A Comparison of the Marketing of Independent Schools in South Africa and the United Kingdom

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The demand for quality education in schools is growing, as parents recognise the importance of education for their children to be successful in their future careers in an increasingly competitive environment. As the cost of education is often used as an indicator of the quality, the demand for private school education is growing in South Africa, which now has approximately 490 independent schools. By comparison, the United Kingdom has approximately 2 600 independent schools, with a longer history dating back to AD 627, and as a result, greater experience in the marketing of these schools. Consequently, the purpose of this research was to compare the marketing strategies of independent schools in South Africa (SA) and the United Kingdom (UK), and to make recommendations to improve the marketing of SA independent schools.

For this exploratory study, qualitative data was collected using a convenience sample, via in-depth interviews, with 24 independent schools, 12 each in SA and the UK, with the person responsible for the marketing of the school. The data was content analysed to identify themes to test the propositions.

The study identified the following marketing activities used by schools: the reputation (product) of a school; the price; the location (place) of a school; promotional activities, including open days, press advertising, word-of-mouth referrals, and a school’s alumni; and the school’s facilities (physical evidence). Service quality was also found as a factor that affects a school’s marketing activity.

The findings revealed that the key marketing differences between SA and UK independent schools were:

- SA schools had typically ex-teachers heading marketing departments, whereas UK schools had professional marketers as heads of PR or communications.
- the admissions process in SA is simply an administrative procedure, whereas in the UK it is a sales process
- pricing for SA schools is a strong marketing tool, but not considered part of the UK marketing strategy
- UK schools focus on personalised marketing and relationship building, where reputation is a key marketing tool, whereas SA schools use tangible promotional marketing activities, such as print media and signage.
SA school target markets are relatively local, whereas UK schools have a more diverse and international outlook.

The findings are comparable with other research in the marketing of educational institutions, and provide great insights to improve the marketing of SA independent schools.

Keywords: Education Marketing; Independent Schools; South Africa and United Kingdom
Background

Educational marketing can be defined as “the analysis, planning, implementation and control of carefully formulated programs designed to bring about voluntary exchanges of values with a target market to achieve organisational objectives” (Kotler and Keller 2009:356). In South Africa in 2008, there were more than 12.2 million pupils with 401 000 teachers in the schooling system (Department of Education 2009). Of these, 11.8 million pupils were taught by 378 000 teachers in 24 751 public schools, while only 430 000 pupils were taught by 22 900 teachers in 490 independent schools; teacher to pupil ratios were 1:31 in the public system, and 1:18 in the private system. The demand for private school education has grown as parents seek to provide a better future for their children, given the superior academic, cultural and sporting education offered by the independent schools.

The UK has approximately 2 600 Independent schools (Independent Schools’ Council 2009). The oldest independent school is St Peters School in York, dating back to 627, whereas the oldest independent school in South Africa is St George’s Grammar, established in 1848. Therefore, independent schools in the UK are five times the number of those in South Africa, and have been going for a lot longer, and face a more competitive environment. In addition, the independent sector in the UK educates around 6.5% of the total number of school children in the UK, with the figure rising to more than 18% of the pupils over the age of 16, while the penetration of independent schools in South Africa is only 3.5%. Consequently, as little research has been conducted on the marketing of independent schools in South Africa, comparing the marketing strategies of UK independent schools with those of South Africa could provide insights that will assist the SA schools develop their marketing programmes.

Research Problem

The marketing of educational institutions falls into the area of services marketing, given the intangibility of the offering. As such, the issues of variability, inseparability, and perishability, as well as intangibility, need to be addressed through appropriate adaptation of the marketing programmes (Lovelock & Wirtz 2007). The key criteria used by parents to select an independent school need to be identified to understand how the purchasing of an intangible such as education is conducted. The research problem of this study is to analyse how the marketing strategies of independent schools in South Africa compare to those of independent schools in the UK. Understanding of the marketing of independent schools from a more experienced market will assist South African independent schools to improve their targeting and effectiveness of their marketing campaigns.

Literature Review

Education Marketing

Education is a very specific industry as the buyer and the consumer are two different people. Education is a service to its customers, although the nature of the service might be different from a service offering such as the hospitality or financial industry. It is also different in the questionability of the identity of its consumers and clients (Harvey 1996; Hartley 1999). The focus in education marketing has been in the ‘Service and Relationship’ and ‘Branding and Corporate Reputation’ areas. The theory of services marketing characteristics can be adapted to education marketing as shown in Table 1:
Table 1: Services Marketing Characteristics applied to Education Marketing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Application in Education</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intangibility</td>
<td>A service which cannot be tasted, smelt, etc.</td>
<td>Education is certainly something which is not tangible, at least, in the act. However, it can be judged in the results.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variability</td>
<td>The quality of the service depending on who provides them. Where, when, how, etc.</td>
<td>In education, the quality can be judged by academic results, results on the sports field, as well as the actual ‘type of child’ who leaves the school. Education has a constant demand; however it is getting tougher for independent schools. Consumers will associate a school with the ‘type’ of pupil it produces. (i.e. A school can be known as an ‘academic school’, or a ‘sporting school’, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perishability</td>
<td>Service is based on supply and demand.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inseparability</td>
<td>The service cannot be separated from its provider.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Kotler and Keller (2009:201)

Independent schools need to address these characteristics when developing their marketing programmes, through differentiating their offering, maintaining service quality, and ensuring staff are motivated.

