Marketing for A Web-Based Master’s Degree Program in Light of Marketing Mix Model

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Abstract

The marketing mix model was applied with a focus on Web to re-strategize a Web-based Master’s program in a southern state university in U.S. The program’s existing marketing was examined using the four components of the model: product, price, place, and promotion, and this is known as the marketing mix (4P) model. The program has been offering a fully Web-based Master’s of Education (M.Ed.) for more than a decade. In addition to the M.Ed. degree program, the academic program also offers a specialization in Educational Technology for the Doctor of Education in Curriculum and Instruction; an undergraduate Educational Technology track in three degree programs: Bachelor of Applied Technology (BAT), Bachelor of Applied Arts and Sciences (BAAS), and Bachelor of Multidisciplinary Studies (BMS); as well as two graduate certificate programs: Master Technology Teacher (MTT) and E-Learning. As the only online M.Ed. program within Educational Technology within the University of Texas System, the state-funded program is currently servicing 58 graduate students that occupy approximately 120 seats in various courses (M. Stevens, personal communication, September 16, 2010). The goal of this piece of applied research study is to investigate this particular academic program (i.e., Education Technology at the University) and concentrate on one of its products (i.e., M.Ed. in Educational Technology) in an effort to strategize a better marketing direction for this product than what currently exists.

Introduction

The focus of this business research study is on the marketing and promotion efforts of an Educational Technology program in a southern state university (referred to as the University in this paper) in the United States of America in terms of product, price, place, and promotion, which is known as the marketing mix (4P) model. The program has been offering a fully Web-based Master’s of Education (M.Ed.) for more than a decade. In addition to the M.Ed. degree program, the academic program also offers a specialization in Educational Technology for the Doctor of Education in Curriculum and Instruction; an undergraduate Educational Technology track in three degree programs: Bachelor of Applied Technology (BAT), Bachelor of Applied Arts and Sciences (BAAS), and Bachelor of Multidisciplinary Studies (BMS); as well as two graduate certificate programs: Master Technology Teacher (MTT) and E-Learning. As the only online M.Ed. program within Educational Technology within the University of Texas System, the state-funded program is currently servicing 58 graduate students that occupy approximately 120 seats in various courses (M. Stevens, personal communication, September 16, 2010). The goal of this piece of applied research study is to investigate this particular academic program (i.e., Education Technology at the University) and concentrate on one of its products (i.e., M.Ed. in Educational Technology) in an effort to strategize a better marketing direction for this product than what currently exists.

State universities, which compete for limited public funds, need to develop an integrated marketing plan to bring in revenues in order to continue its regular operations, just like other publicly funded entities (Amenity, 2010). Marketing in education is being employed pervasively (Gupta & Singh, 2010; Ning & Crossley, 2010; Ščelovs & Gaile-Sarkane, 2010; Van Rooij & Lemp, 2010), and it is generally drawn upon theories and practices of business marketing (Kerstetter, 2011). Beneke (2011) stated, “It would be foolhardy to assume that marketing and the institution [of higher education] are strange bedfellows” (p. 33). Therefore, it is paramount that the University takes on the responsibility for formulating and implementing a marketing strategy in an effort to prevent the issue of student enrollment previously mentioned. The University can start by integrating all existing resources and coordinating with the faculty of the M.Ed. in Educational Technology program.

Because the University is located in the southernmost part of Texas, it is paramount to market the University as a brand to areas outside the Lower Rio Grande Valley that it currently servicing. The online Educational Technology program had defined a brand image known in the State of Texas as a competitive online M.Ed. in Educational Technology degree for teachers, instructional designers, and trainers. That image is now gradually fading away as the deceased UTTC. A new brand must be created through marketing communications (Keller, 2009). When it comes to the conventions of marketing communications, print and television advertising are two popular and effective media, among others (Li, Sun, & Montgomery, 2011; Mulhern, 2009; Pfetffer & Zinnbauer, 2010; Sathuraman, Tillis, & Briesch, 2011). One drawback, though, is their associated cost, particularly the television commercials (Newstead & Romaniuk, 2010). It is important that marketing events often require the determination and dedication of the organization, which also includes regular financial support. Even in recession universities should invest resources in marketing communications because customers still pay attention to the advertising (Sathuraman et al., 2011). Nevertheless, Keller (2009) warned that “traditional approaches to branding that put emphasis on mass media techniques seem questionable in a marketplace where customers have access to massive amounts of information about brands, products, and companies and in which social networks have, in some cases, supplanted brand networks” (p. 139). The question in the title of the paper then is, “Are the various marketing efforts made in an integrated manner?” Keller’s statement, too, supported a proposed viewpoint that the University recognizes and stresses the value of communicating not simply to but also with the customers (Grooms & Biernatzi, 2008; Kitchen & Schultz, 2009; Lee & Park, 2007; Luck & Moffatt, 2009; Mishra & Murialle, 2010). Having said all that, it makes perfect sense to seek alternative venues and solutions to marketing communications than paid services.

