

Public Relations Marketing Strategy in the Unissula New Student Admission Program

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Abstract

The main source of income for Private Universities (PTS) is from payments received from students. Therefore, PTS must be more creative in attracting new students. Unissula is a private university in Central Java with the highest number of students during the 2023 New Student Admissions (PMB) period, reaching 7346. This figure far exceeds the target of 5698. Unissula's Marketing and Public Relations (PH) UPT is a unit mandated by the Rektor to be responsible for the overall PMB program. In practice, UPT PH synergizes with all leaders at the university level, faculties, study programs and other units. This research aims to describe the synergy of UPT PH with all internal stakeholders in achieving PMB targets. This research uses a qualitative case study approach. The data collection technique was carried out using in-depth interviews with 3 informants determined by purposive sampling and observation at PMB meetings. Data analysis techniques are carried out through data reduction, data presentation and drawing conclusions. The research results show that there is a strategic policy from the Rektor which is the driving force for the implementation of three marketing public relations strategies, namely pull strategy, push strategy and pass strategy. The results of this research can contribute to other private universities which are experiencing a decrease in the number of students or who want to increase the number of students

Keywords: marketing public relations; student admission; private university

INTRODUCTION

The number of new students at private universities (PTS) continues to decline (medcom.id, September 15, 2023). Private universities (PTS) complain about the decreasing number of new students in recent years (wahananews.co, September 15, 2023). Recruitment of students thru independent pathways by state universities (PTN) is one of the causes (solopos.com, January 15, 2024). Public universities accept new students thru various pathways, including the National Achievement-Based Selection (SNBP), the National Test-Based Selection (SNBT), and independent selection. Prospective students can apply thru all three pathways. If you fail in the first path, you can register for the second path. If you fail again, you can register for the third path. This third pathway can be opened more than once by a state university.

As a state-owned university, PTN receives its own budget allocation from the state, in addition to the budget obtained from its students. Therefore, for state universities, the issue of new student admissions is not a major problem, as students are not the sole source of institutional income. Unlike private universities, which rely on tuition fees from enrolled students (Hernawati

et al., 2022). The continuous decline in the number of new students has led some private universities to plan to lay off some of their faculty. There are also those who plan to transfer management. Not a few are still struggling to get healthy (Kompas.id, 2023).

Facing market competition in this modern era, business owners (including those in the education sector) must prepare creative ideas to compete openly and increase sales (Aripin & Febrianto, 2022). Higher education institutions are required to have unusual marketing breakthroughs in order to increase the number of new student applicants. Marketing is about identifying and meeting human and social needs (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Marketing consists of a marketing mix strategy that organizations or companies develop to transfer value thru exchange with their customers (Firmansyah, 2020). Marketing can be so powerful when combined with effective and efficient communication (Firmansyah, 2020). A communication approach that considers market needs can be implemented by public relations.

Public relations is a leadership and management function that helps an organization achieve its goals, define its philosophy, and facilitate organizational change (Lattimore et al., 2010). The importance of Public Relations lies in its ability to educate the market (marketing education) (Tulis & Wijaya, 2019). Here, Public Relations seeks ways to build relationships with customers (Fikri & Salma, 2022). Marketing public relations is a marketing activity carried out by building a good/positive image. It is a function of marketing management with the aim of supporting the marketing of offered products or services (Rahmat, 2022), a synergy between marketing strategies and public relations activities (Wiwitan & Yulianita, 2017), involving the process of planning, implementing, and evaluating programs that stimulate consumer purchasing and satisfaction thru communication (Tulis & Wijaya, 2019).

