

Measuring the effectiveness of the faculty of science's marketing strategy

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Progressio 23(1)2001
Forum

OVERVIEW

To assess the effectiveness of its marketing strategy, the Faculty of Science has been conducting research with its first-year intake for the last two years. Students registering for the first time at undergraduate level were invited to complete questionnaires. Issues that were central to the study included educational history, employment status, awareness of Unisa and its advertising activities, and reasons for becoming a university student and for choosing Unisa rather than other institutions. A question on the registration process was also included. The data show that the Faculty of Science has two discrete groups of students at this level, each requiring different marketing strategies to attract them. This bimodal pattern is repeated among some other faculties' first-year intakes. Overlaying this are differences between male and female students, each with implications for marketing strategies.

INTRODUCTION

In the 1998 and 1999 academic years, Unisa's faculties were given their own marketing budgets to conduct advertising campaigns(1). Each faculty had appointed a marketing officer to coordinate the use of the funds allocated, and various committees were established and were instructed by the Deans concerned to draw up strategies and to market the respective faculties. In the 2000 academic year, these functions were centralised and an outside agency was commissioned to assume responsibility for the University's corporate and faculty advertising in the popular media. The reason for these developments was that it was believed that this would lead to the development and marketing of a single, strong brand image rather than that created by the (mostly) uncoordinated efforts of individual faculties. The marketing officers were instructed to cease advertising in "over-the-counter" media and to concentrate whatever funds were allocated to their faculties to printing brochures and other promotional materials, and to advertising in appropriate professional journals and specialist publications.

During the two years when faculties drew up and implemented their own marketing plans, the Faculty of Science conducted the research mentioned with a view to identifying important characteristics of its student body and thereby evaluating the effectiveness of its own marketing strategy. Students registering at Unisa for the first time as undergraduates in the 1998-1999 and the 1999-2000 registration periods were asked to complete questionnaires. The data from the 1998-1999 period were made available internally. The results of the 1999-2000 study are presented here, and the previous year's data are included where appropriate. The implications for the Faculty of Science in particular and the University in general will also be discussed.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

In answer to the question, "In which year did you complete your Matric?" there was a bimodal distribution with 26% having completed Matric (and probably formal schooling) in the previous year (in 1999) and 12% the year before, with 41% of the students having been out of school for more than 6 years.

Just over half (52%) of the students had never studied at post-matric level before, and, of those who had, almost half had attended another university.

As regards employment, 42% of the sample were at that stage employed in a full-time capacity, and a further 10% had part-time jobs. Together with the 2% who regarded themselves as self-employed, 54% of the students surveyed were thus receiving some kind of wage at the time of registration, compared with 44% who had no jobs. Later, when discussing individual faculties, I shall show that there are significant differences in employment levels between the main racial groups and between genders.

In answer to the question, "How did you become aware of UNISA?", 30% indicated friends, 19% stated that they had become aware of Unisa through one of its students, 16% indicated their parents and a further 7% identified their teachers. Although only 19% indicated that they had become aware of Unisa through its advertisements, when asked directly whether they remembered seeing any such advertisements, 70% of the almost 800 students who answered the question remembered seeing some or other newspaper advertisement. Of this 70%, the majority (39%) remembered seeing advertisements in the Sowetan, 26% had read a Unisa advertisement in The Star, 11% in the Pretoria News, 9% in the Sunday Times, 8% in Beeld, 5% in City Press and 3% in Unisa News.

The two main reasons for becoming a University student were to train for a job (40%) and personal development (45%). This was consistent across faculties, genders and races. And, what attracted students to Unisa rather than another university included Unisa's internationally accepted qualifications (37%), the ability to work and study at the same time (26%) and flexibility (17%) ("I can do as few, or as many courses as I want").

In response to the question, "Are you the first in your immediate family to become a university student?", 56% said they were. Predictably, this percentage was higher among black than among white students.

In identifying areas where Unisa could improve the registration process for students, two-thirds of the students indicated that they required more help with subject selection (this figure was higher among black students).

ANALYSES IN RESPECT OF THE FACULTY OF SCIENCE

The results from the analysis of the faculties combined raised a number of questions, particularly with regard to the Faculty of Science, which required closer examination. The responses of students from each of the four faculties with sufficiently large sample sizes were therefore reanalysed.

