STUDENTS EVALUATION OF THE MARKETING STRATEGIES BEING USED BY ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY IN RECRUITING NEW STUDENTS. CASE OF MATABELELAND NORTH AND BULAWAYO REGIONS

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ABSTRACT

Due to the increase in the number of universities and other tertiary education service providers in the country, prospective students are faced with unlimited options. As a result the students are becoming very demanding and disloyal moving from one university or education provider to another seeking better service. This study seeks to evaluate the marketing strategies being employed by Zimbabwe Open University to recruit new students. The main aim of the paper was to evaluate the marketing strategies being used in Zimbabwe Open University: viral marketing (word of mouth) and ZOU on Thursday against the expectations of students. Structured questionnaires were developed to gather relevant data which will be used for analysis. Descriptive statistics which involves simple percentage graphical charts and illustrations were employed in data presentations and analysis. A sample used involved 40 respondents composed of students (former and current), from Matabeleland North and Bulawayo using the simple random sampling technique.

Keywords: Marketing Strategies, Recruiting, Zimbabwe Open University

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1. Introduction

Higher Education in Zimbabwe is becoming more competitive from a variety of perspectives. Internally, institutions must manage costs, while at the same time there's a growing need to specialize and communicate a unique message to the congested marketplace. Student prospects are faced with more education options than ever before. Marketing strategies can, therefore, directly affect the enrolment of a university. Through effective marketing strategies a university can enhance the understanding of its position in the marketplace. With the increase of universities in Zimbabwe now competition for students has intensified particularly over the last 15 years. As a consequence the need to develop sound marketing strategies for attracting students has become more important.

2. Background of the Study

The Zimbabwe Open University was established as an open and distance learning (ODL) institution in 1997. The main aim was to cater for the large population of citizens who were unable to gain access to colleges and other tertiary institutions. Initially the target population consists of mature citizens who are employed or engaged in other activities which make it impossible for them to enroll in conventional universities because of time constraints. Before the establishment of Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) there little opportunities for these time constraint individuals, keen to improve themselves to advance themselves academically. Open Distance Learning represents approaches that focus on opening access to education freeing learners from the constraints of time and place, and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and group learners (Nyaruwata, 2011).

ODL was received well by the Zimbabwean society as exhibited by ZOU's high enrolment levels during its formative years. However currently there is a significant decrease in enrolment levels and this is a threat to the institution as a centre of learning. This unhealthy situation has pushed the researcher to evaluate the marketing strategies being by institution focusing particularly on two Regions-Bulawayo and Matabeleland North. According to Galusha (1998) if a university cannot attract students it is doomed as centre of learning.

Zimbabwe Open University and its regions, in a bid to attract new students employed a number marketing strategies which include viral marketing, advertising, flyers, brochures, web-

marketing and outreach. However this study discusses three marketing strategies: viral marketing, advertising, and outreach programs which are subject to evaluation in this study.

2.1 Viral Marketing

Viral marketing is a form of promotion based on the free circulation of ideas via a word of mouth process. When you hear something very interesting, it becomes imperative to share your discovery with someone you like. Be it friends, relatives or colleagues, you get a kick out of sharing with someone else something cool that you have discovered. And in turn, those people you share something with, will do the same with their network of friends. That is what "*going viral*" all is about.

It is also marketing phenomenon that facilitates and encourages people to pass along, a marketing message. Viral marketing depends on a high pass-along rate from person to person. If a large percentage of recipients forward something to a large number of friends, the overall growth snowballs very quickly. If the pass-along numbers get too low, the overall growth quickly fizzles.

