

## The scientific event – a visibility factor for the university brand

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**Abstract.** *Events are considered to be the most personalised form of marketing, as they generate direct contact with customers and partners. Academic events aim at promoting socio-economic values by facilitating collaborative partnerships with the involvement of academics, researchers, graduates, students and representatives of the economic environment. They also aim to set up participatory networks between socio-economic actors, academic centers and research institutes, as well as between different communities at national and international level in different fields of activity. The experience offered to the participants creates a close relationship with the academic brand, which gains a human face, which positively influences the way it is perceived by the public. Through academic events, it is favored to combine ideas, generate new concepts and phenomena that are useful to society's progress. Moreover, by debating and analysing current trends on how both the economy and the university are affected, new theoretical and practical opportunities can be identified. The main purpose of experiential marketing in academic events is to create memorable and long-lasting ties between the participants and the academic environment, as well as to generate real opportunities for socialisation and interpersonal interactions. The article will treat the results of a qualitative exploratory marketing research. It aims at clarifying and understanding the paradigm of the scientific event as a factor of university visibility. In this sense, we aimed to identify the relationship of interdependence between the scientific event and the brand of an university.*

**Keywords:** academic events, experiential marketing, exploratory marketing research, marketing programme, academic brand.

### Introduction

Experiential marketing is the process of identifying and satisfying customer needs in a profitable way, through authentic communications in two directions which give life to the brand and add value to the target audience.

Experiential marketing is a methodology, a customer-oriented approach, to effectively communicate with the targeted audience. Brands using experiential marketing are the ones that fully embrace the customer experience (Genadinik, 2016), gaining a significant competitive advantage by pursuing this strategy based on two experience-oriented ways of interaction in everything they do in a genuine and real way that is relevant to their audience.

It is not surprising that, while the experimental revolution takes place, marketers change their focus from interacting in only one direction towards interacting in two directions, fact that is also valid for education (Allen, 2004).

Education experts conclude that when students learn, the best way to really understand and debate the information is nevertheless by experiencing the problem, the process and the solution. The main purpose of the experiential marketing is to create memorable ties between the consumer and the brand, to obtain customer's loyalty and, ultimately, to influence purchasing decisions whenever he has a choice. Through the opportunity to know the people and the values behind a brand, the consumer arrives to associate the experiences with the brand in question (Smilansky, 2009), thus contributing to the creation of a long-term attachment between them two.

As long as marketers continue the essay to include brands in consumer's life, experiential marketing will continue to play an important role in the marketing mix.

According to the study conducted by the Event Marketing Institute, 79% of specialists used the experiential method more in 2016 than in the previous year. At the same time, 77% of them believe that this type of marketing represents a vital side of the promotion strategy for branding in the future. Experiential marketing offers a deeper understanding of customers by observing, documenting and analysing their feelings (Smilansky, 2009), of the way they interact with brands and the best way to strengthen their relationship with each customer. This applies not only to areas such as customer service, but also to pre-sales and referral phases, allowing companies to present relevant, contextual and personalised content to customers, also by supporting advocacy.

Marketing specialists are facing difficulties when it comes to the Millennials generation (Allen, 2018), especially because technology and brands consumers no longer respond to traditional promotional methods. They increasingly use applications to reject advertisements in search engines. It is the technology that provides them with all the necessary information when they need something, and young people love experiences.

The Millennials generation looks for authenticity and is attracted by honest, transparent and authentic brands. In fact, in the eyes of young people, brands seem more authentic when a personal connection exists. A study conducted by Cohn & Wolfe highlighted that 87% of consumers consider the authenticity of a brand more important even than the usefulness of the products offered.

## **Literature review**

### ***Features of experiential marketing***

Because experiential marketing is based on consumer experience, its main feature is that it employs more senses simultaneously. Another feature is that it is based on the consumer's logical or sensory information that has previously been acquired or received. For example, in addition to highlighting taste and smell, experiential marketing also helps a consumer to remember past benefits such as the caffeine enjoyment and the joy felt when drinking a cup of coffee with family or friends (Kotler, 2006). Because experiencing marketing appeals to multi-level consumers, it can focus a consumer on a product or a fast service. It is therefore useful for current environments and social environments where people have a shorter span of attention. If it is successful, responding customers end up being loyal to the company, which means that the business has revenue and a stable profit, and customers will also recommend to others the products they value.

### ***Experiential marketing through the event***

Event Marketing is considered by many specialists as the most effective marketing channel, it is defined as promoting a brand, a company through constant interactions with the target audience. With the emphasis on "promotion" and "constant interactions" (Getz, 2007), the transition is as if done in the best form in which you can combine the two: the events.

