

Marketing Mix-Based Strategies for Enhancing School Competitiveness: A Case Study of SMK Ma'arif NU 1 Ajibarang

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the implementation of the marketing mix strategy and its contribution to the competitiveness of educational institutions at SMK Ma'arif NU 1 Ajibarang. The research employed a qualitative approach using a case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation involving key informants, including school leaders, teachers, and students' parents. Data analysis was conducted using the Miles and Huberman model, which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The results show that the implementation of the marketing mix strategy at SMK Ma'arif NU 1 Ajibarang encompasses seven elements (7Ps), namely product, price, place, promotion, process, physical evidence, and human resources. The product aspect is reflected in the diversity of study programs, extracurricular activities, the BTA program, the culture of Qur'anic recitation, and the role of alumni. The price aspect is demonstrated through the provision of scholarships and affordable education costs. The place aspect is supported by the school's strategic location. Promotion is carried out through direct socialization, the kirka system, and support from the Nahdlatul Ulama community. The process aspect is realized through close engagement with the community and the implementation of student discipline, while physical evidence and human resources are supported by adequate facilities and infrastructure as well as teacher development programs. These marketing strategies contribute to strengthening the institution's image, increasing public interest, building trust and loyalty among parents, creating differentiation and competitive advantage, and encouraging stability as well as growth in student enrollment...

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization and rapid advancements in information technology, educational institutions are required not only to provide high-quality learning services but also to compete strategically in attracting and retaining public interest. In this context, schools can no longer adopt a passive stance by merely waiting for students to enroll; instead, they must actively engage in promotional and marketing efforts. Ideally, educational institutions should be able to build a positive image, introduce the strengths of their programs, and establish effective communication with the wider community. The concept of marketing strategy, which has long been associated with the business sector, has now become an essential component of educational management.

Institutional competitiveness is strongly influenced by the quality of governance, graduate

outcomes, learning innovation, and community involvement. An article states that differentiation is the key factor in winning competition, which in the context of education can be interpreted as the integration of spiritual values and academic excellence.

Educational marketing services require well-designed strategies to increase user enrollment in educational institutions. The elements of a marketing strategy consist of seven Ps, including the four traditional P: *Product, Price, Place, Promotion*, and P 3 di Jasa Pemasaran: *People, Physical evidence, process*. The concept of strategy is derived from the business sector, where marketing is closely linked to customer satisfaction; if customers are not satisfied, marketing is considered unsuccessful.

In other words, if an institution aims to build a positive image to attract consumers, it must logically develop distinctive marketing strategies that encourage customers to use its services. One form of marketing responsibility is that madrasahs should work diligently to manage and continuously improve the quality of educational facilities promoted to the public.

Although Islamic educational institutions often rely on religious reputation and community social networks, in the context of modernization and increasing quality demands, marketing strategies have become a factor that cannot be overlooked. Educational marketing is not limited to promotional activities but also encompasses strategic decisions related to the selection of academic or vocational programs, the management of educator quality, student services, and the utilization of information technology for publication and communication.

One form of such marketing strategy is the Marketing Mix. In the educational context, the marketing mix consists of essential elements that can be integrated in such a way as to produce effective marketing strategies capable of winning competition. The marketing mix serves as a tool for marketers, comprising various elements of a marketing program that must be carefully considered to ensure the successful implementation of marketing strategies and the intended positioning. The marketing mix consists of seven elements, commonly referred to as the 7Ps, which include the four traditional Ps used in goods marketing and three additional Ps as an extension of the marketing mix. The four traditional Ps include: (1) Product, referring to the educational services offered; (2) Price, referring to pricing strategies; (3) Place, referring to the location where services are delivered; and (4) Promotion, referring to the methods used to promote services. Meanwhile, the additional three Ps include: (5) People, referring to the quality, qualifications, and competencies of individuals involved in service delivery; (6) Physical Evidence, referring to the facilities and infrastructure available; and (7) Process, referring to the management of service delivery.

At the national level, the current condition of education in Indonesia is facing various challenges. One of the major challenges is the increasing number of educational institutions, both public and private, competing to attract students. On the other hand, the number of junior high school graduates, which serves as the primary input for vocational high schools (SMKs), has not shown significant growth from year to year. As a result, many schools—particularly private institutions—are experiencing a student enrollment crisis. These schools must compete not only in terms of educational quality but also in service delivery, facilities, flagship programs, and promotional strategies. Education has now entered a competitive market, in which public perception plays a decisive role in school selection by prospective students and their parents.

