



Marketing Communication Strategy Of Dehasen University To Attract Prospective Students In Digital Era

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Abstract

In today's increasingly competitive higher education sector, universities must adopt strategic and adaptive marketing communication approaches to attract prospective students. This study analyzes the communication strategy of Dehasen University Bengkulu (UNIVED) by applying Kotler's Promotion Mix framework, which includes advertising, sales promotion, personal selling, public relations, and direct marketing. The research uses a descriptive qualitative method with data collected through interviews, observation, and documentation from key figures within the university's new student admission committee. Findings show that UNIVED effectively combines traditional and digital media, including AI-based content creation for social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Advertising is supported by printed brochures and banners, while sales promotions include scholarships, fee discounts, and referral incentives. Personal selling is conducted via school visits and education fairs, building trust through face-to-face engagement. Public relations efforts are maintained through media exposure and community involvement, enhancing institutional credibility. Direct marketing employs personalized messages via WhatsApp, email, and social networks. From 2020 to 2024, student enrollment steadily increased, indicating the strategy's effectiveness. The study concludes that integrated, technology-based, and student-focused communication enhances institutional visibility and appeal. UNIVED is encouraged to strengthen two-way digital communication to remain relevant and competitive in the digital era.

Keywords: *Marketing Communication, Promotion Mix, Student Recruitment, Digital Marketing, Higher Education.*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of technology and the expansion of digital media have dramatically transformed how higher education institutions engage with prospective students. In Indonesia, where private universities continue to grow in number, the competition to attract student enrollments has intensified. According to data from the Indonesian Bureau of Statistics (BPS) in 2023, more than 3 million individuals applied to universities nationwide, reinforcing the urgent need for effective communication and marketing strategies (BPS, 2023). In this context, universities are no longer solely evaluated based on academic reputation, but also on how well they present themselves to the public—particularly through digital channels that are most frequently accessed by Generation Z.

Marketing communication strategies play a vital role in this effort. These strategies include informing, persuading, and reminding target audiences about an institution's values and offerings, with the aim of building strong relationships and trust. Tjiptono emphasizes that marketing communication is not just about promoting products or services, but also about sustaining loyalty and engagement through consistent messaging (Tjiptono, as cited in Ardianti

& Handayani, 2021). Kotler's Promotion Mix, a widely accepted framework, consists of five integrated tools: advertising, sales promotion, personal selling, public relations, and direct marketing. These elements, when applied systematically, allow universities to target potential students using a mixture of emotional appeal, personal interaction, incentives, and mass outreach (Kotler, as cited in Faradilla Detisha et al., 2023).

Dehasen University Bengkulu (UNIVED), as a regional private institution, has demonstrated a significant application of these strategic principles. From 2020 to 2024, the number of accepted students rose from 1,227 to 2,493, reflecting a steady upward trend (Mesa Laini, 2025). This growth was not incidental, but a result of a well-coordinated communication campaign that utilized both conventional and digital media. For example, printed materials such as brochures and banners were placed in strategic locations, while digital content—including AI-generated promotional visuals—was disseminated through platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook. The university also engaged in direct outreach through school visits, webinars, and personal calls or WhatsApp messages, creating a multi-touchpoint approach to engagement.

In addition to mass communication, UNIVED also applied sales promotions such as early bird discounts, scholarships for high-achieving students, and referral programs. These incentives helped reduce economic barriers while creating urgency in decision-making. Public relations efforts included media exposure, academic seminars, and community service programs, all of which contributed to the university's brand positioning as an accessible and socially responsible institution. Importantly, these strategies were grounded in an understanding of student behavior and the media ecosystems they occupy, enabling UNIVED to maintain relevance in an increasingly digital education environment.

Given these dynamics, this study seeks to analyze the integrated marketing communication strategies employed by Dehasen University in attracting new students. It aims to assess how effectively the Promotion Mix framework has been adapted and applied in the context of student recruitment. Furthermore, the study examines how these efforts contribute to sustained enrollment growth and what lessons can be drawn for other higher education institutions. By exploring UNIVED's case, this research contributes to the broader academic discourse on strategic communication and digital marketing within the higher education sector.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Strategic Communication in Higher Education Marketing

Strategic communication in the context of higher education refers to planned, purposeful messaging aimed at achieving institutional goals, especially those related to enrollment, reputation building, and stakeholder engagement. According to Effendy (as cited in Ardianti & Handayani, 2021), communication strategy involves the careful planning and management of message delivery tailored to audience characteristics. In higher education marketing, this means understanding prospective students' preferences, behaviors, and decision-making processes. Liliweri (2021) emphasizes that strategic communication also serves to inform, motivate, and educate audiences, while simultaneously supporting decision-making through consistent and credible information flow. In the digital era, universities must integrate emotional appeal, clarity, and relevance in their communication to stay competitive.

