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The Effect of Marketing Strategy on Consumer Satisfaction: Distance Education Perspective

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Abstract:

The University of Education, Winneba (UEW) was among the first public Universities to establish Distance Education Programmes for Ghanaians who could not make themselves available for conventional education. However, in recent past, there has been an increase in the number of universities that offer similar services thereby increasing the competitive nature of the educational market. Therefore, the main purpose of this study was to unearth the strategies that could be employed by UEW Distance Learning Education Center to strengthen its competitive position to outwit close competitors. The descriptive survey design method was employed for the study and a sample size of 120 distance students of UEW, Kumasi Girls Study Center was selected. A convenient sampling technique was also employed. Questionnaire was the main instrument used for data collection. Results from descriptive statistics and standard multiple regression analysis showed that the significant predictor of students' satisfaction with the UEW distance education programme is valuable learning experience from the courses. It was also revealed from the students' perspective that the UEW uses student-instructor interactions (i.e. social bonding) as the main form of marketing strategy in satisfying its customers. Finally, it was found that the UEW could maintain its dominant position in the distance education market through positive word of mouth information from students to the public. It is recommended that UEW must build trust and be committed to the welfare of students.

Keywords: Marketing strategy, Customer satisfaction, Competitive position, Distance education, Ghana

1. Introduction

Distance Education has become an effective alternative to traditional On-campus system of university education and enables participants to remain in their workplace and continue to offer their services while upgrading their knowledge (Mankoe, 2006). According to Kaufman, Watkins and Guerra (2001) distance education is now seen as learning opportunities at convenient place and time for learners, irrespective of the institution providing the learning opportunity.

Based on the fact that distance learning can be offered at convenient place and time for learners, many universities in Ghana both public and private universities are involved in offering the same services and this pose danger to the dominant position of University of Education, Winneba as a pioneer in the distance educational market in Ghana. Therefore, to ensure customers satisfaction and strengthen the competitive position of the university, there is the need to put marketing strategies in place to outwit close competitors in order to maintain the University's dominant position.

This paper of marketing strategy has the following predictors: packaging, social bonding, pricing and service quality to assess customer satisfaction. Based on the above discussion, the present study answered three main questions:

- RQ1: Are customers satisfied with UEW's Distance Education Programme?
- RQ2: What are the main marketing strategies for the assessment of customer satisfaction of distance education?
- RQ3: Does customer satisfaction leads to the maintenance of UEW's position in the distance education market?

The next section continues with the theoretical framework and review of the pertinent literature. This is followed by the methodology for the study. The next part deals with the findings of the study and discussions. The final section concentrates on conclusions, managerial implications, and directions for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1. The Performance Model

Based on the Performance Model (Spreng and Mackey, 1996), it is predicted that customer satisfaction leads to the maintenance of UEW's position in the distance education market. The performance model posits that a customer's perception of a product or service performance, and their expectations of that performance have a positive effect on customer satisfaction. Performance is the level of quality of the product, or service, as perceived by the customer, relative to the price paid.

2.2. Customer Satisfaction

According to Oliver (1997) customer satisfaction is the core philosophy of marketing strategy of any organisation and plays a key role in an organisation's success and Kotler (2000) believes that satisfaction is the overall customer attitude or behaviour towards the difference between what customers expect and what they receive, regarding fulfilment of a goal. Kapiki (2012) observed that excellent services quality by companies' results in excellent customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Customer satisfaction has been given different definitions by many gurus in the area of marketing. Zethaml and Bitner (2000) in their service marketing approach define customer satisfaction as the customer evaluation of a product or service in terms of whether that product or service has met their needs and expectations. Bagram and Khan (2012) also see satisfaction as features or characteristics that can fill a need or want of a consumer in a better way than competitors and that satisfied customers are more likely to share their experiences with other five or six people around them. Sherry (2003) believes that communications from faculty that directly engages students and offers timely feedback contributes to interchanges between the organisation and students and leads to success in the course of study. Anderson (1994) concludes that customer satisfaction is the key factor used to measure the company's internal and external performances and assigning funds to each and every activity within the organisation. Anderson (1994) further asserts that the importance of customer satisfaction cannot be dismissed because happy customers are like free advertisers. Anton (1996) also states that customer satisfaction is positively associated with repurchase retentions and that there is a likelihood of recommending a product or service to others. These views bring to bear that when customers are satisfied, they will spread positive word of mouth communications to help a company strengthen its competitive position. Sivadas and Baker-Prewitt (2000) further maintained that customer satisfaction influences the likelihood of recommending a company and its good or service as well as repurchases. Wood (2008) adds that if value is present for both organisation and consumer, the resulting relationship may take the form of a one-time purchase and referrals to other potential customers. Thus, effective marketing covers everything about an organisation and must consistently provide value to win customers and earn their loyalty (Wood, 2008). Bowen and Chen (2001) opined that a high level of customer satisfaction decrease the perceived need to switch service provider, and increase customer repurchase and ultimately enhancing profitability of the organization. Evans and Lindsay (1996) emphasised that companies with satisfied customers have a good opportunity to convert them into loyal customers who purchases from those firms over an extended time period.