Sultan Agung Islamic University (Unissula) is the oldest private university in Central Java, which has been accredited with the highest rating. More than 50% of its study programs have also been accredited with the highest rating, placing it among the top 10 best private universities nationally and number one in Central Java according to Webometrics (2023). Unissula has conducted an extensive identification of market needs. With its grand vision of "Bismillah building the Khaira Ummah generation," amidst the development of information and communication technology and the diverse government policies in managing universities, Unissula remains consistent in presenting itself as an Islamic Private University with a conservative-modern orientation, using Islamic Academic Culture (Budai) as its educational strategy, which also sets it apart from other Islamic Private Universities. Budai is a collective and continuous movement by all campus members to strengthen faith, morals, and knowledge (Sudarto, 2020). Amidst the development of modernization and liberalization in higher education, the alignment between religious and scientific knowledge represents a complete product as expected by the market. Product completeness is one of the important factors in business competition, as product completeness will add positive value to sales (Aripin & Febrianto, 2022).

In the implementation of Budai (Islamic Academic Culture), which is an educational strategy at Unissula, the Rector, as the highest leader of the university, can strengthen Budai in their own way, one of which is by promoting the concept of the Birrul Walidain campus as an implementation of Budai. This is Unissula's way of creating a value that is inherent in the organization, serving as a differentiator from other private universities. Dejawata et al. (in Muhammad & Febriatmoko, 2022) argue that product differentiation is a strategy for creating a product that is sufficiently different from other products.

Despite its competitive advantages, this doesn't mean students will easily come to register at Unissula. The Technical Implementation Unit for Marketing and Public Relations (UPT PH) is a unit specifically mandated by the Rector, required to implement both marketing and public relations programs creatively, effectively, and efficiently so that Unissula's study programs

become the preferred choice for high school/vocational school/Islamic high school graduates. As the highest authority, the Rector is directly involved in the public relations marketing process, mobilizing all the university's resources to achieve organizational goals. Within less than 2 years of his leadership, during the 2023 new student admission period, the number of Unissula students increased by almost two thousand, or more than 36% compared to the previous year, while in 2024, there was a significant increase of 63.45%. While other private universities experienced a decrease in student numbers, Unissula students actually saw a significant increase, as shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Unissula New Student Intake

Year	Number of Unissula New Students
2021	4988
2022	5404
2023	7346
2024	12005

This achievement was obtained thru a structured and measurable marketing and communication strategy, which is an improvement over previous strategies. The implementation of this strategy is interesting to elaborate on and analyze from a marketing and public relations perspective. The purpose of this research is to describe policies in the field of marketing public relations and to examine the three stages of marketing public relations strategy, namely pull, push, and pass strategies. A pull strategy is a strategy aimed at increasing sales (Purwanti, 2018). A push strategy involves providing stimuli, encouragement, and motivation (Nurrahman, 2015). A pass strategy is about influencing and creating favorable public opinion (Samsiah et al., 2023).

However, despite Unissula's success in increasing the number of new student enrollments amid the nationwide declining trend of private universities, there remain unresolved academic issues that warrant further investigation. To date, there is still a lack of comprehensive studies that clearly explain why and how marketing public relations strategies can operate effectively within the context of private higher education, particularly with regard to the role of university leadership policies, internal unit synergy, and the integrated implementation of pull, push, and pass strategies. Previous studies tend to examine higher education marketing in a fragmented manner, focusing mainly on aspects such as promotion, branding, or social media, without sufficiently linking them to strategic leadership policies and internal coordination mechanisms as key determinants of the success of new student admissions programs.

Furthermore, the way in which university leadership policies function as organizational stimuli that encourage changes in attitudes, behaviors, and performance among faculty and study program leaders in achieving new student enrollment targets has not been adequately explored. Therefore, this study is necessary to examine in depth the marketing public relations strategies implemented by Unissula, encompassing policy formulation, program planning, and the implementation of pull, push, and pass strategies, in order to obtain a systematic empirical understanding that can serve as a reference for other private universities facing competition in new student admissions.

Based on the above explanation, the findings of this study are expected to serve as a reference and learning resource for other private universities seeking to increase their student enrollment numbers.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative method to interpret or analyze Unissula's public relations marketing strategies in achieving the PMB goals in 2023, and examines pull, push, and pass strategies, making facts/phenomena easier to understand (Fadli, 2021). The approach used is a case study. Yin (in Wiwitan & Yulianita, 2017) states that a case study is used to study, explain, or interpret a case within its natural context without external intervention. And it can be useful in developing theory, evaluating programs, and developing interventions (Prihatsanti et al., 2018).

