

Public Relations in Service Sector and Corporate Image Management: A Research in Transportation Sector

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Abstract

Because of the services having the features of being human-centered, consumed when they are produced and not able to be stocked; the institutions should give more importance to the works of public relations, use the media communication intensively; maintain and improve their image they should do this permanently. The image of an institution that the companies and organizations reflect out, has a vital importance in its relations with the public. Public relations give reputation to the image of an institution. Public relations have the major responsibility in creation, protection, and consolidation of an institution's image. Under the scope of our work, it is discussed how the public relations studies; that we think it is not used intensively, affect the corporate image and especially on the necessity of public relations methods and techniques to be used by the enterprises to create a corporate image operating in service sectors. As a field research, the in-depth interview was made with the Marketing Manager of Pamukkale Tourism in the transportation sector, which is one of the leading on road public transportation companies, on to what extent they use the advantage of public relations activities on creating a corporate image. As a result of research, we reached the conclusion that Pamukkale Tourism take the advantage of social media with public relations studies, especially considering the investments they made on social media, they used the public relations methods about customer satisfaction and providing a service quality and all of these studies affect the corporate image in positive frame.

Keywords: Public Relations, Corporate Image, Service Sector

Introduction

In today's increasingly competitive environment, institutions often must strengthen their corporate image in order to create demand by differentiating from other enterprises. With the formation of the internal and external image of the institution, its products and services are demanded

more, more qualified employees are in demand of working in that workplace, both financial institutions, public institutions as well as the suppliers confide that institution and sustain long-term relations.

In particular, since there aren't any concrete products presented in the service sector, the image of the institution is of great importance. At this point, it becomes a must to focus on public relations studies in order to build the corporate image and to ensure services are being demanded. Configuring intra-institutional and non-institutional communications, public relation studies are among the cornerstones providing the corporate image and protecting this image in the service sector.

In this study, one of the qualitative research techniques, in-depth interview technique, is applied in order to determine the contribution public relations activities made to the firms in the service sector. Operating in service sector as one of the leading firms in road transportation sector, Pamukkale Tourism Transportation Trade and Ltd. Co., which has carried an average of 300 million passengers by having traveled an average of 3.8 trillion km for 53 years with its fleet reaching up to 400 vehicles and 3,600 employees in 500 different points, is determined as the subject of the research. In this research, it has been tried to find out what public relations activities Pamukkale Tourism Transportation Trade and Ltd. Co. benefited to preserve and develop its corporate image, and what these activities have earned to the enterprise. In this context, the in-depth interview was conducted with the company's senior official. In the last part of the research, some suggestions were made on providing more effective public relations services in service sector enterprises.

The Service Sector

It is a known fact that the service sector has increasingly become more important in all the world's economies, especially in recent years. When people's desire to spare more time to themselves is also added to developing technology and complicated work life, the service sector has become a growing sector. While people were performing many services on their own before, there are many experienced, expert and professional individuals and organizations to offer that service today (Baydaş, Gökdeniz and Erdal, 2008: 1).

Services are spread across so many different areas. It ranges from the services provided in institutions related to physical development and physical health to the services provided by financial institutions. Services also include a wide variety of heterogeneous activities. For instance, it may emerge in a thought, entertainment, information, food, security, transportation or in many aspects like these. Therefore, service has become a term which is extremely complex, dispersed and difficult to define.

According to İçöz (2005), a current service definition is as follows: "Service can be defined as an abstract activity or benefit offered to one party by another and it does not result in possession of anything. Service production can be linked to or independent of physical production" (p.9).

A Service requires face to face relation and closeness between the producing and the consuming parties of the service. For this reason, the existence of a human being is inevitable in the service sector. In labor-intensive and service-intensive featured service, quality and performance are also human depended. Since services are produced and consumed simultaneously, customers are often present in the environment where the service is offered and they communicate with the operating personnel (Öztürk, 2010: 25).

Service quality also affects the customer's purchasing behavior and contributes positively to the financial results of the enterprise by attracting the customer to the enterprise (Zeithaml et al. 1996 transformed by Barutçu, 2008: 109).

Enterprises should provide services that meet customer expectations and should communicate, inform, listen to and sometimes even surprise customers. Particularly in service enterprises, these activities should be planned and regularly carried out by the public relations units, expectations of the internal and external customers should be investigated, and communication plans aimed at them should be carried out with appropriate communication tools.

Public Relations Activities in the Service Sector

The satisfaction and fulfillment of the needs and desires of individuals depend on the mutual involvement of individuals, companies, institutions, and organizations. Public relations in this regard has an important role in establishing and managing the relations between people and organizations (Tengilimoğlu and Öztürk, 2011: 21).

As in the modern business administration understanding, all organizations have to internalize public relations as one of the indispensable components of the management process, which has an aim of giving information and account to public about the services they perform, learning the wishes and thoughts of the public and making use of them, and thus providing the highest rate of adaptation between themselves and the public (Sezgin, 2007: 3).

