BRAND PERFORMANCE SURVEY IN UNIVERSITIES OF UGANDA: DOES UGANDA MARTYRS UNIVERSITY MEASURE UP?

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Abstract

The growing competition among institutions of higher learning has raised the need to be concerned about brand performance. Uganda Martyrs University (UMU) commits a lot of money towards marketing the University yet there has been concern that the current marketing strategies are not adequate enough to offer them the necessary publicity and awareness that it deserves. This survey was undertaken to understand how the UMU brand is performing within the framework of customer values and against competing brands. The survey adapted the 5As brand measurement system to examine brand performance metrics explained as brand awareness (recognition), acquaintance and association (Reputation), and allegiance and appraisal (Preference).

Using a selection of 15 universities, 16 districts in Uganda and a sample of 320 respondents the cross-sectional survey design explored and examined UMU's brand performance on the metrics of recognition, reputation and preference. The findings revealed that UMU is regarded number one as a faith based institution and recognized for high moral standards in Uganda. It is also among the top five Ugandan universities with outstanding academic reputation. We recommend that UMU's Courses, marketing, publicity and networking be adapted to the strength of faith recognition, moral standards and academic reputation.

Keywords: *Brand, Performance, Survey, University*

Introduction

The National Council of Higher Education-Uganda (NCHE) Report (2011) showed that by 2010, the number of universities in Uganda was twenty nine. Of these, five were public whilst twenty four were private universities. The most recent government statistics show that Uganda has forty five universities (MoES, 2013). These institutions have found themselves in an increasingly competitive environment leading to a 'reputation race', greater diversity and the need for marketing. Uganda Martyrs University (UMU) is one of the leading Universities in Uganda that has made tremendous efforts to build her institutional image. Marketing and communication has enabled UMU to advance her reputation and brand, to encourage community engagement and reinforce the Universities relevance in the lives of key stakeholders.

There is need to let the outer community to know and learn more about Uganda martyrs university. The university has its strength in terms of the graduates who are now employed in various organizations and it has opportunities as reflected in the number of applicants wishing to join the university so as to undertake various courses. However the university should be able to respond to the educational demands of the public, which keep on changing and offer the necessary courses so that it can maintain and improve its role as a development partner to the nation.

This paper provides an overview of the state of UMU brand performance and suggests the suitable strategies to enhance the University Brand. These strategies and actions were determined by evaluating the changing needs of the diverse student body through current research, student survey results as well as past UMU's marketing and awareness activities, experiences and efforts.

Background of UMU:
UMU is a Catholic founded, faith-based, not-for-profit private university established in 1993 and officially opened on 18th October 1994, and owned by the Uganda Episcopal Conference (UEC). UMU received a Civil Charter on 2nd April 2005 from the government of Uganda to legitimize its existence and recognize the fact that it had attained the required university standards. Uganda Martyrs University is fully recognized by the Ministry of Education & Sports in Uganda and its degrees are conferred autonomously.

The present student population is 5,648 including 1,796 who are resident on campus. The other 3,852 are on distance learning programs and part-time postgraduate courses in Kampala and various other parts of Uganda (UMU report, 2013). UMU'S Main Campus is located in Mpigi district, Mawokota County, Nkozi Sub County, about 82kms from the city and 3kms off the Kampala-Masaka highway. It is situated along the Equator with an environmentally friendly Campus; ideal for study, learning and reflection and a beautiful view of Lake Victoria.

Purpose of the Survey
The focus of this research assignment was to examine UMU brand performance in Uganda. Specifically the survey was designed to:
  i.   To examine Uganda Martyrs University's brand recognition in different regions of Uganda.
  ii. To analyze Uganda Martyrs University's brand reputation in various regions of Uganda.

iii. To assess Uganda Martyrs University's brand preference in various regions of Uganda.

iv. To recommend the necessary adjustments in current strategies and to propose new strategies.

Review of Related Literature

Branding has ceased to be a reserve for business corporations but for all categories of institutions including colleges and universities. Traditionally, a brand can be seen as a 'trademark', a 'logo' or Symbol but this is a narrow and erroneous view (Kotler, 2010). In a more compressive view a brand is 'the collection of features' that make an institution unique. A university brand encompasses what it "is," what it "stands for," and what it is going to be known for, hence the need for precision, consistency and internal commitment to the brand (Wæraas, and Solbakk, 2009). Branding is the process of creating a unique and suitable visual image of an organization, reflecting its purpose and consistently using the visual image in all correspondences (Rosen, 2014). Branding has several components including the "wordmark" - name or shorthand name of an organization, colour schemes, images and mission descriptions often combined to create a logo.