Half of the Faculty of Science students who responded (50%) were white. Of these, $\frac{3}{4}$ were employed, with 64% having full-time and 11% part-time jobs (in the case of white males, 87% of them were employed). Moreover, 56% of them had been out of school for at least 6 years. Just over one third of the sample (35%) was black. Less than half of the latter were employed (38% had full-time and 9% part-time jobs) and 53% were jobless. And half of them (50%) had completed their Matric in the previous three years (1999 - 25%; 1998 - 9%; 1997 - 16%).

ADVERTISING

Of the formal, "in-your-face" media used for advertising taken out by the University, newspapers were the most potent marketing medium. And, of the different ones, the Sowetan was by far the most popular and The Star the second-most popular. However, statistically, more men read newspapers than women. The ratio of male to female readers of the popular newspapers selected by the University for advertisements varies from 60:40 to 55:45(2). Therefore, spending most, if not all, of the funding on newspapers, as is the University's practice, favours men over women. If women were the primary target, then advertisements should appear in magazines.

However, personal, word-of-mouth recommendations proved to be of far more significance than newspaper advertisements. Indeed, almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of the respondents remembered becoming

aware of Unisa through some kind of personal contact (the year before this figure was 88%). What is worthy of note is that school educators made only a small contribution to this awareness. This was consistent across the different faculties. If, as is apparent, a significant proportion of Unisa's market comes straight from school, then educators hold the key to increasing the number of these students. This is particularly the case with black students, most of whom are the first in their immediate families to become university students. Clearly, the levels of awareness of Unisa amongst black people is considerably lower than amongst whites.

The fact that Unisa maintains high academic standards (ie has internationally accepted qualifications) remains one of its main attractions, particularly among black students. It is assumed that most have no real intention of working overseas, but want real value for their efforts and money. This is therefore more of a response to the perception that qualifications from many historically black tertiary institutions are not worthy. Interestingly, one of the most important characteristics of Unisa's education, namely its low price, was considered among the least important features, attracting only 2% of the respondents. Considering that its market comprises large numbers of unemployed young black people, Unisa certainly needs to stress the value-for-money aspect in its advertising.

Unisa continues to attract large numbers of students who have attended other universities. Indeed, almost ¼ of the entire sample had studied at another university (the previous year this figure was 19%). In the Faculty of Arts sample, 35% of white students but only 6% of black students had previously attended a university; in the Faculty of Economics and Management Sciences the percentages were 33% and 20% respectively; and in the Faculty of Science 41% of white and 21% of black students had previously studied at a university. Note that the students who answered the questionnaires were all registering for the first-time as undergraduates at Unisa. Some had possibly been unsuccessful at other institutions, or had run out of funds (however, the small number who regarded the low price as important would suggest that this was not the case). The fact that many had been out of school for at least 6 years and that most of them had jobs seems to indicate that they were more likely retraining and had chosen to try the "earn-as-you-learn" route. Indeed, in the current climate of affirmative action in the workplace, whites (particularly white males) have to be even better qualified than previously to remain competitive.

The message concerning the registration process is that Unisa simply must improve the information and advice on subject choice - either by making the system easier to understand, or by employing more subject advisors. The large number of study possibilities presented to students, many of whom have little experience of universities, together with the additional complications of modularisation and semesterisation, have made the system of choosing study programmes extremely cumbersome.

Faculty of Science

At 31%, the Faculty of Science attracts the smallest proportion of black students in the University. This is not surprising given that the standard of scientific literacy in South Africa's previously disadvantaged areas is critically low. Township educators are inadequately trained in science and mathematics, schools are poorly equipped, and there is a resulting decline in the university science student intake from an already unacceptably low level(3) (4). Furthermore, the proportion of black students studying science is very small, and engineering produces the lowest proportion of black graduates in comparison with any other discipline(5). A report commissioned by the Danish Development Agency at the end of 1996 indicated that approximately half of the Mathematics teachers had no accredited training in mathematics and that approximately 60% of Science teachers had no accredited training in science. Most of these inadequately trained educators are teaching in black schools. In addition, learners are attempting to learn through a second language - and English is a barrier to them.

