

VERITAS UNIVERSITY ABUJA, A PRODUCT OR A BRAND?

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Abstract

The issue of product and brand especially in the way these two terms are used by non-brand communication individuals have always been a source of debate, to many average consumers they are the same in as much as they can point to an item on display and have it after payment whether they call it product or brand. But for marketing and brand communication professionals, product and brand are not the same because product comes first and after a period of nurturing and support by integrated marketing communication efforts it then becomes a brand. A product is an idea that is designed to meet the yearning and needs of the consumers and it remains so until it is accepted. This acceptance will be made possible if the product is able to prove itself to the level that her market promise is fulfilled. This is when the product will be able to develop emotional bond and feelings with consumers. Feelings is emotional, and when it is combined with communication efforts in support of a product then it transcends into a brand. Branding is the effective way of using colour, logo, symbol and slogan built around a product and organization to create good impression for both the product and the organisation. Positioning is a marketing concept that help identifies the position of a brand in the mind of a customer, and this is determined by the way the brand has been continuously presented to the customer. Marketing communication tools like public relations, advertising and sales promotion are used to promote goods, services and institutions to the identified publics. Each of these tools can be used at a time or simultaneously in other to achieve maximum result. Just like product, a university can also be viewed as a product that can be transformed from product to a brand using the necessary brand communication tools. This paper examined how Veritas Unversity as a product have made progress in becoming a brand vis-à-vis how other identified universities internal and external communication efforts has taken them to a brand position; it examine the efforts of Veritas university Abuja make progress from a product status to that of a brand and what to do in order to attain a strong brand status.

Keywords: Product, Brand, Branding, Positioning, Marketing Communication Tools

Introduction

The essence of a product or service is to fill in the gap concerning the need of customers and as soon as this need is met, customers will get the product at a cost. It means, that product is produced to solve a problem. Product is anything that can be offered to a market for attention, acquisition or consumption (Kotler,1990) meaning that a product is meant to satisfy the needs of the consumer. In marketing, some factors are put into consideration before developing a product and these factors range from the needs of the final consumers, the product packaging, pricing, marketing / distribution, and the marketing communication plan until it gets to the final customers. Manufacturers of product and service must carry out marketing research to find out what customers and prospects want before they embark on production or make presentation to the public.

Product “is a good initiative, good, an object or service that is the outcome of a process to serve as a need or want satisfier” <https://www.economicsdiscussion.net>. The implication of this statement is that product development is something comprehensive that begins with an idea that

is arranged to go through different stages but with the ultimate aim to satisfy the final consumers. **Brand** is a business and marketing idea that assist people to recognise a particular product, company or an individual not only by physical look but more importantly by mental and emotional feelings. This is because sometimes brand is not tangible which means you cannot actually touch it since what it does is to help mold customers and the public's perceptions about a product. Brand always use identifying icons like corporate colour, logo, and other identifiable marks through marketing communication means to promote a product and build good image.

(Pitcher, 1985) **brand** is a consumer's idea of a product, meaning that a brand is made and considered worthy of that name only by the consumers and not the manufacturer. If a manufacturer of a product and service is known for quality and reliability and it introduces a new product into the market, the new product must prove its worthiness and deliver quality service to the customers before it will be accepted. This idea is further reinforced by Brown (1992) that brand is the sum of all the mental connections people have around it.

Unique selling proposition of a product help create brand identity for the product in the market place, brand as a marketing communication concept helps attach great value to a product or a company thereby giving it an advantage over competing brands especially within the same category.

Types of brands: There are different types of brands. Two will be examined that are relevant to this article. These are **corporate brand** and **Product brand**. Corporate brands are given publicity through corporate advertising while products are supported in the public domain with product advertising

A university as an institution of higher learning at inception or when newly established can also be defined as a product and after many years of living up to her promise of providing quality academic and community services, and strategically projecting herself with well-structured brand communication tools will then progress to the level of a brand. Many highly successful and globally recognised institutions like Harvard and Oxford universities have attained this brand recognition level after years of building good image and perception around the schools' primary functions with various brand communication tools.

