

THE INFLUENCE OF INTERNAL CUSTOMER ON IMAGE CREATION of private universities

Agnieszka Pawlak-Wolanin¹

Janusz Gudowski²

Abstract

In the era of fierce competition positive and well established image of an organization can affect its survival. In the case of the university a large part of the organization are its internal customers, ie. students. This paper presents the results of a study on the impact of internal customer on creating the image of one of private universities in the Lower Silesia. The university operates mainly in the local environment, however a group of students come from similar or smaller towns located about 20-50 km away, and even from the provincial capital – Wrocław.

Key words: private university, image creation, internal customer

Introduction

The development of the market economy and the emergence of private schools on the market have changed the perception of a word “education”. Today, this concept can also be understood as a commercial service addressed to a specific group of customers. Sale of each service is affected by certain factors. In the case of education several factors causing the demand reduction can be mentioned: ia. population decline, a growing number of private schools, the declining standard of living. Risks resulting from these elements forced universities to take up marketing activities, including the increasing attention to its image. The school should shape its image constantly and professionally in the context of public relations. It has

¹ PhD, Eng., The Jan Wyżykowski University in Polkowice, Poland.

² Prof. PhD Hab., University of Economics and Innovation, Lublin, Poland.

to disseminate positive information about university among its stakeholders through conscious, purposeful, planned, systematic and long-term activities.³ It could use such channels as the press and the Internet for this purpose. It should also be kept in mind that students who are customers of the university are a major source of information. They can strongly shape the image of the school by generating messages (presenting opinions through “word of mouth” or posting on social media).

Creating the image as a part of marketing strategy

Building of the company’s image and the product brand are fundamental actions to stabilize and develop company on a strongly competitive market. These activities are neither easy nor feasible in a short time. They also require extensive market and managerial knowledge and high flexibility of the decisions taken. Knowing the weaknesses and shortcomings of the product the company should take decisions even drastically different to previous ones in order to avoid the risk of falling out of the market. This will occur when current customers will turn away from the product.

This kind of phenomena happens particularly often on the service market. In this case, to a greater extent than with the products, a major role in branding plays information that is easily available, simple in reception and has a friendly nature, the reliability of delivery just-in-time and the quality of service and competitive price. The latter element is a relative, depending on the consumer segment. It can also be a luxury good. In the case of universities that good is education offered by an elite school which diploma is highly respected on domestic or international market.

Building of the company’s image and the product brand is carried out using a variety of marketing methods. First of all actions in this area is one of the activities in the B2C segment. In the case of education, it could also be, though generally to a lesser extent, the B2B segment, when a university offers its services to staff of the organization. In certain circumstances, an image-building dimension may be omitted, e.g. when the huge production and trade network, employing thousands of workers, founded its own school to train their employees, formally without coercion. They gain a diploma and the safety of employment. However, it is reprehensible to exploit the position of the employer, under strains in the labor market, when the employer

³ W. Budzyński, *Public Relations. Zarządzanie reputacją firmy*, Wydawnictwo Poltex, Warszawa 2005, p. 9.

gains in relation to employees a virtually monopolistic position. So he does not have to care about the quality of a service.

B2C segment and even B2P (e.g. in local government scale) may be successfully implemented as an action bearing the characteristics of corporate social responsibility.

Ph. Kotler and W. Pfoertsch listed the following modules of marketing communication, useful for B2C and B2B segments: personal selling, direct marketing, public relations, fairs and exhibitions, advertising and sales promotion.⁴

The above list must be supplemented by an element which plays particularly important role for educational services. It can be colloquially called “whisper advertising,” or passing information from existing stakeholders to their friends, relatives or neighbors. Even better results can be achieved when the client is aware that he participates in creating the image of the vendor. Co-author of this text led for many years postgraduate studies at one of the leading universities in Poland. From probe into opinions of the candidates it turned out that they did not know any promotional materials for these studies, but they followed only information from older students, who actively participated in the scientific and organizational life of the unit. It was before the era of the Internet. Today, the Internet allows the amplification of this type of advertising which appeals to potential customers much more than even the most sophisticated vendor declarations. The last statement is the thesis adopted for the purpose of this paper.

Characteristics of the research

This paper presents the results of the research on influence of students on the private university on its image-building. The first part describes theoretical and methodological grounds, which were used to perform the research. The second one contains a summary of the result and an attempt to draw conclusions from the collected material.

