

Boys' boarding school management: understanding the choice criteria of parents

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The South African secondary boarding school sector has become more competitive as schools attempt to attract and retain pupils. Management of such schools must not only address the educational and boarding needs of pupils, but also apply appropriate management and marketing principles to compete effectively with boarding schools throughout the country and beyond. Customers base their choices of products and services on their perceptions of various offerings available, evaluated according to selection criteria they deem to be important. Marketing theory uses the term "positioning" to describe the process of constructing the place that a product occupies in the customer's mind relative to competing products. For schools in this sector to position themselves appropriately, they first need to determine the criteria parents use to evaluate one school against another. This study set out to determine these criteria. A sample of 169 parents and old boys, chosen using the database of a particular boys' boarding school in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa, were sent questionnaires. Quantitative analysis was conducted to determine the most important criteria. The top two criteria were found to be a safe environment and competent staff.

Keywords: boarding school choice, boys' secondary schools, choice criteria, competition amongst schools, perceptual mapping, positioning, school management, school selection

Introduction

The South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 requires public schools in South Africa to practise school-based management with, as Bisschoff (2004:467) indicates, "all the concomitant side effects, such as competing for the best learners". This competition for pupils means that the effective application of management principles and techniques has become necessary for schools, as they need to understand their different target markets and develop marketing strategies to attract the best pupils from them.

The South African Schools Act (South Africa, 1996) has also given parents and pupils choice in terms of the school they choose to attend (Bisschoff & Koebe, 2005:156). Parker, Cook & Pettijohn (2007) also credit the increase in household incomes for making school choice a reality for many families. Therefore, in order for schools to compete effectively in this changed market space, it is necessary for them to differentiate themselves and to be perceived to be superior to their competitors. Parents base their choice of schools to which they send their children on their percep-

tions of the various schools in their choice set, evaluated according to selection criteria they deem to be important. Thus schools need to understand these attributes to position their 'product' effectively in the minds of parents. In the boys' secondary boarding school market space, competitors include local schools as well as schools from other regions and even other countries, as proximity becomes less significant as a selection criterion once boarding has been established as an option. This paper reports on part of a broader study and focuses on the determination of the factors that were deemed important by a set of parents in the selection of a boys' secondary boarding school. These results are useful for the management of boys' boarding schools in South Africa, and beyond, that seek to attract pupils in this particular market.

Relevant literature

Positioning defined

The study is based on positioning theory. Positioning as a marketing concept dates back to the late 1960s and early 1970s (Lamb, Hair, McDaniel, Boshoff & Terblanche, 2004). Ries & Trout, in a series of articles titled 'The Positioning Era Cometh' published in *Advertising Age* in 1972, popularised the concept (Maggard, 1976). Kotler, Armstrong, Tait, Bhowan, Botha, De Jager, George, Human, Roberts-Lombard, Rugimbana, Vigar-Ellis, Beneke, Blake, Cassim, Frey, Golestaneh, Rammile, Rootman, Van Zyl and Wait (2010:63) describe positioning as the process of "arranging for a product to occupy a clear, distinctive and desirable place relative to competing products in the minds of target customers". Baker (2003) says positioning is finding a niche in the mind of the customer and occupying that niche. Kotler, Bowen & Makens (2003: 283) define positioning as "the way the product is defined by consumers on important attributes". Thus marketers should seek to match the attributes of the offering with the needs and priorities of customers in the target segment (Evans, Campbell & Stonehouse, 2003:132; Mullins & Walker, 2010). Thus the positioning strategy for a secondary boys' boarding school should seek to match its offering to the needs of the target market, both parents and boys.

Positioning differentiates one product or service from another in terms of attributes that are meaningful to customers and that give the offering a competitive advantage (Kotler et al., 2010). A key issue in positioning is thus the need to find a position that is differentiated from the competition in ways that are meaningful to consumers. A product that is not differentiated from competitors could find it difficult to attract consumers' attention and generate sales (Mothersbaugh, Best & Hawkins, 2007).

Schiffman & Kanuk (2004) and Ries & Trout (2001) speak of positioning as the image the customer has of a product or service as marketers try to position their products and services in a niche that no other product or service occupies in the mind of the customer. They believe that the image a company has in the mind of the customer, i.e. the position of the product, is more important to the success of the product than

its actual attributes (although poorly made products will not succeed on the basis of image alone in the long run). Trout & Rivkin (1996:ix) support this argument by saying that positioning “is not what you do to the product, but what you do to the mind”.