Theoretical Framework

Keller Brand Equity Model is very appropriate for this study. The model which was published in 1997 explained that the best way to nurture a brand is to make sure that brand live up to her promises, so that this performance will help determine the way target audience and customer take the brand. The model stated that it is only customers that can really determine the value of a brand and this can be gaged by their repeat purchase, publicly identify with the brand and willingness to be an advocate for the brand. The model which is also known as Customer-based brand equity (CBBE) posited that brand ability to achieve greatness must be determine by concerted efforts of the brand to provide quality publicity to ride on the acceptance of the brand based on the result based performance to customers. The model further explained that brand must lay the foundation of projecting herself by first asking the question of what the brand represents and end it at the level in which customers will voluntary speak for the brand.

Brand building and product life cycle

Brand go through life cycle which begins from the introduction stage, growth stage, maturity and decline stage. It is between the growth stage and maturity stage that must successful product attain brand status.

Introduction stage: at the introduction stage product go through the process of launching, and introduction to the public and potential customers through massive advertising, sales promotion and other marketing communication efforts in order to attract trial from members of the public. At this level, strong projection of the advertiser and product visual identity, name and other instruments of identification are made available to the public and customers through the relevant media. Advertising and publicity are done in as many media organizations as possible so that all the expected customers and prospects will be captured, these promotional efforts will help create awareness for the product but profit is not expected at this stage of the product development

Growth stage: at this stage the product is expected to gain recognition and acceptance, sales will be better and profit will follow. Mechanism are put in place for quality feedback because at this level the strength and weakness of the product must be established and fine-tuned. Working with distributors in relevant locations based on the customers profile is very key so that relevant information about the market category that the product will be obtain and further in order to enable the product get better market penetration. Value will also be added to the product quality especially in the area of segmentation.

Maturity stage: at this stage, the product is very stable in the market and would have maintained a particular position among same product category, transform into a brand and always keep up with ever changing customer's needs. Regular brand audit is required at this level and loyal customers must be properly profiled so that they will be rewarded for being loyal at interval through through appropriate sales promotion. This is very important because loyal customers are brand advocates. Brand position is adequately defended at this stage, and brand variants / extension are developed in form of diversification. Good corporate name and strong identity is also certain at this stage.

Decline stage: at this stage brand experience low patronage which translate to low sales and profit. Things that are responsible for this decline are strong competition and when product outlive her usefulness, at this stage, manufacturer of the product can retire the brand or repositioning it.

Veritas University as a product

Veritas University Abuja as an institution of higher learning was established by the Catholic Bishop Conference of Nigeria making the university the only one jointly owned by the Catholic Church in Nigeria. Considering the university's publicity and positioning efforts until lately that she now has a television programme on Lumen Christy station, Veritas University has the status of a product that is still evolving to becoming a brand.

| Ma | PRODUCT | BRAND |
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| | Product is produced by a company and offered for sale to customers. At the introductory stage, a product begs for recognition and patronage; the entry price is usually very low compared to already existing similar products in order to gain acceptance. | Customers on the other hand look for brand, and are willing to pay premium price to own a brand. This is why designers products and well established automobile brands like BMW and Mercedes Benz get orders even before new models are mass produced because the level of these products life cycle have gone past maturity stage, and psychologically it affects consumers and prospects in a positive way. Martineau (1959) brands as images in consumer's minds of functional and psychological attributes. This is why brand communication experts say that product is made by a manufacturer and bought by customers, while brand is created in |