2.3. Customer Satisfaction and Competitive Position

In keeping with the identified literature, customer satisfaction and maintenance of a company's position was investigated. Fornell (1992) emphasised that increased customer satisfaction can lead a company to a sustainable competitive position in the marketplace. Over the decades, a number of studies have been conducted to identify the key drivers of customer satisfaction (Chavan & Ahmad, 2013; Singh & Kaur, 2011; Anderson et al., 2008; Johnson & Fornell, 1991). According to Schulz (2012) retaining loyal customers is very essential and a key factor in keeping the industry running and more competitive to measure a company's performance in changing trends of the industry. Today, customer satisfaction has been regarded as a fundamental determinant in maintaining long-term customer relationship behaviors (Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996; Anthanassopoulos, Gounaris, & Sathakopoulos, 2001). A study by Walsh et al. (2006) revealed a strongly relationship between customer satisfaction and corporate reputation. Zeithaml (2000) findings prove a relationship between customer satisfaction and business performance. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2002) in their discussion of customer satisfaction proved that customers who are satisfied with the performance of a company, are likely to give positive word-of-mouth communication about the company and enhances company's reputation. Oliva et al. (1992) provided evidence to show that customer satisfaction enhances financial performance of a company. Study by Cronin and Morris (1989) and Innis and La Londe (1994) found that a satisfied customer is more likely to repurchase, which leads to increased sales and market share. Increase in sales and market share are key in solidifying a company's position in the marketplace. Nelson et al. (1992) found positive evidence on the direct relationship between customer satisfaction and business performance which leads to a higher profitability. Chavan and Ahmad (2013) concluded that customer satisfaction has been shown to have effects on organizations' revenues and the underlining factor is because satisfied customers tend to purchase the service again which in the long-run leads to increased profits and maintenance of the company's position in the industry.

2.4. Marketing Strategy

A strategy is a unique battle plan that one company uses to outwit its close competitor. Marketing strategy according to Walker, Boyd and Larréché (1996) involve specifying the target segments to be pursued and the breadth of product line to offer. Hence, for customers to be satisfied, effective marketing strategies that deals with the process of planning and executing programmes designed to influence the behavior of target audiences by creating and maintaining beneficial exchanges for the purpose of satisfying individual and organisational objectives (Andreasen and Kotler, 2003).

2.4.1. The use of Packaging as a Strategy

To influence decision of consumers on the type of product or service to choose, there is the need to differentiate parallel products or services. Wells, Farley and Armstrong (2007) opine that packaging works as an instrument for differentiation, and help consumers to decide the product from wide range of parallel products and packaging also stimulates customer's buying behaviour. Adelina and Morgan (2007) see packaging as one of the most valuable tools in today's marketing communications and that packaging has an important impact on consumers buying behavior. Saeed, Lodhi, Mukhtar, Hussain, Mahmood and Ahmad (2011) conclude that organisations should integrate the brand image, brand attachment and environmental effects to have impact on consumer purchase decision.

