

Indigenous Business Model Practices by Small and Medium Enterprises: A Case in Marketing of DBIM

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Abstract

Higher education institutes and the corporate world share many characteristics. Prospective students, like prospective customers, have a vast array of choices: private or public institute, large or small, domestic or international, management studies or technical / engineering studies -- the list goes on. Like businesses competing for talented workers, colleges and universities compete vigorously for talented students and calculate ways to improve the conversion rate from accepted to enrolled students. Marketing of higher education thus plays a very prominent role, in creating and sustaining the brand image of the institution, in the customers and consumers mind. Higher education is a broad marketplace, and no college or university can rest on its laurels.

Keywords: Higher Education, Marketing, Value Learning, Participating Institutes

Introduction

Marketing can be defined as the following:

- Human activity directed at satisfying needs and wants through exchange processes.¹
- Achieving needs and wants by determining the needs and wants of target markets and delivering the desired results more effectively and efficiently than competitors.²
- To create and keep customers at a profit (anyone who is a stakeholder)

The basic questions that arise are:

What is marketing of an Institute or University?

What is the role and nature of marketing in higher education?

It can be argued that courses, programme and qualifications are products, but that they are delivered with the characteristics of services. Therefore, service marketing

¹ Kotler, P. and Turner, R., *Marketing Management*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1981, p. 5

² *Ibid*, p. 15

methods are deemed more relevant. The generic challenges of service marketing can also be expressed in higher education Institutes.

- **Intangibility:** Where you are purchasing an abstract, a “performance” - where the value of the student lies in the new levels of understanding and performance which have transformed them.
- **Inseparability:** Where for learning to take place, there needs to be a willing and active student, and an effective teacher coming together at the same time, and an underlying support service contract.
- **Perishability:** An empty class cannot be saved or preserved - it is a lost opportunity.
- **Heterogeneity:** The challenge of delivering constant quality.

Let us take a view of the marketing activities undertaken by Don Bosco Institute of Management in its erstwhile MBA programme.

Value Learning - Shaping Lives

There are Institutes. And then there are Institutes. The former are just study places-nine-to-five affairs with all those daily lectures. The students have regular uniforms, wear ties, come bearing the road chaos, attend assemblies, attend the boring lectures where it seems marketing management and human resource management make one sleepy, laugh at the teachers’ bad jokes, have some non-palatable lunch at the dusty canteen, reach home tired after the daily bus juggling and then go to bed thinking of no justified chanting.

The latter are Institutes like that of Don Bosco Institute of Management (DBIM), Guwahati, one of the recent starters. Here, students stay in comfortable hostels, overlooking the mighty Brahmaputra. Staying at the Institutes’ hostels, separate for the boys and girls, was made compulsory during the first two years, which became optional from the third year onwards. Majority of the students have opted to stay at the hostels. This actually is a beneficial enforcement for the stakeholders of MBA, where behavioral change is one of the prime concerns. It is an accepted fact that, for shaping the desired behavior, students cannot be constrained within the four walls of the classroom and within a limited time-frame. It is here that DBIM stands tall from the crowd, providing the needed ambience for self development and enrichment. Surrounded by the green lofty hills and the river, the usual day starts with jogging, stretching and students make plans for the day. They have smart uniforms, with Saturdays being an exception, when students come in informal dresses. After having a filling breakfast, the students come for the Assembly. The morning prayers are being offered, presided over by the Rector. Normally, important incidents, both internal and external, are appraised at the Assembly gathering. News Reading by the students has also become a daily input at the assembly, whereby the students remain upto-date with the current events round-the-world. Important persons and guests are being acknowledged and their relation with DBIM strengthened.

The classes begin from nine-thirty hours, after the assembly. Although each class is of one and half hours duration, occasionally two classes on the particular subject are being taken at a stretch, with a tea break in between. This increases the focus of the students on the day's topic and it also helps in their understanding. The two class sessions are being followed by the sumptuous lunch at the Institute's dining hall. A nice strolling up the terrace, overlooking the river fine-tunes the body. The warmth of the sun makes one feel nourished with the essentials on a wintry day while the same may bring giddiness in the summers.

The afternoon classes usually begin from 1.30, with the same three hour sessions, but on different subjects. This is when the students can't help, but feel tired and sleepy, much to the amusement of all present. A half-an-hour gap is being provided within the two sessions, so that students can have refreshments and fight away the sagging. Though the official classes finish by 5 in the evening, the unofficial guidance of the students, which is very important, start. The students after having the evening snacks come to the teachers' cabins, either individually or in groups, for consultation on various class and general topics. It is here, when various team sharing activities are worked upon. The students usually call it a day at around 8-8.30 at night and retire to their respective hostels and rooms, where they complete their unfinished assignments, discuss in groups and study. This is how a normal day ends for the students.