The establishment of educational markets has urged schools to incorporate various forms of marketing into their strategy in order to successfully recruit students in this ever growing competitive environment (Davies and Ellison 1991; Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown 2004; Kotler and Keller 2009). Teachers and school leaders have been perceived as conservative individuals who resist change and innovation in their profession (Harvey 1996; Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown 2004). Similarly, they tend to find the commercial value of competition and individual choice incompatible with educational goals. In general, marketing their professional services seems to create tension. As a result, marketing within schools, in South Africa specifically, is a concept which needs to be addressed.

There are many stakeholders in an educational institution – these stakeholders being the parents, students, past students and staff of the institution. Just as schools vie for students or customers, they also vie for reputational status. Perceptions and reputations are the perspectives of the stakeholders - such as the customer, the employees, and the general public (Ivy 2001; Helm 2007). The parents and pupils are considered to be the consumers, as well as the future marketers for the school. The teachers provide the service and the owners of the school need to market the school correctly to the consumers. Consequently, an understanding of consumer behaviour and selection criteria is important to determine a marketing strategy.

Consumer Behaviour when choosing a school

Consumer-buyer behaviour is to understand how the consumers interact with the marketing mix (Marketing Teacher 2000). The consumer decides whether or not to purchase, where to purchase, and the brand that he or she prefers. In choosing a school, parents and pupils will take into consideration aspects such as, the cost of the school, its physical location, as well as the educational product or offering given by the school, and what the pupil will gain from being educated in a particular school’s environment.
Decision criteria classifiers such as the size of the intake and the facilities or school amenities affect the decision of a parent when he or she chooses a school. Some parents also consider the educational standards and the atmosphere of the school to be important. Furthermore, the head teacher affects the choices made by parents. Potential parents look for a school with a head teacher who is a moral and innovative leader, and whether or not the school offers a specific differentiation. Selection criteria include the following:

- **the Service Offering**, which includes issues such as the size of the intake / class sizes; the school facilities or school amenities, the educational standards of the school; the atmosphere of the school; the current head teacher of the school; the academic staff and their qualifications; and, finally, a specific offering the school might have in terms of academics, sporting, or technical or learning support (Johnson 1990; Harvey 1996; Carlsmit and Railsback 2001; Oplakta and Hemsley-Brown 2004; Willows 2008).

- **the Quality of the Formal Communication** includes aspects such as the ease of communication with the school and the formal written communication, such as websites, emails and letters. It also reveals that having an effective and efficient admissions and administration department reflects the quality of the communication. Finally, functions such as parents’ evenings and sports days are also included in the Quality of Formal Communication (Gronn 1983; Webster et al. 1993; Herbig and Milewicz 1995; Pruzan 2001; Perna 2006; Helm 2007; Bronn 2008; Willows 2008; Marketing Teacher 2009).

- **the informal marketing channels**, such as word of mouth and rumours, are probably a school’s biggest challenge. An important influence on consumers’ choice of products is the word-of-mouth spread by consumers, which occurs in any educational environment. Schools ought to be particularly concerned about negative word of mouth (Kamins et al. 1997; Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown 2004; Willows 2008). The behaviour of and feedback from current staff, parents and pupils also forms part of the informal communication process. Word-of-mouth recommendations from other parents are probably one of the strongest aspects that can do great things or great damage to a school’s reputation. One can never underestimate the power of the ‘car park talk’ (Davies and Ellison 1991; Carlsmit and Railsback 2001; DiFonzo and Bordia 2002; Helm 2007).

- **the Price** charged by a school is often seen as an indicator of the quality of education and the reputation. Parents believe that this cost represents the greatest educational experience or that the high price attracts a certain socio-economic class of people. Alternatively, parents might choose a school because it is more affordable (Harvey 1996; Oplakta and Hemsley-Brown 2004; Klemmer 2007; Willows 2008).

- **the physical place or location** of a school is a criterion whereby parents will choose the appropriate school for their child. Often a child attends a boarding school away from a city or they attend a school that is near an airport for convenience purposes (Harvey 1996; Klemmer 2007; Willows 2008).

- **the Reputation**, which includes aspects such as the image and identity of the school, the socio-economic status of the school; its sporting and academic results; the school’s pastoral care; discipline and anti-bullying policies and finally the happiness and behaviour of the current pupil (Elliot 1981; Adler and Raab 1988; Johnson 1990; West et al. 1993; Harvey 1996; Oplakta and Hemsley-Brown 2004; Lubienks 2010).

This leads to the development of our first proposition:

**Proposition one**: the perceived factors that influence consumer selection of an independent school include: the service offering, quality of the formal communication, informal communication (word-of-mouth), price, place or location of the school, and reputation.
Marketing of Independent Schools

Davies and Ellison (1991:461) defined the marketing of a school as “the means by which the school actively communicates and promotes its purpose, values and products to the pupils, parents, staff and wider community”. School marketing needs to become more institutionalised and established within the discipline of the educational institution. A clear framework showing the unique characteristics of the schools and the impact on their marketing should be developed (Pardy 1991; Hunt 2002; Oplakta and Hemsley-Brown 2004).

This marketing framework should include the following key marketing elements, which effectively comprise an extended services marketing mix:

- **Relationship Marketing** includes managing external relationships with prospective parents/learners prior to and during their time at the school and then the internal relationships with current staff. Furthermore, relationship marketing includes managing the relationships between the staff and the pupils or parents (Berry 1983; Macbeth 1989; Petch 1992; Herbig and Milewicz 1995; Davies et al. 1998; Jeynes 2000; Carlsimith and Railsback 2001; Oplakta and Hemsley-Brown 2004; Willows 2008; Kotler and Keller 2009).