Through organised events, the target audience feels included, can see closely what is present and actively participates. (Allen, 2004) Great companies have discovered the importance of this, so Event Marketing is a successful tool for them, and events are considered indispensable and will continue to grow more and more. It is estimated that by 2020 there will be 3.2 million professional events per year.

Looking back, we can say that the brand has represented and continues to represent a way of communicating the values with the target audience (Smilansky, 2009). Moreover, building a brand is based on stories, and the ways in which we transmit them - is how the institution interacts with people at both rational and emotional levels. Stories and interaction with people will always be the most important coordinates. The main purpose of these events is to promote the university, this goal being achieved by increasing the awareness of the university mission by generating a better visibility of the institution and by creating and maintaining a positive image.

In academic events, the emphasis is on creating and sharing information, but also on building relationships and for networking purposes. Relations between actors in the educational sphere are numerous and contribute to better mutual knowledge.

The events also consist of promoting the values of economic sciences by facilitating collaborative public-private partnerships with the involvement of scientific personalities, researchers, university graduates, students and representatives of the socio-economic environment. The organisation of academic events facilitates and creates collaborative networks between actors of the economic environment, between academic centers and research institutes and between different communities.

The Department for Business Administration of UNESCO and the Faculty of Business Administration in Foreign Languages is involved in the organisation of economic events that bring together the representative partners of the community, at national and international level, from different sectors of activity. Partnerships with actors of the economic environment, artistic manifestations aim to redefine the spirit of community. The crystallisation of powerful communities that are based on well-established goals become the mediums that favor the "clashing" of ideas, debates and the generation of new concepts useful to the progress of society.

### ***University branding through the event***

There are few works in the literature treating university branding, although this concept has become increasingly important (Chapleo, 2007; Wæraas, Solbakk, 2009). In this moment there are various researches on marketing in the academic sector as well as separate aspects of the university brand and its applicability. However, we do not have a wide-ranging specialised literature that includes exactly the concept of a university brand, established strategies and programs and generally valid ones. This chapter briefly analyses the university brand, his appearance, definition and perspectives. There is a trend of expansion of the academic sector in order to create an educated workforce as well as to increase participation in higher education. Of course, this expansion leads to a fierce competition between higher education institutions. In one hand, students are seen as consumers of education and knowledge, and on the other hand, institutions are seen as

companies that work to meet their needs (Melewar, Akel, 2005; Sauntson, Morrish, 2010; Furedi, 2010; Molesworth et al., 2011).

The dynamics of globalisation, liberalisation, privatisation, diversification, decentralisation and the internationalisation of education are some of the few challenges faced in academia, challenges that have increased the emphasis placed on the concept and branding process at the level of higher education institutions. Moreover, they have fueled competition between higher education institutions, offering consumers, students, teachers, companies, etc. a wide variety of consumption (Melewar, Akel, 2005; Gopalan et al., 2008, Gupta, Singh, 2010). There are only a few definitions that overwhelm the university brand in its integrity. In Bulotaite's vision (2003), the role of university branding is to build, manage and develop associations, emotions and images in the minds of education consumers when they hear the name of a higher education institution. The author also mentions the brand's ability to create stronger feelings than other brands, and for that to happen, a unique and strong corporate identity is needed. In the same way, Wæraas and Solbakk (2009) emphasize the relevance of corporate identity in defining the university brand, noting that it is a long-term process, defining the essence of the university, which is requiring a precise and consistent description of its mission, what it promotes and for what it will be recognised by consumers. Bennett and Ali-Choudhury (2007) believe that the university brand refers to the characteristics of the institution that distinguishes it from the others, characteristics that are designed to meet the needs of students and trust the university's ability to offer a certain type and level of higher education. Summarising what has been said above, university branding involves, in fact, the formation of a corporate identity with tangible and intangible elements, manifested by images, associations, perceptions, emotions and feelings in the minds of higher education consumers. In short, it's about a clear identity that creates positive brand experiences, materialised in trust, attachment, and devotion.

The brand concept is still quite controversial. The peculiarities of higher education do not allow simple application of marketing principles, including classical branding strategies in the academic sector. Even though universities have realised that they need to carry out promotional activities (Chapleo, 2004) in order to position themselves in the market and to differentiate themselves from competitors (Mazzarol, 1998, Gray et al., 2003, Melewar, Akel, 2005), branding is only partially embraced (Chapleo, 2004).