2.1.1 Critical Factors for Viral Marketing Success

According to Hinz, et al (2011), there are four critical factors for viral marketing success:

1: Content or the attractiveness of a message makes it memorable

2: The structure of the social network

3: The behavioral characteristics of the recipients and their incentives for sharing the message

4: The seeding strategy, which determines the initial set of targeted consumers chosen by the initiator of the viral marketing campaign

There are typically three types of people you can target:

- **Hubs:** well-connected people with a high number of connections to others
- **Fringes:** poorly connected people
- **Bridges:** those who can connect two otherwise unconnected parts of the network
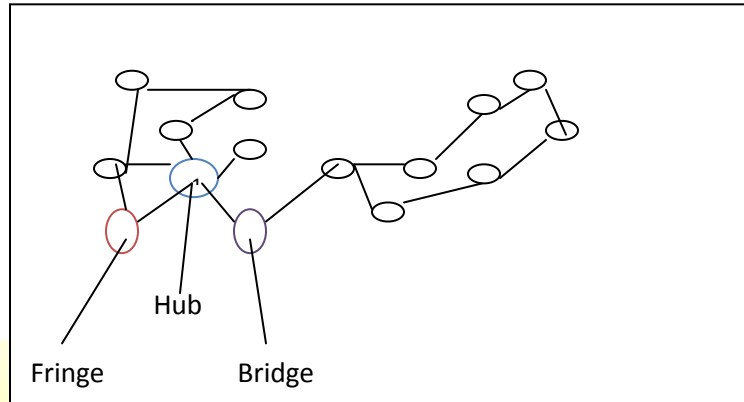
Figure 1 Seeding Strategy

Hubs are better informed because of their social links and they can also influence their networks (e.g. if I got this from Bob it must be good!). However, Hubs may not be optimal channels because if the person that acts as a hub doesn't like or doesn't agree with the content, they will not pass it on to their network. As big targets for new content, hubs are constantly bombarded with information and therefore may ignore or not see your new content which will prevent it from being spread.

Adoption of a new idea can then start at the "fringes" and make its way through the network. It has also been argued that fringes are more easily influenced than hubs and therefore may be good targets for spreading content. Bridges, for their ability to connect different areas of a network have also been targets because they can influence a portion of the network otherwise immune to the 'viral' content you have created.

In ZOU viral marketing is done through former students, current student, part-time tutors,. internal staff and other external stakeholders

2.2 Advertising (ZOU on Thursday)

According to Baker, (2008) advertising is a form of communication for marketing and is used to encourage, persuade, or manipulate an audience (viewers, readers or listeners; sometimes a specific group) to continue or take some new action. Advertising messages are usually paid for by sponsors and viewed via various traditional media; including mass media such as newspaper, magazines, television commercial, radio advertisement, outdoor advertising or direct mail; or new media such as blogs, websites or text messages. ZOU uses advertising as marketing tool to attract new students. The popular advert being 'ZOU on Thursday' which comes every week on

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a Thursday. The advert is usually carried out in public owned newspapers –Herald and Chronicle.

2.3 Outreach Programs

Outreach is an activity of providing services to populations who might not otherwise have access to those services (Dewson et al. 2006). A key component of outreach is that the groups providing it are not stationary, but mobile; in other words they are meeting those in need of outreach services at the locations where those in need are. In addition to delivering services, outreach has an educational role, raising the awareness of existing services.

Rhodes (1996) distinguishes between three types of outreach: domiciliary (undertaken at individual homes), detached (undertaken in public environments and targeting individuals), and peripatetic (undertaken at public or private environments and targeting organizations rather than individuals).

ZOU's outreach programs involve public institution visits (schools, hospitals, other government establishments) careers days, sports events etc.

Dewson et al. (2006) list the following tools of outreach: leaflets, newsletters, advertising; stalls and displays, and dedicated events, with the common location being local community institutions such as libraries, community centres, markets and so on.

3. Statement of the Problem

The ZOU Regions- Bulawayo and Matabeleland North have been attracting low number of students since 2008 as evidenced by statistics shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1- Student Enrolment 2008 - 2012

Semester/ Year	Bulawayo	Matabeleland North
Aug-Dec 2008	1315	718
Aug-Dec 2009	744	471
Aug-Dec 2010	770	454
Aug-Dec 2011	861	350
Aug-Dec 2012	700	318

Source: Internal Records

Low enrolment may indicate that there are problems in marketing strategies being used by the university regions in the advent of fierce competition in the higher education sector. Most

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conventional universities in the country are offering flexible programmes that have similar characteristics to ZOU ODL programmes. Bindura University is a good example which has an operating centre in Lupane (capital of Matabeleland North Province). Low enrolment and intense competition in the sector prompt the researchers to evaluate marketing strategies being employed by ZOU to recruit new students.

