private institutions.

The process of harmonization with the systems existing in the countries that are members of the European Union and the future increased competition in the higher education market will generate significant shifts in the marketing strategies of the Romanian players.

**2. Awareness and image of the marketing higher education among high school students**

High school students are one of the most important targets of the marketing communication strategies of the marketing higher education providers. Due to this fact, the awareness and the image among them is a valuable asset for every academic institution providing a specialization in marketing.

In November 2006, a survey has been carried out among high school students by a group of professors from the Marketing Department of the School of Marketing of the Academy of Economic Studies from Bucharest (Catoiu, I. et al., 2006). The goal of the research was to evaluate the awareness and image of the marketing higher education. The
statistical population considered consisted of students in the eleventh and twelfth form, in high schools from Bucharest. The research has been carried out in nine high schools of various profiles, not only economic.

Marketing enjoys a very high level of awareness among the high school students, as 91% of them have heard of it. However, the meaning of the term is partially clear. Most of the respondents (78.5%) declared they are aware of one or more institutions providing specializations in marketing. The institution that scores the highest top-of-mind awareness (96.7%) is the Academy of Economic Studies from Bucharest.

A critical aspect is the relatively low top-of-mind awareness of the School of Marketing from the Academy of Economic Studies, among the high school students. The research showed a level of only 29.8%, compared to the 96.7% of the Academy of Economic Studies. The main reason of this discrepancy is the relatively recent creation of the School of Marketing, during the academic year 2003/2004.

The range of sources of information considered by the high school students is wide. The Web site and former graduates are the most important channels of communication with the high school students.

A significant share of respondents (40%) did not make their mind relative to the school they are going to attend after the graduation of the high school. This shows that effective communication strategies could support the decision of students and increase their propensity towards marketing. Those who intend to attend a specialization in marketing represent only 12.2% of the sample. This share should be perceived as favorable considering the diversity of specializations provided by the public and private universities from Romania.

In essence, marketing enjoys a high awareness and a positive image among the future high school graduates. The Academy of Economic Studies owns a leading position among the higher education institutions providing specializations in marketing. However, the School of Marketing component of the Academy of Economic Studies has not achieved yet a clear image among the future graduates of the high schools.

3. School of Marketing: Present communication objectives and strategies

From its creation in the academic year 2003/2004, the School of Marketing has pursued as main goal the increase in the awareness among the various groups of stakeholders: high school students, university graduates interested to attend a master or Ph.D. program in marketing, present students, companies from the Romanian market etc. Another objective was to increase the awareness about the entire offering of programs, especially master programs of the School of Marketing. At the same time, the school aimed at developing the
The communication strategy has relied heavily on the following main activities and tools:

a. **Development of the visual identity and the slogan of the school.** Since the academic year 2005/2006, the School has its own logo and the slogan “The School of Marketing: Supplier of Market Leaders”. The logo and the slogan are present on the billboards located at the premises of the school.

b. **Creation and maintenance of the Web pages of the School of Marketing.** A very important tool for the communication with the various groups of stakeholders is the Web site. The online communication is one of the most popular among university students and high school students. The site offers information about the school, its mission, vision, management, curricula, events etc.

c. **Organization of conferences on marketing and personal development topics.** Together with multinationals like Coca-Cola HBC, P&G Marketing Romania and Auchan, the School of Marketing has organized various conferences dedicated to students from all the faculties from the Academy of Economic Studies.

d. **Communication officer.** Since the academic year 2004/2005, the organizational chart of the School of Marketing includes a position of communication officer. He is the interface of the school with various types of stakeholders, mainly the present students of the School of Marketing. In addition, he is in charge with the electronic mail for the address: facultatea.marketing@ase.ro.

Only the Web strategy targets to a higher extent the high school students besides other stakeholder groups. This strategic approach is too narrow to ensure the building up of an appropriate awareness and image for the School of Marketing among the pool of potential students. Consequently, several shifts in the communication objectives and strategies are necessary.

4. **New communication objectives and strategies**

Communication is a component of maximal importance for the universities. Effective communication with the market and publics is a must for every educational institution (Kotler, P.; Fox, K.F.A., 1995). For the period 2006-2008, from the perspective of the School of Marketing from the Academy of Economic Studies from Bucharest, among the most important objectives of the communication with the high school students should range the following:
a. *clarification of the meaning and relevance of marketing*, for the high school students, in order to help them making the right choices from their perspective, according to their own aspirations of personal development and avoiding the arbitrary choices of the academic field of study;

b. *differentiation from the challenger faculties/universities*, especially from those in the private field;

c. *increasing the top-of-mind awareness* of the School of Marketing from the Academy of Economic Studies from Bucharest (from the present level of 30% to at least 70%) among the high school students from Bucharest and other parts of the country;

d. *developing the image* of the School of Marketing as the first school in marketing created in Romania and the one that provides all levels of education in marketing, from university diploma to master diploma and Ph.D. diploma;

These objectives reflect a multifold approach. On one side the school is interested to develop the primary demand for marketing. On the other side, the major objectives refer to the development of the specific demand for the brand represented by the “School of Marketing: Supplier of Market Leaders”.