In the face of the shortage of funds, use of the marketing techniques at no or a nominal cost seems to be an optimal albeit short-run option, especially for the non-for-profit state universities that occupy approximately 120 seats in various courses (M. Stevens, personal communication, September 16, 2010). The goal of this piece of applied research study is to investigate this particular academic program (i.e., Education Technology at the University) and concentrate on one of its products (i.e., M.Ed. in Educational Technology) in an effort to strategize a better marketing direction for this product than what currently exists.

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reengineered to stay competitive (e.g., useful) because certain courses that were originally contributed by other institutions through the partnership may be unavailable in the long run. A reengineered program must be kept in a way that “the core of marketing is the marketing mix [model]” (Grönroos, 1989, p. 53) in spite of its criticism. Interested readers may refer to prior studies by Akroush (2011), Constantinides (2006), and Möller (2006) for opponents’ views on the marketing mix model.

Applying Marketing Mix Model to New Plan

In essence, there are four components of the original marketing mix model: product, price, place, and promotion (4P). Each represents one aspect or parameter of a marketing plan (Parno, Lee, & Soekartawi, 2010). The four, as a whole, make a well-known marketing toolkit that is catchy and applicable, and the model serves as a significant cornerstone of marketing science (Constantinides, ed., 2006). The four-parameter model, however, is based on a conceptual framework that identifies the principal decision making managers make in configuring their offerings to suit consumers’ needs” (Goi, 2009, p. 2). For the past decades, it has remained an instrumental beginning point for marketing analysts (Hakånsson & Seiders, 2011) to afford a synergetic information infrastructure which addresses the cost issue. The new marketing plan will also enable the University to coordinate its marketing activities by tapping into the talent of the concerned faculty of the graduate program, which leads to an integrated endeavor. Most importantly, the strategy will reposition the University itself out of the Valley. The other aspect of the new marketing strategy deals with the utilitarian approach to the product development. The University needs to acknowledge the need to (re)design the M.Ed. in Educational Technology degree into a more useful product that can attract its prospects and retain present customers outside the servicing area. To do so, this strategy should rely on the program faculty’s content knowledge and the alignment of the curriculum with the industry standards as argued earlier.

Challenges and Recommendations

Three imminent challenges are faced by the M.Ed. program due to the dissolved UTTC partnership. First, all promotional events sponsored by the UTTC have been discontinued; whether the degree program and the University are able to sustain a vigorous marketing effort is in question. Second, prospective students may no longer identify the degree program with the UT brand; this potential loss of branding is a concern. Third, the alliance with the four UT campuses lacks formal coordination and communication. These challenges, along with others, are affecting the distinctive, competitive and comparable advantages the M.Ed. program previously owned. Surrounded by its competitors in Texas alone, the degree program must take additional courses of action to sustain the advantages. To do so, below are six recommendations to improve its present marketing strategy.

1. Use social media to aid in recruiting efforts. The Web 2.0 social networking tools currently adopted should accommodate this effort. For instance, a recruiting event can be integrated into a simple content in the program’s Facebook page to generate more traffic in the virtual space.

2. Restructure the degree program to streamline the course completion effort. The present design of the curriculum is flexible enough to allow for four elective courses transferred from the UT’s online or accredited institutions. However, required courses and graduate courses numbers are not always offered without a viable justification due to the University’s current policy. More flexibility should be implemented.

3. Create a marketing intelligence sub-system exclusively for the M.Ed. program within the existing marketing program of the University by working with Marketing Office of the University. A specific set of objectives resulting from this development will need to be formulated. With the objectives in mind, effectiveness of various ongoing marketing efforts will be assessed to identify a performance gap and eliminate recruiting events that are not effective. Whenever possible, consolidate available resources for smart marketing actions by tapping into the talent of the concerned faculty of the graduate program, which leads to an integrated endeavor. The program focus on what it can do best. During the process, the marketing efforts that are proven to be effective are reinforced; while less effective efforts are adjusted or eliminated. For instance, the online application form may also collect the information on how prospective students learned about the M.Ed. degree. See Appendix B for a detailed explanation.

4. Remove barriers in admission and financial aid processes, as well as course registration processes. For example, the M.Ed. program should consider removing the GRE scores from the admission requirements within reason. See Appendix C for a brief list of graduate programs that do not require GRE scores. This is likely to sharpen the competitive advantage of the program.

5. Research current demographic values within the State of Texas to target untargeted markets. Reaching a different clientele is another way to survive this competitive market. This piece of intelligence should be collected through the online application form.