4. **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of the study was to evaluate the marketing strategies being employed by Zimbabwe Open University to recruit new students.

1. To evaluate the effectiveness of viral marketing (word of mouth) as an enrolment strategy in ZOU

2. To evaluate the effectiveness of advertising (ZOU on Thursday) on student enrollment

3. To access the outreach programs being employed by ZOU to recruit new students

4. **Methodology**

The research is descriptive in nature and employs survey method in the evaluation of marketing strategies being used by ZOU for recruiting new students. Convenience sampling techniques were employed in selecting the 40 participants: (20 former students and 20 current students) that constituted the sample of the research. Structured questionnaires were designed to facilitate the acquisition of relevant data which was used for analysis. The questionnaire was used as suggested by Crimp and Wright, (1993) that it is an important tool that is flexible, fast, accurate and easy to be used for statistical analysis. According to Miller et al, (2002) a questionnaire can provide unbiased statistical results and can be representative of the whole population. The questionnaires were completed when the researchers were waiting and this led to the 100% response rate. Descriptive statistics which involves simple percentage graphical charts and illustrations were used in data presentation and analysis.

The major limitation of the study was that it involved two Regions based in the city Bulawayo and the results may not reflect the views of all the students in Zimbabwe. Also time was the limiting factor hence the reason to concentrate the study in Bulawayo.

5. **Finding and Discussions**

The students (former and current) were asked to evaluate the marketing strategies being used by ZOU to market its programs. The marketing strategies which were subject to evaluation in this study were Viral Marketing, Advertising, and Outreach.

6.1 Viral Marketing Evaluation

6.1.1 Former students Involvement in Word of Mouth

Former students as members of the University Regions Alumni and key figures in viral marketing were asked how often they had marketed ZOU to their peers and acquaintances encouraging them to enroll with the university.
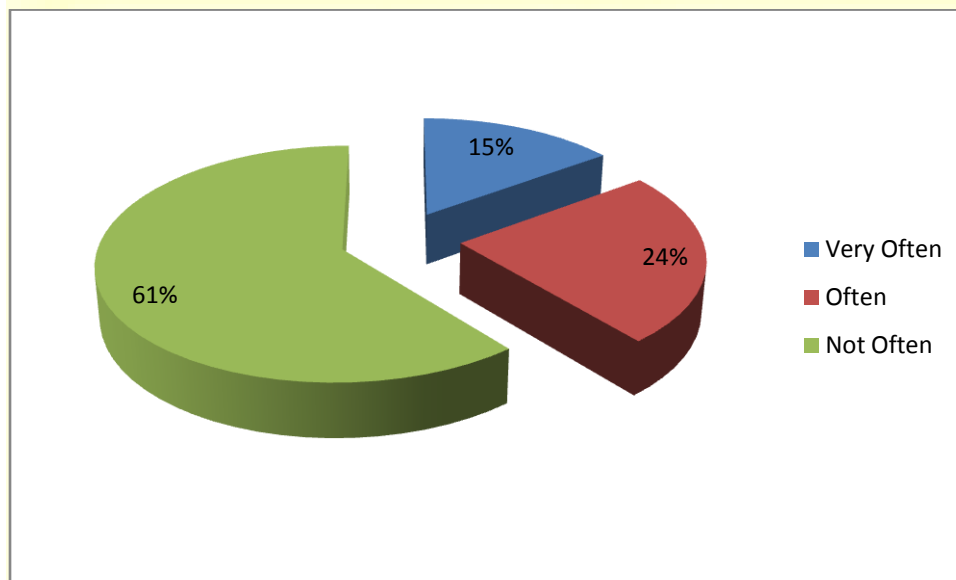

Figure 2: Former Students Involvement in Word of Mouth

The results show that the former students were not doing enough as 61% acknowledged that they were not involved in the marketing of the ZOU brand through the word of mouth (viral marketing). This may mean that they were not incentivized to do so. The former students as members of the Alumni, are key members in the viral marketing drive. According to Hinz et al, (2011) they should act as the Hub (people who are highly connected).