The Promotion Mix Framework by Kotler

Kotler's Promotion Mix remains one of the most widely adopted models in marketing communication, especially in education. The model comprises five essential components: advertising, sales promotion, personal selling, public relations, and direct marketing (Kotler, as cited in Faradilla Detisha et al., 2023). Each element serves a distinct function. Advertising

helps raise awareness through both mass and targeted media; sales promotion offers incentives to accelerate enrollment; personal selling builds personal trust through direct interaction; public relations focuses on maintaining a positive institutional image; and direct marketing uses personalized messages to build engagement. The Promotion Mix framework is especially useful for universities seeking to balance traditional and digital tools in a cohesive strategy.

Previous Studies on University Marketing Communication Strategies

Several previous studies have explored how universities apply marketing communication strategies to enhance student recruitment. Husin (2023) examined STAI As-Sunnah's strategy, highlighting the role of social media, brochures, and school outreach in increasing enrollment. Similarly, Yoman (2022) studied the communication strategy of Universitas Islam Syekh Yusuf and found that face-to-face engagement and community involvement significantly boosted prospective student interest. Another study by Gomes et al. (2018) analyzed strategies targeting students from outside Java, emphasizing the importance of tailored communication and multi-platform exposure. These studies support the argument that integrated communication efforts, combining digital, interpersonal, and promotional tools, are vital in influencing prospective student behavior.

METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research method aimed at exploring and understanding the marketing communication strategies used by Dehasen University Bengkulu in attracting prospective students. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for a deep and holistic understanding of social phenomena in natural settings (Sugiyono, 2020). The researcher served as the primary instrument for data collection, utilizing triangulation techniques that included in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation analysis. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on individuals directly involved in the student admission process, such as the Chairperson, Vice Chairperson, and Secretary of the New Student Admission Committee.

Data collection involved four key techniques. First, observations were conducted to examine promotional activities and materials used by the university, including both offline and digital campaigns. Second, semi-structured interviews were held with key informants to gather insights about planning, implementation, and evaluation of the strategies. Third, documentation such as brochures, website content, and social media posts were analyzed to understand how communication elements were presented. Lastly, a literature review supported contextual understanding. The collected data were analyzed using an interactive model involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. This approach ensured that findings were derived systematically and reflected the actual communication practices within the institution.

RESULTS

The findings of this research show that Dehasen University Bengkulu (UNIVED) has implemented a structured and comprehensive marketing communication strategy based on Kotler's Promotion Mix framework. This strategy was designed to address the increasingly competitive landscape of higher education by leveraging both traditional and digital approaches to reach and persuade prospective students. Through interviews, observations, and documentation, it was found that the university deliberately applied all five elements of the promotion mix—advertising, sales promotion, personal selling, public relations, and direct marketing—in a coordinated and responsive manner.

The advertising strategy at UNIVED encompasses both offline and online methods. Offline advertising includes brochures, flyers, banners, and billboards, which are distributed or placed in strategic areas such as senior high schools and public locations across Bengkulu Province. These materials provide essential information about academic programs, admission requirements, scholarship opportunities, and campus facilities. Meanwhile, online advertising plays a dominant role in the university's outreach efforts. UNIVED actively utilizes social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook to share engaging visual content, often generated or enhanced using artificial intelligence (AI) tools to attract attention and differentiate from competitors.

In addition to creative visuals, UNIVED ensures that its advertising messages align with the expectations and values of its target audience—namely, senior high school students from both urban and rural areas. The integration of student testimonials, campus life highlights, and educational success stories into the university's promotional content helps build authenticity and trust. These advertisements are posted regularly, optimized for engagement, and adjusted according to feedback received from followers and viewers. The real-time nature of social media has allowed UNIVED to test different content strategies and immediately respond to shifting trends in student preferences.

Sales promotion emerges as another key component of the university's strategy. The university offers financial incentives such as early registration discounts, fee waivers, and scholarship programs to attract students. These incentives are often time-limited, creating a sense of urgency that encourages faster decision-making among applicants. Additionally, UNIVED has implemented a referral system whereby current students or alumni who successfully refer new applicants receive non-monetary rewards. This system not only incentivizes recruitment but also strengthens community involvement in student enrollment efforts.

