A Study of the Crucial Factors Impacting the Brand Positioning of B-Schools in West Bengal

Subrata Chattopadhyay, Assistant Professor and Head-Corporate Relations, Future Institute of Engineering and Management
Saumya Singh, Associate Professor, ISM University, Dhanbad

ABSTRACT
Brands are living components that we have been holding in our minds for years. What go into them is both, logical and irrational. Products and services will continue to come and go but the residual experiences of customers who consume them will ultimately define the brand. These residual experiences of customers help brands develop an image.

The act of imprinting the brand image firmly in the minds of customers is a great challenge to marketers. The act of image building has two basic components, positioning and consistent delivery of quality.

Positioning a brand is about interaction with people, what they read in press, style of advertising, quality of products, and efficiency of after-sales service. Branding is nothing but positioning a product successfully in the minds of the customers. If a brand is well positioned in a customer’s mind, half the job of directing customers to buy their products or services is done. The power of a brand is all about how customers associate their feelings with the brand. Long-term customer association can be built only through building emotional associations around a product.

The paper isolates the gamut of factors responsible and crucial to the B-School Brand positioning in West Bengal. These factors are perceived to create a Brand Differentiation and add credibility in an aim to create value perception in the mind of the students’ as customers. It is based on a rigorous survey of the students based out of AICTE approved B-Schools in West Bengal. The primary research objective was identify the factors like physical and infrastructural factors, faculty, facilities, teaching and learning methodology and environment, placements which the students’ feel that help serve their interests and desires and the sub-factors therein influencing their choice of B-School. The mode of MBA program preferred, the choice basket of entrance exams taken, the rigors of learning and the value addition and delight perspectives have been studied using a structured questionnaire. Management Institutions either fall in the category of autonomous/central government sponsored/aided or private B-Schools. Sustenance and goodwill creation develop over a period of time and development of the future leaders who will shape the industry need utmost care and due diligence.

Using rank correlation and other rigorous statistical techniques using SPSS-17, the idea was to find out, which of the sub-factors impact the students’, the most. Also the second motive was to identify if there was any dependence of the factors therein so as to identify and create the clusters which may define the best the crucial factors guiding the perception of the future leaders in the management studies aspirers and pursuers so that the gap between the desired level of service and the actual service delivered can be understood.

Once the management institutions can identify the choice of their set of target customers’ they can equip themselves better in a market where competition is fiercer with the day and differentiate to create an unique identity not only in their target markets but to all the stakeholders’ therein.

Key words: Brand sustenance, customer delight, value generation

Research Methodology

The study uses stratified random sampling with the sample area being the state of West Bengal and the government, government aided and the Private B-Schools as the strata on one end and the different B-School entry coaching centres on the other. Survey based research with a structured questionnaire was conducted over a sample size of 184 with equal weight to the aspirers and the pursuers i.e. the sample size taken from the B-Schools was the same as that obtained from the different coaching centres. The respondents educational, financial, economic background and the related demographics, psychographics were studied to understand their preferred choice of the management Institution based on their capability of developing leadership skills and the corresponding degree of emphasis. The age group was considered in equal intervals of five from 19 to 38 years. The income level considered was in intervals of INR 10000, with the higher limit open as >INR
55000. Occupational and experience parameters like service, government, public, private, fresher, business and the level of experience if so, was given due weight-age. All possible forms of undergraduate education were taken. The respondents had varied preferences regarding the methodology adopted by the management institutions on leadership cultivation. The methodology of teaching was examined with regards to the preference level of the respondents as to whether they like case study/project oriented teaching not strictly according to the curriculum or they wanted to go for a curriculum with stringent University norms. Participation in Business Quiz, workshop mode of teaching, debates, B-Club discussions, extempore etc contributes to the honing of leadership skill set required and customization of the same as per the specific industry requirements. Due diligence was also done as regards perceptual preference about SAP/ERP/Industrial visits/Corporate conferences. The questionnaire was expert opinionated and Cronbach Alpha values of 0.845 indicated the reliability.