Lovelock & Wirtz (2007), however, emphasise that the positioning of services, in particular, is about guiding the entire marketing strategy around what is important to the target market in making their product choices. It is not just about communication and imagery. Positioning therefore guides the marketing strategy by clarifying the essence of the brand (product/service), the goals it helps the consumer achieve and the way in which it does this uniquely (Kotler & Keller, 2007). Ultimately, it is imperative that the proposed marketing mix is developed in a manner that will reinforce the firm’s intended strategy, particularly in terms of positioning objectives (Hoffman, Czinkota, Dickson, Dunne, Griffin, Hutt, Krishnan, Lusch, Ronkainen, Rosenbloom, Sheth, Shimp, Siguaw, Simpson, Speh & Urbany, 2005:17). Palmer (2005:10) defines the marketing mix for services as the “tools available to an organization to shape the nature of its offering to customers”. For services such as those offered by schools, the mix elements include the product or service itself, the price (or fees for schools), the place (or location and accessibility of the school), the promotion, the people who deliver the service, the physical evidence (which includes the school buildings, grounds, and so on, as well as other tangible aspects offered by the school, such as food in the boarding establishment) and the process of delivering the service (Palmer, 2005). Thus all aspects of the marketing mix should contribute to achieving a particular position in the mind of the customer. In the case of schools, their actual features (quality of staff, facilities, and so on) must support the image created in the adverts.

Thus the position a product occupies in the customer’s mind relates directly to the perceptions the customer holds about that product, and is influenced by all aspects of the marketing mix. Determining the position a product/service occupies is important because customers base their purchase decisions and behaviour on their perceptions of a product or service, rather than on reality (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2000). Thus the position a product occupies is central to the customer’s choice between competing products (Alford, 1998). If customers perceive two competing products to be similar on important attributes then they will see those competitors as offering substitute products. While these perceptions may not reflect reality, they form the basis for consumers’ decisions and thus are very important for marketers to determine. Thus two schools perceived to be equal on important attributes will be considered direct competitors from which to choose.

The positioning process

Ries & Trout (1981:193) state that “instead of starting with yourself, you start with the mind of the prospect. Instead of asking what you are, you ask what position you

already own in the mind of the prospect". According to Mullins, Walker and Boyd (2008:197) the first step in the positioning process is to determine the various competing products the target market considers in their choice, i.e. identifying clearly which schools parents consider when choosing a boys' secondary boarding school. Then the marketer must determine the important attributes the target market uses to choose between those competing products, i.e. the attributes in relation to which the schools will be considered. Through research, customers' perceptions of each brand in terms of these attributes, and thus the positions that the competing products occupy in the product space, are identified. Any company, or school, can then assess the actual position versus their desired position, and plan a marketing strategy to achieve their desired position.

Kotler et al. (2010) state that in order to achieve the chosen position an organisation should identify possible competitive advantages, in other words, attributes that the company can offer more effectively or successfully than competitors, and then select those that align best with the customers most important attributes.

The marketing strategy must then deliver and communicate the selected position (Kotler et al., 2010) by using all aspects of the marketing mix to position the product in the desired place in the customer's mind.

Mullins et al.'s (2008) steps provide a foundation for the methodology used in this study.

Lovelock & Wirtz (2007), looking specifically at services, indicate the need for three analyses in the development of a positioning strategy: market, competitor and internal analyses. Positioning plays a key role in marketing strategy because "it links market analysis and competitive analysis to internal corporate analysis" (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2007:195). Market analysis identifies what is important to the target customer (in this case, the attributes parents consider important in boarding school selection), competitor analysis determines the positions already occupied by the competitors (competing boarding schools considered by parents in their school selection), and internal analysis identifies what is possible as a basis for differentiation (the ideal basis on which the school can differentiate itself from competing boarding schools). The whole marketing mix is then used to achieve the desired position.

School choice attributes

For parents of day-scholars, decisions about schools often relate to proximity rather than specific choice factors or attributes. These decisions are sometimes forced by legislation, as was the case in South Africa prior to the South African Schools Act of 1996 (Bisschoff & Koebe, 2005:156), by school selection policies and by parents' need for convenience. There is a body of literature that debates the merits of open enrolment versus designated schools but most of this research relates to day-scholars. Bell (2009), for example, considers the role of choice sets in school selection; Jackson & Bisset (2005) focus on the decision regarding single-sex versus co-educational

schools; Power (2001, cited in Jackson & Bisset, 2005) addresses the role of social class in school selection; and Finnemore (1984) investigates parents' choices between private and government schools in South Africa.