As far as literature is concerned, the few opinions about university branding and its applicability are segmented. Starting from a fundamental examination, some authors reject the value of branding both as a concept and as an applicability in the academic sector, arguing that the brand becomes more complex when applied to higher education. (Argenti, 2000; Maringe, 2005; Jevson, 2005; Jevons, 2006; Temple, 2006; Waeraas and Solbakk, 2009; Lowrie, 2007). However, over the years, there have been various studies, which have as main objective the marketing and its applicability in higher education. Unlike the author's opinions above, the authors of these studies have a positive brand vision in universities, encouraging universities to focus on developing marketing strategies and programs to build a strong brand. The studies conducted aimed the marketing communication (Gatfield et al., 1999), marketing models (Mazzarol, 1998), marketing strategies (Gumport, 2000, Brown, Goonawardana, (Klassen, 2002), brand positioning (Gray et al., 2003), corporate identity (Melewar, Akel 2005; Chapleo, 2007), internal branding (Whisman, 2009) and brand equity (Mourad et al., 2011). University branding is therefore a complex phenomenon at the outset and research in this direction should continue in order to reach a consensus on finalising a theoretical and practical model of the university brand.

## Methodology

### *Qualitative research among ICBEX organisers and participants*

As far as the practical part of this paper is concerned, a qualitative exploratory research has been carried out, aiming at clarifying and understanding the paradigm of the scientific event as a factor for university visibility. In this respect, we have identified the relationship of interdependence between the scientific event, for example, a scientific conference and the brand of an university. Exploratory research allowed us a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon investigated, providing us with qualitative information.

## Results and discussions

To achieve the research objectives, we used the in-depth interview as qualitative research technique among a specially selected audience, according to the criteria of organisers or participants in the International Conference on Business Excellence. The research has been conducted among eleven organisers, eight participants, as well as seven keynote speakers at the International Conference on Business Excellence. In total, there were twenty-six respondents, but due to the lack of full responses, we analysed twenty-one responses. Respondents fall into three categories, namely, teachers, researchers or PhD students, some of them are founders of the conference, and others are members of the current organisation team. The interview questions have been formulated in a way to offer the respondents the possibility to formulate their answers freely, but in the same time, the information received from the respondents contributing to the validation or invalidation of the hypotheses formulated in this research, hypotheses that theoretically followed the scientific event and the university's brand and practically the International Conference on Business Excellence and the Bucharest University of Economics University brand.

The International Conference on Business Excellence was organised for the first time in 2006 at the Faculty of Business Administration (in Foreign Languages) within the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, in partnership with the Faculty of Economic Sciences within Transylvania University of Braşov. Initially, the conference was organised by members of the Faculty of Business Administration (in Foreign Languages), but because it has been developed continuously every year, it currently has members from different universities in Romania. At the beginning, the conference proposed three main objectives, namely bringing together academics, scientific and business experts; creating a bridge between the Romanian business environment and international business environments; representing a suitable framework for a new context of entrepreneurial education within universities (Bratianu et al., 2006). The International Conference on Business Excellence had from the outset a clear vision and well-defined performance standards, so it was intended to be the best conference in the field, organised in Romania and achieved this performance. Subsequently, due to problems with the efficient use of funding, it was decided to set up the professional association "Society for Business Excellence", which took over the management of the conference, including the financial management. The conference has been continuously developing in terms of number of participants from the country and abroad, attracting more and more valuable works. After the first edition, the conference was the best organised conference in the country. In 2016, the location and organising committee changed, and the volume of the conference was redeployed ISI. In 2018, a partnership was established with the International Scientific Index - ISI with Impact Factor - Sustainability, the indexed international magazine ESCI - Management & Marketing, Challenges for the Knowledge Society. The conference