- **Product** includes the school having a specific differentiator or specific offering, the reputation of the school as well as the brand management of the school (West and Varlaam 1991; Harvey 1996; Flatley et al. 2001; Pruzan 2001; Oplakta and Hemsley-Brown 2004; Klemmer 2007; Frei 2008; Willows 2008; Kotler and Keller 2009; Independent Schools Council 2009).

- **Price**: Parents are usually aware of the cost of an independent school education, and are prepared to pay the fees - this cost is often considered to be an investment, as “the price of education, in real terms, is more than money” (Stott and Parr 1991:2). Similarly, firms with a good reputation are able to charge premium prices and attract better staff (Helm 2007), which becomes a self-fulfilling cycle in developing this important intangible asset. As reputation grows, the profits will follow: the more students attracted to the schools, the more school fees / funding received (Cowan 1991; Carlsimith and Railsback 2001).

- **Place/Location**: the actual location of a school is an area where schools can market themselves. A school could be in a convenient position such as in the middle of a city, near an airport or, alternatively, out in a rural area where the students can enjoy the outdoors (Harvey 1996; Klemmer 2007; Willows 2008).

- **Promotion** includes aspects such as the formal and informal communication between the school and its potential and current customers; open days; promotional material; TV; radio and newspaper advertising; the social media management, which includes aspects such as management of school website, Wikipedia, Facebook and Twitter (Gronn 1983; Webster et al. 1993; Herbig and Milewicz 1995; Pruzan 2001; Bell 2002; Perna 2006; Helm 2007; Klemmer 2007; Bronn 2008; Willows 2008; Kotler and Keller 2009; Marketing Teacher 2009).

- **Physical evidence** includes aspects such as the school facilities and the atmosphere of the school; the tidiness of the grounds; the school culture and the current students’ behaviour (Harvey 1996; Carlsimith and Railsback 2001; Oplakta and Hemsley-Brown et al. 2004; Klemmer 2007; Kotler and Keller 2009).

- **People**: In independent schools, it is vital that when managing reputation, management must be aware that the “employee pride in the workplace is an important indicator as to the effectiveness of the organization” (Pruzan 2001:53). Schools need to look after their staff as there is a global shortage of teachers (Lomofsky and Lazarus 2001; Pruzan 2001). Protecting and improving reputation is perceived as a necessary condition for maintaining the organisation’s license to operate in competitive times (Harvey 1996; Pruzan 2001). Independent schools face market sanctions if they fail to attract and retain the kinds of
teachers that sustain the school’s reputation. Schools that fail to elicit a strong performance from their staff will have a competitive disadvantage (Ballou 2001; Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown 2004; Helm 2007).

- **Service Quality** includes aspects such as the academic and sporting results of the school; the additional support given for children with learning difficulties; the location and facilities of the school; the identity or culture of the school; having an effective administration process; the reputation of the school; and the welcome received when arriving at the school (Lovelock and Wirtz 2007; West and Varlaam 1991; Bitner 1995; Balmer 1999; Klemmer 2007; Willows 2008; Kotler and Keller 2009).

This theory base leads to the development of our second proposition:

**Proposition two**: the key marketing elements used in the marketing of independent schools are: relationship marketing, product differentiation, price, place/location, promotion, people, physical evidence, and service quality.

**SA independent schools compared to UK independent schools**

In 2008 there were 490 independent schools in South Africa, while the United Kingdom has approximately 2600 independent schools. The oldest independent school in South Africa is St George’s Grammar founded in 1848; the oldest independent school in the UK is St Peter’s College in York founded in 627. The number of private schools in South Africa is growing quickly, and this has caused a lot of competition in this market segment. As a result, the marketing of the schools becomes a vital component for these organisations (Webster et al. 1993; Harvey 1996; Carlsmith and Railsback 2001; Independent Schools Council 2009).

Therefore, independent schools in the UK have been present for a lot longer than South African schools. As a result, the findings of this research should be of value, as South Africa could perhaps learn from the marketing strategies used amongst independent schools in the UK as they have been marketing themselves longer and they have had a more competitive market than that of South African independent schools. This leads to our third proposition:

**Proposition three**: the marketing elements of South African independent schools are different from those of United Kingdom independent schools.

**Methodology**

As this was an exploratory study, qualitative research was conducted to gain insights into the phenomena regarding the marketing of independent schools. An interview guide was used in in-depth interviews to generate the qualitative data. The population consisted of all independent schools in South Africa and in the United Kingdom. There are approximately 490 registered South African independent schools and 2600 independent schools in the UK.

A convenience sample of 12 South African and 12 United Kingdom independent schools were interviewed. The interviews were conducted with the Head Teacher or the Marketing Director of each school to ensure that valuable perspectives and insights were obtained. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed by one of the researchers, and then content analysed to extract the key themes, opinions and perceptions from the respondents.

Internal validity and reliability were ensured by one of the researchers conducting all the interviews using the same interview schedule. External validity could not be ensured, as with a limited sample size, the results cannot necessarily be generalised to the population researched. However, Head Teachers and Marketing Directors in South Africa could still derive value from this study. A limitation of the study was that only school representatives (suppliers) were interviewed:
perceptions of the parents and pupils (buyers) were not sought to understand their selection criteria. However, given the experience of the sample, it would be expected that they would have a good understanding of these selection criteria.

