Marketing schools and consumer choice

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States that the concept of marketing is regarded with suspicion by many in education because of its commercial implications. Marketing is seen as a potential tool for the application of market forces and is therefore regarded as ethically undesirable. Argues that the methods and ideology of commercial marketing, if properly understood and correctly applied by professionals in education, can be beneficial rather than harmful, and may be imperative for schools and colleges wishing to attract students and to offer them the most relevant provision.

What can marketing offer education?

Education is a service to customers or clients, although that statement raises questions about the nature of the service and the identity of its consumers/clients. Marketing in any sphere is concerned with the quality of the relationships between producers and consumers. As a concept marketing is not the same thing as market forces or market accountability. Petch[1] felt that market accountability is marked more by confrontation than by the co-operation desirable in education between schools and their students and parents.

Wragg[2] expressed strong hostility to education becoming subject to market forces. Marketing subsumes an ideology that makes the needs and wishes of an organization's customer/purchasers more important than its members' preferred methods of working. It can also appear to define the value of a product or service solely in terms of what purchasers are prepared to pay for it and therefore to encourage providers of services, such as schools, to consider questions of cost of service more important than ethically rounded processes of practice. Teachers find the commercial values of competition and individual choice incompatible with educational goals of providing equitable opportunities for the learning and development of all people. Marketing their professional services appears to create a tension between an emphasis on social values which put the good of the individual above that of society and those social values which give preference to the greatest good of the greatest number of people in a community.

This paper considers how a detailed understanding of marketing can allow teachers to implement their educational values more successfully when facing the pressures of competition and parental choice, whether in independent schools or in state sector education such as that brought about by education legislation in the UK since 1980.

Marketing a service

In the commercial world marketing has evolved over the last half-century, the focus of interest changing from consumer goods in the 1950s through concern with industrial markets in the 1960s to attention on non-profit organizations and the services sector in the 1970s and 1980s. Recent trends towards relationship marketing, with its recognition that marketing affects a firm's employees and suppliers as well as its customers[3], particularly suggest the relevance of marketing to education.

The British Institute of Marketing defines marketing as:

> …the management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirements profitably[4,p. 3].

In manufacturing industry this was expressed as the four Ps: product, price, promotion and place. Products were the goods sold; price had to cover the cost of manufacture and a reasonable margin of profit; promotion advertised those features which distinguished a product from its competitors; place referred to the point of sale and the distribution network which supplied it. It was believed that these four ingredients needed to be balanced to form a "marketing mix"[5].

Although the marketing of services such as leisure activities, telecommunications and education has many similarities to the marketing of goods, there are some important differences. For example, conceptually there appears to be no universally accepted definition of a service. In part this is because services cover such an enormous range of functional differences, from transport hire to banking[6], which make it difficult to prescribe common strategies for marketing. Further, service industries have no tangible products, although many have tangible goods inseparable from their provision – a secretary's documents, for example, or an airline's seats in its aircraft. Moreover it is almost impossible to detach the sale of a service from its provider – when clients purchase legal services they usually see a lawyer, too. Since in many service industries almost any member of staff may come into contact with

the customers there is a need for all staff to be aware of an organization's policies and preferred practices[7].

Rushton and Carson[8] defined the characteristics which service industries have in common, and which distinguish them from manufacturing industry, as intangibility (services cannot be identified by the senses); heterogeneity (the human element involved in their provision means they cannot be standardized); perishability; and inseparability (the provision of a service cannot be separated from its consumption). These factors led Cowell[9] to add three further Ps – people, process, and physical evidence that a service is being delivered – to the original "four Ps" marketing mix. The last category he mentions includes the culture and environment in which a service is delivered. Bateson[10] stressed the importance of managing this effectively, a point which can hardly be overstated in the context of schooling.

Service characteristics in education

Rushton and Carson[8] regarded intangibility as the single most important difference between goods and services. Gray[11, p. 14] pointed out that there are varying degrees of intangibility, with education being:

> right at the "intangible" end of the spectrum, with few if any tangible products normally provided as part of the service.

Intangibility makes it difficult for potential clients to assess the quality of a service, except by looking at the tangible elements associated with it, whether it be the tidiness and emptiness of dustbins in refuse collection or examination results and student behaviour in schools. Lovelock[12] pointed to the importance in service industries of the customer service function to ensure that customers' needs and expectations were met effectively.