The main objective of the study was to obtain information from the internal customer (a student) about his impact on the building of the university image. The image of the organization is the composition of the personality of the project, which originates from his philosophy, strategy, management style, reputation and behaviour of the employees and other company representatives. It is a projection of company personality that people perceive,

⁴ Ph. Kotler., W. Pfoertsch, *Zarządzanie marką w segmencie B2B*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2008.

identify with and express their own opinions and feelings about”.⁵ Such image can be built, namely: to create, invent, establish, implement. In case of such an organization as a university, a student becomes the “representative” of the company and he can create its image through his behaviour, dress, and expressions.

For the purpose of the research a survey was used, since it is particularly suited to public opinion research.⁶ The next step was the choice of measurement techniques. It was decided to collect the necessary data using a questionnaire. Table 1 presents the questions contained in the questionnaire. The order of questions is the same as on the sheet.

Tab. 1. The list of questions contained in the questionnaire

No.	Question
1	What do you associate the concept of image of the organization with?
2	How important for the university is the creation of its image?
3	In what way our university could better take care of its image?
4	Does the image of the university affect how you are perceived in the environment?
5	Do you identify with image of your university as an internal customer – a student?
6	Do you think that your behaviour, attitude, appearance have an influence on building the image of the university?
7	How important is the promotion of the image of the university by your own person?
8	What could be the best hallmark of our university?
9	Given the university logo indicate the dominant colour of the item to which you have assigned the highest priority in question 8.
10	What gadgets with its logo should the university have?

Out of ten questions one was open (No. 3). In the other, closed questions the attention was drawn to propose categories of answers which are detailed and mutually exclusive. Four of the nine closed questions had half-open character, ie. some answers were indicated to choose from (questions No. 1, 8, 9, 10) but respondents had the opportunity to provide their own answer. In two questions (No. 2, 7) the well-known and widely used scale measuring attitudes – Likert scale was used.⁷ These questions allowed determining the extent to which students agree or disagree with a given statement.

⁵ A. Figiel, *Etnocentryzm konsumencki. Produkty krajowe czy zagraniczne*, Polskie Wydawnictwo Ekonomiczne, Warszawa 2004, p.77.

⁶ E. Babbie, *Podstawy badań społecznych*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2009, p.132.

⁷ K. Mazurek-Łopacińska, *Badania marketingowe. Podstawowe metody i obszary zastosowań*, Wydawnictwo AE im. Oskara Langego we Wrocławiu, Wrocław 1996, p.157.

In formulating the questions the formal form of Mrs. / Mr. was abandoned and a form You was used. This emphasized that the survey was carried out by students and for students.

In order to detect any shortcomings of the questionnaire, the proper survey was preceded by a test study on a group of students. Preliminary test showed no defects; therefore obtained data was included in the total pool of research.

Almost never researchers are able to examine all members of the given population. The population is a group (usually human beings), which conclusions are to be drawn about.⁸ For this study the size of the university (851 students in four fields of study in the academic year 2013/14) determined that that the study covered the entire population. Therefore there was no need to make sampling. However, considerable difficulties in obtaining data from all respondents were encountered due to the nonobligatory participation in lectures resulting in absence of students. In such cases, the research group has not taken another attempt to obtain missing data. In total, the study covered students of all faculties.

In order to carry out a research a questionnaire was prepared and then a research team was selected to conduct a survey. This type of research was chosen, because it allows collecting information from a large number of respondents. The research team consisted of 8 people. Questionnaires were distributed during the scheduled activities (lectures, exercises) and collected at the same time and place. This form of research ensured the high level of returns.

In the next step, "raw" data from the questionnaires were processed. This phase took classification (encoding) of given responses and transfer all the information into the computer. After collecting the data in an appropriate form their interpretation has started in order to draw conclusions on the theory that inspired the research.

The research results

The survey was conducted in the winter semester of the academic year 2013/2014. Data collection began on March 22, 2014 and was completed on April 13, 2014. During this period, 354 questionnaires were obtained and 348 correctly completed were qualified for further analysis. The survey has covered 41.01% of students. In surveyed group 52.15% were women and 47.85% men.

⁸ E. Babbie, *Podstawy...*, op. cit., p.132.

Table 2 shows the percentage of students of each faculty in the study in relation to the number of students in a given faculty.