Results

Results pertaining to Proposition 1:

Respondents were probed for their understanding of the selection criteria of parents and pupils when choosing an independent school. While more reliable data could have been generated from the customers themselves, rather than the suppliers, it was felt that the respondents would have a great understanding of the purchasing behaviour of parents and pupils. The results were content analysed which revealed ten key themes from South African and UK schools, as given in Table 2; specific comments are highlighted to illustrate the derivation of the theme:

Table 2: Perceptions of Parents and Pupils’ Selection Criteria for an Independent School:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The academic and sporting reputation of the school</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>South African Schools:</strong> A private boys’ school is judged on the performance of its academic and 1st IV rugby results; parents want to know their money will produce good academic results and give their child an opportunity for a good university entrance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>UK Schools:</strong> Parents look for all kinds of things, though our research suggests that overwhelmingly, exam results are top priority; A school’s academic results are imperative to the prospective parents when they visit our school.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specific image of the school</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>South African Schools:</strong> Our parents tend to be captains of industry and often know each other socially; they want their children at the same school; this school tends to be ‘new money’ parents. As a result we have many of those families here; our school does not have a ‘flashy’ appearance or image, parents send their children here because we are “Johannesburg’s best kept secret”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>UK Schools:</strong> The image of our school is a key criterion when parents look at our school; we aim for an image that attracts the right parents for our school; we simply rely on our image and reputation.</td>
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</tbody>
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<tr>
<th>Current Head teacher</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>South African Schools:</strong> Many of our prospective parents are interested in who the current Head teacher is; parents want to know that we have well educated staff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>UK Schools:</strong> After exam results, our research suggests that a sense of leadership from the Head teacher is considered important when parents choose a school.</td>
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<tr>
<th>School’s values and principles</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>South African Schools:</strong> We are a catholic school, so we have catholic families attend the school; Parents choose us because we ensure our numbers have 30% to 40% Eastern Cape children, as a result we have strong Eastern Cape values; we are not an elitist school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>UK Schools:</strong> We base ourselves on Jesuit values and all our pupils know this; not every child fits into our school; they need to agree with the values and principles of our school; parents want “their child to be happy” – they look for a school that encompasses this.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Single Sex / Co-Ed School

- **South African Schools:**
  An easy decision is whether they are looking for a single sex or co-ed school; our value proposition is that we offer a co-operative model, a combination of monastic and co-ed teaching; we offer a “one-stop-shop”.

- **UK Schools:**
  An obvious selection point is whether or not we are a monastic or a co-ed school.

**Physical Location**

- **South African Schools:**
  We have the advantage of being centrally located with easy highway access; the school is in the middle of the Midlands – the perfect setting for a boarding school; our numbers have dropped due to the train line (Gautrain) and degeneration of the area; we are on the train line and children can travel to us easily; we are 15 minutes from the airport.

- **UK Schools:**
  Most of the Forces’ Parents sent their children to us, we are easily located to their base; we are based in the city centre and parents like to send their children to a city school.

**Facilities of the School**

- **South African Schools:**
  We believe that parents do choose our school because of the facilities that we have on offer; we have the most sporting facilities in South Africa; parents are very impressed with the new IT facilities that we have installed on the property.

- **UK Schools:**
  Our research suggests that things like facilities, attractiveness of the environment plays a part in parents’ choice of the school.

**Word of Mouth**

- **South African Schools:**
  We rely heavily on word-of-mouth and make sure we protect our reputation; our current pupils and parents are our strongest marketers; parents will contact the school for an open day stating that they had heard about us from their colleague.

- **UK Schools:**
  We find that parents talk to each other for advice on choosing a school – we aim to keep them happy; our parents are “an army of salesmen”; all our applicants are through word-of-mouth avenues.

**Price**

- **South African Schools:**
  We believe that some of our parents will look at the price of our school before making a final decision; we are an elite school and pride ourselves in the highest fees and parents choose us based on this fact.

- **UK Schools:**
  Parents already know that private education is not cheap and as a result price does not factor when they are choosing one independent school against another; fees are not a criterion.

**Open Communication Channels**

- **South African Schools:**
  We aim to have continuous communication with our parents as we know it is key to their selection if they are able to contact us easily; we make it as easy as possible for prospective parents to contact us.

- **UK Schools:**
  Our prospective parents want to know that they can contact us easily; we have a dedicated person dealing with communication with prospective parents.
The themes are summarised as follows:

**Academic and sporting reputation of the school:** It was clearly evident from all the findings that the academic results, as well as the sporting results were key criteria on which parents judge and choose a school. It seems that a school’s reputation is often driven by these factors. Furthermore, the discipline and pastoral support were also factors that schools believed would affect a parent’s decision when choosing a school for his / her child.

**Specific Image of the school:** Schools in both the UK and South Africa emphasised the fact that the image of their school certainly added to the criteria when parents choose a school. One school stated that it “only relied on their reputation and image”. It was also noted that schools with a specific image attracted a certain ‘type’ of customer.

**Current Head teacher:** Most schools mentioned that they thought the head teacher was a key deciding factor for parents when choosing a school. It was admitted that the headteacher can “make or break” a school, and as a result, this person determined the quality of the education process that would be offered to their child.

**School’s values and principles:** It was found that schools believed that parents would choose a school based on its religious standing or on the values and principles of the school. This choice could be based on aspects such as a particular school being an ‘elitist school’, or not being at all elitist. Furthermore, schools felt that they are being expected to ‘parent’ the pupils and, as a result, parents will choose a school based on ‘family values’.

**Single Sex / Co-educational School:** This was a clear decision maker and an aspect that all parents consider in the early stages when choosing a school.