2.4.2. The use of Social Bonding as a Strategy

According to Mylonakis (2009) to understand the relationship between customers and organisation, managers should understand more their customers in terms of needs, behaviour, satisfaction and perception towards the services and products and consider customers as important assets to them. In the words of Chiu (2002) social bonds positively influence customer's emotions toward or feelings associated with service experience and contribute to the formation of an effective component of attitude. From the view point of the customer, the social bonding strategy seems to provide an important psychological benefit (Chiu, 2002). Social bonds dispose customers to self-disclosure, listening and caring, which in turn improve the mutual understanding between the customer and the service provider, their openness and their degree of closeness. Damkuvienė and Virvilaitė (2007) also noted that the elements in relationship should be interdependence, long term orientation, commitment and trust. Hence, without these elements in the marketing game, it will be difficult for the university to build a strong customer base in the distance education market. According to Kandampully and Duffy (1999) a customer's interest in maintaining a loyal relationship is depended on the organisation's ability to anticipate customers' future needs and offering them before anyone else does.

2.4.3. The use of Price as a Strategy

Price is considered to be the most significant factor that affects consumer's choice (Kotler, Armstrong, Saunders, & Wong, 2002). Kotler et al. (2002) further believe that in Customer-Value Based Pricing, products or services are priced on the basis of perceived value and that company's must find out what value customers assign to competitors' products or services as well as the value they perceive of their own company's products or services. Therefore, if price is charged higher than the perceived value, it will have a negative impact on the company's products or services (Kotler et al, 2002). Oliver (1997) believes that customers perceive price in line with the quality and if price does not match quality of products or services, customers will experience dissatisfaction. Thus, price is used to judge parallel products or services that offer similar satisfaction.

2.4.4. The use of Service Quality as a Strategy

Quality service stems from a host of activities within and outside an organisation. Levesque and McDougall (1996) mention that performance of the service provider on core and relational dimension of service quality is an important driver for customer satisfaction. Bolton and Drew (1992) believe that customer satisfaction depends heavily on service quality. According to Moore (1989) and Young and Norgard (2006) there are three types of interactions that increases students' satisfaction of quality of distance education: Student-content; student-instructor; and student-student interaction. The authors contend that these three types of interactions help promote timely and quality interaction among students, between student and their instructor, as well as between students and their course content which serves a motivational tool for students' satisfaction. Durling, Cross and Johnson (1996) also echo that instructors should understand the diverse nature of students and encourage them to interact regularly to promote effective learning. Kurtenbach (2000) concludes that organizations which are successful in customer service rank their customers experience as their top priority.

2.5. Conceptual Framework

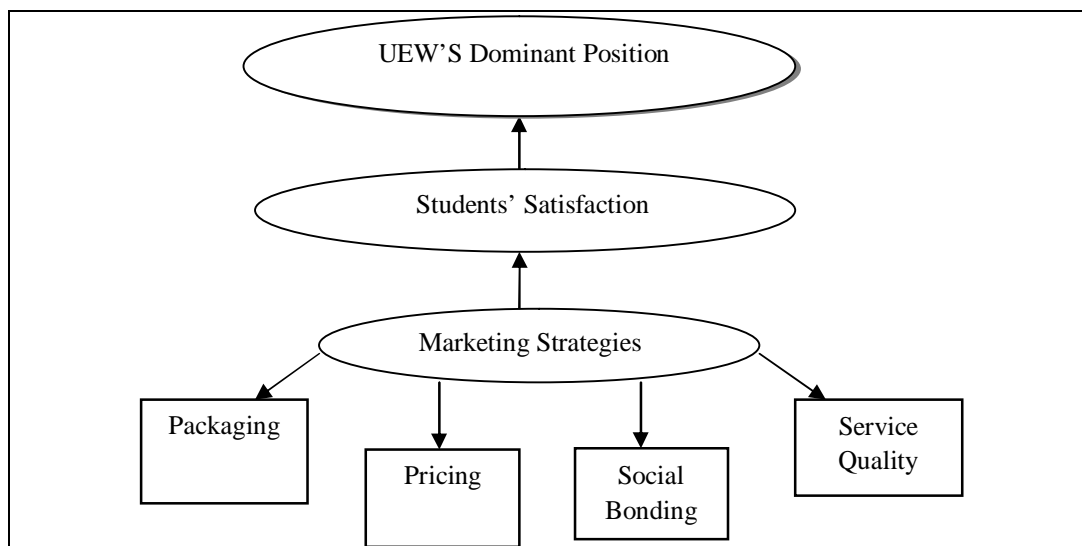


Figure 1

The study provided a framework which served as the basis for the questionnaires developed in order to collect relevant data for this study. The framework assumes that in order to understand how the University can maintain its dominant position in the distance education market, one needs to understand the marketing strategies that leads to students' satisfaction and eventually results in building a strong dominant position of the university. Figure 2 provide a schematic representation of these issues.