One of the major purposes of marketing, therefore, is to explain to potential clients the services or products they are about to purchase, as well as trying to persuade them to buy a particular brand. Marketing functions include customer education as well as sales. Schools, for example, can explain what opportunities are offered to students, such as how and what they are taught. Gray[11] thought that the preparation and promotion of an institution's mission statement, the use of a logo, and careful public relations would help parents and students to identify the particular services offered. Pardey[13] suggested that process or meta-variables, such as evaluation of the environments within which a service is

provided – how, for example visitors to a school are welcomed – help clients to evaluate the quality of service they receive.

The provision of services tends to be a heterogeneous process. To some extent the quality of provision depends on the personal skills and attributes of each provider within an organization who is in contact with the clients. Homogeneity of service, unlike that of goods on a production line, is difficult to achieve since the people involved, providers and clients, are all different. Teaching as a craft is dependent on teachers' interpersonal skills and the social interactions of groups of students. Even if a curriculum is prescribed, as it has been in state schools in England and Wales since 1988, how staff teach and how students respond to their pedagogy will vary.

Schools, like other services, provide something which is perishable and which, in its creation, is largely inseparable from the interactions of teacher/providers and student/clients. The process of education is perishable because it is "consumed" at least partially at the point of delivery[6]. In education, a lesson missed by an absent student cannot be recreated identically, although its content may be conveyed. Linked to this perishability is inseparability: teaching and learning are inextricably intertwined. To complicate matters further, students usually interact with one another in complex ways during lessons, helping one another to learn as well as learning with the teacher. Effectively, students both produce and consume the educational product, knowledge. Some service industries turn inseparability to their advantage by featuring the providers as part of the benefit of the service[11]. Schools can promote the pastoral care, extracurricular activities and academic qualifications of their staff as valuable features, attractive to students and the local community.

Identifying the client customers of education

In addition to its educative and sales functions, marketing has, perhaps primarily, a research function. To survive, an industry must identify the needs of its potential clients and develop products or services which will meet these needs[14] at a price which the customers can afford to pay. This appears to create an ethical minefield for public services: to what extent should the quality of their provision be geared only to that for which client customers are willing or able to pay? To what extent should their quality of provision be determined by professional expertise applied altruistically to perceived

and identified client/customer need regardless of the costs involved? To what extent should the price mechanism, which is theoretically supposed to regulate markets, determine both the quality of provision and which customers receive what quality of provision? Furthermore, who precisely are the customers of education?

In education, identifying the customers or clients, i.e. the people who benefit from it, is problematic. Gray[11] noted that clients are often long-term users of such things as the personal services of a lawyer, whereas customers tend to have brief, one-off contacts with providers when purchasing goods or services. On this argument schools would seem to have clients rather than customers. Students and their parents usually work for a long time with the schools which the students are attending, as well as taking part in the creation of the learning process. Distinguishing between clients and customers in this way is helpful but does not address the deeper problems of understanding for whom the education service is constructed, i.e. to whom it is accountable, even if it is clear to whom the service of schooling is delivered. It does not assist schools to decide how to market themselves.

Petch[1] regarded parents as the consumers of education. Macbeth[15] suggested that there are four groups of people who benefit from the education system:

1 the pupil (who receives instruction);
2 the parent (who delegates authority over the child to the teacher);
3 the owners of a school, whether independent or a state authority, who employ the staff; and
4 society at large.

He defined the first group as "consumers" and the second as "the school's prime clients"[1, p. 16] because in the UK they are legally responsible for the education of their children until the age of 16 years.

An implication of the preceding paragraph is that schools should market themselves as much to their pupils and potential pupils as to their pupils' parents, both being perceived as important client groups. This is an important perspective which has recently been given support by the work of Rudduck *et al.*[16] who comment on the accuracy and perspicacity of students' views of schooling. We would support this contention, regarding students, of whatever age, as the direct primary clients of education, and deeming the other stakeholders – parents, employers, society at large – to whom a school also has to market itself, to be its secondary beneficiaries.