**School’s atmosphere:** A school’s atmosphere was mentioned in many of the interviews. Schools believe that parents choose a school based on the ‘feeling’ they get when visiting the school. Aspects which might influence the atmosphere would be the size of the school or the ‘intangible’ feeling of how their children will feel in the environment.

**Price:** The price of a school was also considered to be a clear aspect that affected the decision-making process in the early stages. Parents might choose a school based on it being the most expensive or, alternatively, where they could still get good private education at a more affordable cost.

**Open Communication Channels:** The schools interviewed identified that parents needed to feel that they could contact and communicate with the school easily as this seemed to have an indirect influence on their judgement of the school in terms of its efficiency and care. This aspect would add to their decision criteria.

**Word-of-Mouth Recommendations:** Every school commented that word-of-mouth recommendations are certainly the way in which parents will choose a school. The majority of the schools mentioned that parents would ‘talk to other parents’ to ask advice when choosing a school.

**Physical Location:** The location of the school is certainly a key choice criterion and is clearly revealed in the research results. Parents would choose the school based on location in terms of wanting their children to be at a school nearby, or far away located in an isolated area, or for the school to be near an airport or train station.

**Facilities of the school:** The school facilities were mentioned as an aspect by which parents might choose a school. If their child had great sporting or cultural talent, the parents would look to see if the school had good sporting facilities or cultural facilities.

**Results pertaining to Proposition 2:** Respondents were asked to identify the key marketing elements used in the marketing of independent schools. The responses were content analysed to develop the following themes, as given in Table 3:
Table 3: Marketing Elements used by Schools use in their Marketing Strategy:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word of Mouth</th>
<th>South African Schools:</th>
<th>UK Schools:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Word of mouth</td>
<td>Word of mouth is our strongest marketing tool; we bring parents into the child’s learning experience – we use U-Tube, email photos of the child or invite the parents in for a special occasion. This works very well for word-of-mouth advertising; we aim to keep very close to our staff and ensure that they are happy, as their opinion also has a huge influence out in the market place.</td>
<td>Word-of-mouth recommendations are a large marketing component for us; have parents who ‘defend’ what we do; we are confident that by offering our customer promise, our satisfied customers (i.e. parents) will cause word-of-mouth referrals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeder School Referrals</td>
<td>South African Schools:</td>
<td>UK Schools:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeder School Referrals</td>
<td>We visit our feeder schools. We meet the children and the parents; it is important for us to keep in touch with the Heads of our feeder schools – they recommend where the children of their Primary school should go.</td>
<td>We engage with our primary schools and hope that through this, word-of-mouth referrals will occur; we ensure a good relationship with our feeder schools; we support local prep schools’ fete programmes and the like; at transfer time we visit the junior schools with a display (minor) and friendly staff (the key marketing tool).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relying on own reputation</td>
<td>South African Schools:</td>
<td>UK Schools:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Relying on own reputation | We aim to manage our reputation as much as possible as we are aware that this is our major marketing tool; siblings influence a decision – we ensure that they have a good experience with us; our reputation is “every child counts,” and we rely on this. | Our reputation is our only marketing tool; we have tight quality control on our product in all its areas, which ensures a good reputation; we look to reinforce our reputation: “act what we speak”.
| Alumni | South African Schools: | UK Schools: |
| Alumni | The alumni have a big influence on our intake; student loyalty is key; we look after our past pupils, we have well organized reunions, tea days, moms and tots groups; we are continually organizing golf days for our alumni; we aim to ensure that our alumni want to send their children to our school (if not, we need to find out why), we send continual updates to our alumni. | Obviously the alumni of our school add to our reputation; our alumni are our strongest marketers. |
| Academic results seen as a marketing tool | South African Schools: | UK Schools: |
| Academic results seen as a marketing tool | We are known for our academic excellence; a school’s academic results are imperative to the prospective parents when they visit our school; parents want to know their money will produce good academic results and give their child an opportunity for a good university entrance. | Our research suggests that the academic results of the school are a huge influence on our marketing; our results speak for themselves. |
| Price | South African Schools: | UK Schools: |
| Price | We are very careful in planning our pricing as part of our marketing strategy; we are the most expensive school in South Africa and believe this reflects the quality we offer; this school is priced just below the “Level 1” band; subconsciously our parents feel they are getting a good... | |
deal; we offer discounts to big families; pricing is key for our marketing.

- **UK Schools:**
  Price / fees were not mentioned in the discussion.

**Location of School**

- **South African Schools:**
  We have the advantage of being centrally located with easy highway access; the school is in the middle of the Midlands – the perfect setting for a boarding school; our numbers have dropped due to the building of the Gautrain line and degeneration of the town; we are 15 minutes from the airport; we aim to get parents to come to our school, generally once they see it they know if it is for them or not; we know we just have to get the parents in to see the school.

- **UK Schools:**
  Most of the Forces parents send their children to us, we are easily located to their base; our research suggest that things like facilities and the attractiveness of the environment play a part in parents’ choice of the school.

**Printed Media: Press advertising; local papers, etc.**

- **South African Schools:**
  It is very important for us to be known in the local community; we have close ties with the local papers and radio stations – they report on our achievements; we advertise our scholarships in the paper; we have a large rugby and hockey festival each year which is televised and widely advertised; we advertise on bill boards and street posters.

- **UK Schools:**
  We have a glossy termly ‘Highlights’ newsletter which is widely distributed – parents, governors, link schools and prospective parents; we advertise at local train stations; we try to get a few good stories about the school into the press – a subtle marketing tool.