In this research, marketing public relations strategies are analyzed through three main approaches, namely pull strategy, push strategy, and pass strategy. The pull strategy is understood as a strategy aimed at attracting and generating interest among target audiences by creating demand for the offered products or services. This strategy is implemented through the development of a positive institutional image, the delivery of persuasive messages, and the provision of stimuli that encourage audiences to actively seek information and voluntarily make enrollment decisions (Purwanti, 2018).

Furthermore, the push strategy focuses on directly encouraging products toward the target market through promotional and sales activities that are more personal and direct in nature. In the context of marketing public relations, the push strategy is carried out through socialization activities, school roadshows, educational exhibitions, and interpersonal approaches to stimulate prospective students to take concrete enrollment actions (Nurrahman, 2015). Meanwhile, the pass strategy aims to shape, maintain, and strengthen favorable public opinion toward the organization. This strategy is implemented through media relations activities, media publications, as well as social concern and community service programs, enabling the organization to gain public legitimacy and trust that support the achievement of marketing objectives (Samsiah et al., 2023). These three strategies are analyzed in an integrated manner as a unified practice of marketing public relations in supporting the success of Unissula's New Student Admission (PMB) program.

The primary data collection technique used in-depth interviews with the Head of the Marketing and Public Relations UPT, the Head of the Public Relations Division, and the Head of the Marketing Division, as well as thru observation where the researcher attended PMB meetings organized by the Unissula rector and was also directly involved in Unissula's marketing and public relations activities. Meanwhile, secondary data was obtained thru literature studies by examining journals, books, and articles related to new student admissions and public relations marketing on online news portals.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results and discussion of this study are structured based on the three stages of marketing public relations strategy, namely pull, push, and pass strategies, as implemented by Unissula in the New Student Admission (PMB) program. These three strategies are carried out in an integrated manner with the support of strategic policies from university leadership. Overall, the findings indicate that the pull strategy builds initial interest among prospective students, the push strategy encourages direct enrollment actions, and the pass strategy shapes positive public opinion toward the institution. Collectively, these strategies contribute to the increase in the number of new students at Unissula. The subsequent discussion elaborates on leadership policies, program planning, and the implementation of each of these strategies.

Policy support from university leadership

The success of an organization is fundamentally supported by effective leadership (Refra, 2021) thru various policies that are created. Policies are formal organizational decisions that are binding and regulate behavior (Zabir, 2018). Based on the results of the researcher's interviews and

observations, there was a fundamental policy change made by the Rector of Unissula as an evaluation of the previous PMB program, namely: (1) before the 2023 PMB period began, the Rector issued Rector's Decree number 6812/E/SA/2022 regarding performance bond assessment indicators for structural officials at the faculty and study program levels. One of the points in this decree stipulates the fulfillment of the minimum target for new student admissions for all study programs.

The consequence of this decree is that both the head of the study program and the dean will be asked to resign if the number of new students in their study program or faculty does not reach 70% of the new student admission target set by the university. In its implementation, after the closing of the 2023 PMB period, this decree was applied to 2 deans and 5 program heads who did not meet the minimum PMB target. This served as shock therapy and motivated other faculty and program leaders to meet their respective performance bonds. Meanwhile, by 2024, all faculties have successfully met their student admission quotas. In fact, one faculty underwent separation because it had independently met its quota, namely the Communication Science Study Program, which was previously part of the Faculty of Languages and Communication Sciences. Since that year, there has been a restructuring into two separate faculties: the Faculty of Communication Sciences and the Faculty of Languages, Literature, and Culture.