UNIVED's personal selling efforts are embodied in their direct engagement activities with high schools throughout the region. University representatives, including members of the admissions committee, visit schools to conduct presentations, distribute information, and interact with students directly. These face-to-face interactions allow prospective students to ask questions, clarify their concerns, and establish a more personal connection with the institution. Informants reported that these school visits were effective in increasing awareness, building emotional trust, and helping students visualize themselves as future UNIVED students.

The university also engages in public relations activities that promote its image as a responsible, active, and community-oriented institution. Events such as educational seminars, community service programs, and collaborations with local government initiatives are regularly publicized through mass media and social platforms. These activities are intended not only to fulfill the university's social mission but also to build a positive reputation that resonates with both students and parents. The visibility of UNIVED in media reports and community events has significantly contributed to its branding as a trusted higher education provider in the region.

Moreover, UNIVED pays special attention to how it crafts and disseminates its public narratives. Media coverage of student achievements, faculty innovations, and social contributions is managed in collaboration with journalists and media outlets. The university's media relations team works to ensure that institutional news is consistently shared with appropriate framing. These efforts not only serve to increase visibility but also help reinforce the university's identity and credibility in a highly competitive market.

Direct marketing plays a vital role in maintaining personalized communication with potential applicants. After collecting prospective students' contact information through school visits or online inquiries, the admissions team follows up via WhatsApp, email, and phone calls. These direct messages provide reminders about registration deadlines, updates on scholarship eligibility, and personal assistance throughout the application process. Respondents noted that

personalized communication increased the likelihood of application conversion because it made students feel valued and attended to.

Through these direct marketing efforts, the university has also developed informal support systems. Prospective students are often added to WhatsApp groups where they can ask questions, receive updates, and interact with other applicants. This form of group-based digital communication fosters a sense of belonging even before formal enrollment, thereby improving student engagement from the earliest stages. The feedback loop between the institution and the prospective student community is thus continuously strengthened.

Cumulatively, the application of the Promotion Mix strategy has yielded measurable results for UNIVED. From 2020 to 2024, the university has recorded a consistent increase in new student enrollment, rising from 1,227 students in 2020 to 2,493 in 2024. This trend not only reflects the effectiveness of the marketing strategy but also demonstrates the institution's ability to adapt and evolve within a fast-changing media and educational landscape. The success of UNIVED's approach lies in its ability to integrate multiple communication tools, tailor its messaging to specific audiences, and maintain a balance between modern digital innovation and traditional interpersonal engagement.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that Dehasen University Bengkulu (UNIVED) has successfully adopted an integrated marketing communication strategy rooted in Kotler's Promotion Mix framework. This framework, comprising advertising, sales promotion, personal selling, public relations, and direct marketing, provides a flexible yet structured approach to communicating with prospective students. The implementation of these components shows that UNIVED understands the shifting behavior of its target audience and the evolving landscape of digital media. This aligns with previous research by Yoman (2022) and Gomes et al. (2018), which emphasized that the use of multi-channel communication is critical to sustaining recruitment in higher education.

The advertising strategy deployed by UNIVED illustrates the importance of maintaining a balance between traditional visibility and digital presence. Offline media such as brochures and banners continue to serve as essential information sources, especially for students in rural areas. However, the strategic use of social media platforms, particularly Instagram and TikTok, represents a timely adaptation to digital consumer behavior among Gen Z. The use of AI tools to generate visual content reflects the university's willingness to embrace innovation, ensuring that promotional materials are not only informative but also visually appealing and algorithm-friendly.

UNIVED's sales promotion strategy reveals an understanding of economic considerations in students' decision-making processes. Discounts, scholarships, and referral programs act as persuasive tools that reduce financial barriers and provide tangible incentives for early action. These short-term promotions create urgency, as suggested by Kotler, and help convert interest into actual enrollment.

Moreover, by positioning these offers as recognition of merit and community support, UNIVED frames them not only as marketing tools but also as part of its institutional mission to expand access to education. Personal selling efforts at UNIVED remain crucial in the context of Indonesian culture, where interpersonal communication and trust still play a significant role. School visits and direct interactions with students allow the university to deliver customized messages, address doubts in real-time, and build rapport that purely digital channels cannot fully replicate. This face-to-face strategy supports Liliwari's (2021) view that strategic communication must consider social and cultural contexts to be effective. The interviews

confirm that students feel more confident about applying after direct engagement with university representatives.

