

SPECIFIC PECULIARITIES IN CREATING THE IMAGE OF A HIGHER SCHOOL

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Abstract. The article discusses and clarifies some specific features in creating the image of a higher school. This issue is not sufficiently detailed and thoroughly researched by Bulgarian public relations specialists. It analyzes the dialectical link between the equilibrium and imbalance in conducting image-based activities within the context of an innovative communication process. There are arguments in support of the belief that, in defeating the corporate image, the attempt to disturb the market equilibrium is more productive, taking into account the attitudes and wish of the public in the motivation consumer process. Examples of higher education are described, confirming the belief that disturbing the balance results in better outcomes. The article examines seven possible sources generating innovative image maker activities that determine the purposeful and systematic nature of creating a university's image. The complex nature of the corporate image does not allow it to be uniquely appreciated and determined by its audiences - media, in-house institutional environment and external consumer environment. The role and significance of the eventful PR are clarified and specific activities related to the realization of the university image are identified.

Keywords: image; image maker activities; higher school; university; ranking; innovation

Introduction

Creating a corporate image is, in essence, an innovative, management-organizational and communication process that must provide competitive advantages that guarantee sustainable economic prosperity and growth. The imaging activities of its construction can be linked to both maintaining balance and seeking a purposeful change that causes distortion so that the corporate image can meet the attitudes, expectations and demands of audiences, recipients and consumers. The nature of this change can be in the internal as well as in the external environment of the company. When creating a corporate image, each organization is useful to put itself and think it is in a state of a constant problem situation. This conception calls for a systematic, continuous and organized search for new solutions. In our

view, corporate image creating activities should, if they do not initiate a breach of balance between the organization and competitors, at least lead to preparedness for adequate action in the event of imbalance or suddenly arising risky situations caused externally. Corporate image is a socio-psychological phenomenon related to the needs and desires, and the search for ways to satisfy them is the perceived motivation that becomes a motivation for decision and action. The dialectical relation between equilibrium and imbalance, the alternative change from a temporary equilibrium to temporary imbalance and back makes both conceptual concepts reasonable. Corporate image creating activities can be typed in two main groups, depending on the reasons why they are applied – activities connected with good opportunities (opportunities for entrepreneurship) and ones that are caused forcibly and when it is necessary (necessity entrepreneurship).

Discussion and results

In our view, in addition to systematic and purposeful, one of the most important features of corporate image policy is the overwhelming character and novelty, i.e. innovative image solutions. New imaging solutions can be brand new or new to the organization. What can only be new is the way to apply already known techniques and activities.

An advance image policy within a university, for example, is the drastic reduction in student fees in unpopular but important national economics majors – mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, and engineering specialties. Another advance opportunity to achieve a good corporate image is the “innovative” decision for the universities to recall practices from the middle of the last century – the admission of students not in specialties but in professional fields that are being taught in the first two or three years; after that the student gets different choices of majors. This “new” practice in recent years is imposed in higher education in Bulgaria.

The rationale behind maintaining the perception that while creating a corporate image, striving to disturb market equilibrium is more productive is the following:

1. The equilibrium leads to stagnation and very often it is temporary and merely apparent. Not all competitors are satisfied with their position on the market and it is a matter of time for some of them to take forward actions to ensure competitive advantages; In other words, even if an organization does not seek to break the balance, another market entity will do it before it. That is why even if it does not strive to disturb the balance, the organization must be ready to react if this happens;

2. Even assuming that all business entities on the market are equally satisfied with the existing equilibrium (which is utopian), the users of products and services themselves will inevitably demand and impose new requirements. This is a matter of time and will lead to new demands and the need to breach the existing equilibrium. Psychologists explain these changes in consumer attitudes and wish as a natural process that can be described as:

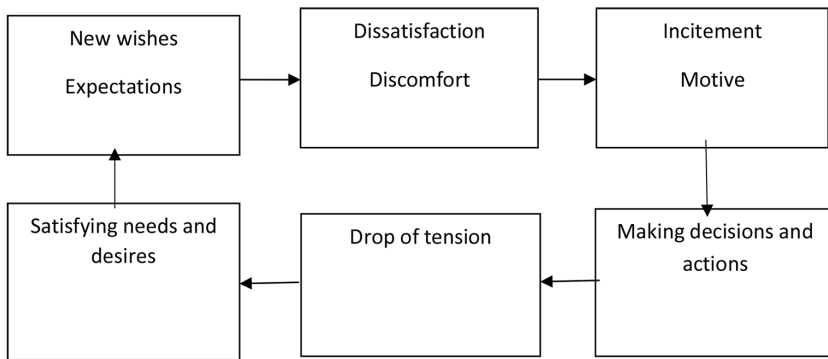


Figure 1. Motivational user process

Source: Adapted by J. Lindner and team, Entrepreneurship and Management, 2007

The formulated thesis can be illustrated and confirmed by many examples. At the beginning of the 20th century, for example, “silent” cinema was a profitable business, cinemas were full, and the sale of cinema equipment, as well as peanuts, popcorn and soft drinks, as commercial activities accompanying projections, brought money and financial prosperity has been guaranteed. Market participants did not see the reason for the balance being breached, but after 1920, electricity has begun to enter households - vacuum cleaners, washing machines and other electrical appliances. Warner Brothers Company sensed and knew that change is imminent, inevitable, induced, and is related to new wishes and attitudes of audiences and new technologies. In addition, each screening is accompanied by live actors’ and musical performances that were paid at each performance, which was financially unprofitable. The Warner Brothers, even before 1920, were preparing to use the strategy of “striking them where they do not expect”, irrespective of the existing equilibrium. They release the “Just Singer” movie, which is dubbed and the market equilibrium quickly starts disappearing. New requirements are emerging for the cinema industry, the production and distribution of films – new cinema equipment, new microphones, new silent projectors, a new type of cinemas and rules for attendees.

That is why, in our view, market equilibrium is always a seeming one, illusory and “*the world is big, and salvation does not lurk around the corner.*” This continuous shift of satisfaction with new desires and expectations naturally alternately transforms the equilibrium state into an unbalanced one and vice versa.

The pushed on the inside innovative and advance corporate activities related to image creating activities not only create competitive advantages but also enable them to avoid “fire-fighting” and coercive action. In other words, realizing imaging activities as an opportunity, driven by in-house needs, tailored to its resources and company policy, are preferable and give better outcomes. Such type of policy is associated with consistency and purposefulness as basic principles in the implementation of PR activities.

The corporate image of a higher educational institution is characterized by its complexity and diversity. This is why it is difficult to tell what the image of a higher school is and to uniquely define and appreciate its individual audiences. The different ranking charts prepared by Bulgarian and international organizations show considerable discrepancies in the comparison and ranking of two universities. In a ranking, one university is ahead of another, and in another one - vice versa. The rankings are based on a standardized complex assessment of the higher educational institutions with about 40-50 indicators selected, compiled according to collected and processed statistical information. For example, in the ranking (complex assessment) that the Ministry of Education and Science conducts for Bulgarian higher educational institutions, the indicators are divided into 6 groups according to the main categories on which the higher schools are evaluated. These groups are a learning process, research, learning environment, social and administrative services, prestige, the realization of the labor market and regional significance. We can assume that these are the main factors influencing the creation of the university image.

“The weights of the individual groups of indicators as well as the indicators themselves are determined, taking into account the views of the various users, the number and interrelation between the indicators and the reliability of the primary information used. Comments received by representatives of higher educational institutions and the academic community have been taken into account after the previous editions of the ranking system. The main logic for the weighting choice is that important indicators for which reliable information is available should receive a relatively higher burden. By reducing the importance of the indicator and the reliability of the data, the weight is reduced.”¹⁾

Obviously, with another choice of indicators and/or other weights, the rankings would be very different, which explains their conditionality and ambiguity.

The prevailing conclusion is that in the media or more generally in the information space there is built a holistic corporate image, but its integrity is difficult to visualize and see. If this image of a higher school is a sphere in the space of all universities, depending on the location of the observer and their interests, only part of the spherical body can be seen and observed - more precisely, its individual details, from which this corporate image is compiled. Therefore, it is natural for different subjects (audiences), at different time intervals and at different locations, to see the corporate image differently. In this case, we are not talking about manipulated notions and attempts to distort reality, but about the impossibility to assimilate and process in real time publicly available information with a huge volume.

Since image maker activities and image creation are strongly related and correspond to innovative entrepreneurial solutions, it can be assumed that targeted systemic image maker innovation activities are generated by the following seven sources, which are not uniquely defined but are blurred and overlapping (Drucker, 2002):

1. The unexpected – unexpected success, unexpected failure, unexpected external event;

2. Discrepancies – between reality, as it is, and the reality that is assumed to be, or what “should be”;
3. Process-related need;
4. Changes in the structure of the industry or the market, which leaves everyone unprepared;
5. Demographic changes;
6. Changes in perception and values;
7. New knowledge both scientifically and outside the scientific sphere.

