

Theoretical Approaches regarding Instruments of marketing Research on the educational Services Market

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Abstract

In the context of globalization, market research has become a necessity, a condition for identifying pathways to attract customers and to gain an advantageous position in front of the competitors. Adapting to the expectations and needs of the consumers and educational market determines changes in products and educational services offered by higher education institutions. The marketing research allows the evaluation of the structure of the activity of the higher education institutions and of the specific institutional framework regarding the functioning of these organizations, seen as prerequisites of their elaboration and implementation of the marketing strategy, also the definition of the educational market, the study of its dimensions and its characteristics.

Key words educational market, marketing, higher education, marketing research, services market

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Introduction

After a period of relative stability, the educational services market in Romania has a dynamic evolution after 1990, the emergence of new educational institutions determining the development of a wide range of products and services, often without being correlated with the needs of the labor market, the needs of education of consumers. On the same level of education, both public and private education institutions, which are competing, offer the consumer educational offers consisting of curricula and qualifications compatible with those offered by institutions from other countries, the openness to the European education area enabling access of consumers of educational services to products and services of this type offered by the institutions.

The current market context, the globalization trend, no longer allows decisions to be taken without the research of the environment in which the educational institution operates, as the demands of consumers are constantly evolving, market competition is enhanced, the evolutions of the informational environment determine the decision making according to the size and accuracy of the information held, so that their diminution or possible incorrect information could lead to the implementation of erroneous decisions with significant repercussions to the institution's activity and image on the market, and the macroeconomic and legislative elements can have a decisive influence on market success or failure. Any decision regarding the activity of the institution should be based on research, on concrete data on the dimensions and elements of the marketing environment, so that the products and/or services offered will be in line with market requirements (Constantinescu, 2011).

Marketing research is needed on the market for higher education institutions, information about potential students, attitudes and behavior to the educational offer are very important for decision-makers. The development of programs compatible with those developed in other universities in the Romanian higher education system, as well as those from similar institutions in other states, leads to an advantageous position on the educational services market, to the increase of the satisfaction of the needs and requirements of the consumers.

Literature review. Discussions

The literature offers a wide range of definitions of marketing research. Thus, research is a systematic and objective investigation of a subject or problem to discover relevant information or principles (Smith and Albaum, 2010). Marketing research is a function that binds the consumer, the client, and the marketer audience by information, and the information is used to identify and define marketing opportunities, to generate, refine and evaluate marketing actions, monitor marketing performance, and promote understanding of marketing as a process (Churchill, Brown and Suter, 2010).

Marketing research is defined as systematic data collection, recording and analysis to identify and assess the impact of changes in marketing mix elements on consumer behavior, systematic and objective identification, collection, analysis, dissemination and use of information with the goal of improving decision-making in identifying and solving marketing problems and opportunities (Malhotra, 2015).

Cătoiu et al. (2009) define marketing research as "the formal activity through which, with the help of scientific concepts, methods and techniques, the specification, measurement, collection, analysis and interpretation of marketing information for the management of the economic unit is made, for the knowledge of the environment where it functions, identifying opportunities, evaluating alternatives to marketing actions and their effects".

Depending on the functional purpose of marketing research, different types of research are identified: exploratory, instrumental, descriptive, explanatory and predictive, and qualitative research and quantitative research are distinguished from the perspective of the resulting information.

Kotler and Keller (2008) show that marketing research is the systematic activity of defining, collecting, analyzing and reporting data and conclusions relevant to a particular marketing situation faced by the firm, an indispensable tool for assessing wishes and consumer behavior, current and potential market size, an important part of the endeavors to collect environmental information to measure market potential and anticipate future demand.

Marketing research consists of systematically and objectively obtaining information, analyzing those considered useful for the recognition and solving of problems based on scientific methods of collecting and evaluating them, the results being used as a basis for planning, coordinating and controlling decisions in the marketing strategy (Grigoruț et al., 2011).

Marketing research projects the method for collecting information, manages and implements the data collection process, analyzes results and communicates results and implications to the entire marketing process (AMA, 2004).

Marketing research focuses on understanding the customers of higher education institutions and, in general, competitors on the educational market. Higher education institutions need to understand and respond to what customers want and expect from the educational products and services they offer. However, the relationship is always influenced by competitors and the way their products are received by the educational market. Thus, it must clearly identify the clients of the institution and the competition, before developing a research project. There are several important factors to consider: customers and competition, product awareness and image, product use, undiagnosed product issues, customer desires and needs for new product development (Smith and Albaum, 2012).

Marketing research connects the consumer, customer and the public through information, which is used to identify and define marketing opportunities and threats to create, improve and evaluate marketing actions as well as to monitor the performance of the institution. Marketing research includes methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation, communication of findings and their implications (Proctor, 2005).

Marketing research in the field of education involves identifying the needs of potential clients in order to provide appropriate educational programs, analyzing their perception of the services offered by helping to improve or develop new study programs (Dumitru, 2013).

Investigating secondary data sources is one of the most widely used methods to conduct exploratory research that seeks to identify the overall coordinates of the investigated marketing phenomena. Secondary information is information obtained for purposes other than the research in question, being collected at an earlier stage in a research project different from the one in progress (Cătoiu et al., 2009).