Tab. 2. The percentage of students of a given faculty participating in the survey

Faculty	Number of		% share of students of a given faculty participating in the survey
	Students	Returned questionnaires	
A	348	144	41,38%
B	113	42	37,17%
C	254	126	49,61%
D	136	36	26,47%
Total	851	348	41,01%

Source: own elaboration

According to the data presented in Table 2, nearly 50% of the students of faculty C took part in the survey. Faculty D was represented the least – about 26% of students. In the case of one questionnaire respondent did not record information about his faculty.

The data presented in Table 3 indicate that the largest group at the university are students of faculty A, who filled about 41% obtained questionnaires. On the other hand the smallest group are the students of the B, but their percentage in the study (12,07%) was higher than D students (10,34%), although this second group is larger than the number of students B.

Tab. 3. % Share of students of particular faculties in the survey

Faculty	Number of:		% share of students in	
	Students	Returned questionnaires	population	survey
A	348	144	40,89%	41,38%
B	113	42	13,28%	12,07%
C	254	126	29,85%	36,21%
D	136	36	15,98%	10,34%
Total	851	348		

Source: own elaboration

Presentation of the results of the survey, in the order they appear in the questionnaire.

Tab. 4. What do you associate the concept of image of the organization with?

Answer	%
logo recognizable by the environment	32,12%
opinion about organization	25,32%
external view of buildings and their surroundings	19,62%
effective advertising and other tools of public relations	12,66%
appearance, dress, behaviour and attitude of the members of the organization	9,02%
no opinion	1,27%

Source: own elaboration

The first question concerned the associations of respondents with the concept of “image of the university.” Respondents could select up to two proposed answers, or give their own proposal. There have been 632 responses. More than 32% of responses concerned recognizable logo. Over 25% of respondents indicated a connection between image and the opinion about organization. Nearly 20% of the responses were associated with external view of buildings and their surroundings. About 13% of the respondents associated image of the organization with effective advertising and other tools of public relations and just 9% with appearance, dress, behaviour and attitude of the members of the organization. The respondents did not indicate their own proposals. Gender of respondents did not have a major impact on the answers given. The order indicated in both sexes was the same.

Tab. 5. How important for the university is the creation of its image?

Answer	%
definitely important	49,86%
rather important	32,17%
no opinion	12,17%
rather unimportant	5,22%
definitely unimportant	0,58%

Source: own elaboration

Nearly half of the surveyed students said that the creation by the university of its image is very important and over 32% thought that it is rather important. Only less than 6% said that it is definitely or rather unimportant. Women in greater extent than men (about 2% more) indicate this aspect, as definitely important. Men, on the other hand, often define it as rather important.

Tab. 6. In what way our university could better take care of its image?

Answer	%
no opinion	36,19%
infrastructure	16,19%
advertising and promotion	14,05%
organization of studies	7,38%
academic and administrative staff	5,71%
improving the operation of the website and virtual dean's office	4,52%
other	4,29%
way of teaching	3,57%
cooperation with renowned universities and companies important to the region	3,10%
expanding the educational offer	2,86%
financial activities	2,14%

Source: own elaboration

In the only open question in the questionnaire, just over 36% of the respondents did not indicate any proposal which would allow the university to take care better of its image. The remaining 64% of the responses were grouped in certain subject areas. More than 16% of cases, proposals concerned university infrastructure: parking places for students, refurbishment of building (from the outside, inside, repairing the floor on the first floor) or change it to a larger one, cloakroom enlargement, larger store, better catering, improved adjacent terrain (lawn, benches for students), smoking ban in front of the building and organize a smoking room out of sight, expansion of buildings on campus, with a gym hall, better classrooms. Over 14% of the responses were related to the topic of advertising and promotion: promotion among students, gadgets for students (eg. a free USB memory for new students), the launch of gadgets into market, badges for students or other characteristic element as plaque, brooch, button, bracelet, emblem on a jacket, advertising in schools, social media and on the Internet, advertising in regional media, advertising on TV, effective advertising that is clearer, more colourful, with an exhibition of university results, logo recognizable by the environment, wider promotion outside the city, participation in fairs, presentation how many graduates obtain a job, lectures in high schools, meetings with pupils, study visits during classes and changing the name of the university, because the present is not very prestigious. More than 7% of requests related to organization of studies: the more thought-out schedule (one day in one building), lack of several hour breaks between lectures, raising the level of services provided by paying more attention to students (creation of favourable conditions for learning, friendly plan, efficient equipment, etc.), upgrade of computer equipment, laboratories, teaching aids,