3. Methodology

Students offering both Degree and Diploma programmes at University of Education, Winneba, Kumasi Girls Study Center constituted the population for the study. Sample size of one hundred and twenty (120) students was selected based on the convenience sampling method. Of the 120 students selected for the study, 73 were males, while 47 were females. 40 % of the students were offering degree programmes, whilst 80 % were offering diploma programmes. The mean age for the respondents was 32 years. Students who were present at both degree and diploma lecture rooms at the time of collection of data were given self-designed questionnaires. The students were given twenty minutes to answer the questions on the questionnaire after which all were collecting. Questions relating to students' satisfaction of the programme and the activities of the university to position the university on 'topmost' mind of consumers for the university to maintain its dominant position in the educational market were formed. The respondents were asked to respond to the questions on the questionnaire by showing the degree to which they strongly disagree or strongly agree with each question on the questionnaire. These items were measured using a five-point, Likert Scale with the following anchors: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree and 5 = Strongly Agree. The respondents were required to fill the questionnaire as sincerely as practicable. The study employed SPSS in analyzing the data collected and frequency tables were drawn from the data analysed.

3.1. Reliability Statistics

One of the commonly used indicators of reliability is internal consistency. The Cronbach alpha coefficient was used to test the internal consistency of the scale used in the study. According to De Vellis (2003) and Straubs et al. (2004), the Cronbach alpha coefficient of a scale should be 0.7 or above. In the current study, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was 0.91, indicating that the research instrument has a high reliability.

4. Research Findings and Discussions

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics was conducted to determine the means, standard deviations and the correlations among the determinants of customer satisfaction in this study. Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations and correlation matrix for predictors of customer satisfaction

Predictor	n	Mean	Sd.	1	2	3	4	5
Relevance and usefulness of course materials	120	3.71	1.337	-				
Provision of timely information on programme	120	2.66	1.399	.633**	-			
Valuable learning experience from courses	120	3.74	1.081	.773**	.614**	-		
Lecture rooms condition and environment	120	3.54	1.243	.591**	.707**	.599**	-	
Competitiveness of programmes offered	120	2.72	1.373	.467**	.758**	.375**	.647**	-

Table 1: Means, standard deviations and correlation matrix for predictors of customer satisfaction

Note. ** $p < .001$, Sd. = Standard deviation.

Standard multiple regression was performed to determine the contribution of each of the statements or predictors (i.e. *relevance and usefulness of course materials, provision of timely information on programme, valuable learning experience, lecture rooms condition and environment, and competitiveness of programmes offered*) to overall customer satisfaction. Preliminary analyses were conducted to ensure that there was no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity. A correlational analysis was also conducted to check for multicollinearity. According to Tabachnick and Fidell (2007) correlation coefficients from $r = .90$ and above reflects multicollinearity. The correlation matrix in Table 1 shows that the correlation coefficients ranged between ($r = .38, p < .001$) and ($r = .77, p < .001$), indicating that multicollinearity was unlikely a problem. All predictor variables significantly correlated with overall satisfaction indicating that the data was suitably correlated with the criterion variable for examination through linear regression. The results from the model fit shows that the five predictor variables explained 82% [$R^2 = .818, F(5, 114) = 102.812, p = .000$].

As indicated in Table 2, the significant predictor of overall student satisfaction is valuable learning experience ($\beta = .455, p = .000$). Valuable learning experience contributed 46% to the variance in overall customer satisfaction. This is followed by competitiveness of programme offered ($\beta = .385, p = .000$), which contributed 39% to changes in customer satisfaction, relevance of course materials ($\beta = .285, p = .000$), and then provision of timely information on programme ($\beta = .136, p = .031$). Lecture room condition and environment, however, did not significantly predict overall customer satisfaction. Table 2 shows a summary of the standard multiple regression results of satisfaction with UEW distance programme.

	b	Seβ	β
Constant	.412	.183	-
Relevance and usefulness of course materials	.305	.073	.285**
Provision of timely information on programme	.127	.058	.136*
Valuable learning experience from courses	.393	.058	.455***
Lecture rooms condition and environment	.000	.055	.005
Competitiveness of programmes offered	.318	.062	.385***