No matter how qualified is the service an enterprise produces and offers, there will be some service disruptions that occur from time to time. In order to eliminate these disruptions, the enterprise will have to change its image in public opinion. One of the methods it will be used for this purpose is public relations. However, it is also known that public relations studies

which have been done for many years for a positive image can be lost in a short time, in the case of a small issue (İslamoğlu, Candan et al. 2006: 255).

Today, when the competition is so intense, enterprises have begun to use non-price competition tools to differentiate from their competitors. Service enterprises also use their public relations departments to communicate with customers, listen to them, surprise them when it is necessary, and show them reassuring behaviors. Customers are able to communicate all kinds of their requests and complaints to these units and get quick returns. At this point, the customer who trusts to the enterprise might well remain faithful for many years. Those enterprises which prepare their loyalty programs, creating customer cards, and databases for it and question the customer satisfaction constantly through questionnaires, face-to-face and phone interviews are able to survive long years and build a good corporate image.

The establishment of good mutual relations and communication between the customer and the transactor in the service process can be formed by a qualified service delivery environment in the enterprise. Therefore, no matter how developed is the technology of the service, the human factor is deeply important in giving a service in the best possible way (İçöz, 2005: 35). Business firms acting with the philosophy; "our most important customers are our employees, always win". Applying the public relations projects firstly to the employees in the institution, taking their support and interpretation will bring benefit in the long-term. Not only the commitment of the employees to the company will increase but also the work quality of them within the organization can be tested.

It is known that the efforts of the companies that are endeavoring for the satisfaction of their employees are turned into the satisfaction of the customers and the profit increase in the enterprise after all. If the service personnel are not content with their job, they reflect that to the customer, and the customer is not satisfied with the service. In particular, the quality of services in the marketing of professional services is closely associated with the person providing the service. Customers do not only mind if the technology of the service is good, but they also give great value to the quality of the service (Karahan, 2006: 98)

As a result of the long-term public relations studies performed by the business firms, the image of the institution is created, the goods and services of the business firms with a high corporate image are demanded more, the crisis situations are overcome more easily, and more qualified job applications is received. There are many factors constituting the corporate image. The experience in product and service, the stance of the management, corporate citizenship, communication studies, employee behaviors and attitudes, organizational structure, physical environment and financial

performance are some of these. The most important one among these factors is the communication studies of the institution which have an importance for the reflection of the business firm in the external environment. If we are to define the corporate image as the perceived image of the institution (Peltekoğlu, 2009: 570), then it is appropriate to direct the public relations studies to the way the institution is wanted to be perceived in the external environment (such as customers, suppliers, financial institutions, public institutions).

When the constantly changing expectations and needs of the targeted market are also added to many of the mentioned features of the service sector before, like being abstract, having the production and consumption simultaneously, the necessity of the public relation studies arises. In order to increase the corporate image, service companies have to take public relations studies into their priorities in their external marketing efforts. Public relations activities lie on the basis of the healthy communication established both with the internal and with the external target group.

The Field Research

As a result of the high number of firms operating in the transportation sector, and airline services being frequently preferred by consumers in terms of both low price and appropriate quality, the competition rises. Being aware of the necessity of differentiating from their competitors to be able to increase their market shares, road transport operators also use public relations methods and techniques to both strengthen their corporate image and act towards customer expectations.

Within this scope, the aim of this study is to reveal the public relation activities used by one of the leading firms in road transportation sector, Pamukkale Tourism Transportation Trade and Ltd. Co., which has carried an average of 300 million passengers by having traveled an average of 3.8 trillion km of road for 53 years with its fleet reaching up to 400 vehicles and 3,600 employees in 500 different points, to protect and develop its corporate image and what these activities have earned for the company through an in-depth interview with its senior official.

By this interview; the activities carried out by the institution towards the internal customers, the studies carried out by the institution to ensure the service quality of the institution, and the extension they use the public relations methods and techniques or not in these studies are investigated.

In order to investigate the importance Pamukkale Tourism gives to public relations techniques in creating its corporate image, questions prepared by one of qualitative research methods, in-depth interviewing, are directed to the company's senior official, and the results are interpreted.

The questions are prepared in 3 sections:

In the first section, the concept of customer service is emphasized, and customer satisfaction and public relations activities and the studies were done to provide and strengthen this satisfaction are investigated.

In the second section, the public relations studies made towards employees, who have a great contribution in creating a corporate image, are examined.

And in the third section, considering the fact that corporate identity must be established to create and protect the corporate image, questions about the studies done related to corporate identity were directed.

In the answers given to the questions in the first section, it has been observed from customer questionnaires and communication studies established with the customer that Pamukkale Tourism Transportation Trade and Ltd. Co. has made investments towards their customers and evaluated customer requests and demands. It has been determined that by examining the customer data with the loyalty card named "Pamukkart" it has put public relations programs in accordance with its target market into practice. Since 40% of its target market consists of students, Pamukkale Tourism Transportation Trade and Ltd. Co. organizes campaigns directed to students. Pamukkart members are reached via SMS messages, e-mail messages and are informed about the target market events and campaigns.