Students exercise varying degrees of control over their choice of educational institutions at different ages. Although most parents select a child's primary school, at age 11 or 12, children may expect to contribute to the decision[11]. Webster *et al.*[17] found that 69 per cent of families in their survey on secondary school selection thought their child's opinions "very important". Stillman and Maychell[18] and West *et al.*[19] also found that parents took significant account of their children's views before making a final choice. On the other hand, whatever influence children have over their parents' perceptions of a school[20], parents are still the major, if not the sole, education choice makers for most children during their years of compulsory schooling. Students are likely to make their own decisions about post-compulsory education, although "parents are also influential, but may have very different expectations from those of their offspring"[21, p. 109].

Ignorance about the consumer's environment is one of the major problems facing service industries[6] and education is no exception. Managing this external environment is one of the main challenges of marketing[4]. Marketing helps an organization to identify how and why its clients chose it and so to act more effectively to attract clients to it. Implicit in many marketing processes is the unproven assumption that clients, given adequate knowledge, will always make rational choices which maximize their benefits. This presupposes that clients have a choice, which is not always the case where there is only one school serving a particular area or parents are unable to afford the alternative (private) schooling, if it exists. It also assumes that increasing the flow of information to identified client groups, through school prospectuses, for example, will necessarily increase the student inflow sufficiently to cover the costs of expenditure on public relations; again, this assumption is unproven. Indeed, many headteachers point to the deleterious effect of the costs of elaborate marketing exercises on their budgets for curriculum provision, one of the criteria by which parents judge the success of a school.

Although parents generally tend to consider the same broad range of factors, priorities vary from survey to survey. This indicates the importance of every institution exploring its own customer base in order to understand its specific needs and wants[7]. Johnson[22, p. 28] outlined the main educational choices which schools can offer parents:

public or private; "free" or fee-paying; selective or non-selective (by various criteria); strongly or nominally religious; residential

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or non-residential single-sex or coeducational; all-through or age-related; institutional or home-based.

For primary schools, the Plowden Report[23] found that location, religious ethos, word-of-mouth reports and prior family contacts with a school were all significant factors affecting choice. Some parents also considered educational standards and the atmosphere of the school to be important.

When children transfer from primary to secondary school, most parents make either a child-focused choice, based on the health, ability and temperament of the child concerned, or a school-focused choice based on criteria such as size, nature of student-intake (mixed or single-sex), and amenities[24]. Webster *et al.*[17] found that siblings at the same school were the single largest influence on parental choice. There is evidence that some parents choose secondary schools on the basis of the subjects/facilities offered by schools and by students' performance in academic subjects[25,26]. Adler and Raab[27] noted that school attainment was of sufficient importance to encourage parents to send children considerable distances to secondary school, usually to schools that were large or that had a selective intake of students of high socio-economic status. The enquiries of Johnson[22,28] into parental choice of independent schools echo this.

Social factors also have a major influence on parental choice. Elliott[29] found that parents placed great value on the process of education. They stressed the importance of personal and social development and the happiness of the children in school. Hanford[30, p. 4] found that parents valued most "the hidden basic fundamentalism of schools" with the behaviour of staff and current students being perceived as the key indicators. Parents' perceptions of these behaviours were mediated by agencies external to the school, such as the neighbourhood grapevine and parents' personal experiences of schooling.

Negative perceptions of schools by parents damage their ability to recruit students. West *et al.*[26] found parents particularly discouraged by reports of poor discipline/behaviour, by a school's bad reputation, by dislike of what they saw on a visit or by a school's location. Both positively and negatively, the importance of a school's reputation locally, and the style of the welcome which is offered to parents, must be seen as major factors in its success in recruiting students.

Marketing for education

Firms market themselves to attract customers to sell products to earn money to survive. To market itself effectively an organization not only needs to communicate with its customers and clients but also to involve all its personnel in the creation of market strategy[3]. In schools this includes support staff as well as teaching staff. All need to share ownership of the schools' vision of what it is aiming to achieve and feel they have a role to play in future development[31].

In the business world, neither products nor services are usually marketed across the whole of society. Different kinds of customer have different wants/needs, which marketing sets out to identify. Failure by a firm to differentiate adequately between the buying behaviour of different customers leads to poor customer focus[32] and ultimately to the firm's collapse. The devolution of funding to maintained schools and colleges in the UK since the late 1980s has presented schools with the same need to attract and keep student clients. In the independent sector of schooling this situation has existed for much longer, although demographic, social and recessionary pressures are prompting independent schools also to reconsider the need for positive marketing.