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| | customer's mind through perception built over a period of time. |
| Product is tangible because most often there must be physical contact with customers for it to be appreciated. | Brand is intangible because customer's relationship with brand has gone beyond physical to emotional one. |
| Product is short time, and that is why a product can be replaced. | Brand last for a long time sometimes forever; the reason why you see brands that are more than 50 years old still doing very well. |
| People can fake product. | Brand is original, and it is because of a particular brand originality that people produce fake ones in order to enjoy the good will of the original one. |
| Product is introduced into the market for quick transfer of money and profit. | Brand is used to help introduce and distinguish a product in the market place, and also help set it apart from the crowd; this is done by branding and exhibitions. |
| Product becomes meaningful as soon as it comes into the market because of the immediate benefits it offers; it must be noted that sometimes these benefits are not enduring. | Brand becomes meaningful and impactful with time and consistency. |
| Product is tasteless and has no recognition in the crowd. | Brand is tasteful, has niche and stands tall in the crowd. |

Reinforcing Brand Identity

A good brand has a way of separating herself from others and strive towards growth by living up to expectation by living up to expectation by delivering on its promises. In addition to solving the issues it is designed to solve, a strong brand must be consistent in her brand visual identity, brand value, brand voice, brand value and what the product stands for.

Brand visual identity: visual identity constitute the different elements put together to project a brand, it also represent the brand anywhere it features. It also serve as an effective way of differentiating a brand from others.

Brand Value: brand value is putting everything about a particular brand into a monetary value, this point to the direction of how much people are willing to pay to own your brand. This usually add up by bringing together the emotional bond, stories and the relationship customers have with your brand comperere to the alternatives. Brand value is created by establishing a bond with customers, create a unique story around your brand based on her USP unique selling proposition, and constant modification of the product in line with customer's expectation.

Brand voice: brand voice is what customers and prospects associate with brand especially what it represents and make people do. Nike sports wears inspire people to do more so it is inspirational.

How some University's names and locations help them attain brand status

Since the process of moving from a product to a brand status is universal and applicable not only to products and services, but also to universities. Here are some universities that their names and locations helped achieve brand status faster.

University of Lagos: the name Lagos is well known in Africa and in many parts of the world because Lagos was the capital city of Nigeria for many years before the establishment of the institution in Lagos, and for many years after the establishment of the institution Lagos remained the capital until in the early 90's when Abuja officially became the new capital of Nigeria. Quality research, community service and of course alumni activities among other efforts help nurtured university of Lagos into the strong brand it is today but the name especially outside Nigeria played a major role in achieving this success. For example old and new students of the university refers to themselves as great Akokites which was coined out of location the institution is located, Akoka part of Lagos State

Achieving a brand status by a university is not something common and that is why when former President Goodluck Jonathan named University of Lagos after late MKO Abiola, students and stakeholders of the school protested against it not because they don't like Chief Abiola but because of the quality brand the existing name and other branding tools have given the institution over the years. Rejection of the new name in favour of existing one by the internal and external publics of University of Lagos with logical reasons, especially in the area of rebranding the university won the argument hence the school name remains as the University of Lagos.

In line with the above change of name, the transformation of the University of Ife in Osun State to the current Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU) many years ago still remains a bitter pill for many to swallow. Old students of the institution that find it difficult to accept the new name still refers to themselves as former students of University of Ife instead of the current OAU.

University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN): UNN is one university that her recognition within and outside the country will be very easy to note because it is named after a country with the largest economy in Africa and the most populous black nation in the world. This is a big advantage for the institution because Nigeria is a popular nation and a well-established brand as a country not only in Africa but in the world. Based on this development and of course the exploit of the university as an institution, and the efforts of her old and new students have made the school attained the state of a brand within a short period of time. Other academic and social efforts on the part university have also contributed to the elevation of the institution from that of a product to a well-known brand. Students of the institution refers to themselves as Lions, since this has become the tradition overs the years the mention of Lion means the same thing UNN product.

University of Abuja, University of Abuja is located in Gwagwalada, Abuja, Nigeria. This is another university that location and name has help turned into a brand faster than expected. Just like what we have in the case of Lagos as the former capital of Nigeria, Abuja is the current capital of Nigeria, and anywhere in Nigeria or outside the country the university is mentioned, people will not find it difficult to get her location on the global map.