6.1.2 Nature of Information Respondents Received of ZOU

All participants were asked the type of information they receive through word of mouth. The type of information was divided into two: Negative and positive.
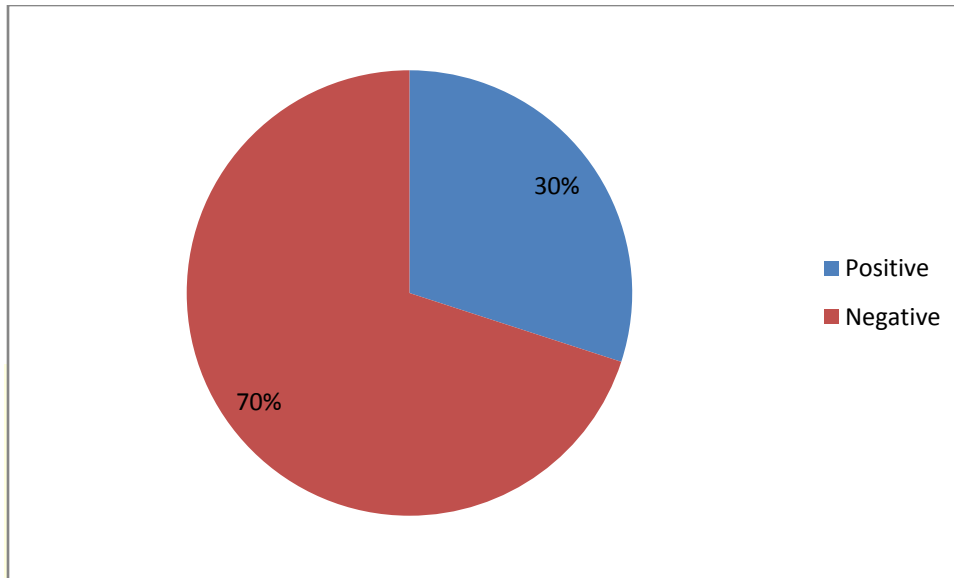
Figure 3: Types of Information received by Respondents

70% of the respondents said they had received negative information about ZOU through word of mouth (Viral Marketing). This may mean that the respondents were exposed to wrong sources of information that were not sanctioned by the institution. Also this may mean that correct information was flowing through the social network, thereby allowing grapevine stories to take centre stage.

6.1.3 Do you agree whether the regions are doing enough to promote word of mouth?

The respondents were asked whether the regions were doing enough to promote word of mouth marketing.
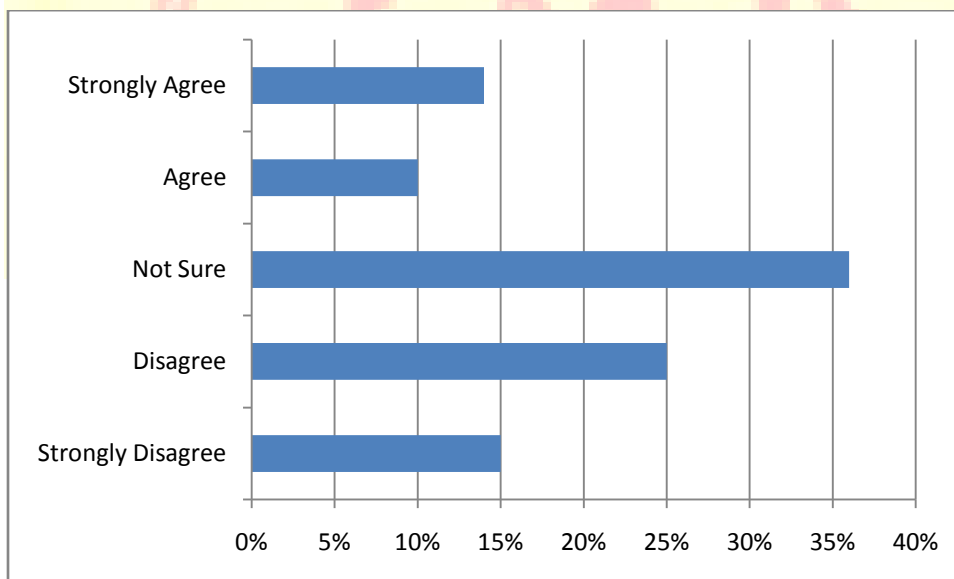
Figure 4: Promotion of Word of Mouth