My own field work conducted at such schools in a particular district confirms this, for the number of black school learners who are passing Mathematics and Physical Science (and therefore who qualify for immediate entry to the Faculty of Science) has been decreasing over

the past few years. Indeed, in the 11 ex-DET (black) schools in this district, only 13 learners passed Higher Grade Mathematics and only 5 passed Higher Grade Physical Science in 1999(6).

The Faculty of Science also attracts the smallest proportion of female students in the University, namely one-third female to two-thirds male. There are still real barriers preventing both female and black students' entry into science.

Student trends

With the exception of the 2000 academic year, student numbers for the previous five years showed a decline (figure 1). Furthermore, the overall percentage of black students also declined between 1995 and 1999 from a high of 49% in 1996 and 1997. This percentage remained the same (44%) for the years 1999 and 2000, yet this was far less than the overall South African population.

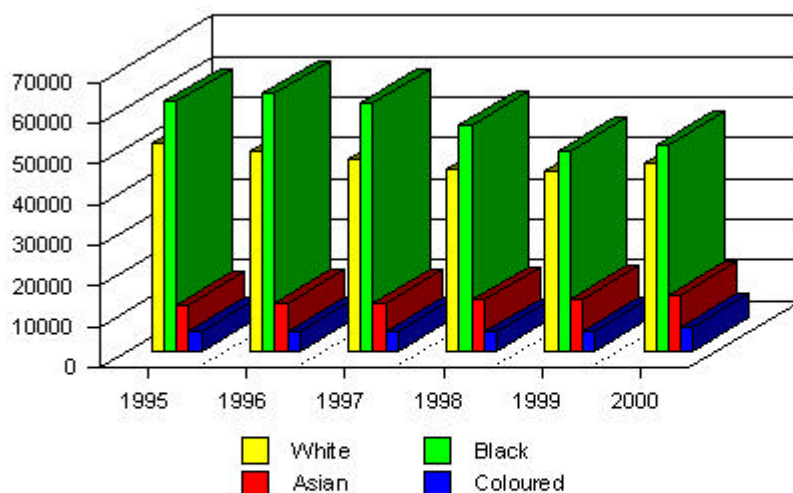


Figure 1: Unisa's overall student population 1995 - 2000

If marketing is regarded as a measure of transformation and, in this case, as a means to effect change in the racial make-up of the University's student body to reflect that of the South African population, then more resources need to be directed to marketing Unisa among these previously disadvantaged people.

In conclusion, two clearly defined markets can be identified with regard to the Faculty of Science. This pattern also exists in the Faculty of Arts. The first of these markets is made up of students with the following characteristics: they are predominantly white; they have been out of school for at least 6 years; many of them have studied previously at university; and most of them are employed and are studying to reskill and improve their job prospects. The second comprises young blacks, freshly out of school, who are unemployed and are studying to get a job.

Marketing a university such as Unisa is a complex operation. Unisa has six very different faculties, each with a myriad of educational opportunities to offer potential students. Furthermore, student numbers and choices are constantly changing in keeping with various trends in the economy, with the activities of other similar institutions and with the requirements of the job market. Indeed, as the fortunes of individual departments, and even faculties, change, additional demands will be made of marketing strategies. And, since Unisa jobs are inevitably at stake, there is a need for coherence and transparency - marketing affects everybody.

The thorny issue of transformation further complicates matters - marketing can be both a means and a measure of transformation. Realistic targets, at least in terms of student numbers, can be identified and funds for advertising channelled accordingly, but this kind of forward planning has yet to be achieved at Unisa.

The real challenge facing Unisa is to first identify its own strategic objectives, with such objectives taking into account academic restructuring and transformation, and then to reconcile these with the financial and political realities of being a state-funded institution operating within the broader educational framework of South Africa.

FOOTNOTES

1. A million rand was divided among the six faculties, according to their student numbers, for each of these two years.
2. The reasons probably have to do with the fact that most of the sports pages are written for men, and that many more male readers obtain business information from newspapers.
3. City Press, 10 November 1996.
4. South African Survey 1995/1996. South African Institute for Race Relations 1996.
5. City Press, 10 November 1996.
6. This may be compared with the 16 ex-model C schools (ex-TED) in the district, which produced 337 Physical Science and 439 Mathematics Higher Grade passes in 1999.