Public relations activities at UNIVED have served to build institutional reputation through consistent storytelling and media presence. By participating in community-based initiatives, hosting free seminars, and publishing student and faculty achievements, the university has cultivated a credible and positive image. This aligns with Sulaksana's definition of modern public relations as two-way, reciprocal communication. UNIVED's efforts not only inform but also reinforce public trust and stakeholder loyalty, which are essential in a competitive education market.

The university's direct marketing approach also demonstrates effectiveness, particularly in its personalization. Follow-ups through WhatsApp and email allow communication to become more immediate, contextual, and supportive. This form of marketing resonates with digital-native students who expect timely responses and customized interactions. The use of WhatsApp groups for prospective students not only aids information dissemination but also fosters a sense of early belonging—essential for reducing enrollment anxiety and increasing conversion rates.

When these strategies are viewed collectively, they demonstrate a strong internal alignment between communication tools and institutional goals. UNIVED does not rely on a single method but adapts each component of the Promotion Mix to maximize impact. This reflects the institution's awareness of both the media preferences of its audience and the broader socioeconomic context in which students make enrollment decisions. The synergy between offline and online efforts also minimizes gaps and ensures that communication is inclusive and far-reaching.

In conclusion, the success of UNIVED's marketing communication strategy highlights the relevance of Kotler's Promotion Mix when implemented in a contextually sensitive, media-diverse, and student-focused manner. As technology continues to evolve, the university is encouraged to further enhance its digital analytics, content automation, and feedback systems to maintain its competitive edge. However, the institution should also continue investing in personal and community-level engagement, ensuring that the human element remains central to its communication philosophy.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Dehasen University Bengkulu (UNIVED) has effectively implemented an integrated marketing communication strategy based on Kotler's Promotion Mix framework to attract prospective students. Through a combination of advertising, sales promotion, personal selling, public relations, and direct marketing, the university has managed to build a consistent and persuasive communication flow that aligns with the needs and behaviors of Generation Z. Each element is not used in isolation but interwoven to create a cohesive message that enhances institutional visibility, trust, and engagement.

The success of UNIVED's approach is reflected in the significant increase in student enrollment from 2020 to 2024, showing that communication strategy plays a direct role in influencing admission trends. Advertising efforts, especially on social media supported by AI-generated content, have proven effective in capturing attention. Sales promotions, including scholarships and fee discounts, lower financial barriers and add urgency to the decision-making process. Meanwhile, personal selling and school visits strengthen trust and clarity through direct interaction.

Public relations activities have enhanced the university's image by highlighting its community involvement and academic achievements, while direct marketing provides personalized communication that nurtures prospective students through each step of the

enrollment process. The integration of these strategies demonstrates UNIVED's responsiveness to the evolving media landscape and student expectations.

In summary, UNIVED's success story underscores the importance of combining traditional and digital marketing communication strategies in a harmonized and adaptive manner. For sustained relevance, the university must continue innovating its communication tools, embracing technology, and maintaining a human-centered approach. This research also offers a practical reference for other educational institutions seeking to optimize their student recruitment strategies in a competitive and digitized environment.

LIMITATION

While this study provides valuable insights into the marketing communication strategy of Dehasen University Bengkulu, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the scope of the research was limited to a single institution and may not fully represent the diversity of marketing communication practices in other universities, especially those with different organizational scales, funding capacities, or geographic contexts. As such, the generalizability of the findings is constrained.

Second, the study relied primarily on qualitative data gathered through interviews, observation, and documentation. While this approach allowed for in-depth exploration, it did not include quantitative measures such as student satisfaction surveys, enrollment conversion rates, or social media engagement metrics. The absence of such data may limit the precision of evaluating the actual effectiveness of each promotional component.

Third, the research informants were limited to three individuals within the student admissions committee. Their perspectives, although central and authoritative, may not fully capture the views of other stakeholders involved in communication planning—such as faculty members, marketing staff, or the students themselves as message recipients. Broader stakeholder input would have provided a more holistic understanding of the strategy's impact.

Lastly, given the rapid evolution of digital media platforms and trends, some of the tools and methods evaluated in this study may quickly become outdated. The dynamic nature of technology and student behavior requires ongoing study to ensure that communication strategies remain relevant and effective over time. Therefore, future research should incorporate longitudinal analysis and comparative studies across institutions.

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