There are different applied studies to better understand the educational market, descriptive studies on market potential, description of potential customers for products and services offered by educational institutions, market share (Smith and Albaum, 2012).

Researching the educational market involves sequencing stages of goal definition, establishing action directions, identifying and selecting information, analyzing and making effective decisions for educational institutions. Kotler (2005) presents six stages of marketing research: defining marketing research issues and objectives, elaborating the research

plan, gathering information, analyzing information, presenting conclusions and making decisions, and five ways to collect data: observation, groups oriented discussions, surveys, consumer behavioral studies, experiments.

Marketing research can be done by focusing on customer analysis of the institution and monitoring markets, measuring the knowledge, attitudes and image of the institution, following the behavior of using products offered, diagnosing problems, supporting the development of marketing strategy (Smith and Albaum, 2010).

Quantitative research allows for the identification of significant statistical differences between people with a high level of consumption compared to those with a low level, it aims to quantify the data and generalize the results in the analyzed target population, the data collection being structured and as a data collection tool it uses questionnaires (Cătoi et al., 2009). The questionnaire is defined as a set of written questions or images to stimulate, generate data and information necessary to achieve the objectives of marketing research by linking the objectives pursued through research with the information to be obtained by applying it and translating objectives into concrete questions, accessible to the respondents (Băcilă, 2013). The questionnaire is one of the most common research methods used in the field of education as part of a larger study (Menter et al., 2011).

The questionnaire is by far the most common tool, managed either personally, by telephone, e-mail or online (Kotler and Armstrong, 2014), the questions contained may be closed, including all possible answers, and the subjects can make choices between them, multiple choice questions, and questions that contain variants of scale response, as well as open questions that allow respondents to respond freely, especially useful in exploratory research, when the researcher tries to find out what people think.

Qualitative research allows a better understanding of the phenomenon investigated without resorting to its quantification, given the attitude towards the product, the motivation to choose it, can provide information about consumer attitudes, the reasons for purchasing, the language used and the way of communication with the target market (Cătoi et al., 2009).

In the field of educational services, the qualitative research methodology refers to what customers feel about the service received, the qualitative research will often tell researchers why the client behaves in a certain way, but since it is usually based on subjective opinions, it may be difficult to quantify (Grigoruț et al., 2011).

Qualitative research enables qualitative understanding of marketing phenomena, identification of motivations, data collection is unstructured, and as a collection tool uses the interview guide, the amount of information gathered using techniques and methods specific to psychology and sociology, applied to small samples that allow for simple identification of the subjects, as well as the active role of the researcher, are distinctive features of qualitative research. The obtained data are of a qualitative nature, obtained by means of two methods of investigation: individual interview and focus group, measurable using the nominal scale (Cătoi et al., 2009).

The in-depth interview as a marketing research tool requires a detailed approach to people's attitudes about educational products/services offered by military higher education institutions, the position of institutions on the educational market, and the possibilities of approaching the market in marketing vision, communicating to the participants the aim of the research (Băcilă, 2013).

Boyce and Neale (2006) defined the in-depth interview as a qualitative research technique, which involves performing individual intensive interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, program or situation. In-depth interview is a direct and unstructured research technique by which a single respondent is researched by a qualified operator to discover motivations, beliefs, attitudes and feelings about the subject of research, the only characteristic of this technique is that the interviewer has the opportunity to feel the respondent and collect information, the answers provided during the interview can be used and turned into questions that provide more detailed information (Shukla, 2008). A variant of the undirected in-depth interview is the semidirected interview where the discussion with the subjects is based on an interview guide.

Measurement in scientific research involves the assignment of numerical values or other characteristic symbols of objects, according to certain established rules, that which is measured is not the object, but some characteristics of it (Malhotra, 2015).

Measurement in marketing research is the process of symbolic, numerical or non-numerical representation of the extent to which a phenomenon or an object possesses a certain characteristic or property to which a number or symbol is assigned (Cătoi et al., 2009).

Scaling in marketing research refers to procedures for assigning numerical measures to subjective concepts, such as attitudes, opinions, and feelings. Number assignment allows comparison and easier synthesis of information from different population groups. Statistical techniques can also be used to analyze the data obtained. In the marketing

research, several types of scales are used, classified according to the level of measurement obtained with them, respectively the statistical-mathematical properties they possess: nominal, ordinal, interval and proportional.

Conclusions

Marketing research on the educational services market should address the educational needs of potential consumers for educational products and services, future admission exam candidates, students, their behavior, the evolution of the determinants of the marketing environment, decisions aimed at meeting the needs of consumers to a high and efficient level.

By using specific tools, the information needed for descriptive research to understand the attitudes and behaviors of students and graduates of higher education institutions is obtained. Descriptive marketing research generates a broad perspective on the opportunity to implement and operationalize the concepts of educational marketing.

It is necessary to collect relevant marketing information from both the consumers of educational services, students, graduates and prospective employers, the final beneficiaries of education provided by higher education institutions, so that an effective marketing mix can be established. Researching consumer satisfaction on the quality of education offered by higher education institutions allows the identification of strengths and weaknesses of educational institutions, opportunities and threats existing in the marketing environment in which they evolve. Marketing research highlights the image of higher education institutions and educational products/services offered by these institutions on the market.

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