Amid these challenges, SMK Ma'arif NU 1 Ajibarang has emerged as one of the private vocational schools that has successfully attracted public attention. This school is a vocational education institution under the auspices of the Ma'arif Educational Institution of Nahdlatul Ulama and has experienced rapid development, becoming the school with the largest number of students in Banyumas Regency. Based on data from the past four years, SMK Ma'arif NU 1 Ajibarang has shown continuous growth in student enrollment. This achievement reflects the school's success in

responding to community needs, as evidenced by its active involvement in various community activities and services, which has enabled the community to perceive the school's presence and contribution. The existence of SMK Ma'arif NU 1 Ajibarang is therefore particularly interesting to study, as it has been able to maintain its institutional sustainability amid intense competition with both public and private schools. The school offers vocational programs that are relevant to labor market demands and is supported by the strong and extensive organizational network of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU).

The success of SMK Ma'arif NU 1 Ajibarang in attracting students cannot be separated from the marketing strategies it has implemented. However, to date, there have been limited academic studies that comprehensively examine how these strategies are implemented and how they contribute to the school's competitiveness. Therefore, further research is needed to understand the patterns, approaches, and effectiveness of educational marketing strategies at SMK Ma'arif NU 1 Ajibarang.

This study is expected to identify the educational marketing strategies that have been implemented, analyze the supporting and inhibiting factors, and evaluate the extent of their contribution to enhancing the school's competitiveness.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a post-positivist paradigm, which views reality as objective yet not fully comprehensible, thereby requiring critical and contextual approaches through various data verification techniques. This paradigm is relevant to the study of educational marketing strategies, as such strategies are influenced not only by empirical data but also by the perceptions and experiences of stakeholders.

The research employs a qualitative approach with a case study design, aiming to explore in depth educational marketing strategies in enhancing institutional competitiveness. The study is conducted in a naturalistic setting, with the researcher serving as the primary research instrument.

The research site is SMK Ma'arif NU 1 Ajibarang, and the study was conducted from June to December 2025.

Data sources consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation involving key informants, including the Vice Principal for Student Affairs, teachers, and students' parents. Secondary data were derived from institutional documents, reports, and relevant literature.

Data collection techniques include in-depth interviews, observation, and document analysis. Data analysis was conducted using the Miles and Huberman interactive model, which comprises data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification to ensure valid and systematic findings.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Marketing Mix Implemented at SMK Ma'arif NU 1 Ajibarang

The research findings indicate that SMK Ma'arif NU 1 Ajibarang implements a marketing mix strategy as an effort to enhance institutional competitiveness. This finding is supported by data obtained from interviews with the Vice Principal for Student Affairs, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders.

a. Product

1) Alumni

One important finding of this study reveals that the institutional image in the eyes of the community is strongly associated with graduates who are perceived as easily obtaining employment. This image does not emerge instantly but is the result of the quality of educational products offered by the institution. In service marketing mix theory, the product is not merely understood as a physical output, but rather as a value bundle that includes

educational programs, graduate competencies, job-related skills, and readiness to enter the industrial workforce.

A product refers to anything that can be offered to the market to satisfy consumer needs and desires. In the educational context, the main product of an institution is its graduates along with the competencies embedded in them. When alumni are competitive and readily absorbed into the labor market, it indicates that the educational product has high utility value for users of graduates, particularly business and industry sectors.

2) *Study Programs*

Another significant finding is that SMK Ma'arif NU 1 Ajibarang offers six study programs or vocational majors. The availability of diverse programs not only reflects the institution's readiness to provide varied educational services but also demonstrates a market-oriented marketing strategy aligned with students' interests and labor market needs. From the perspective of the educational marketing mix, this diversity of programs constitutes the product element, namely the core services offered to the community.

Based on the data, the development of new study programs is not conducted arbitrarily, but rather through careful consideration of student interests, labor market demands, and contemporary developments. Each time a new program is introduced, there is a noticeable increase in enthusiasm among prospective students and parents, as reflected in rising enrollment numbers following the introduction of new majors.

3) *Extracurricular Activities*

Within the marketing mix framework, extracurricular activities are considered part of the educational product because they provide added value beyond core academic services. The diversity of extracurricular activities serves as a form of service differentiation that enhances the school's attractiveness to prospective students.

The findings show that SMK Ma'arif NU 1 Ajibarang offers a wide range of extracurricular activities, including academic, artistic, sports, and religious fields, such as Kentongan, Scouts, Pencak Silat, Futsal, Volleyball, Hadroh, and Band. This variety provides students with ample opportunities to develop interests, talents, and non-academic competencies.

The abundance of extracurricular activities also indicates the school's strong commitment to character development. Through these activities, students learn teamwork, discipline, responsibility, and effective communication—skills that are highly relevant both in social life and the workplace. Parents perceive schools with rich extracurricular programs as better prepared to nurture independent and competitive individuals.

4) *Religious Programs*

The findings indicate that SMK Ma'arif NU 1 Ajibarang implements religious programs such as Qur'anic Literacy (BTA), istighosah, and *Manusa Mengaji* (daily Qur'an recitation). These programs serve as the school's distinctive identity and reflect its commitment to integrating religious values into the educational process.