Notions of consumer choice in education and the attendant view that more powerful people, at least financially, are more able to gain the service provision they want, fit in well with the attempts by the UK government to introduce a market into state education in the last 15 years. On the other hand, they lie uncomfortably alongside notions of social justice and equity of educational provision which have underpinned the development of the state sector of schooling in the UK for more than a century. This latter perspective emphasizes an entitlement to education which meets the varying needs of all people in a community, regardless of their ability to wield influence.

State schools therefore face a dilemma, particularly where only one school serves a local community: whether they serve the needs of an entire community or whether they target particular groups of parents in it. Marketing would seem to suggest the latter, targeting those who are more influential, for whatever reasons, but this confronts issues of equity of provision. If a school targets only specific client groups, it is likely that the needs and wants of those parents and students not targeted will be met less well than those targeted. In this respect, perhaps, independent schools face less of a problem than do state schools since they can elect to service a

niche market for particular parent wants and income brackets. If parents find the provision unsatisfactory they can withdraw their children from the school.

In competitive arenas, localities where several schools are trying to attract the same student population, schools may want to attract some parents in preference to others. They could identify these parent niches in the market by specifics or by descriptors. Specifics include such items as the rate at which clients purchase services, the range of products available (in schools this might be the range of courses or extracurricular activities) and media exposure. Descriptors cover variables such as age (schools are usually either primary or secondary), gender, geodemographics (social structure of a school's catchment area) and people's preferred lifestyle. Independent schools have more opportunity than maintained schools in the UK to segment their markets by these variables.

On the other hand, any school wishing to serve the whole community can use the same processes to identify the specific needs of all its potential client groups, allowing it to differentiate its provision to each of them. It could use such processes to identify, for example, any disenchanted groups of parents and set out to make them feel more welcome.

The seven Ps for satisfied school clients

As in any other industry, schools must first plan where they want to go, analysing the four Ps – product, place, promotion and price – of the original market mix as well as the other three Ps suggested by Cowell[9] –people, process and the physical evidence of production.

A school's product is defined by Marland and Rogers[33, p. 9] as "that created by producing – that is to lead ('due') forward ('pro')". For them product development is "…the work of the school in establishing what would benefit the pupil and researching and planning it" and separates delivery, i.e. the actual teaching/tutoring, from content: what and how it is being taught. They suggested that "product development" in schools is shorthand for "preparation": curriculum development, planning for pastoral care programmes and any other forward planning which utilizes the skill of the staff. However, school management usually has little control over its place of production, although Bowles *et al.*[34] indicated that it could control the site provision of rooms and time to courses, while site maintenance and minor repairs

have been the responsibility of most schools in the UK since 1990.

Promotion of an educational institution means ensuring that its work is understood and appreciated by its primary and secondary beneficiaries as well as by more distant stakeholders such as central government[20], further education[35] and higher education[36]. Devlin and Knight[37] identified both internal and external markets as recipients of this information, the internal market including an "immediate family" of staff, students and governors and an "extended family" of present parents and relatives, former students and parents, others who use school facilities, and local traders and service providers to the school[37, p. 16]. In the external market they identified feeder schools, community organizations, industry and commerce and local authorities. Their definitions raise questions about how membership of a school as an organization is defined.

Price cannot be separated from promotion. Independent schools obviously offer a commercial service but all schools are cost centres and need to balance their budgets. Davies and Ellison[20] pointed out that maintained schools in England and Wales since 1990 must attract enough students to generate sufficient income to survive, i.e. to cover their costs. Because at least two-thirds of the running costs of a school are spent on personnel[38], the deployment of such resources has to be carefully tailored to meet identified client need. Stott and Parr[31, p. 2] perceived that "…the price of education, in real terms, is more than money". For students in many maintained schools in the UK there are, for example, school uniform costs, travel costs and the efforts to gain access[34]. In independent schools such items are overshadowed by school fees, offset in some cases by different types of bursary support.