Literature Review

An individual’s response to purchase a service product depends on the way in which he/she perceives it. Du Plessis and Rousseau (2005:111) state that it is imperative that organisations realise that a consumer’s perception is a reality for the consumer and determine how they act towards the organisation and its service products. Mabote (2001:62) is of the opinion that perception is equal to the truth, which, if not managed, can destroy an organisation. Institutions should realise that they are in business not only because they offer good quality service products and prices; they are also in business because consumers hold particular views about them.

Customers prefer to be in a Brand name Institution because they benefit from improved curriculum, pedagogy, technology and faculty quality aiding development of leadership (Lee and Tai, 2008). The students as customers look for the reputation of academic programmes, social climate, cost and location, and influences of others (parents, friends, recruiters and counselors) identified as very important by students when making decisions, higher education.

Since management is a practice oriented domain, management education has to incorporate an element of on-the-job training. This will need a mix of concepts, cases, exercises as well as simulations for themes such as business strategy, market planning, business negotiations, leadership, business ethics and team work. Case studies help the students to analyse the information, undertake critical thinking techniques (Mc Dade 1995) and encourage active learning, problem solving skills and impart real life into the subject matter (Millis and Lottel 1998). Curricular practices vis-à-vis emerging principles of pedagogy, evaluation of learner’s performance and progress vis-à-vis curriculum evaluation and quality management practices have become crucial (UGC, Sustaining Quality in Higher Educational Institutions, Golden Jubilee Seminars-2003).

The main lesson learnt from an analysis of US Business education is that they give considerable attention to context design and theme delivery modes. In the field of higher education, survey research was used to study student/customer choice criteria for selecting colleges (Coccari & Javalgi, 1995, Conard & Conard, 2001), student/customer expectations and attitudes (Winzor & Morley, 1994), student/customer evaluations of program quality and satisfaction (Zammuto, Keaveney, O’Conner, 1996, Browne et al, 1998) employer evaluations of college programs (Joseph and Joseph, 1997), and employer expectations of student graduating students (Franzack & Cowles, 1993, Karakaya & Karakaya, 1996).

We accept the statement from the "Baldrige Education Criteria for Performance Excellence"(BNQP 2005) that students are the “key customers” of higher education, and those parents of the students, future employers of the students, and others could also be appropriately termed customers or stakeholder.

Discussions of Research Results:

The total prospects included all eligible under graduates from different streams. The highest percentage had done either B.E/B.Tech as their undergraduate studies followed by commerce graduates and the Bachelor’s in Business Administration which implies that it is the general perception of the engineers to don administrative and managerial skills in addition to their technical qualities for better job prospects and fulfillment of esteem needs. It was also found that the Humanities, Pharmacy graduates were relatively low in either their pursuits or aspirations towards management studies and prefer to choose other form of Masters’ in preference to MBA/PGDBM.

A good 87.6% of the respondents use different educational websites to gain information regarding all aspects of B-Schools. This is followed by social networking sites and Business Magazines-indicating that social networking is gradually gaining predominance. McDonough (1994:434) found that for mid-range academic performers, institution choice is a highly rationalized, managed
process requiring professional help from a variety of sources.

A study was done to understand the form of MBA specialization giving an edge to a fresher as a platform to enter the Industry. The options given were of different forms of MBA viz: General MBA/PGDBM with core/dual specialization or specialized sectoral MBA with/without industry tie up, MBA under DEC+PGP (autonomous with AICTE) and optional foreign University certification or MBA from a foreign University with opportunity to earn while they learn. It was found that a general MBA/PGDBM with dual specialization was preferred by 39.1% of the aspirants and 47.8% of the pursuers, simplifying that both of them want the option doors to be open and be a specialist in whatever they learn as “knowledge and action” are inseparable and there is a need to be educated wisely and well to manage the critical Institutions of the world (Dymsza 1982). An MIT study validates the same as significant attitude changes take place in the students’ after management education.