The above policy is part of the evaluation of previous policies, as there has never been a university policy that dismisses faculty and study program leaders for not meeting PMB targets. (2) changes in the promotion budget policy. The Rector, thru Vise Rector 2, allocated promotion budgets for all faculties, increasing them by an average of 400% compared to the previous year's budget. The budget is ammunition for the faculty and program marketing teams to directly approach the target market. (3) The rector sets targets or deadlines for study programs that are still accredited B or Very Good to improve their accreditation to Excellent. Accreditation of an excellent study program will be one of the key messages in the promotion. Therefore, the university is facilitating the submission of reaccreditation applications for all study programs that have not yet been accredited as excellent. The key to improving accreditation lies in the compiled forms. For programs that cannot complete their reaccreditation forms by the specified deadline, the program head will be given a warning up to dismissal. (4) In addition to setting targets for faculty and program leaders, the rector also issued policies related to providing rewards for faculties that are able to meet their performance bonds. The rewards given include umrah prizes for faculty leaders and incentive trips for lecturers and staff of study programs or faculties who successfully exceeded their targets.

Public relations marketing planning

Discussing planning also means discussing management, as planning is part of the management function (A. M. Rahmat, 2021). The public relations management process in this study includes four steps as stated by Seitel: defining the problem or opportunity, programming, action, and evaluation (Seitel, 2016). In planning, the first step is to identify problems and opportunities. In an effort to identify problems or opportunities, the environment was first scanned to assess market attitudes and opinions, particularly regarding products, as well as market expectations and emerging issues. This was done thru a questionnaire distributed to new students in the 2022 period. The data obtained will serve as the basis for producing promotional messages in the next PMB period. In addition, Unissula also looks at data from previous new student applicants to predict market behavior for the 2023 PMB period, by classifying the market based on region of origin and school of origin. The regions and schools that contribute the most to the highest number of applicants will be the main targets of the PMB program, while still expanding market reach.

The next step is to program. At this stage, Unissula is creating a formal plan that addresses key public constituents, strategies and tactics, and goals. Learning from the experience of previous

PMB periods, the plan is focused on efforts to reach the primary audience, which is high school students in their final year, and to spread as many positive messages as possible to the public. In addition, to strengthen the promotional message, Unissula also programs the improvement of study program accreditation thru BANPT, the Independent Accreditation Agency (LAM), and international accreditation agencies. Institutionally, Unissula also programs the improvement of university rankings thru several international ranking agencies, namely; Webometrics, Time Higher Education World University Rankings, Scimago Institutions Rankings, and UI Green Metrics.

After creating the program plan, the next step is action. This is the communication phase where the UPT PH, in coordination with faculties and study programs, consistently sends promotional messages to the target market thru school socialization activities, participation in education expos, online media publications, and official social media of the university, faculties, and study programs, with four key messages: *First*, institutional accreditation and study program accreditation. Institutionally, Unissula is one of the first private universities in Central Java to be accredited with the highest rating by BANPT. It offers 42 study programs ranging from D3, bachelor's, professional, master's, and doctoral degrees, all of which have been accredited by the National Accreditation Board for Higher Education (BANPT), the Independent Accreditation Agency (LAM), and international accreditation bodies such as ASIC and ABEST21. Currently, 25 study programs, or over 50%, have been accredited as Excellent, 2 have been accredited as A, 12 have been accredited as Very Good, and 3 have been accredited as B. There are no study programs accredited as C. In 2024, the rector aims to increase the accreditation of at least 7 study programs to Excellent.

Second, external recognition. Starting in 2022, Unissula participates in university rankings by various international ranking agencies, with the ranking results updated every few months. In January 2023, the international ranking agency Webometrics placed Unissula at number 41 out of all public and private universities in Indonesia. By July 2023, Unissula had successfully climbed to 10th place among private universities nationally and number one in Central Java. In October 2023, the Times Higher Education World University Rankings placed Unissula as the best private university in Central Java, 6th best private university in Indonesia, and 27th among public and private universities in Indonesia. In March 2023, Scimago Institutions Rankings placed Unissula as the best private university in Central Java for the innovation category and first in Semarang for the overall ranking category. In December 2022, UI Green Metrics ranked Unissula as the best private university in Central Java. All of these rating agencies have updated their rankings.