In order to accomplish these objectives, some of the major strategic steps to be made by the School of Marketing are presented below:

a. *Integrated marketing communication*. The School of Marketing should diversify the channels of communication with the future high school graduates. The communication through the Web site is the major tool. The messages conveyed through the online channel should be supported by offline tools such as public relations, advertising and direct marketing. At the same time, the school should integrate and coordinate the communication channels to deliver a clear, consistent and compelling message (Kotler, P.; Armstrong, G., 2006). The diversification will increase the complexity of the communication strategy, but will improve the chances to establish contacts, to receive and convey messages through various points of contact with the target audience. The integration will increase the effectiveness of the communication.

b. *Web strategy*. The results of the survey carried out in 2005 among the high school students show that 68.8% of them use as information source the Web site of the school they intend to attend. Consequently, the Web strategy of the School of Marketing should be upgraded and developed in order to meet the expectations of the future candidates to the admission process. The site should be reviewed and the information updated in order to enhance the interest of the target audience. A “Latest News” section can be created in order to help surfers identifying quickly the “hot” information about the activities of the school, the admission process, the new
regulations issued by the Senate of the Academy etc. A strategy to obtain online feedback from surfers could be devised in order to increase their satisfaction relative to the site content.

**c. Public relation tools.** The School of Marketing should implement a proactive marketing public relations (MPR) approach. Instead of being defensively oriented towards problem solving, it has to develop an offensive orientation that is seeking opportunities (Shimp, T.A., 2000). Such an approach will increase the likelihood of building a strong awareness and a positive image among the high school students. The proactive MPR strategies may be accomplished by means of online and offline tools. A new PR concept that could be implemented by the School of Marketing is that of “*Open House*”. This will be an event organized at the premises of the Academy of Economic Studies. It will be dedicated to all those who want to know better the educational offering, the professors and the activities of the school. The target is represented mainly by the future high school graduates, but also includes their parents and their professors from the high school. During such an event, the school will introduce itself and its people, will invite several present students and professors, as well as former graduates who may present their own perspective about the curricula and the extent to which the school experience is beneficial for their career and personal development. On the occasion of the “Open House”, a *tour* of the Academy’s facilities may be organized for the participants. Being proactive means reaching out the target audience. Consequently, the School of Marketing should organize in partnership with major high schools of Bucharest events under the title “*Meet the People of the School of Marketing from the Academy of Economic Studies*”. This type of events may be organized as an afternoon to which high school students are invited on the premises of their school, to meet and communicate with representatives of the School of Marketing, specifically with professors and present students. For the events “Open House” and “Meet the People of the School of Marketing” a *DVD recording* may be used to point out the major benefits of attending a specialization in marketing, the types of careers that are available in marketing and other aspects of relevance to high school students, like the preparation of the entry file and the admission examination etc. The visits of the university representatives in the high schools have a multifold purpose: (i) to increase the awareness about marketing; (ii) to develop a basic and correct understanding of marketing; (iii) to build a positive image of the School of Marketing; (iv) to communicate and establish relationships with individual high school students who would like to become university students in marketing. These afternoons in high schools could be organized in a series, in order to contribute to the development of a relationship with the
students. Among the offline tools may also range the invitations to marketing conferences addressed to selected high school students who express their interest in attending the School of Marketing. The two types of events that have been already mentioned are a good ground for developing closer relationships with such potential customers. The invitations will have the role to improve the understanding of the high school students relative to the marketing significance and the possible career opportunities. The conferences to which they will be invited are those organized by the School of Marketing in partnership with companies, for the university students. In addition, the relationships with the media should be strengthened (Topor, R.S., 1993). The school could prepare news releases for various publications relevant to high school students on topics such as the events organized for this segment. The online MPR tools may consist in a Web forum area for the high school students that will be moderated by the communication officer. This tool will contribute to enhancing the communication about the curricula of the School, the admission process and other relevant aspects. Marketing professors may also participate to the extent that clarifications of marketing concepts are required by the Web navigators.

- **Advertising.** As a public institution, the Academy of Economic Studies has a very limited budget. The financial resources of the School of Marketing are mostly ensured by means of the tuitions paid by the master students who attend the five distinct programs provided by the school. Consequently, due to the high costs incurred, the investment in advertising should be kept at a minimal level. However, with the support of the Academy of Economic Studies or of some donor companies, the school may print some leaflets and posters to be used before and during PR events like the “Open House” and “Meet the People of the School of Marketing from the Academy of Economic Studies”.

- **Direct marketing.** The School of Marketing may consider the direct mailing campaigns in order to target the professors from the high schools. The reason for this approach is the result of the marketing research that shows that 45.4% of the high school students communicate with their professors when they want to obtain information about the opportunities available in the field of university education. The direct mailing package may contain a letter signed by the dean, a leaflet about the benefits, advantages and features of the educational offering of the School of Marketing, as well as an invitation to an “Open House” event.

The core target of the communication strategies that have been presented is represented by the high school students. In order to accomplish the marketing and communication objectives, the School of Marketing should consider the extended target that also includes the high schools, specifically the management as well as the professors and
especially the class coordinators who advise the students. At the same time, parents may also be addressed with specific marketing communication tools.

The communication strategy should contribute to the development of good relationships with the high schools and their students. The School of Marketing could consider the pyramid of relationships (Peelen, Ed, 2005) in setting the terms of the collaboration with the high schools. The pyramid has the following levels: prospect, client, customer, ambassador support and partner.

The School should approach the high schools aiming at developing a partnership and a long term relationship. All the parties will enjoy the benefits. The high schools will be in a better position to advise their students, due to the direct and relevant information provided by the School of Marketing or obtained directly in the PR events. The high school students will be able to make more informed choices relative to the university specialization. The School of Marketing will increase its competitiveness in the Romanian educational market and build a leading position in the minds and hearts of the potential candidates to the admission process.

The reshape of the communication strategy is a must in a market that will become more tempting for international players starting with Romania’s accession to the European Union. Simultaneously, a review of the entire marketing mix is needed in order to ensure the sustainability of the leading position on the Romanian market of marketing higher education.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**