Table 2: Standard multiple regression results of customer satisfaction with the UEW distance programme

Note. $R^2 = .818$, $\Delta R^2 = .811$, ** $p < .001$, * $p < .05$

Respondents were asked to indicate from their point of view, the main marketing strategy used by UEW. The results in Table 3 shows that the UEW uses student- instructor interaction as its main strategy in satisfying students (frequency = 46). This was followed by student- student interaction and spreading positive information distance education (frequency = 21). From the students' perspective, the UEW least used the fees paid for the distance education as a form of marketing strategy to satisfy students. Table 3 shows that summary results on the marketing strategies that UEW uses in satisfying customers.

Strategies	Frequency	Rank
The academic programmes are attractive	17	4
UEW encourages student- instructor interaction	46	1
UEW encourages student-student interaction	21	2
UEW encourages students to spread positive information distance education	21	2
Fees paid match quality of tuition given	15	5
Total number of respondents (n = 120)		

Table 3: Marketing strategies used in satisfying customers

Respondents were asked to indicate how UEW could maintain its' the market position in distance education market. The results in Table 4 clearly indicates that, the university can maintain its market position through positive word of mouth information to the public (frequency =53, percentage = 44.2). The next significant means by which the university can maintain its market position is by building trust and committing to the welfare of students (frequency = 40, percentage = 33.3) centrally to our expectation, as few as, 27 (22.5%) of the respondents stated that the university understanding the needs of its customers (students) could help the university to maintain its position in the distance education market.

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
The university must understand students' needs	27	22.5
The university must build trust and be committed to students' welfare	40	33.3
Students must give positive word of mouth information to the public	53	44.4
Total number of respondents (n =120)		

Table 4: Maintaining UEW's position in the distance education market

5. Conclusions

Distance learning is the 21st century concept and it is gaining grounds in every university in Ghana. For universities to succeed in this area of learning there is the need to craft never ending marketing strategy to be more competitive. Without proactive marketing strategy, investment made in this area of education will yield no results. Since distance education is an instructional mode in which the teacher is not in the same place always at the same time with students, there is the need to make it more attractive through marketing strategies in order to deliver valuable learning opportunities at convenient place and time for learners to create customer satisfaction.

Price is considered to be the most significant factor that affects consumer's choice of service provider (Kotler, Armstrong, Saunders, & Wong, 2002). However, a high level of customer satisfaction decreases the perceived need to switch service provider. Therefore, when customers are highly satisfied with the service provided, fees paid become irrelevant for customers to switch service provider because customer satisfaction influences the likelihood of recommending a company and its goods or services to others as well as repurchase of the service (Sivadas and Baker-Prewitt, 2000).

Again, since packaging is used as a competitive tool, the university needs to repackage its academic programmes to reflect students' interest. Hence, packaging of academic programme is one of the most valuable tools in today's marketing communications and that packaging has an important impact on consumers buying behavior (Morgan, 2007). Packaging works as an instrument for differentiation, and help consumers to decide the product from wide range of parallel products (Wells, Farley and Armstrong, 2007).

5.1. Managerial Implications

The findings of the study provide important information for distance learning universities. Findings of the study need to be considered by UEW in order to maintain its dominant position in the distance education market. The distance learning centre have to consider the fact that the students are the invaluable asset of the university and their word-of-mouth can affect the university either negatively or positively because they are more information-oriented.

Furthermore, organizations which are successful in customer service rank their customers experience as their top priority (Kurtenbach, 2000). The university needs to look at the classroom condition and environment where teaching takes place. Poor teaching environment has a negative effect on learning and will eventually results in customer dissatisfaction.

5.2. Limitations & Future Research

Although the study is of importance to distance learning universities in Ghana, the study has some limitations. The study was carried out in only one distance learning centre in Kumasi municipality; the views of other students in other distance learning centres were not captured. Accordingly, more studies need to be conducted with participants from other distance learning centres in Ghana from time to time to capture changes in students' assessment of distance learning programme. In addition, since the study is predominantly quantitative in nature, it is suggested that further studies should be conducted using a qualitative approach to give the study a broader view.

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