Reasons given for school selection in these and similar studies relate to a wide variety of factors, such as holistic education (in other words the general development and well-being of the child), academic factors (such as performance in final exams), social factors (such as the perceived pupil and parent profile) and logistics (such as proximity to home, work or sibling schools) (Bell, 2009). Additional factors include sports facilities, a school's reputation in particular subjects (Collins & Snell, 2000), discipline, religious affiliation (Finnemore, 1984), offering introductory classes for tertiary study, extra-curricular activities, feelings of community, teacher quality, small classes and price (Parker et al., 2007). This paper, however, focuses specifically on boarding schools, where proximity is possibly less influential in parental choice, and factors other than the academic performance of the school alone may play a role, as the boarding school has a far greater role to play in the child's overall development and wellbeing due to the time spent at the school. Boarding schools in South Africa can be found in both private and government school settings, for both genders, and in both primary and secondary schools. This particular research looks at secondary boys' boarding schools.

Parents sending their children to a boarding school may do so for a variety of reasons. It may be due to tradition, for example, in cases where boys of the family have always attended that school, irrespective of where they live in or outside the country; out of necessity, for example where families live in rural areas where there are no high schools; or out of choice, for example where parents believe that the offering of a boarding school education is superior to the alternatives, including local day-scholar schools, home schooling, etc. Van der Horst & McDonald (2002:19) say that parents "are concerned that their children will not cope in the international work arena and are looking for options for internationally recognised education". Thus many parents are making educational choices with careful consideration of the alternatives. However, parents' reasons for choosing to send their sons to a boarding school were not the focus of attention for this research. What was of interest was the attributes they deemed important in their choice of boarding school. No literature could be found that looked specifically at factors or attributes related to boarding school selection. The closest comparison that could be made would be to look at the choice factors used to select universities, which more often involve students staying in university accommodation. Studies of tertiary institution selection factors beyond those mentioned for school selection above, and which may relate more to boarding, include social life (Arpan, Raney & Zivnuska, 2003:98), campus safety and security (Wiese, Van Heeren, Jordaan & North, 2009:49) and sports facilities (Bonnema & Van der Walt, 2008:321).

The boys' secondary boarding school sector in South Africa

According to Shaik (2005), education is a service comprising core and supporting services. While teaching and learning are examples of the core service because they are crucial to a successful learning experience, there are also a number of supporting services that contribute to the learning experience. Part of that education service is the accommodation and care of boys outside classroom hours. Thus, when looking particularly at boarding schools, while parents are likely to include a variety of the factors discussed above, they are also likely to include attributes specifically related to the boarding in their choice of school. In the 21st century, where the environment is changing rapidly, it is important that organisations understand exactly what their customers seek when looking for particular services — in this case education and particularly boarding for young men.

There are 12.3 million pupils in South Africa and 26,292 schools, of which 6,000 are secondary schools (South Africa.info, 2010). While a comprehensive list of secondary schools offering boarding for boys in South Africa could not be found, various listings, including those of the Department of Education, the SA Schools website and the School Guide website, were used to calculate the number of schools in the market. Secondary schools offering boarding for boys number in the region of 43 and of these, about 15 are only for boys. Thus the boys' secondary boarding school sector in South Africa is large and competitive, and includes both private and government schools, and schools in a variety of different provinces in South Africa.

Jackson and Bisset (2005) argue that parents today need skills and strategy in school selection, as the choice of school is ever more important in a society that increasingly seeks academic and professional credentials. Power (2001, cited in Jackson & Bisset, 2005:197) argues that the middle class “largely depend upon the credentials bestowed by the education system in order to acquire or hold on to their position” in a more competitive job market. Consequently, choice of school for young boys is an important decision parents make.

Aim and objectives

This research therefore aimed to better understand the choice criteria or factors used by parents to choose between the variety of boys' secondary boarding schools available in the South African market.

To achieve this aim the objectives of this study were:

1. To determine the critical factors used by parents when choosing a boys' secondary school boarding establishment (BE)
2. To establish the key competitors in this market

Methodology

This exploratory research used a two-phased data collection process:

In the first phase a workshop was held with a sample of a KZN school's manage-

ment (5) and staff involved with boarding (15), current boarder parents (10) and old-boys (10) who represent both current and potential parents. The majority of the participants were male and white, as this reflected the management, staff and old-boy composition for the school. One purpose of the workshop was to determine from these key stakeholders the factors that may be critical to the choice of a boarding establishment (BE) for young men. Small-group brainstorming amongst five mixed group participants (i.e. including representatives from the multiple stakeholders), and then further workshop discussions revealed 31 possible factors that may affect parents' choice of boys' boarding schools. These factors related to management and staff, accommodation facilities, academic factors, school reputation, sports, and value for money, amongst others.