The BTA program is conducted systematically across all classes, with students grouped based on their reading ability. Teachers and capable students collaboratively assist those who are less proficient, ensuring inclusive and effective learning. Other religious activities, such as weekly istighosah and morning Qur'an recitation before classes, aim to strengthen students' spiritual character.

From an educational marketing perspective, these religious programs function as a branding advantage that enhances the school's image as a vocational institution that balances technical competence with moral and spiritual development. This unique positioning increases institutional competitiveness amid intense competition among vocational schools.

b. Price

The findings show that SMK Ma'arif NU 1 Ajibarang places strong emphasis on educational sustainability through the provision of various scholarship programs. Scholarships are offered to academically outstanding students, economically disadvantaged students, and class-ranking achievers, including tuition-free programs for six semesters.

In addition, teachers and staff regularly contribute funds to support orphaned students, reinforcing a culture of social solidarity and inclusivity. These pricing strategies reduce financial barriers and enhance the school's appeal to a broader segment of society.

c. Place

The school's strategic geographic location in the center of Ajibarang District and along major inter-district routes provides significant accessibility advantages. Adequate transportation facilities, including public transport and online ride services, further strengthen the school's attractiveness.

This strategic location enables the school to draw students from a wider catchment area, making accessibility a key component of its marketing strategy.

d. Promotion**1) KIRKA System**

One unique promotional strategy is the KIRKA (Kiri–Kanan) system, which involves collecting data on prospective students living near teachers', staff's, and students' residences. This approach leverages social proximity and trust-based relationships as effective marketing tools.

Each school member acts as a promotion agent, enabling organic and cost-effective dissemination of information. The collected data are followed up by the admissions team through visits and communication with prospective students.

2) Open Socialization

Another effective promotional strategy is direct socialization visits to junior high schools (SMP and MTs). These activities involve interactive presentations, student performances from extracurricular groups, and direct engagement with prospective students, enhancing the school's visibility and appeal.

e. Physical Evidence

SMK Ma'arif NU 1 Ajibarang is recognized for its comprehensive and modern facilities, including well-equipped practice labs, comfortable classrooms, and technology-supported learning environments. These physical facilities serve as tangible indicators of service quality and strengthen the school's competitive position.

f. People

The school provides teachers with opportunities to participate in industry internships aligned with their teaching fields. This human resource development strategy enhances teachers' professional competence and ensures alignment between educational content and industry needs.

From a marketing perspective, qualified and industry-experienced teachers add value to educational services and increase public trust in the institution.

g. Process

The school enforces student discipline through clear regulations and consistent sanctions applied in a proportional and educational manner. Discipline is viewed as a character-building process rather than mere punishment.

In service marketing theory, process refers to procedures and mechanisms through which services are delivered. In education, consistent rule enforcement and standardized service delivery contribute to service quality and institutional credibility.

2. Contribution of Marketing Strategy to Institutional Competitiveness

Educational marketing mix strategies significantly contribute to institutional competitiveness amid intense inter-school competition.

First, product strategies strengthen institutional image through graduate employability, student achievements, and discipline, fostering positive public perception.

Second, place and physical evidence strategies enhance attractiveness through strategic location and accessible facilities.

Third, marketing strategies build trust and loyalty among parents, leading to sustained enrollment and word-of-mouth promotion.

Fourth, differentiation strategies—such as religious identity, diverse study programs, teacher internships, community services, and NU networks—create sustainable competitive advantages.

Finally, these integrated strategies contribute to enrollment stability and growth, indicating the institution's ability to survive and thrive in a competitive educational environment.

4. CONCLUSION

The implementation of the marketing mix strategy at SMK Ma'arif NU 1 Ajibarang encompasses seven elements (7Ps). The product aspect is reflected in the diversity of study programs, extracurricular activities, the Qur'anic Literacy Program (BTA), the Manusa Mengaji culture, and the role of alumni. The price aspect is realized through the provision of scholarships and the establishment of affordable tuition fees. The place aspect is supported by the school's strategic location. Promotion is carried out through the kirkas system, direct community outreach, and support from the Nahdlatul Ulama community. The process aspect is manifested through efforts to build close relationships with the community, including the lending of facilities, student involvement in community activities, and the enforcement of student discipline. Physical evidence is demonstrated by the availability of adequate buildings, facilities, and infrastructure. The people aspect is indicated by the development of teacher competencies, including participation in internship programs.

Educational marketing strategies significantly contribute to enhancing institutional competitiveness. These contributions include strengthening the institution's image, increasing public attraction and interest, reinforcing parents' trust and loyalty, creating differentiation and competitive advantage, and supporting the stability and growth of student enrollment.

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