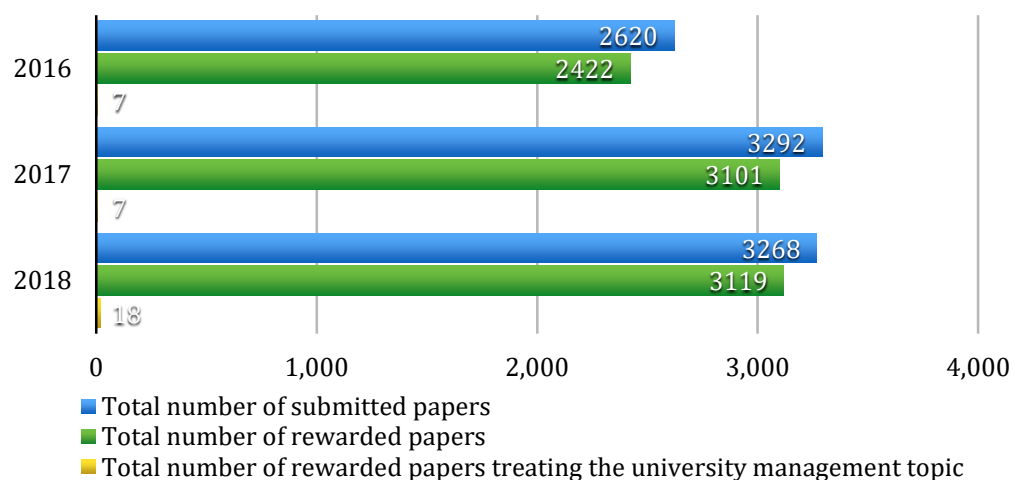
therefore presents an undeniable development, especially since each year the number of works increases by at least 30% and at the same time their quality as well as the diversity of the participants as geographical location.

Starting from the role of this scientific conference in developing and maintaining a strong and visible university brand for the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, we will outline the five hypotheses below, four of which have been validated and one invalidated.

*The first hypothesis (H1)*, which claims that the scientific event in higher education institutions is among the top three factors of influence in the university brand economy, has been validated. Following the analysis of the answers given by the participants to the present research, the scientific event within higher education institutions is placed among the top three factors of influence in the university brand economy, but this is true, according to a large number of respondents, only if the event fulfils certain conditions such as rigorous and strategic planning of the event, intense promotion of the conference among the university community, the existence of relevant scientific articles appreciated in the scientific field, the participation of famous authors with an appreciated research activity or the existence of partnerships with other renowned universities. Another significant part of respondents mentioned that promoting the scientific event, both at the faculty in which it is organised and in the university, becomes one of the most important aspects to be respected. The purpose of a scientific event is, in fact, to bring researchers and teaching staff together, who, through the scientific articles presented, and later through the related intellectual debates, can contribute to the visibility of the university they belong to, and strengthen, depending on the quality of articles or debates, the reputation of the university. In consequence, according the opinion of a large number of respondents, if the scientific event has a high academic value, and more specifically, it complies with the rules imposed by an international event by the keynote speakers, the participants with communications outside the country, the indexing of the papers supported by the IBD (International Data Base), including ISI (Institute for Scientific Information), then the event can join the first three vectors that outline the university brand.

*The second hypothesis (H2)* aims to verify whether the modelling of the university brand is part of the most important research topics of the years 2016, 2017 and 2018 (topics recently awarded by UEFISCDI - the Executive Unit for Financing Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation). In order to verify this aspect, a desk research has been carried out on the themes awarded by UEFISCDI. This organisation represents the national body that evaluates and awards the academic scientific research in Romania, aiming at increasing the quality, the impact and the international visibility of the Romanian research by recognising the significant results published in prestigious journals from the main international scientific flow. As a research funding agency, similar to prestigious international agencies, it organises competitions and then monitors the implementation of projects accepted for funding. We have assumed that the selected papers represent the best scientific studies developed by the academic environment between 2016 and 2018. The conclusion that can easily be deduced from Table 1 is that the topic of university management, in general, and the one of university branding, in particular, occupies a marginal place among the concerns of Romanian researchers in the academic environment. Only 0.29% of the number of rewarded papers covered the issue of university management in 2016, respectively 0.23% in 2017. In 2018, although there was an increase among the rewarded papers, the percentage arrives at only 0.58% of the total rewarded papers, therefore hypothesis 2 is confirmed.