In the second phase a questionnaire was developed based on the information gathered from the workshop, and was used to quantify and prioritise the factors. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of each factor on a scale from 1 – 5, where 1 was totally unimportant and 5 was very important to parents' selection of boys' boarding schools. The questionnaire was sent to a larger sample of parent and old-boy stakeholders. The questionnaires were emailed to approximately 2,000 old boys and sent home with the approximately 400 boarders on a free weekend for parents to complete. The parent response rate was 27%, while the old-boy response rate was only 3%. However, a combined sample of 169 completed questionnaires was achieved and was deemed satisfactory for exploratory research. Cronbach's alpha was used as a measure of the internal consistency reliability for the measurement of the importance of the attributes. Internal consistency reliability means "the degree to which items measure the same trait" (Lemke & Wiersma, 1976:99). Cronbach alphas above 0.7 are deemed to have a good strength of association and are acceptable (Hair, Money, Samouel & Page, 2007). The Cronbach alpha statistic for the importance of attributes section was 0.84, indicating a very good level of internal consistency or reliability.

In order to illustrate the positions competing schools occupy in customers' minds, perceptual maps were constructed. Perceptual mapping is defined as "a commonly used multidimensional scaling method of graphically depicting a product's performance on selected attributes or the position of a product against its competitors on selected product traits" (Czinkota, Dickson, Dunne, Griffin, Hoffman, Hutt, Lindgren, Lusch, Ronkainen, Rosenbloom, Sheth, Shimp, Sigauw, Simpson, Speh & Urbany, 2000:228). More specifically, Mercer (1992) describes positioning/perceptual maps as maps that are drawn with their axes dividing the plot area into four quadrants. These axes reflect the attributes of a product that customers perceive to be most important. Competitors are plotted on the map based on how customers rate them.

Sample profile

Of the sample of 169, old-boys made up 35.5% and the parents the remaining 64.5%.

Old-boys represented potential or future parents. It should be noted, however, that many of the parents were also old-boys, so 51.5% of the questionnaires were completed by old-boys. The gender breakdown of respondents was 29% female and 71% male, and the sample age ranged from 15 to 73 years old, with an average age of 45. A limitation of this study is that 95% of the respondents were white. Although the majority of the school's old boys and boarder parents were white, the response from other race groups was particularly low and thus the findings can only represent the views of the white old-boy and parent target markets.

Analysis and interpretation of findings

In the questionnaires, the respondents were asked to rate the factors in terms of importance when choosing a boys' BE, on a scale from 1 – 5, where 1 = totally unimportant and 5 = very important.

Table 1 Most important criteria for selecting a boys' secondary boarding school

Factors	Mean	Min	Max	SD	Valid N
1. Safe environment, free of drugs, alcohol, etc.	4.98	4	5	0.154	N = 166
2. Competent BE staff	4.87	4	5	0.333	N = 166
3. School and BE with competent management	4.86	3	5	0.364	N = 166
4. A BE founded on a strong value system	4.79	3	5	0.438	N = 166
5. Strict but fair discipline	4.77	3	5	0.435	N = 167
6. A BE that builds character and independence	4.74	3	5	0.481	N = 167
7. Nutritious food	4.68	3	5	0.504	N = 167
8. Strict and structured supervision	4.63	3	5	0.555	N = 166
9. Good sports facilities	4.62	3	5	0.557	N = 167
10. School's success academically, e.g. good Matric results	4.61	3	5	0.558	N = 166

The most important factor to respondents was a *safe environment, free of drugs, alcohol, etc.* As a boarding school is a home away from home, this environment is a critical factor in choosing a boarding school. Parents want to know that their boys will not be exposed to, or have access to, alcohol and drugs, that they will not come to harm, and that the school will do whatever possible to protect their boys from social problems such as underage and binge drinking, drug abuse and pornography.

The next two most important factors were to do with the competence of those

looking after these young men: the *BE staff* and the *school and BE management*. These people are responsible for ensuring the safe environment and are the guardians of these young men during their years at the school. They therefore play a critical role not only in the education of the boys but in their overall upbringing.

