

Session: **Research for management and marketing V.**
Abstract nr: **EASM-0171**

The use of qualitative methods in benchmarking research: The case of promotional objects in French universities

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Background

Use of benchmarking by contemporary managers has developed increasingly in the last twenty years (Hermel et Achard, 2007). We define benchmarking as a method to identify and analyse the best practices (working process, services proposed, etc.) and experiences developed by competitors or comparable organisations to adapt its own organisation. If functions and advantages of benchmarking are well known (Al Mashari, 2005), its methodology is not as well established and is missing of referential models. This can be explained by the fact that a benchmark study will have to be adapted following the context of the study (competitive environment, type of product, sector of activities, market cycle), the type of benchmark used (internal or external, cooperative or competitive, generic or functional) and the means allowed to that task. The fact that it is overall a recent approach and therefore not quite stabilized can also explain the lack of models.

If at first glance, the benchmark approach is mostly a quantitative one, based on precise criteria (benchmarks) which need to be measured to allow the comparison, we think that some characteristics of benchmarking allows qualitative methods just like many marketing studies (Andreani et Conchon, 2005). First, benchmarking is, by definition, an observation of real experiences. Secondly, it is an empirical approach close to “case thinking” (Passeron et Revel, 2005): identifying possible *unique* good practices, compared and, if needed, adapted to the *specific* context of the sponsor organization. Finally, when doing an exploratory study, benchmarking is mostly inductive.

Objectives

The authors were solicited by executives of the University Lyon 1 to make an exploratory benchmarking study on university promotional objects, including sporting ones. Starting from the hypothesis presented above, the authors chose to develop a qualitative method to collect data on practices and experiences of university organizations in promotional merchandising.

The main objective of this presentation is to expose the methodological construction (tools development, processing and analysis mode) in order to reveal the conditions of validity and the contributions, but also the limits, of a qualitative research in benchmarking. To illustrate these results, we will more specifically describe the role and the importance of sporting promotional objects while positioning them in the mix marketing and in the broader social and economical contexts of higher education institutions (HEI).

Methods

The study, conducted during spring 2010, articulate and confront three complementary field study methods: an ethnographic type of direct observation of sales outlets (n=16), an e-observation of web promotional or sales tools (n=25) and semi-directed interviews with in charge staff (n=15). This compendium was also done on multiple scales: internal audit of the promotional products of the sponsor, exhaustive identification of the rudimentary use of promotional products at local level (n=12 out of 35 students unions), a complete census of the publicly available offers (n=12 out of 117 HEI) at national level and a selective study of classical merchandising boutiques in North America (8 U.S. universities in Shanga? ranking 2009 top ten + 3 major Canadian universities) where the university marketing is one of the most developed (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006).

Results

Commercialization of promotional objects is well rationalized in the universities observed in North America: multiple integrated shops (including web) for each university, extensive and homogeneous offers and well developed marketing approaches. In France, it is still a fallow field: scarcity of boutique dedicated, heterogeneous offers, rudimentary marketing approaches and scarcity of innovative practices (e-shop for example). In North America, sports equipments represent about 3% of the proposed products, sportswear around 30% and products associated with university's sports teams' brand up to 20%. Sport can therefore be understood as an important motivation of North American buyers. In France, with a much more limited market, if the most important proposed products are also sportswear, only few sports equipments (as golf products) and exceptional "sportization" of promotional objects (as co-branding) can be found. Finally we will show how these offers reveal forms and strategic functions of HEI promotional merchandising.

Conclusion/Application to practice

The primary result of this kind of benchmark study is that the different models observed and analysed can guide the decisions of HEI management. On a second level, we demonstrate that benchmarking can constitute a relevant methodological tool for scientific research, especially in the first stages with inductive process. In our case, we would submit, as hypothesis for further research, that promotional sporting goods can act as revelators of the role (practice, spectacle) and importance of sports in HEI (in different cultural and economical contexts) and therefore of the place of sports in HEI management.

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