Domestically, Unissula received recognition from the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Research and Technology (Kemendikbud Ristek), which designated Unissula as the best private university nationally in 2022 for two categories: the best private university in reporting internationally recognized study programs and the best private university in tracer study reporting for graduates in the 1001-3000 range. In 2023, Unissula also received 5 awards from the Higher Education Service Institution (LLDIKTI) Region 6 Central Java, including the best private university in program accreditation ratio, best research performance, best fulfillment of teaching duties, best MBKM index, and best student achievement.

Third, the Birrulwalidain Campus. To strengthen Islamic Academic Culture (Budai) as an educational strategy and a differentiator from other private universities, the Rector of Unissula promoted the practice of birrulwalidain for all Unissula academic staff. In this regard, students are encouraged to show respect and obedience to their lecturers, just as they respect and obey their parents. In addition, lecturers must also love and honor their students (takrimul aulad), guiding, educating, and directing them with full affection, just like the students' parents do at

home. There should be no "killer" professors or professors who make things difficult for students, just as there should be no students who are rude or disrespectful to their professors. This concept also applies to leaders and subordinates.

Fourth, the strengths of the study program. Each faculty and study program has its own characteristics. UPT PH is deploying its resources to help all faculties and study programs fully showcase their potential, including their unique characteristics, and disseminate this information thru online and social media managed by each faculty or study program. The final step in public relations management is to conduct an evaluation. This is the evaluation stage for what has been done, and making improvements for future performance. In this phase, Unissula identifies programs that are performing well and those that are not, including which faculties or study programs are meeting their targets and which are not. One effort to improve future performance is to replace faculty or study program leaders who do not meet the minimum target for new student enrollment with individuals considered to have greater ability in the field of new student recruitment.

Pull marketing strategy for public relations

To implement the program plan, the first strategy is to increase sales (pull strategy). This strategy is used to build consumer demand (Samsiah et al., 2023) and generate or stimulate consumers, attracting them into the organization's distribution network (Nurrahman, 2015). This strategy is implemented thru 3 tactics: (1) external relations tactics by building good relationships with the Guidance and Counselling Teacher Deliberation Community (MGBK), (2) social media content tactics, and (3) offering discounts and scholarships.

Guidance counselors play an important role in facilitating students' study choices. As providers of guidance and counselling services, guidance counselors can act as mediators in students' indecision regarding study choices (Netty, 2019). Thru guidance counselors, Unissula can bring its products closer to 12th-grade high school students. Currently, there are over 300 guidance counselors who are part of the MGBK group connected to Unissula. They can help motivate the rest of their students to continue their studies at Unissula.

In addition to collaborating with guidance counselors, Unissula also focuses on disseminating content suitable for its target market that can encourage prospective students to apply. This is done out of the awareness that high school students, especially those in the 12th grade, are a market segment actively seeking information about campuses, study programs, facilities, accreditation levels, and other factors. Therefore, all social media officials from the university, faculty, study program, and even units, institutions, and bureaus, all conveyed a similar message, positive things about Unissula.

To increase the number of applicants, Unissula also offers tiered discounts, depending on the terms and conditions. Discounts are given to hafiz/hafizah (those who have memorized the Quran) ranging from 5 to 30 juz (chapters), to alumni children, high-achieving students, and children of parents with certain professions such as laborers, farmers, teachers, etc. Discounts vary from 20% to 100% of the Internal Development Fund (DPI). In addition to offering discounts, Unissula also provides full scholarships until graduation thru the Khaira Ummah scholarship program offered by Lazis Sultan Agung and the KIP K scholarship from the government.

Public relations push marketing strategy

Ruslan (in Widuhung, 2021) writes that a push strategy means a pushing strategy used by the sales and trade promotion group to push products thru the marketing channel. A promotional strategy where companies take on the role of bringing their products to consumers (Nurrahman, 2015). This strategy is implemented thru roadshow socialization tactics to schools and

participation in educational expo events. Through this activity, Unissula brings its products closer to the market. At the socialization location, agents can answer various questions and even handle on-site registration.