The fourth and fifth most important factors were a *boarding establishment founded on a strong value system and strict but fair discipline*. Parents want boarding schools to have values that are not only communicated but are entrenched in school behaviours and traditions. This particular research did not explore what these particular values should be but Du Preez and Roux (2010:24) advise that positive discipline requires “a firm value base that is understood and constructed by all through a process of dialogue”.

The sixth most important factor was a *boarding establishment that builds character and independence*. This factor related to school boarding traditions that often reflect a school with a long history in the industry. These traditions are sometimes seen to be too harsh by some, but are seen as a means of building camaraderie, character and independence by others. In the workshop, some participants talked of a “rite of passage” and of boarding being a “character-building experience”. This factor was described as a “toughening up” of boys and as “weaning them off their mothers’ support”. This factor was closely linked to the strong value system and strict, but fair discipline.

The seventh factor was *nutritious food*. Boarding schools have a reputation for providing poor food and it is possible that this reputation has led to the high relative importance of this factor. Healthy living and nutritious eating habits are part of the global trend of living better, healthier lives. Healthy eating habits have been linked to a wide variety of factors, such as learning, sports ability and general wellbeing. Parents want to know that their boys will eat as well as, if not better than, they would if they were at home.

Strict and structured supervision also relates to strong core values, strict but fair discipline, as well as to caring and supportive boarding establishment staff who will act as role models to the young men under their care.

Good *sports facilities and the school’s success academically* were the ninth and tenth most important factors in parents’ choice of a boarding school for their sons. Parents choose boarding schools as they would day-scholar schools, taking into account the sporting facilities available and the academic results achieved by past pupils of the school. These factors are not unique to boarding school choice (see Bell, 2009 and Collins & Snell, 2000).

Competitors in the boys’ boarding school sector

Parents and old-boys of the KZN school were asked which schools they considered when choosing a boarding school for their son. In alphabetical order, the following schools were mentioned: Durban High School (DHS) (Durban); Glenwood (Durban);

Grey College (Bloemfontein); Hilton College (Pietermaritzburg); Kearsney College (Hillcrest); Maritzburg College (Pietermaritzburg); Michaelhouse (KZN midlands); Pretoria Boys' High; St Charles (Pietermaritzburg); Selborne (East London); Treverton (KZN midlands); and Weston Agricultural College (KZN midlands). These schools included in the competitive set include both private and government schools. While most of these schools are in KZN, the competitive set for this target market includes schools from other regions because proximity is less important in the choice of boarding school. Many of these schools have a long history of offering boarding for boys. These schools were rated on the critical success factors identified, but in order to ensure anonymity for the school involved in the survey, these data have not been presented.

Management implications and recommendations

Schools in this sector need to match their own competitive competencies with what is important to customers. This research reflects only the first two steps in Mullins et al.'s (2008) process for positioning. Step 1 was to identify the competitive set. The schools above represent the competitive set for this sample of KZN parents. Step 2 was to identify the determinant attributes. These have been identified and discussed above for just one of the target markets for boys' secondary boarding schools, i.e. white parents and potential parents.

The next step is for schools to identify where they are currently placed on positioning maps. "In order to select the most effective market position, the strategist needs to begin by identifying the structure of the market and the positions currently held by competitors. This can be achieved through the process of perceptual mapping" (Gilligan & Wilson, 2003:440). Competing schools were plotted on the map with axes depicting the most important attributes to parents (see Figure 1).

Thus schools can determine the "place" they occupy in the consumers' minds relative to competitors in relation to these important attributes. Institutions within a cluster (such as schools E, D, and F in Figure 1) are considered relatively alike (Walker & Mullins, 2008). Both Kaydo (2000) and Adcock (2000) highlighted the fact that the company should not be clustered with others. There must be significant differences to the business or there will be a blurring of the differential lines. Thus schools need to set themselves apart from their competitors. Where schools are perceived to be inferior to others on key dimensions, those schools must decide on the actions to take.

According to Ries & Trout (1981, cited in Payne, 1993), organisations have three positioning options:

1. Strengthening the current position against competitors: for example, School A would attempt to strengthen an already healthy position in terms of providing a safe environment free of drugs and alcohol.