Respondents felt, the regions were not doing enough to promote word of mouth (viral marketing) as 50% of them either disagreed or strong disagreed that the regions were not doing enough in that regard.

6.2 Advertising

Respondents were asked to evaluate the ZOU on Thursday advertisement. A list of evaluation attributes was developed and a Likert Scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strong Agree was used to in the evaluation.

Table 2: Advertising Evaluation

Evaluation Attributes	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Somewhat (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
ZOU ads communicative	10	10	25	50	5
Truthful	10	15	0	40	35
Conveys emotional appeal	15	10	55	10	10
Placed in the right media	25	25	30	15	5
They are visible	0	0	40	50	10
Portrays a positive ZOU image	0	0	100	0	0
Shows the benefits of studying with ZOU	24	36	25	10	5
Encourage immediate action	0	0	100	0	0
Placed at the right time	0	0	20	50	30
Easy to understand	0	0	0	50	50
Show creativity	10	10	30	30	20

It is very encouraging that most respondents agree that ZOU advertisements are communicative and show truthfulness. However most of them are not sure whether the advertisements convey emotional appeal. Probably they did not understand the attribute. Also most feel that the advertisements are not widely accessible. This may be attributed to the fact the adverts are usually placed in Herald and Chronicle which are concentrated in urban centers. On portraying positive image respondents are not sure.

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6.3 Outreach Programs

### 6.3.1 Visit by ZOU Personnel

Both former and current students were asked how often they saw ZOU personnel on a marketing mission.
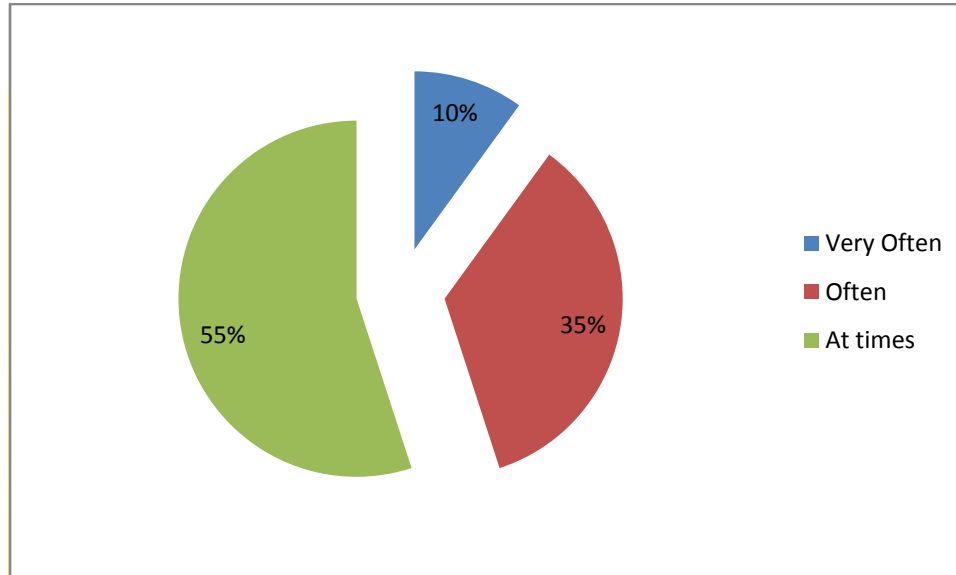
Results were unhealthy as most respondents (55%) said that they saw ZOU personnel at times on a marketing mission, meaning that they saw them after a long time. This situation shows that outreach programs were not being conducted adequately. That was the most plausible reason for the low enrolment figures.