Pan-Atlantic University and Lagos Business School Experience

Lagos Business School is a faculty under the Pan-Atlantic University. Lagos Business School is one of the best business schools in Africa and the school is highly rated both in Africa and globally. Pan-Atlantic University is located in Lekki, Lagos Nigeria. Pan-Atlantic University started as Pan-African University in Lagos and from inception became a university to reckon with because of her quality educational standard which started much earlier with Lagos Business School. In terms of branding and positioning, Pan-African University developed an acronym PAU out of her name, which the public and stakeholders also came to

know the school with within a short period of time. So if you say PAU people know it means Pan-African University.

After 2012, there was need for PAU to change her name and the implication for this development means that the school must embark on rebranding. In the course of rebranding, the school did something smart by changing her name from Pan-African University to Pan-Atlantic University. With this change, the institution still continued with the PAU acronym without any problem

Creating Veritas University, Abuja brand

The upward movement of a university from product level to a brand status must start by first determining how she wants to be seen. This is known as brand identity and in the case of Veritas University, there are valid and useful elements that are readily available for the university to lay claim to. You become a brand by laying claim to something that is unique and real about yourself that competing brands don't have, and make that advantage the arrow head of your publicity campaign. For example, there are different brands of toothpaste in the marketplace but each product push and focus more on the edge it has over others and this range from good breathe, whitening teeth, cavity wipe and eliminating teeth tingling sensation. Veritas University Abuja has a lot of good things to lay claim to in pushing her brand name to the next level and they are highlighted below.

- ❖ The only university in Nigeria jointly owned by the Catholic Bishop Conference of Nigeria, this is the only University that all the catholic Bishops in Nigeria call theirs and also contribute to her development on a regular basis.
- ❖ Faith based university with strong moral values
- ❖ Located in the Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory and in a very serene location that is highly conducive for learning
- ❖ Observe strictly the practice of the Catholic faith tradition
- ❖ Has a slogan " seeking the truth" that aligns with the above claims
- ❖ Highly involved in visible and commendable Corporate Social Responsibility efforts, two of which are Construction of a Police Station in Zuma 2, employment of many indigenes of the two Zuma communities and provision of quality water for the benefits of man communities in which the University is located
- ❖ Quality and well composed school anthem that gives emotional upliftment each time it is rendered

The effective use of the school Logo, colour and slogan is something that must be strategically used to nurture school into a quality brand.

Systematic and subtle use of Catholic Icons in Nigeria in projecting the University brand

There are Catholic icons that are household names in Nigeria due to the way they have positioned themselves over the years in terms of selfless service to humanity, as agents of religious tolerance and epitome of sincerity. Two of these agents of love are

Anthony Cardinal Olubunmi Okogie [former Archbishop of Lagos]

John Cardinal Onaiyekan [former Archbishop of Abuja]

Bishop Hassan Matthew Kukah [Pro Chancellor of the school]

Veritas University should identify more personalities like them and initiate a co-branding activities with them during their birthdays, retirement anniversary and charity projects they identify with. As opinion leaders that are highly respected in the country, their influence cuts across ethnic and religious backgrounds so associating with them will definitely generate goodwill for Veritas University, Abuja.

Veritas University should also endeavor to be visible during the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria activities. The school should know their yearly programme, plan around it and do everything it can to be part of it. The school should be part of their activities through all acceptable forms of publicity like advertisement placements in event programmes, banner and backdrop displays, topical but relevant presentation by appointed school representatives, then make it visible to relevant audience through the appropriate media.

The visit of the Papal nuncio, Archbishop Antonio G. Filipazzi to Veritas University, that of the Catholic Bishops of West Africa, and the regular visit of Archbishop of Abuja Diocese Ignatius Kaigama who is also the Chancellor of the university are events that should be effectively used for positive projection of the institution's image. The strategic and staggered use of photonews, features, news mentions and interviews by management staff of Veritas University on these personalities visit and their timely exposure in selected media organisations would have helped add value to the Veritas University.