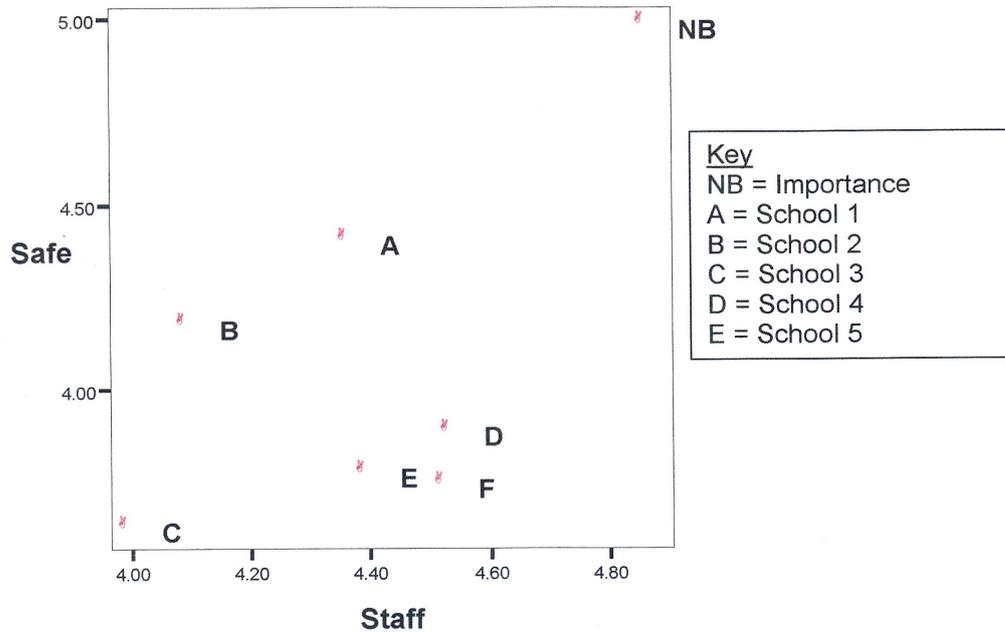


Figure 1 Positioning map for Safe Environment versus Competent BE Staff

2. Identifying an unoccupied market position: there is space on the map in Figure 1 for a school that is both safe and has highly competent BE staff, in other words, located closer to the ideal or importance score in the top right corner.
3. Repositioning: the school attempts to change its position.

Actions related to repositioning involve changing customer perceptions, either by changing the actual factor, for example, providing better sports facilities or employing more competent BE staff, or they may relate to changing perceptions through communication strategies. For example, a school may actually have a highly competent BE staff, which is qualified, experienced and extensively trained. If consumers are made aware of such staff development activities they may change their perceptions of the BE staff at that particular school. Another example may be that a school is perceived to be poor in terms of academic success relative to competitors and yet in terms of the Matric results this school outperforms many of its competitors. This school would need to communicate these results to current and, particularly, potential customers. This could be done through seeking editorial space in newspapers or placing an article on its own website. Thus action plans put in place by a school's management should be based on an internal assessment.

As mentioned by Lovelock and Wirtz (2007:195), positioning plays a key role in marketing strategy because "it links market analysis and competitive analysis to internal corporate analysis". The market analysis conducted in this research identified what is important to a target market (white parents of boys in secondary boarding schools). Competitor analysis determines the positions already occupied by the competitors. Internal analysis is then necessary to identify what is possible as a basis for differentiation and positioning. Thus a school in this sector would need to look at where it has core competencies and competitive advantages and match those to what is important to the target market(s). If the school lacks competency in areas that are important to customers, then strategic plans should be put in place to develop the school in these areas. Thus the positioning research not only assists schools in marketing communication, in other words, knowing what factors to focus on when communicating with prospective parents, but it also aids schools in determining where best to allocate their development resources. This is because ultimately the position that a school occupies in the customer's mind is not only influenced by what the school tells customers but by all aspects of the school. Thus the school's management must address all aspects of the marketing mix, to rectify or reinforce a position.

Conclusion

While the data were collected from parents of boys at a KZN boys' boarding school, a large number of these parents are situated outside KZN and therefore consider the wide range of similar schools available nationally in their competitive set of boys secondary boarding schools. Thus the criteria deemed important in this study should also be important for other schools in the country to consider when determining the

positions they wish to occupy in the boys' boarding school product space. A safe environment and competent staff and management, particularly in the BE, can be critical bases for differentiation and offer a competitive advantage for any school able to match these needs with core competencies in the school. A limitation of this study is that the respondents reflected predominantly white parents, who, while being reflective of the majority of the boarder parent body of this school, may not be reflective of all boarder parents, and particularly non-white boarder parents. Jordaan and Wiese's (2010:550) study of university students' selection criteria found significant differences in the importance of selection criteria for black and white students, for example. Future research focusing on black boarder parent perceptions may identify different criteria that would be useful for schools to know as they development marketing strategies aimed at this market.

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