Yet, historically the teaching profession has resisted the implications of the "commercial" or "price" aspects of education, preferring to implement what it perceives as educationally desirable practices, regardless of cost. The lack of clear commercial indicators of effectiveness is a major cause of this problem, although meta-indicators such as the popularity of a school or of some courses can be used to assess the likelihood that a school or a particular practice would make a profit were it in a commercial market.

Of the remaining three Ps, schools might be said to have limited control over the people. Recent education legislation in England and Wales in 1986, 1987 and 1988 has given maintained schools quasi-employment powers, powers which independent schools have had for a long time, but there is extensive employment legislation in the UK which limits how

such powers can be used. Schools also have only limited control over their central processes of teaching and learning, partly because of long-established teachers' professional freedoms in the classroom, and partly because of the prescription since 1988 by the UK central government of a National Curriculum. This inhibits schools from adapting the academic curriculum to the identified needs of the communities which form their markets. It is in their control of the physical environment, such as the quality and ambience of their rooms, and of the physical evidence of the learning processes, such as the use of open or resource-based learning, that schools have most freedom[34].

Is marketing ethical for education?

Teachers are professionals who, as Burgess [39] pointed out, use their knowledge and experience to assist their students as clients and who act in accordance with a set of values so that their conduct towards these clients is both ethical and professional. Their concerns are usually with the quality of educational experience which they provide to students and only rarely and reluctantly with the commercial or marketing aspects of their work. Yet the latter provide crucial constraints on resources which inevitably affect outcomes.

Debates about the appropriateness of marketing to non-profit-making organizations are not confined to education. Habgood[40] questioned the suitability of marketing methodologies for the purposes of evangelization. However, McIntosh and McIntosh[41, p. 9] indicated that, although the public often associate marketing with "slick and, perhaps, underhand professionalism", marketing was actually an ethical imperative for charities. It is important to identify beneficiaries' needs as accurately as possible to avoid wastage of scarce resources.

Marketing is a philosophy of management through which institutions consider, debate and clarify their underlying principles and purposes to meet the needs of their clients. Educational marketing requires the identification of student and community needs and a commitment to meeting those needs with a high quality product[20]. Pardey[13] suggested that the client-centred nature of marketing made it ethically acceptable in education, pointing out that values shape the goals and decision making of any organization. Gray[11] pointed out that if all staff involved in a school are trying to improve the quality of service, all must be involved in promoting "customer care" and in enhancing levels of "customer" satisfaction. This is,

effectively, marketing a school to its primary beneficiaries, the students, and their parents, even if the staff concerned are not comfortable with the use of commercial terminology to describe it.

The aspect of marketing which seems to cause most offence in schools is that which relates to selling. It is thought to be unprofessional, if not unethical, for professional carers to try to attract custom when their implicit professional codes emphasize looking after people altruistically. On the other hand, clients and potential clients may need to know the quality of a school's product/process and the competence of its staff if they are to make reasoned choices about how best to meet their own needs. School prospectuses and open days give parents some basis for informed choices as well as being means of giving them some account of how well a school is looking after their children. Perhaps as Gummesson[42, p. 34] says "…it is not unethical or unworthy to express the advantages of a service of a professional…as long as the truth is told". Because teachers have been reticent in the past about the complexities of their job and what is involved in performing it, they have suffered the humiliation of seeing a travesty of their work portrayed in much of the mass-media in the UK in the 1980s, such that the public could have been led to believe that teaching was an easy job with relatively short hours of work, the problems of which were trivial and relatively easily resolved by harder work, tougher discipline and more rigorous testing. Would that the problems of schools were solved so easily!

Marketing is a "management orientation process"[43, p. 48], the foundation of a school's management strategy. Its main focus is not on those aspects of an organization for which teachers seem to have little time – the slick processes of image-making and public relations – nor on those in which most of them take little interest – resource management – although it is concerned with using scarce resources as effectively as possible to meet the identified needs of an organization's clients. The main focus of marketing is on a dialogue between an organization and its clients, a school and its students and parents, and on how their different needs can be met most effectively, issues which are at the heart of most teachers' professional concerns. To meet these needs requires all staff to be involved in a constant, systematic review of their practice in order to improve the quality of the service of teaching and learning which their school provides. Marketing, then, is crucial if a school is to develop its vision for its students and maintain the practices of school improvement.

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