Branding is known for creating instant recognition of an organization's name within target audiences, differentiating an organization from its competitors, promoting the unique purpose of the organization and establishing an emotional connection with current and prospective stakeholders for their trust and support (Rosen, 2014). The success of the highest performing universities globally is directly linked to good reputation due to appropriate branding and closely connected to the value of distinctiveness. In times where parents are financially cautious, universities are being encouraged to create more distinct brand identities. Most universities have not yet figured out how to excel in a marketplace where they all offer the same basic service, i.e. teaching and research. Basically a brand enables a university to achieve its strategic goals through being memorable, authentic, and clear about the value proposition to its stakeholders (Wolfgang, 2013).

University leaders are compelled to re-think about genuine and strategic branding that's ultimately critical to bottom-line revenues, target market engagement, student enrolment and retention, and donor relations. Branding is a source of competitive advantage and helps organizations define their vision and mission. According to Mersino (2013), universities that fail to brand appropriately risk; decreased revenue, internal

misalignment, leadership tensions, continuation of outdated programs and services, and the continuing battle of competing priorities. Brand success depends on how well they focus, define, and have their brand positioning guide all that they do (Thornton and Shannon, 2014).

Given the ever increasing competition, demanding students and compliance requirements, quality education is no longer the only success factor. Survival of universities will largely depend on how well they sell their name (Abbas, 2014). A lot can be learned from the famous Mark Twain's quote according to which "Many a small thing has been made large by right kind of advertisement" otherwise many historic institutions despite training the best graduates, may live for centuries with stumpy reputation. Pull strategies are required to reposition the brand and its awareness in general. However an important factor is to create and sustain customer brand preference. Business leaders are often obsessed with their company's brand image; leaders in higher education likewise are pre-occupied with their school's perceived image and value equation in the marketplace. In many cases, though, educational brand strategy is limited to marketing and advertising campaigns. An effective brand management strategy should have a brand promise and stakeholder commitment to maximize that promise.

However, critics still argue that branding and marketing communications are big business practices having nothing to do with learning and real-time challenges facing university leaders (Wæraas, and Solbakk, 2009). Collegiate ranking methodologies, accused of being flawed, complicate further the task of building an educational brand. Several university leaders have declined participating in ranking surveys, yet others reluctantly conform adding to the misalignment of academic perceptions and brands. Running a university like a business may be considered to be somewhat ridiculous yet the challenge of building a brand is ultimately the same for both. Academics and the student experience are foundational elements of any university and are key elements of its brand promise. Institutions that want to actively manage their education brand must first consider how the marketplace perceives their brand promise. Comparison among educational brands shows varying marketplace perceptions (Lockwood and Hadd, 2008).

Methodology

The study was carried out following a cross-sectional survey design. This was based on questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions.

It involved collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. Data was collected from across the country, especially in areas where UMU has centers. Using the four (4) traditional regions of Uganda (Northern, Eastern, Central and Western), four (4) districts were purposively selected from each region. The East was composed of Jinja, Mbale, Soroti and Tororo. The north was composed of Arua, Lira Gulu and Packwach. The central was composed of Kampala, Mukono, Wakiso and Mpigi. The west was composed of Kabale, Kanungu, Bushenyi and Mbarara.

Twenty (20) respondents were chosen per district giving a total of eighty (80) respondents per region. Four (4) members of the research team were assigned to administer questionnaires, conduct interviews and focused group discussions in each of the four regions chosen. The people that were involved in the study were selected randomly. However, care was taken to ensure that the people were selected from different areas. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and an interview guide. The instruments were divided into two sections: 1) Identification particulars; and 2) Factors accounting for brand performance.

Procedure

The research team was divided into four groups and each region in the study area was assigned one of the groups. The team members were each given a letter of introduction and permission to collect data from the areas selected for the study. The team members were each assigned to administer questionnaires, conduct interviews and focus group discussions with various respondents. On returning from the field, the team held a meeting to discuss the individual member's field experiences and preliminary observations. The discussion fed into finalization of the data processing and analysis plan. Thereafter, the data were entered and analyzed and a report drafted. The vigilance of research assistants led to 100% response rate.

Quantitative data captured from questionnaires, interview guides and focus group discussions were entered into spread sheets, and analyzed using percentages and ratio analysis. Qualitative data was also captured and analyzed used content analysis. The study relied on self-reported data. This was grounded on the assumption that the respondents were not only cognizant of the reasons underlying UMU brand performance and publicity but also mixed up the actual identity of UMU with other institutions. There may be need to cross reference the findings (and/ or conclusions) of the study with data collected using indirect approaches like ethnography.

The enumerators disclosed their identity and the goals and scope of the study to their respondents. Subsequently, they secured the respondent's informed and voluntary consent to participate in the study. Anonymity of the respondents was also upheld by ensuring that their identification particulars were not elicited, which means they cannot be identified explicitly or implicitly and that the data collected is reported in aggregates.