**Internet / Social Media:**

- **South African Schools:**
  We are trying to update our website; websites are becoming bigger marketing tools by the day; we aim for a user-friendly website as it is one of our biggest marketing tools; we are using the likes of Facebook, Twitter and Wikipedia.

- **UK Schools:**
  The website is a clear marketing tool; it is a physical marketing tool for our school; the website allows parents to find out all about the school; without anyone knowing about it – it gives them ‘school searching’ privacy; our website is constantly updated – on a daily basis; we keep a close eye on the likes of Wikipedia and Facebook.

The themes are summarised as follows:

**Word of Mouth:** Word of mouth was identified by most schools as their strongest marketing tool. The recommendations can come from current parents, past pupils, past parents and from within the community.

**Feeder School Referrals:** The schools acknowledged that the feeder schools’ opinion of the school is considered to be a vital marketing element. The feeder schools have the trust of their current parents and those parents will listen to their suggestions when choosing the school.

**Relying on own Reputation:** Certain schools went so far as to say that their only marketing tool was to rely on their reputation. But then, as a result, they were very clear that they had to manage their reputation very carefully.

**Alumni:** The alumni were identified as having a strong influence on the schools’ numbers. Often parents will send their children to the school that they attended. The challenge for schools is to ensure that they maintain contact with their alumni. This was found to be a strong marketing element.
Academic and sporting results seen as a marketing tool: The academic and sporting results of a school were mentioned by most schools as being a key marketing element for themselves. They needed to ensure positive results in these two areas.

Price: Price was mentioned as an important marketing tool by the schools that were interviewed in South Africa. Schools would either price themselves very highly or more at an affordable rate – this was in line with their specific target markets.

Location of School: The location of the school is a marketing tool which can easily be used by schools. Many of the schools mentioned that where they were physically positioned could be used as a marketing tool. Either schools were centrally located, near transports routes or, alternatively, in a setting far away from city life.

Printed Media: Advertising / Newspapers: Both UK and South African schools mentioned that they would use either the local press, a school newsletter, fliers, sponsorship of local events in their area as forms of advertising.

Internet / Social Media: It was mentioned in a few interviews that schools all knew that their website could often be the first experience of their school for potential parents and pupils and, as a result, this was identified as a key marketing elements. Many schools admitted to outsourcing their website management. Facebook, Wikipedia and Twitter were also found to be important marketing tools for schools.

Experience / Open Days: Many of the schools interviewed stated that they had Open Days or “Experience” days. The schools in the UK identified it as a time to build relationships, which was a fascinating find.

Results pertaining to Proposition 3:

The interview guide questions probed the marketing elements used by independent schools; from analysis of the interviews in South Africa and the UK, clear differences were identified between the South African and UK schools. These findings are given in Table 4.

Table 4: Key Differences between Marketing Elements in South African and UK Independent Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>South Africa</th>
<th>United Kingdom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 The majority of schools had Marketing Directors or Marketing Departments.</td>
<td>The majority of the schools had Heads of PR / Communications / Business Developers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Often the Marketing Directors in South African schools had no specific marketing training or experience. Many of them had been teachers previously.</td>
<td>The majority of the PR / Communications Directors had been professional marketers in other service industries, such as hospitality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 The admissions process is simply considered to be an administrative process.</td>
<td>The admissions process is considered to be a sales process, which requires key relationship management as stated by one of those interviewed, “We take a business approach in our admissions process.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 South African target market is more local.</td>
<td>Diversity is a key element to advertise, as the UK target markets are more international.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 The target market did not always come across as clearly as that of the UK schools.</td>
<td>A very clear target market was identified by most of the schools in the UK. As stated by one school, “We have done a lot of research to clearly understand our brand.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Pricing is used by South African schools to attract parents – either by pricing higher</td>
<td>Pricing was not considered part of the marketing process at all in the schools</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
South African schools offer “Special Needs Support” and use it as a Marketing Tool. In the UK, this is a “given” in terms of the school service offerings and therefore not used in the marketing process at all.

Further information was deduced from the thematic analysis of the qualitative research, as listed below:

- The UK schools aimed to create a relationship with their prospective parents. “The intuition of the admissions officer is very important.” The admission staff positions are not simply administrative process positions.
- Individualised / personalised marketing has been a clear outcome from the research in the UK. The schools all commented on ensuring that each parent who applied was given personal interest and communication. “We aim to ensure that our potential applicants already feel part of our school.”
- Low volume -> high value. It seems the UK schools were more affected by the economic recession. “Our enquiries have gone down, but we still have the numbers we need. We are getting more genuine enquiries.”
- UK schools made a clear differentiation between the tangibles and intangibles within their marketing elements and in what they believe parents look for when choosing a school.
- UK schools were not as forthcoming about their pricing strategies, whereas South African schools showed that they considered their pricing very carefully. It seemed that South African consumers are more aware of the price of a school in terms of their selection criteria, whereas this was not considered amongst the UK prospective parents when choosing a school.

Discussion and Conclusions

Discussion of Findings pertaining to Proposition 1:
Reputation was one of the strongest criteria present amongst the findings of the schools interviewed. Reputation is often measured by the parents in terms of the school’s academic results, closely followed by strong sporting results. This finding was found to be in line with the literature, which reports that any service institution or, in this case, a school, would be measured by its reputation (Bick et al. 2003; Carlsmith and Railsback 2001; Helm 2007; Herbig 1995; Macbeth 1989; Pruzan 2001).