more markers to whiteboards, taking care for the welfare of students, taking care of satisfaction of students (greater respect to students) – “they make a verbal advertisement by themselves and they will recommend the university if they are pleased – at no cost”, ensuring a positive assessment among students, organize more events eg. conference and raising the awareness of organization participants that they have an influence on the improvement of its image. Another part of the answer, nearly 6%, concerned academic and administrative staff: a higher level of academic staff, less demanding lecturer, analyze academic staff, renowned lecturers, good selection of personnel – practitioners (younger staff), more interesting lectures, praise the lecturers, lighter approach to student, benignancy and accessibility of staff, the school and its employees could be more lenient and should be fine in relation to the students, improvement of cooperation of dean’s office employees (poor flow of information), improvement of the organization of the departments such as the dean’s office or secretariat, “generally, at the first year usually there are no many troubles, however, over time, there are growing problems with the plan or dealing with some issues, there are many things vaguely defined, which can make life difficult for student; eventually, it makes little discouraging to arrange many things,” “secretariat and Dean’s Office staff should have a nicer approach to students,” better flow of information through direct contact with the internal customer. Approximately 4.5% of the responses related to improving the operation of the website and virtual dean’s office and the low quality of Wi-Fi. The respondents believe that the Web site should be more interesting, clearer and faster available.

Among other proposals were: organizing additional lectures outside the university, expanding the educational offer by launching master studies and academic research. Respondents indicate the necessity to establish and strengthen cooperation with renowned universities in the country and companies important to the region through the integration meetings, organization of interesting events, as well as inviting business representatives on university events. A small percentage of respondents think (approx. 2%) that the image of the university would be boosted in case of running appropriate financial activities for students, such as lowering tuition, which is too high in relation to earnings, abolition of excessive penalties for keeping books or not charging penalties for late payments.

It is worth emphasizing that women in greater extent highlighted the infrastructure issues – more than 23% of the responses, and in the second place indicated promotion and advertising (nearly 16% of proposals). While men in the first place, with around 12% of the answers, put the action in the area of promotion and advertising, and infrastructure appeared in the second place with about 8% of responses.

Tab. 7. Does the image of the university affect how you are perceived in the environment?

Answer	%
yes, it has a positive effect	38,90%
no, it does not affect	29,11%
yeas, it has a negative effect	23,34%
no opinion	8,65%

Source: own elaboration

Nearly 39% of respondents claim that the image of the university has a positive effect on their perception in the environment and nearly 24% say that it has a negative effect. More than 29% of respondents consider that the image of the university does not affect their perception in the environment, and almost 9% have no opinion. About 40% of surveyed women is of the opinion that the said image of the university has no effect on their perception in the environment, while nearly 37% of men share this opinion. Every third man finds that the image of the university has a positive effect, while among women every fourth person is of that opinion.

Tab. 8. Do you identify with image of your university as an internal customer – a student?

Answer	%
yes	43,52%
no	31,7%
no opinion	24,78%

Source: own elaboration

Over 43% of respondents say they as students identify with the image of the university, while nearly 32% answered that they do not. Every fourth respondent had no opinion on the subject. In this question the respondent's sex had no effect.

Tab. 9. Do you think that your behavior, attitude, appearance have an influence on building the image of the university?

Answer	%
yes	57,52%
no	28,02%
no opinion	14,45%

Source: own elaboration

Approximately 58% of respondents think that their behavior, attitude, appearance have an influence on building the image of the university. Nearly 61% of women and 54% of men share this opinion. In contrast, 28% of students believe that their behavior, appearance, attitude do not affect the image of the university. Men more often than women do not have an opinion on this subject.

Tab. 10. **How important is the promotion of the image of the university by your own person?**

Answer	%
very important	39,94%
moderately important	37,07%
insignificant	12,93%
no opinion	7,76%
irrelevant	2,30%

Source: own elaboration

Almost 40% of respondents believe that the promotion of the image of the university by their own person is very important, 37% find that it has a moderate importance. Only a little over 15% believe that such promotion of the university is unimportant or irrelevant. Nearly 43% of women surveyed indicate the answer “very important”, while among men this figure is about 37%. 5% more men than women are of the opinion that the promotion of the image of the university by their own person is moderately important. The percentage of women and men, for which promotion of university by their own person is insignificant or irrelevant, is similar.