6.3.2 Rating of Outreach Personnel

All respondent- groups (former and current students) were asked to rate the personnel they met on   outreach   programs.
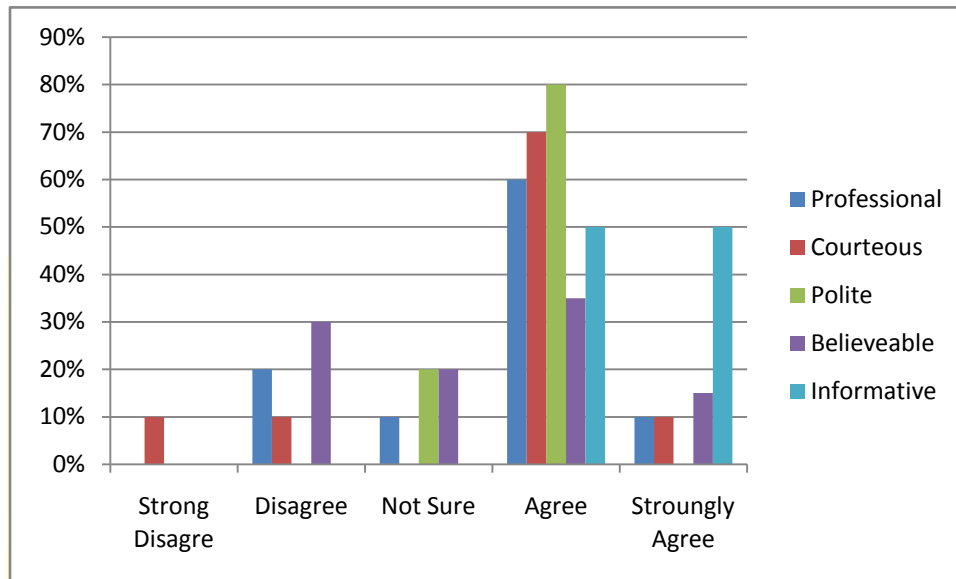
Figure ZOU Outreach Personnel Evaluation

Results showed that ZOU personnel that the respondents had encountered during outreach programmes were informative as all respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that they were informative and also the majority, 60% and 80% said they were professional and polite respectively. However it is disturbing because 30% said that they were not believable. This may have been caused by negative coverage of the institution in the papers and grapevine.

6. **Conclusion**

Understanding the marketing strategies which the institution is employing is important to all stakeholders. This study sought to evaluate the marketing strategies being employed by 2 ZOU Regions Bulawayo and Mat North. Three marketing strategies namely Viral Marketing, Advertising (ZOU on Thursday) and Outreach programmes were evaluated. The results indicate that the Regions were not doing enough on viral marketing as stakeholder engagement activities were limited. Current and former students who should be the mirror of the university were not engaged to promote the University of Brand. Also they say they are more exposed to negative information about the university, meaning that the university is not doing enough in promoting the University brand.

7. Recommendations

The researchers made the following recommendations that:

1. The ZOU Regions should establish information centers in their district centers so that correct information about the institution can be easily accessed. These information centers would augment viral marketing efforts.

2. The Regions should pay incentives to keys members of the Alumni for them to aggressive sell the ZOU brand.

3. The ZOU adverts should be placed in most newspapers-public and independent ones.

4. The Regions should increase visibility by carrying out more outreach programmes, depending on the availability of funds and transport.

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