In the same vein, it was found that schools believed that their prospective parents chose the school from word-of-mouth recommendation. This was found to be strong in both South African and UK schools. This point is supported by the literature (Bick et al. 2003; Helm 2007; Pruzan 2001). Similarly, it was found that parents would choose a school based on its image and its sustainability for them. For example, captains of industry might choose to send their children to a similar school as their colleagues or “new money” families tend to choose the same school for their children as their peers. Furthermore, it was found among the schools interviewed that the schools believed that some parents would choose a school based on the fact that it would represent their ‘social standing’ in the community. This is supported by the literature (Macbeth 1989; Carlsmith and Railsback 2001; Bromley 2002; Bick et al. 2003).

Furthermore, schools indicated that parents with busy schedules were looking for a ‘one-stop-shop’ that would offer academics, sports and cultural education all in the same school. Some schools stated that parents would look for a school that offered a specialised offering such as special needs education or a school that had a good reputation for its sport if they had a particularly talented child.
These factors are all supported by the literature in terms of the schools having a specific value proposition (Frei 2008; Kotler and Keller 2009).

The majority of the schools interviewed also stated that prospective parents wanted to know who the head teacher was of the school and that many parents would choose a school based on its head teacher. This finding was not identified in the literature and is a fascinating point to be revealed. An overwhelming response was shown when schools spoke about the fact that their location is a massive player in the decision process when parents choose a school. This was also not found in the literature and as a result is an interesting finding.

In terms of pricing it was interesting to note that the UK schools felt that the price did not seem to be a key criterion for parents when choosing the school, as the literature had indicated. However, a few South African schools indicated that parents might take into consideration the price of the school when choosing an independent school (Fombrun and Shanley 1990; Herbig and Milewicz 1995; Shefrin and Statman 1995). In addition, in terms of forming strong relationships with prospective parents, schools both in South Africa and the UK did not seem to identify this as a strong factor. The discussions were rather focused on the fact that they felt the parents would choose a school based on it having clear and open communication channels between themselves and the schools (Macbeth 1989; Bitner 1995; Davies 1998; Carlsmith and Railsback 2001).

Further interesting findings are the role played by alumni, and the referrals from feeder schools. In addition, it was found that the actual consumer is changing: pupils are having a large influence on the parents’ decision. This was not identified in the literature and is a growing phenomenon found in schools.

The findings compared to the first proposition are given in Table 5:

### Table 5: Comparison of Proposition and Research Findings for Proposition 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proposition Criteria</th>
<th>Research Findings</th>
<th>Conclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Service Offering</strong></td>
<td>Some, but not all, of the aspects mentioned in the literature were identified in the findings. The aspects identified were facilities, atmosphere, staff, current head teacher, and school’s values and principles. Class size, standards of education and specific offerings such as sporting / technical / cultural focus were <strong>not</strong> found in the research.</td>
<td>Partially Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quality of Formal Communication</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Not found</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Informal Communication</strong></td>
<td>Word of mouth was found to be a strong criterion for parents in their choosing of a school. Open communications and ease of contact with the school were found in the research.</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Price</strong></td>
<td>Price was identified by the South African schools as a criterion that parents use when choosing a school, but not in the UK schools.</td>
<td>Partially Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Place or Location of the School</strong></td>
<td>Place or Location of the School</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reputation</strong></td>
<td>Reputation in terms of Academic and Sporting results, as well as the image of the schools, was identified as being important for the school’s</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
reputation.

“One-stop-shop” offering was not identified in the literature, whereby the child will receive his or her academic, sporting and cultural teaching all at one school. Also, all ages can attend these schools too.

Alumni

The referrals from feeder schools were identified as key influences on parental decisions.

As a result, Proposition 1 is partially supported.

Discussion of Findings pertaining to Proposition 2:
The key marketing element, which was generally mentioned first when in discussion with the schools, was that they all relied on their own reputation. All the schools were aware that this was a key marketing tool and that they needed to protect their reputation at all costs. A school such as Eton stated that it “only relied on its reputation.” Another school stated that it reinforces its reputation by “acting what we speak”. This is fully in line with the literature. As stated by Bick et al. (2003:837), “reputation is a collective term referring to the stakeholders’ view of corporate reputation, including identity and image.” Every school admitted that their reputation was important for all stakeholders (Balmer 1991; Herbig and Milewicz 1995; Pruzan 2001; Bromley 2002; Bick et al. 2003; Helm 2007).

Furthermore, word of mouth was identified in the discussions by many schools as their strongest marketing tool. The school stakeholders - parents, pupils and teachers - are all vital elements of the word-of-mouth marketing tool. This is in line with stakeholder buy-in being key. The literature also supports all these findings. However, one difference was identified and that was that schools were aware of the strength of positive word-of-mouth marketing, yet, very few schools noted that the negative word of mouth can be just as powerful, but in a negative manner (Macbeth 1989; Cowan 1991; Balmer 1993; Carlsmith and Railsback 2001; Bromley 2002; Oplakta and Hemsley-Brown 2004; Mitnick and Mahon 2006; Helm 2007).

In the same vein, referrals by their feeder schools were mentioned in all the interviews. The schools stated that the feeder schools needed to be visited and positive relationships were established as the primary schools are key in their marketing process. The parents currently trust the primary school that they have their child in and, as a result, they are more likely to listen to the recommendations made by their current school in terms of secondary school choice. This was not identified in the literature and is an interesting new finding.