The teachers, selected from various field of specializations, give cent percent dedication to their work. Apart from teaching, they are also doing research activities, getting involved in training, administrative and consultancy works. The very start of DBIM was followed by the inception of North-East India's first business magazine, 'the Brahmaputra', which is actually a gateway to the North-East, to make the world realize the immense potential that lie in the region and thereby, fill the gap between the East and the West. Team DBIM has also started the business incubation centre, 'MouiZori', which can bring the much needed business development in the region. DBIM is also focusing its activities on the development of the society by initiating various social activities, through the forum, 'Prajwal'. The social forum has undertaken the task of giving free teaching workshops to the school students of the surrounding village - Joypur. And the students of DBIM are actively taking part in these workshops. The faculties of DBIM, in collaboration with RMSA, Assam, were also involved in providing training to around 3640 Heads of Government Schools of all the districts of Assam, in the recently concluded programme, the theme of which was 'State Level Residential Training for Principals/Headmasters on School Management and Leadership'

The students, from the various state boards of the North-East, are slowly getting acclimatized with the new form of education, they are anchoring into. The class activities start with case studies, understanding of the various problems through supportive knowledge, unannounced tests and quizzes, theoretical and practical assignments and other class works. Another tough job for the students is getting involved with social activities. Some of the students have the general belief that in two years' time, they

cannot make any notable difference to the society, when the government and other agencies have failed so far. And moreover, the social works will have no bearing in their final placements. This is the mindset of some students, which is not their fault. They have come from such environments, where doing something good for the society is seen with the third eye. DBIM is not looking to upturn the society in 2-3 years, but make distinct changes in the way the people think and act and make them realize the future of their present actions.

This may seem a lot of work for the students, in addition to their regular studies. But if one dwells deep and understands the whole scenario, then one will realize the importance of such activities, in developing students to become effective and valuable managers, with highly qualified MBA degrees. The tag of DBIM i.e. 'Building Dreams-Shaping Lives' will then, really fit into.

Let's figure out the various activities that are being considered in creating the value chain of higher education institutes in general and DBIM, in particular.

Higher Education Value Chain at DBIM

Based on the classification of activities proposed by Porter in his generic framework for the industry analysis, here the sequential operational activities are represented as primary activities i.e., the activities or operations essential to deliver the services. Secondary or Support activities are those activities, which facilitate the primary activities to function. One important aspect of this framework is that competitiveness may be build around any of the activity or their combination.

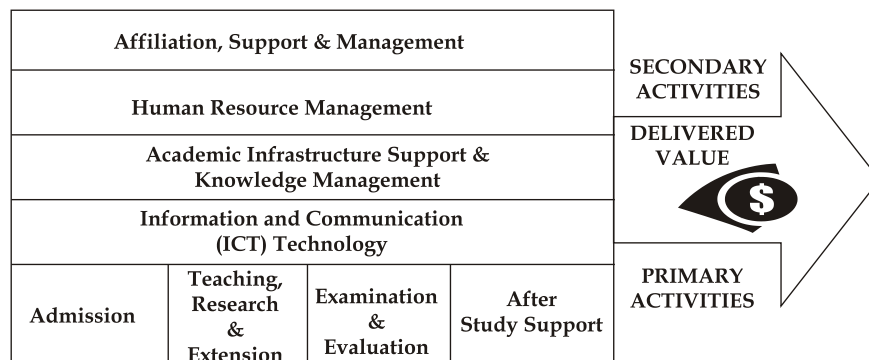


Fig: A modified Higher Education Value Chain

Primary Activities

The activities of the entire value chain starts from the admission process. In the Indian Higher Education Sector, this activity has enough scope for value-addition and improvement. Right from the pre - admission support till the final admission, the competitiveness may be built.

DBIM doesn't give much importance to the board and other examinations, which a particular student has come through. It believes that there can be numerous reasons for a student to fare better or poor in an examination. Instead, it is in the Group Discussion and Interview, that a students' real caliber comes out, which can be ably judged. So, students below the prescribed minimum qualifying marks can apply to get admission in the MBA programme. DBIM lays emphasis on giving equal opportunities to students from all over the North-East region. And this has been proved in the student ratios from the different regions.