Every time they return from school roadshow activities or participate in expo events, Unissula agents always bring data containing student names, school of origin, WhatsApp numbers, and preferred study programs. This data was then followed up by a special team recruited from students who had been trained as direct sellers and personal sellers. Thru the Unissula PMB hotline number, this team will contact and persuade each prospective student one by one with a sales message. This team is also responsible for overseeing the phased registration process, starting from initial data entry, payment of the registration PIN, document upload, and reminding applicants who have been accepted to immediately re-register.

Public relations pass marketing strategy

Pass strategy is part of the marketing public relations strategy whose purpose is to support the achievement of marketing goals by forming positive public opinion toward the Company (Nurfritriani & Suhartini, 2018). Opinions are formed thru two tactics: (1) media relations, online media publicity, and social media optimization, and (2) community service programs, social responsibility, and community relations. In implementing the first tactic, the UPT PH acts as a press agent, with a PR officer specifically tasked with writing news that will be published on the website and online media. There's a motto that Unissula's PR team should always remember: one day, one news. News sources and materials are obtained from all available resources within the campus. The article that has been published in online media will be republished on Unissula's social media. This tactic is combined with a media relations strategy, which involves maintaining and updating contacts with the media, disseminating news, organizing press conferences, and responding to media inquiries (Rosalina & Anshori, 2023). Media outlets with good relationships with Unissula include republika.co.id, Jawa Pos Group, Suara Merdeka Group, Tribun Jateng, Suara Baru, and others.

In addition to publications, to cultivate positive public opinion toward Unissula, it is also done in conjunction with the faculty service program in the campus surroundings, in residential areas, at disaster locations, in schools, and various other locations. The program can include free medical services, training, and mentoring tailored to community needs, including always being on the front lines alongside LAZIS Sultan Agung during disasters, both in and around Semarang and nationally.

Increased student enrollment in response to public relations marketing policies and messages

An increase in the number of students means an increase in sales in the higher education business amidst competition among private universities and even public universities. The decision of prospective students to choose Unissula is their response to the quality of the stimuli they receive. When the communicator pays attention to the stimulus or message they receive, it means the communication process is ongoing (Rahmat abidin & Abidin, 2021). The stimulus here relates to how planned messages, both verbal and non-verbal, are sent and received by the prospective student market, thereby influencing attitudes and driving action. Here, there is a process of action and reaction between the message sender or between Unissula and the prospective student market.

This process aligns with the Stimulus Organism Response (SOR) theory model, which posits that certain words, nonverbal cues, and symbols will stimulate others to react in a specific way (Rahmat abidin & Abidin, 2021). The emphasis of the SOR model in communication is when the message conveyed is able to foster motivation and enthusiasm, so that the message can be

quickly received by the communicator and lead to a change in attitude (Layrensius et al., 2022). The emphasis here is not on what the message is or why it is sent, but on how communication messages can change attitudes. For a change in attitude to occur, the stimulus presented must meet three elements: attention, understanding, and acceptance (Abidin, 2022). The three pull, push, and pass strategies in Unissula's public relations marketing are ways to stimulate the market and drive changes in attitude. The rector's policy, through Unissula Rector's Decree number 6812/E/SA/2022 regarding performance bond assessment indicators for structural officials, which was widely circulated internally at Unissula, is also a stimulus that was responded to by the organization (structural officials, deans, and program heads) by working harder than before.

CONCLUSION

The most fundamental aspect of a public relations marketing strategy is implementing marketing programs with a public relations approach, which involves building good relationships and cooperation with all parties (stakeholders) related to the new student admission program, both internally and externally. The leadership policy (rector) that facilitates the new student admission program and implements performance bonds with their rewards and punishments serves as motivation for subordinates (deans, program heads) to achieve their best performance.

However, this study has several limitations. First, it focuses on a single institution using a qualitative case study approach; therefore, the findings cannot be broadly generalized to all private universities. In addition, this study primarily emphasizes the perspectives of internal stakeholders, and thus does not directly explore the perceptions of prospective students or parents as external stakeholders. Based on these limitations, future research is recommended to involve more than one higher education institution for comparative analysis, to employ quantitative or mixed methods approaches, and to expand the research subjects by including prospective students and parents in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of marketing public relations strategies in new student admissions.

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