Moreover, the schools’ alumni were mentioned as part of their key marketing to stakeholders. The schools considered their alumni to be their ‘strongest marketers’, and need to be looked after with reunions, golf days and tea dates. This fits in particularly with Balmer’s (1999) adapted “Corporate Reputation Chain”. Similarly, the school’s academic and sporting results were found to be key marketing elements for the school, as identified in the literature that schools needed to show good results in the service offered (West et al 1993; Pardy 1991; Ivy 2001).

Relationship marketing was identified in the literature as being key for any educational service product or offering. South African schools, in particular, showed that physical evidence marketing was still used in their marketing process. Signage, events sponsored by the school and gifts with the school logo were all part of the marketing tools. The UK schools, however, hardly mentioned this as being a criterion in their marketing process. This is an interesting comparison as it reveals that
the UK schools have a clear understanding that the key for educational marketing is relationships, as suggested by the literature (Berry 1983; Pruzan 2001; Oplakta and Hemsley-Brown 2004; Bronn 2008; Kotler and Keller 2009).

Communication in terms of advertising and communicating with parents was identified as being relatively important by the schools interviewed. Schools admitted that ease of communication and effective administrative systems are key marketing elements for the school. This is supported in the literature by Gronn (1983). Moreover, Both the UK and South African schools mentioned using the local press, radio and TV stations as part of their advertising strategies for their schools. Social media, specifically websites, were mentioned in the discussions as being a vital marketing tool. It is a ‘given’ that all schools will have well maintained and up-to-date websites.

Price was tabled by the South African schools, in line with the high cost reflecting the high value or quality (Herbig and Milewicz 1995; Helm 2007), but not raised by the UK schools. The UK schools felt that due to their strong reputation, parents would pay the cost and that they, therefore, did not need to use it as a marketing element.

Although not identified in the literature, the place or physical location of the school is another important marketing tool. Many parents choose a school based on ease of access for various reasons: either due to closer-to-home proximity or alternatively, because it is either in or away from the city or that it has easy access to the airport (for parents living abroad).

The findings compared to the Proposition are given in Table 6:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proposition Criteria</th>
<th>Research Findings</th>
<th>Conclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Marketing</td>
<td>No mention of relationship marketing.</td>
<td>Not found</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product</td>
<td>Relying on school reputation and its specific product offering.</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price</td>
<td>Pricing strategy was mentioned by South African Schools, but not by UK schools as a marketing element.</td>
<td>Partially supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place / Location</td>
<td>Location of the school identified as a key marketing element.</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotion</td>
<td>Informal communication such as word-of-mouth referrals and feeder school referrals were mentioned as part of the marketing elements of the school. Printed media / press advertising / newsletters / Open Days / signage / school bus were mentioned by South African Schools as marketing elements.</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People</td>
<td>Schools mentioned that some of their people would affect their marketing, such as the alumni of a school. However, internal marketing with staff and the interactive marketing element was not identified by the schools.</td>
<td>Partially supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Evidence</td>
<td>Facilities were all referred to in the interviews.</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service Quality</td>
<td>The academic and sporting results were mentioned; however, a clear focus on service quality as such was not specifically identified by the schools.</td>
<td>Partially supported</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Consequently, Proposition 2 is partially supported.
Discussion of findings pertaining to Proposition 3:
In terms of both numbers and the history of independent schools, the UK is certainly ahead of South African independent schools. As a result, this indicates that the UK has more experience in independent education than South Africa does, which was borne out by the key differences:
- The UK schools have clearly identified that relationships and reputation are the key marketing tools. Not all South African School had yet come to this realisation;
- The way in which the marketing is structured and viewed in the schools. In The UK it is seen as more of a PR / Communications Department, whereas in South Africa, these divisions are still referred to and identified as “Marketing Departments.”
- Type of individual who heads up the Marketing Department and these people’s previous training and experience.
- An administrative process versus a selling process
- Local vs International Target Markets
- Pricing strategies in terms of marketing
- Identifying the intangible marketing elements versus the tangibles and identifying that the intangible aspects are the most important.
- Quantity of customers / queries versus quality of customers / queries.

Through all the comparisons mentioned above it is evident that many differences do exist and that on the whole, South African schools can aim to learn from the UK independent schools.

Consequently, Proposition 3 is supported.

Recommendations

The outcome of this study has identified that there are key marketing elements that independent schools use when marketing their schools, which are very much in line with their perceptions of the selection criteria that parents use. The key recommendations to South African independent schools in the marketing include:
- building relationships with prospective customers, by using more of a ‘sales approach’ rather than a hard sell; marketing needs to be more professionalized as a school activity, rather than being treated as a ‘poor cousin’ to the education provided, with a suitably qualified marketing person heading up this function, rather than an ex-teacher.
- focusing on reputation, relationships and communication, and measuring the quality of their formal communication; head teachers should be cognoscente of the fact that as Pruzan (2001:53) states “protecting and improving reputation is a necessary condition for maintaining the corporation’s license to operate in competitive times”. Schools need to consistently be working on their reputation. It is not a ‘once off affair’ (Helm 2007:24).
- emphasizing internal marketing to the schools’ own staff, as they are critical in delivering an excellent education or teaching service.
- monitoring word-of-mouth marketing, both positive and negative, and utilizing appropriate channels to communicate effectively, such as alumni, feeder schools, and current parents.

Further research could be to confirm the results of this exploratory study, by conducting a quantitative research study. In addition, the selection criteria were based on schools’ perceptions of these; a study needs to be carried out from the customers’ (i.e. the parents and pupils) perspectives. A longitudinal study could also be conducted, based on interventions as a result of this study, to determine their effectiveness over a period of several years.
References