The teaching - learning system is the core of the entire higher education value-chain. The innovation in pedagogy, need-based teaching and flexibility in design of the teaching-learning system are some of the major issues that need urgent attention, in order to build the competitiveness. DBIM has evolved the method where teacher is basically the coach, who sits on the sidelines and keeps an eye on the performance of the players / students. Normal class hours are from 9-5, which is essential to attend daily for skill development and not just for understanding. The classes are of 11/2 to 3 hours duration, which students cannot afford to miss. Practical oriented case learning is the method that is followed in the class and there's no prescribed text book in any course. Moreover, day-to-day assignments, group activities, presentations etc., really keep the students on their toes. Internet facilities are there to browse through, for searching information, but plagiarism is seen as a crime. The much needed informal interactions begin after the class hours till late night, where individual and group learning takes place. DBIM has a rich source of top executives from industries and experienced persons in different fields. They come, communicate and enrich the students' knowledge, on different aspects.

The Examination and Evaluation is another area of activity of concern. Especially, with the increase in the scale of the operation, the focus of the examination bodies shift to the management of examinations and timely declaration of results. And the teachers, with the help of the office and the management of DBIM, are ably managing the whole examination process. DBIM has made it a rule, to send the corrected answer scripts to the University, within a week of completion of exams, for quick declaration of results.

After study support system is one area that can be used to develop long-term mutually rewarding relationships with the graduates of the system. The placement and career counseling services, continuing education programme and other such activities will not only help in strengthening the bond of relationship with the alumni but also strengthen shared values with existing students in the system. DBIM has created websites by which students can always remain connected with their colleagues and teachers.

Ultimately, the credibility of higher education institutes viz. DBIM, largely depends on the 'word of mouth'. Therefore, DBIM has to look into the quality of after support system, which needs to be addressed in an organized and careful manner.

Secondary Activities

The affiliation support and management services are important activities for the affiliated institutions of the universities. In our country, a large number of academic institutions operate under this system; this function may be seen as the origin point of quality in affiliated institutions. In the affiliation function, careful consideration of the affiliated institution is carried out and so, quality is being given the prime importance. As the number of institutions increase, the transparency and quality of this function seems to dilute, and this is an alarming indicator of the emerging situation.

DBIM is a constituent institute of the Assam Don Bosco University, Guwahati, and the first private university in the region. The University does not have policy of giving affiliation to academic institution of any type. As such, the matter of quality dilution does not arise.

The problem of effective Human Resource Management is another challenge in our system. By its very characteristics, the quality of higher education services largely depends on the human factor. This is one of the areas, where efforts are required to standardize the skills and training need of the human resources on one side and establish uniform procedures of recruitment, selection and career planning on the other. Regular behavioural training has become very much important for all categories of employees, including teaching, non-teaching and administrative staff. The quality assurance and career planning should be linked together in more objective manner, with the focus on inculcation of professional values. The efforts towards value-addition in this particular area are critical for overall upgradation and maintenance of system quality. DBIM do not give much emphasis on the academic achievements of its human resource i.e. the teaching faculties. Instead, it gives much more emphasis on industrial and practical market experiences and achievements. DBIM is endowed with faculties who have the rich international and industrial experiences, along with the academic exposure.

Academic infrastructure support system, including curriculum development, library and computing support facilities and knowledge management systems are the support facilities, which although not in the front line, play a very active role in the overall branding of the institution. DBIM is equipped with the latest infrastructure in all departments, be it in the class, computer lab, library unit, office, canteen, hostels etc. As the Rector of DBIM always recommends, 'Be here to feel the difference'.

Information and communication technology facilities can not only make the system more efficient and competitive, but can significantly add to the effectiveness of quality assurance and management system. ICT also allows the academic institutions to reach disadvantaged groups and new international educational markets. Especially in developing countries like India, effective use of ICT for the purpose of education has the potential to bridge the digital divide. DBIM, with the help of the management and the faculty, is trying to bridge this gap between the knowledge seekers and knowledge

givers. The faculty, due to its connections with the Institutions viz. Asian Institute of Technology, Bangkok; ICFAI, Hyderabad; Virginia State University, Virginia; XIM, Bhubeneshwar etc. are able to provide helpful knowledge in their subjects of study and present latest cases that make the classes very interesting and knowledge enriched ones.

To look at the results of marketing, DBIM has rightly won two prestigious awards in the very first year of its establishment. At first, it bagged the 'Best Participating Institute' award at the 'Quasofiesta 2010', a management fest organized by Gauhati Commerce College. Then it won the 'Best B-School' title at the 'AIM Quest 2010', organized by AIM, Guwahati. Continuing its winning tradition in the various competitive spheres in and around the region, the students have made DBIM, a name to reckon with.