A service compensation in which a structure is created for social media, rapid responses are given to feedbacks from social media, customer requests and the complaints are evaluated, is being used. For crisis situations, they have crisis teams who have been trained in the crisis management process, from the general manager to departmental heads.

Surprise the customer tactic, which has an importance for the service sector, is also done by following the customers on social media, guerrilla marketing tactics are applied. Methods of surprising and impressing the customers are applied through establishment of an emotional bond with customers, like organizing meal in the closest way station for the customer who says "I am hungry" from social media, allocating bus tickets for the customers who are in a difficult situation because of his canceled flight, blanketing the customers who are sleeping.

Being published every month, with "the Pamukkale" image magazine consisting of columns, such as fashion, technology, art, interview, biography, sports, health, it is aimed to make customers to have a pleasant time.

It has been determined that Pamukkale Tourism Transportation Trade and Ltd. Co. also attaches great importance to the concept of corporate citizenship. It compiles its social responsibility projects under the name of "Pamukeller" and continues to carry out projects especially in the field of education. Social responsibility projects are being carried out with universities and student clubs at universities. In the field of art, it sponsors

the International Ankara Theater Festival, brings together thousands of people who have never been to the theater with the theater. In the field of health, it carries on studies with the Foundation for Children with Leukemia and a certain share of each ticket sold is donated to the benefit of the children with leukemia. With the "Voice Descriptions Social Responsibility Project" aimed at visually impaired people, it provides the opportunity to watch movies for its visually impaired customers. It has been seen that these applications are shared with the target market both on its website its magazines or in the posters at the ticket sales branches, and also with the use of e-mail and SMS.

In the second section, questions are asked to determine the communication studies directed to employees, education programs, and internal public relations studies. Internal communication is provided through the software named "Pamukwin" and the education of the employees at every level is planned with "Pamukkale Academy" which makes training plans for employees. In addition, there is an in-house magazine, which is prepared regularly every month and shared with employees, containing news about the company.

Pamukkale Tourism Transportation Trade and Ltd. Co. has been giving great importance to public relation studies since the past. In 1990, the Public Relations Directorship was established in Izmir and today, the public relations activities are carried out within the Marketing department.

In the third section; it is seen that the name of the brand has been taken from Pamukkale, a natural wonder in the hometown of the founders, Denizli and that its corporate identity has been established, and the same standard has been maintained in printed documents, communication studies, personnel clothes, interior and exterior layouts, external and internal visual arrangements of the vehicles.

If we examine the press relations in two groups as news studies and advertising studies, Pamukkale Tourism Transportation Trade and Ltd. Co. is in communication with the sector newspapers and magazines and its directors inform about the institution through press interviews.

Conclusion and evaluation

It is clear that it is quite difficult to provide customer satisfaction for a long time in the service sector. The Customer might well switch to the rival company even in the case of a minor distress. In order to provide customer loyalty, it is necessary to effectively perform public relations practices that will provide long-term cooperation with customers. Clients of companies that can keep up their corporate image have confidence in that institution, follow the works has been done by the institution and stand by the institution even during the crisis periods.

It is seen that Pamukkale Tourism administration also communicates with the customers by using the public relations methods and techniques in order to strengthen its corporate image. Both social media and magazines, web sites, regular surveys are used to communicate with external customers, and with the loyalty card, Pamukkart, the campaigns, and discounts are applied for the customers. In addition, Pamukkale Tourism, which implements the concept of corporate citizenship and shares it with all target groups, carries out the mission of giving what it received from the public back to the public, in the awareness of its social responsibility. All these practices are shared through communication studies made by the institution and they contribute to the image of the institution. In addition, Pamukkale Tourism, which has a young and dynamic vehicle fleet and staff, has always tried to put its activities on the basis of trust in order to strengthen its corporate image and to provide this trust, it has carried on practices directed to customer reassurance and satisfaction.

As a result of this research, it has been reached to the conclusion that customer relations and public relations concepts are intertwined in the service sector, and public relations practices in customer service are important.

If we investigate public relations activities in two main functions as recognition and promotion, we see that Pamukkale Tourism has made progress towards recognizing the target group in its public relation studies and has performed projects towards university youths, who are the main target group of the institution. It is thought that Pamukkale Tourism must have some improvement studies on sharing of the public relation studies with the external environment. The public relations department should have a separate structure rather than being within the Marketing unit, that their activities should take more place in the press, and that the public relations activities should be coordinated from Istanbul in order to ensure a better communication with the press.

Considering that the service sector is on a knife's edge and volatile as a sector, the only power that can keep the enterprises up is actually their corporate images. And the most important factor in protecting these images is the long-term and well-planned public relations studies.

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