The best choice of the respondents was to do MBA from a reputed college under a University, approved by UGC/AICTE. Mintzberg, enunciated the same viz.- “The attainment of knowledge and the enhancement of the competencies are important but we wanted our program to go beyond these, to help people become not just effective managers but wiser human beings – more thoughtful, more worldly, more engaging which the candidates felt would be better in a regulated environment in which the E3: Enhancing the educational experience.”

Preference factors of the management studies were surveyed on these lines as above as regards physical infrastructure and facilities in leadership building viz. AC online smart classroom was not considered to be an urgent/ immediate requirement as perceived by the aspirants. Though 35% of the aspirants ranked it in the first three on their priority index, 30.4% ranked it as the 6th.

A centralized 24*7 library is a must for the respondents. The Kurien Committee, set up by the G.O.I in 1991 stressed “on the interrelatedness of teaching, research and consultancy needs to be better emphasized for greater synergy.”

A good 54.3% of the aspirants and 56.5% of the pursuers indicated that quality infrastructure was what they sought/seek when they choose a B-School thus making it one of the most vital parameters in B-School selection as the interviewers ranked it in the first three as the priority list. AICTE stipulates the norms required for the minimum carpet area, classroom, tutorials, computer centre and library and reading room seminar halls. Lush green Campus in an Industrial Township has its natural advantages of well connectivity and availability of practical exposure towards holistic learning.

Faculty with Rich Industrial experience is preferred by 45% and 50% of the aspirants and pursuers as their first preference. The Institutions need to invest in getting better faculty, improving skills and developing research center etc (Baxi and Sahay 2005), There is an increasing realization that faculty must conduct research, raise funds for research and publish regularly in reputed journals (Dayal 2002).

Case studies account for around 80% of the coursework at HBS (The Economist, 1995, p.69), This was reflected that 63% of the aspirants and 77.4% of the pursuers preferred it in the top three of their priority thus indicating its sustained acceptance. According to Mc Dade (1995) one of the most important purposes of teaching case is to create “realistic laboratories” in the classroom so that “research techniques”, “decision making skills” can be applied.

A good 52.2% of the aspirers and 47.8% of the pursuers felt the need for holistic education and such value additions would make their learning process complete. Garvin(1991) appeals for doing away with lecture based pedagogy for more interactive learning because case-conference mode enables skills such as analysis, problem solving and judgment which cannot be taught and also due to the need to have an alternative to lecture based classroom environment.

Pursuing MBA was also perceived as a gateway to the global arena in Industry, as there was a heavy bias in the first three of preference, 39.1% and 50.1% of the aspirants and pursuers felt their B-School study would ultimately lead them to International placements though their MBA pursuit was primarily aimed at gaining knowledge and insights into the functioning Industry.

An appreciable 45.7% and 52.2% of the aspirants and pursuers vied for empathy positioning of the B-School brand. Since student choices of universities and academic programme would certainly affect the student’s intake for any academic institution, higher education institutions are confronted with the rise of “consumers” and the challenges resulting from commoditization / Commercialization of higher education (Ngok, 2000).

Conclusions and Recommendations
Development of leadership skills in the future leaders with a TQM approach envisages Brand Building in Institutions. Proper infrastructure and facilities with access to research journals,
conferencing facilities, case study discussions and workshop mode of teaching by faculty with a proper blend of Industry and academia helps foster leadership skills with practical insights thus providing a gateway to superior employability and enhance brand building and sustenance. Management students value empathy positioning with availability and approachability to the concerned faculty. All round grooming with business quiz, debates, case conferences, and extempore presentations together with research orientation etal pave for all round development of the candidates. With information readily available on the various educational websites added to peer group influence the aspirers and pursuers are better equipped to judge brand equity and make informed judicious decisions identifying gaps in the zone of tolerance.

References
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