This, of course, does not deny the existence of opportunities for company image maker activities to be induced outside of the seven sources mentioned and to be the result of some “genial sparkle”. These sparkles, however, usually lead only to creativity, and the corporate image is organized and implemented in a systematic and purposeful manner.

The seven cited sources, which induce the activities of creating the image policy of a university, can be summarized in such a way. The first source - the “*unexpected*” – can be a successful accreditation or a failed one, also a lack of candidate students in a particular professional field. To the second source, “*Discrepancies between the reality as it is supposed to be or what it should be*” may be the case when students seek a distance form of education, but the university itself does not offer it. The disclosure of a new major due to the need of the market by specialized cadres can be referred to as the third source. Regarding the fourth one, these may be, for example, activities imposed by new requirements in the law on the development of the academic staff regarding the publication activity and the activity of the lecturers in obtaining degrees and positions. The imposed new national minimum requirements related to publications in indexed magazines with an impact factor found a large number of lecturers in higher schools in Bulgaria not prepared. This imperatively makes the desire for a large number of publications to be transformed into the pursuit of publications in well-established magazines with a high ranking and impact factor. “*The Demographic changes*” as a source of new image solutions and actions at a university can be linked to a sharp decline in the number of graduates of secondary education, which requires the organization of field exams or electronic competition exams for prospective students. This example could also be given for the seventh source, indicating that the borders are indeed blurred and seven sources are being overlapped. Towards the sixth source can be addressed – the provision of modern working conditions in the university library, dormitories and university seminar halls, multimedia halls, access to EBSCO-type electronic databases, Scopus, quality and secure access to the Internet and Internet services, providing access for disadvantaged people, the availability of infrastructure providing opportunities for scientific, arts and crafts and sporting activities. These services can also be referred to the seventh “*New Knowledge*” source. Many of the above-mentioned things can be seen as induced by the seventh source of innovative solutions.

The good corporate image of a higher educational institution is created not only by the good media presence but by the concrete positive activities that the school carries

out. In modern forms of communication and transfer of information, it is difficult to manipulate public opinion and present the real image and the identity of the subject. Undoubtedly, a professionally secure media presence is a factor, but the most important is the eventful PR and the activities of a university that are mostly related to:

- *flexible student admission system;*
- *the quality of the offered educational service;*
- *the quality of the acquired knowledge, skills and competencies;*
- *the opportunities for graduates to enter the labor market;*
- *the opportunities for continuing education in a higher educational qualification degree;*
- *opportunities for parallel training in two majors;*
- *providing preferential student fees in the case of excellent performance or other additional conditions;*
- *providing scholarships and incentives outside those provided for in the regulations;*
- *possibilities for further qualification and retraining;*
- *opportunities providing practical training and internships in partner companies;*
- *providing part-time work for students;*
- *the organization of valuable, international scientific events as well as events and opportunities for participation in them;*
- *recognition of learning stages held in other higher educational institutions;*
- *the level and quality of research and performance in the higher educational institution;*
- *the opportunities offered to students, PhD students and young scientists to participate in research, arts and crafts and sports activities;*
- *opportunities for professional and career development of lecturers;*
- *a flexible system ensuring pay differentiation and the stimulation of teaching and scientific research activity.*

Conclusion

The company's strategy and organization's specific policies depend on its traditions, capabilities, strategic goals, and the type of image maker activities the company has decided to implement. In many cases, it is preferable to use "pushed" type activities in the presence of equilibrium, i.e. to use the so-called good opportunities (*opportunity entrepreneurship*). These are the preparation or implementation of pre-emptive decisions and real actions, guaranteeing the company adequate responses in case of disturbing the equilibrium. In our opinion, this type of corporate behavior and policy is preferable to activities of the coercion type (*necessity entrepreneurship*). The first type of behavior is more productive, more innovative, and creates competitive advantages for the organization, reducing the risk of undesirable consequences in case of imbalance. In other words, the image maker activities, motivated by internal needs and opportunities that are at the forefront, are, in our opinion, preferable.

The role of a corporate image is growing every day. Companies understand that it is the key to their sustainable development and the creation of competitive advantages. Corporate image is a factor that has a serious impact on public attitudes and their views on the organization.

NOTES

1. Ranking of Higher Education Institutions in Bulgaria, Volume 1, 2017.

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