Voice bite endorsement and recommendation of Veritas University Abuja, on audio and visual tapes by the above mentioned personalities should be encouraged in future and preserved by the school, so that it will be used by the university whenever the opportunities to use them to the school advantage comes up.

Veritas University Alumni Association

Deliberate efforts should be made by the school authority to work closely with alumni association of the University. These old students are veritable tools in projecting the good image of the university, especially as brand ambassadors. There is a university alumni association in Lagos that is so strong and influential that her members get 5% discount on ticket with an international airline when travelling outside the country by that particular airline. This is achievable because the school works closely with them. This same University also reached out and maintained relationship with selected organisations concerning her students internship placement. Students are posted to these organisations for their internship and when they graduate the institution do help some of them to get jobs.

Veritas University as a corporate brand, faculties and departments as product brands

In corporate world, organisations have what is known as mother brand and also products. These organisations produce advertising materials known as corporate advertising materials to push the organisation as an entity and also produce product advertising materials for product publicity. For example, Unilever Nigeria Plc develops advertising materials to promote the company's image and activities. It also has advertising materials for each of her products like Close-up toothpaste and Lux Soap. Also, Dangote Plc as an organisation has a life of her own and activities projected under corporate Dangote publicity plan, her different products like Dangote cement, sugar, salt, etc. are given publicity through specific advertising materials for each of these products. So under a comprehensive marketing communication plan, organisations have different publicity schedules for both corporate and product advertisement but it is done in a way that they complement each other for the overall benefit of the organisation.

Veritas University, Abuja can market herself as a corporate brand, while her Faculty of Law, Departments of Computer Science and Mass Communication that are the cash cows of the university can be separately pushed in terms of publicity as products. Two universities that have successfully done this are Harvard University with two of her global products Harvard Business

School and Harvard Business Review. Another university with similar and successful efforts in Nigeria is Pan-Atlantic University in Lagos, with her Lagos Business School and School of Media Communication [SMC].

Veritas University with time can extend this treatment to her water bottle and bakery businesses which investigation already revealed are doing well through " Word-of-Mouth Advertising" in Zuma and other communities under Bwari Area Council.

Veritas University Abuja movement towards a brand

Brand building effort must be a planned and deliberate process, and two of the elements that will make it successful are consistency in brand communication efforts and funding. Brand building does not have a destination and that is why big brands like Coca-Cola, Pepsi and universities like Harvard and Oxford continue to build their respective brands. Veritas University brand building efforts must continue with:

- ❖ Well established Public Relations directorate with good knowledge of brand management and marketing communication tools deployment
- ❖ Well organised yearly publicity plan putting into consideration all the school activities within this same period with budget attached
- ❖ Identify and determine the role both internal and external publics of the university will and should play towards the short and long term brand building development of the university
- ❖ Initiate and execute co-branding efforts with relevant organisations that will add value to the good image of the university
- ❖ The school Public Relations directorate should be the only clearing house for all publicity materials before they are sent out for exposure in order to ensure consistency and uniformity in terms of colour, logo and other brand building icons of the school.
- ❖ It is strongly advised that Veritas University produce corporate as well as product advertising materials for her academic programmes. These materials must be ready at all times for press insertions and radio spots at a very short notice, the good thing about such materials is that they aid maintenance campaign publicity.

Recommendation

It is important that the school management engage the services of a certified external Public Relations and brand management consultant that will work with the current university PR team to manage the image of the school integrating it with the numerous achievements of the institution especially in the areas of innovations and national awards the engineering faculty of the school, success in the inter- university debates and corporate social responsibility efforts of the university External consultant will work from outside and this will help get the balanced opinion the university need, as well as carry out the brand audit exercise for the school at agreed intervals which is important in tracking the brand development progress of the University.

Conclusion

If a university positioning and brand building strategy is right, she will definitely enjoy goodwill, support and patronage from all her publics. The role of Veritas University Public Relations and brand management unit is very important in developing the university brand into exactly what the school management and proprietor want it to be.

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