Tabelul 1. Numărul lucrărilor premiate de UEFISCDI în perioada 2016-2018



Source: Authors' own processing

*The third hypothesis (H3)* which aimed to confirm if the scientific event, namely the International Conference on Business Excellence, contributed to the visibility of the Faculty of Business Administration (in Foreign Languages) and to the visibility of Bucharest University of Economic Studies, has been validated. On the one hand, through the presence and participation of as many scholars and teachers as possible both in the country and abroad, the visibility of the faculty of Business Administration with teaching in foreign languages has improved significantly. Much of the respondents argue that the main contribution of the conference to both faculty and university is related to the fact that it mobilises the research of teachers at the Faculty of Business Administration (in Foreign Languages) and the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, but also from other national and international universities, thus increasing the number of published articles. One of the respondents even mentions that this conference improved the faculty image especially during the time when it had participants from all the major university centers in Romania and abroad and when it was one of the few indexed Web of Science conferences. Most respondents also argue that through the rigorous review process and the fact that this conference is indexed to ISIs, the quality of the conference is enhanced. Another important aspect in the opinion of the respondents regarding the visibility of the scientific event is the intense promotion on different platforms to promote scientific events, but also by e-mailing to a large number of researchers. Following the analysis of these answers, it can be inferred that nationally or internationally renowned participants, the quality of the articles, as well as their indexing in journals with international academic recognition and the intense promotion of the scientific event represent four important aspects that initially contribute to the visibility of the conference and determine the internationalisation of the faculty and the university, especially those from foreign countries, teachers with the experience of decades of research and teaching and indisputable Hirsch indices. Following the conference, some of the participating teachers even get to collaborate with the UNESCO Department and teach various masters programs at the faculty.

*As far as the fourth hypothesis (H4)* and the experience of the participants in the scientific events are concerned, they have a considerable impact on the perception of the university brand, it has also been validated. Obviously, if participants perceive faculty as

a valuable faculty with real science research results, if they feel good and comfortable from the point of view of organisation, interact with personalities from the academic world, appreciate the papers presented and the debates they will want to return or even become partners in research projects and, of course, they will also send this positive feedback to universities where they come from or to other universities. The researchers' perception of the university is significantly influenced by their experience at the scientific event, as the associations that are made are always strategic and so do the partnerships that end and thus the members of the academic community can be promoted and benefit from the highest scientific standards. Therefore, the experience of the participants in the scientific events, starting from the way the conference is organised, to the themes of the scientific sessions, the interpersonal communication up to the quality of the articles or the quality of the debates, certainly increases the degree of notoriety of the university and eventually of the faculty, but of course it has to be filled in with other elements.

*The last hypothesis (H5)*, which refers to the fact that a successful academic brand is determined by the existence of scientific events at each faculty of the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest, was invalidated. In the opinion of the respondents, a successful international conference can only be organised by those who have the managerial capacity and the experience of major international conferences, motivating that a successful conference can not be organised if there is no extensive international experience in this respect. Moreover, unfortunately, the idea that each faculty organises a conference has led to the organisation of superficial and questionable qualitative events that can be categorised as mediocre from an academic point of view. A large number of respondents argue that organising scientific events at faculty level can produce a cannibalisation of conferences and that it would be more useful and effective to unite the forces of faculties to create truly performing scientific events thus ensuring the overall growth of notoriety university. Indeed, a scientific event contributes to the visibility of the faculty and that of the university, but the existence of scientific conferences at each faculty will not lead to a guaranteed success of the university brand because it involves many risks. The success of the university brand is influenced by other factors, such as articles published in reputable journals, international conferences, membership in various international associations, research projects with visibility and impact, image on the labor market or didactic activity appreciated by to students. In the opinion of the respondents, not the quantity of conferences within an university is decisive for the success of a university brand, but the quality of the conferences.

## Conclusion

The brand of an university is shaped as result of the action of many factors of influence, both at university level and at faculty level. For example, high-profile academic events organised within faculties, such as international congresses and conferences, international symposia, international workshops, including those of doctoral students, constitute a leading image vector for the university or organising universities. Also, a scientific event, such as a conference, has an enormous ability to give visibility to the organising faculty, as well as the university to which the faculty is assigned. However, this is only possible, subject to certain conditions, such as published articles and the number of quotations generated, indexing works as Proceedings ISI; Strict adherence to organisational rules (support for all English works, quality of debates, stricter compliance with the conference agenda, intense promotion of the conference among the university community, existence of scientific articles with a major impact, participation of famous authors with an activity of extensive research or the existence of partnerships with



foreign universities or renowned institutions. All these aspects, presented above, are finally the experience offered by the organisers and, of course, by the scientific event itself, the participants. by the participants and translated by the different experiences during the scientific event, considerably influence their perception of the university and can create trust and finally attachment. So if the participants have a positive experience in the light of the activities and interactions of the scientific event, certainly the perception of the university will strengthen positively. Therefore, it can be concluded that the most important aspect of a scientific event is its quality, quality offered by different aspects - not quantity. This demonstrates that it is not necessary for each faculty to organise a scientific event for which it should organise its own scientific event, thus achieving a "cannibalisation" of these events. Much more useful and effective would be to organise high-quality scientific conferences at faculties with extensive experience in organising scientific events. Therefore, the scientific event occupies an important place in the brand economy, being a determining factor in the success of the university brand, as long as it complies with certain rules.

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