Presentation of Findings

The study indicates that UMU brand awareness as compared to other universities in Uganda (both public and private) is highest in western Uganda (43%) and lowest in Northern Uganda (30%) both putting UMU in 6th position. UMU is also highly regarded for academic standards (reputation) in western Uganda (40%) followed by Eastern and Central Uganda ranking UMU in 5th position on brand reputation both with 33% of the respondents. Northern Uganda on the other hand puts UMU in the 6th position by 36% of the respondents.

Further analysis indicates that UMU brand awareness as compared to other private universities in Uganda is highest in western Uganda with 49% of the respondents giving the university the 1st position. Central Uganda closely follows with (48%) of the respondents also giving the University the first position. Similarly central and western Uganda highly regards UMU on academic standards with 46% of the respondents in both regions ranking the university in the first position on brand reputation. Northern and Eastern Uganda also consider the quality of UMU's academic standards with 44% of the respondents giving the university the 1st position on brand reputation. Like in the case of the comparison of UMU with all Universities in Uganda, the awareness of the university is also lowest in Northern Uganda with only 34% of the respondents ranking it in the 1st position among the private universities in Uganda.

UMU's awareness as a faith based University is highest in Western Uganda with 73% of the respondents putting the university in first position on brand recognition. On the other hand awareness of the university as a faith based institution is lowest in Northern Uganda with only 61% of the respondents giving the university the first position. The highest brand reputation (75%) as a faith based university is in western Uganda and the lowest (51%) is in Northern Uganda (See appendix B for details).

Proposed Marketing Strategies for UMU

Given the findings from focus group discussions, interviews and the analysis and interpretation of data from questionnaires, the following recommendations were derived:

1. **Improved Marketing and Publicity:** UMU ranks highest as a faith based university no doubt, but additional effort is required to make it distinct. There is always confusion between Uganda Christian University and Uganda Martyrs. While both of them are Christian/faith founded, they remain distinctive. Particular attention is needed in Northern and Eastern Uganda where UMU's awareness is the lowest.

    a) **Visiting Potential Students:** These visits can be important especially when candidates are about to sit for their final exams. The PRO and other staff members can visit secondary schools and explain what academic programs are offered and incentives can also be offered to the first students to express their intentions of joining UMU.

    b) **Internship Offers:** Internship still remains an option at UMU. If UMU can obtain posting for its students in various organizations just like other universities do, it provides them with a competitive edge.

2. **Introduction of New Courses:** The courses offered by UMU are considered limited. The public would like to see the introduction of Law course, more specializations of business courses both at undergraduate and post graduate levels such human resource management, Micro-finance, procurement (MBA), Insurance and entrepreneurship.

3. **Exchange Programs and Partnerships with Sister Universities:** This is a case in which students from UMU go and study for a semester or more in a similar university, while students of that university come to study at UMU. These exchange programs offer exposure and different learning experiences to both sets of students.

4. **Improved Support to Centers:** These centers include Mbale, Masaka, Nyamitanga and others. These lack computers, library books, computer software among others. The main campus should address these issues.

5. **Awards to Students**: UMU has been offering scholarship both partial and full scholarships to students. These schemes should spread to other centres and the selection and competing criteria should be well indicated. This also makes students brand ambassadors for the University.

6. **Public Relations:**
   a) **Partnering with the Business Community:** The business community has always expressed interest in working with UMU. These individuals should be encouraged to construct lecture rooms, guest houses and other recreational facilities besides the hostels.
   b) **Tracking the Alumni:** UMU has a lot its graduates spread locally and internationally. UMU should establish a database of these individuals because each one can find a way of supporting and promoting UMU in various ways.
   c) **Offering Awards to the Public/Stakeholders:** These awards include PhDs and professorship to outstanding and distinguished individuals in society. Such personalities bring a lot of political and economic blessing.
   d) **Designing an Integrity Award:** The university is well known for its integrity stance, therefore the university can offer this award, however small it may be to outstanding individuals e.g. MPs, ministers, managers, executives etc who display and promote integrity.
7. **Social Networking:** Social networking as a marketing strategy for university campuses cannot be denied. Most college students have some form of social networking available to them, whether it is Twitter, Face book or LinkedIn. All of these have different marketing strategies attached to them, but the one thing that they have in common is the desire to make sure that the material they post does seem like they are trying to "sell something."
8. **Making students Brand Ambassadors:** Students should be made responsible for media distribution, including posters, door hangers, flyers, and table tents, ability to enthuse others, passionate, outgoing, and friendly, and be highly networked on and off campus. Such activities help spread information about the University.

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