Tab. 11. **What could be the best hallmark of our university?**

Answer	%
rubber bracelet	18,82%
badge/clip	18,10%
bag	14,87%
shirt	10,04%
brooch	8,6%
other	26,16%
no opinion	3,41%

Source: own elaboration

As the best mark of university student respondents considered a rubber bracelet. It was indicated by nearly 19% of respondents. The bracelet

was an element of choice for men. More than 17% voted for it. Women have given as many votes (20.1%) on the rubber bracelet and a badge/clip. A badge/clip was in the overall second place with slightly over 18%, a bag was third with nearly 15% of the votes. Fourth place went to a shirt with about support of 10% of respondents. Although women rather chose a brooch instead of a shirt. In this group of respondents a brooch was given more than 14%, and a shirt about 6% of the vote. Over 14% of men indicated a shirt. Apart from the proposals from the questionnaire, students in this question were given an opportunity to indicate their own proposals. There were: an electronic device with the university logo, key chain, pen, t-shirt, folder for notes, material shopping bag or cap with the logo of the university.

Tab. 12. **Given the university logo indicate the dominant color of the item to which you have assigned the highest priority in question 8.**

Answer	%
copper	47,85%
green	34,10%
graphite	14,04%
no opinion	1,43%
other	2,58%

Source: own elaboration

Almost 48% of students indicated the copper, as the color of the item selected in the previous question. About 34% chose green. In this question gender preferences were different. More than 40% of women pointed green as a dominant color, almost 38% copper and about 20% graphite. Almost 59% of men chose copper, less than 28% marked green, and only about 8% indicated graphite. Among others, not mentioned in the proposed responses colours, respondents indicated: white, orange, pink, red, salmon, grey and black. A proposal to use all colours of the logo also appeared.

Tab. 13. **What gadgets with its logo should the university have?**

Answer	%
pen	25,4%
USB memory	23,15%
notebook	20,67%
calendar	16,74%
other	13,03%
no opinion	1,01%

Source: own elaboration

Among the gadgets, which the university should have, most respondents pointed a pen (more than 26% of the votes), followed by a USB memory – about 23% of the vote and a notebook with a score of nearly 21%. The choice of a gadget was variously shaped depending on the gender of the respondents. Women indicated in the first a pen with the result of more than 28%. In second place, with the result of about 22% of the vote, they put a notebook and a USB memory in the third with over 20%. While men gave more than 26% of the votes on a USB memory, more than 24% on a pen and less than 20% on a notebook. As to the fourth place respondents of both sexes were unanimous. This place, with the overall outcome of about 17% of responses, was allocated to a calendar. Among the answers given by the respondents appeared: a keychain, an electronic device, a bag / organic bag, a lanyard, a backpack, a mug, a t-shirt, a folder for notes with the logo of the university, an air freshener for a car.

Conclusions

Students participating in the study associated the term “image of the organization” primarily with a logo recognizable by the environment, with the opinion about the organization, the external view of buildings and their surroundings, and with effective advertising and other tools of public relations. Four out of five students believe the creation by the university of its image is very important or rather important. Every third respondent did not indicate, however, any suggestion, which would allow the university to take care better of its image. Most proposals concerned improvements in the university infrastructure and advertising and promotion. Nearly 39% involved in the study are of the opinion that the image of the university has a positive effect on their perception in the environment, however, almost 30% do not see any impact. As the best mark of university student respondents considered a rubber bracelet copper-colored and as the most essential gadgets: a USB memory stick, a pen and a notebook. Almost half of the surveyed students identified themselves with the image of the university. Four out of five students believe that the promotion of the image of the university by their own person is very or moderately important, but only three in five respondents see the connection between their behaviour, attitude, appearance and shaping the image of the university.

References

- Babbie E., *Podstawy badań społecznych*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2009.
- Budzyński W., *Public Relations. Zarządzanie reputacją firmy*, Wydawnictwo Poltex, Warszawa 2005.
- Churchill G., *Badania marketingowe. Podstawy metodologiczne*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN Warszawa 2002.
- Figiel A., *Etnocentryzm konsumentki. Produkty krajowe czy zagraniczne*, Polskie Wydawnictwo Ekonomiczne, Warszawa 2004.
- Kotler Ph., Pfoertsch W., *Zarządzanie marką w segmencie B2B*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2008.
- Maison D., Noga-Bogomilski A., *Badania marketingowe. Od teorii do praktyki*, Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, Gdańsk 2007.
- Mazurek-Łopacińska K., *Badania marketingowe. Podstawowe metody i obszary zastosowań*, Wydawnictwo AE im. Oskara Langego we Wrocławiu, Wrocław 1996.