6. Develop product alliance with any complementary program in the state or the country while continuing to form product alliances with other UT campuses. Resuming the partnership with the four UT campuses can be an effective way to increase customers’ “mind share” of the degree.

Major competitors of the M.Ed. in Educational Technology at the University are the M.S. in Computer Education and Cognitive Systems program at the University of North Texas, the M.Ed. in Instructional Technology program at Texas Tech University, the M.Ed. in Educational Technology program at Texas A&M University-College Station, the M.S. in Instructional Technology program at the University of Houston-Clear Lake, and the M.Ed. in Educational Technology Leadership program at Lamar University. All are Web-based
degree programs. As Appendix A indicates, most of these competitors are so-called flagship universities within respective public university systems in Texas. Among them, Lamar University is taking an aggressive, entrepreneur-type approach to its recruitment drive. Although there is not much known about the deal between StateU.Com and Lamar University, this approach appears to have posed an enormous threat to the M.Ed. program at the University and others on the market by offering a more competitive price. With that being said, the M.Ed. program must continue its existing delivery method to maintain the advantages as its own opportunity to survive. Speaking of its strengths, the M.Ed. program provides more flexibility in its curriculum and more synchronous instructor-student interaction. On the other hand, lack of brand awareness because of the phased-out UTTC is deemed one of its major weaknesses.

Summary

The present applied research is intended to offer a better marketing strategy for the M.Ed. in Educational Technology at the University in light of the marketing mix model. Taking into consideration the program (product) itself, its price, place, and promotion, three immediate challenges are identified. The challenges were caused by the demise of the UTTC. To address the challenges, six recommendations are made in an attempt to improve the marketing strategy for the M.Ed. program. It is also suggested that the program maximize its own strengths and opportunities while simultaneously minimizing its weaknesses and threats as indicated in the examination findings through the adopted model. Nevertheless, the degree program should continue to be adaptable and vigilant in its marketing strategy in the event that the state policy for formula funding changes in accordance with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (2010) recommendations.

References


Appendix A

An Overview of Major Online Graduate Educational Technology Programs in Texas by Program, Public University System, Required Hours, Tuition and Fees, and Allowed Transfer Hours.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Program</th>
<th>University of Texas at Brownsville</th>
<th>University of North Texas</th>
<th>Texas Tech University</th>
<th>Texas A&amp;M University-College Station</th>
<th>University of Houston-Clear Lake</th>
<th>Lamar University</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>M.Ed. in Educational Technology</td>
<td>M.S. in Computer Education and Cognitive Systems</td>
<td>M.Ed. in Instructional Technology</td>
<td>M.Ed. in Educational Technology</td>
<td>M.S. in Instructional Technology</td>
<td>M.Ed. in Educational Technology Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public University System</td>
<td>UT System</td>
<td>UNT System</td>
<td>TTU System</td>
<td>TAMU System</td>
<td>UH System</td>
<td>TSU System</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Required hours</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuition &amp; Fees for 3, 6, and 9 hrs (Fall 2010)</td>
<td>$850.71</td>
<td>$1,473.12</td>
<td>$1,075.13</td>
<td>$1,932.41</td>
<td>$2,789.69</td>
<td>$1,063.80</td>
<td>$1,800.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allowed transfer hours</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Tuition and fees for University of Houston-Clear Lake are adopted on the basis of $7,092 for 20 hours per year published at http://prtl.uhcl.edu/portal/page/portal/FAO/Costofattendance-2010-2011.


Appendix B

Sample Forwarded Admission Web Application Form.
Appendix C

Graduate Educational Technology Programs That Do Not Require GRE.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Admission Requirements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boise State University</td>
<td>M.E.T. and M.S. Educational Technology</td>
<td>No GRE requirement; just a 3.0 or better GPA and a well-written essay.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of North Dakota</td>
<td>M.Ed. and M.S. Instructional Design &amp; Technology</td>
<td>No GRE requirement for students with 2.75 undergraduate GPA.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas State University – San Marcos</td>
<td>M.Ed. Management of Technical Education</td>
<td>No GRE requirement for applicants with a 2.75 GPA or above on the last 60 undergraduate semester hours. Applicants with GPA below 2.75 are required to submit GRE scores of 900 (verbal and quantitative combined) and personal interview.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Texas – El Paso</td>
<td>Master of Education-Instructional Specialist - Educational Technology</td>
<td>No GRE requirement. Undergraduate GPA 3.0 or above.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Arkansas – Fayetteville</td>
<td>M.Ed. Educational Technology</td>
<td>No GRE requirement for applicants with a 3.0 GPA in all undergraduate coursework.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California State University – Fullerton</td>
<td>M.S. in Instructional Design and Technology</td>
<td>No GRE requirement.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The table above is only intended to present a brief list of graduate programs that do not require GRE in their admission process.