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## **Marketing Strategies for Enhancing New Student Enrollment: A Multi-Case Study of Bustanul Muta'alimin and Nurul Ulum Islamic Boarding Schools in Blitar City**

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**Abstract.** The marketing of educational services, once deemed inappropriate due to its perceived commercial and profit-oriented nature, has become increasingly transparent and accepted. Education plays a pivotal role in the development and enhancement of human resources, and the existence of high-quality educational institutions is a shared aspiration, as they are instrumental in producing competent individuals capable of driving meaningful societal transformation. Within the context of educational services, marketing is understood as a social and managerial process aimed at fulfilling needs and desires through the creation and exchange of valuable educational offerings. This study aims to explore and analyze the promotional strategies implemented by Bustanul Muta'alimin Islamic Boarding School and Nurul Ulum Islamic Boarding School in Blitar City in their efforts to increase new student enrollment. Employing a qualitative approach with a multi-case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. Data analysis was conducted using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldana model, encompassing data condensation, data display, verification, and conclusion drawing. The trustworthiness of the data was ensured through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability procedures. The findings of the study reveal that the promotional strategies employed to increase new student enrollment involve a variety of approaches—mass, personal, and digital—utilizing both online and traditional media. Specifically, these strategies include: promotion through the structural networks of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing, alumni network promotion, maximizing the use of digital technology, the use of large-scale billboard advertisements, and the influential role of Islamic scholars (kiai) as promotional figures.

**Keywords.** Marketing Strategy, Increasing Student Enrollment

### **Introduction**

Islamic boarding schools (*pondok pesantren*) are educational institutions established by individuals or community groups, and are typically funded independently by the society they serve. In other words, both the management and financing are entirely borne by the community. The primary objective of these institutions is *tafaqquh fid-din*—to deepen religious understanding—thus they function as non-profit institutions that provide educational services.

Pesantren grow and thrive alongside the community, are supported by the community, and are led by a *kiai*—a respected religious figure who serves as a moral and spiritual guide.

In recent years, pesantren have undergone significant changes and development in response to the demands of modern society. They are increasingly expected to produce graduates who are not only well-versed in religious knowledge but also equipped with general competencies, which are often validated through formal educational certificates. In response to these expectations, many pesantren have established formal educational institutions equivalent to junior high schools (SMP/MTs) and senior high schools (SMA/MA). This evolution reflects the community's growing demand for integrated religious and formal education.

This observation aligns with the researchers' findings at Bustanul Muta'alimin Islamic Boarding School and Nurul Ulum Islamic Boarding School, where both institutions have transformed by establishing formal schools integrated with the traditional pesantren curriculum. This integration addresses the community's educational needs in both formal and non-formal domains.

Pondok Pesantren Nurul Ulum was founded in 1994 by KH Imam Sugrowardi and is currently led by KH Badarudin. It is built on a waqf (endowment) land of approximately 12,000 square meters. Nurul Ulum combines both *salafiyah* and *khalafiyah* traditions, with a non-classical learning system. Academically, the pesantren excels in language instruction, with students demonstrating proficiency in both Arabic and English.

Strategically located in the heart of Blitar City, near the tomb and tourist site of Indonesia's first president, Bung Karno, the pesantren has strong appeal. A significant proportion of its graduates—around 60%—pursue higher education, 20% continue at advanced Islamic institutions (*Ma'had Ali* or other pesantren), and the remaining 20% enter the workforce or community service. To enhance student quality, Pondok Pesantren Nurul Ulum also offers *Madrasah Diniyah* at both the *ula* (basic) and *wustho* (intermediate) levels, along with the Ibnu Sina Training and Education Center for language development and the Qur'anic Recitation Education Institute (LPTQ). The core strengths of Pondok Pesantren Nurul Ulum's educational system include three key areas: the boarding school system, language development (Arabic and English), and the implementation of Board-Based Education (BBE).

Pondok Pesantren Nurul Ulum in Blitar City, operating under the structural framework of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), integrates both modern and *salaf* (traditional Islamic) educational concepts to provide a balanced and comprehensive learning experience. Managed by a Director of Education, the pesantren does not rely primarily on the personal profile of a *kiai* (Islamic cleric) as its main appeal, although it is staffed by many highly competent *kiai*. As one of the largest Islamic boarding schools in Blitar City, Pondok Pesantren Nurul Ulum offers a wide range of programs—including elective extracurricular activities, entrepreneurship training, and religious habituation—through its integrated madrasah system, as a response to the evolving needs of the community for both formal and non-formal education.

To increase its visibility and attract prospective students, Pondok Pesantren Nurul Ulum employs various marketing strategies. One of the primary approaches is digital promotion through social media platforms, which enables the pesantren to reach potential students across different regions. Additionally, the use of large-scale billboard advertisements in strategic locations serves as a prominent promotional medium. The pesantren also benefits from the structural support of Nahdlatul Ulama, enhancing its credibility, and leverages its active alumni network to assist in promotional efforts. Furthermore, the presence of respected local *kiai*—well-known for their humble and approachable manner—serves as a unique attraction for the surrounding community. Although non-formal educational institutions like pesantren are not

profit-oriented, the role of marketing has become increasingly indispensable in their development. As Jamal (2025:162) states, marketing is one of the key quality drivers that propel the advancement of educational institutions. The increasingly complex challenges of the global era must be addressed through the presence of high-quality educational establishments.

To support the development of high-quality educational institutions, financial backing is essential—most of which is sourced from the surrounding community. In addition, the increasing competitiveness among educational institutions has placed greater demands on administrators to be more creative and innovative in highlighting the uniqueness and strengths of their institutions. While educational service marketing was once considered taboo due to its perceived commercial and profit-oriented nature, it is now conducted openly. This shift acknowledges the vital role of education services in enhancing the quality of human resources. High-quality educational institutions are a shared national aspiration, as they produce competent individuals capable of driving significant societal transformation.

In line with Sudarwan Danim (2012:10), a high-quality school is one that satisfies its stakeholders by offering a variety of facilities and high standards of service. In this context, quality assures users of the institution's reliability—ranging from educational outcomes to sufficient supporting infrastructure (facilities, tools, and resources). When these elements are met, the satisfaction of educational service users is more likely to be achieved.

Consequently, marketing becomes one of the key driving forces behind the progress of educational institutions. Once a school has established strong quality standards, is staffed by competent educators, and is supported by increasingly advanced facilities, marketing plays a crucial role in positioning the institution. The growing complexity of global challenges demands a responsive approach, through the presence and advancement of high-quality educational institutions (Jamal Makmur, 2015:112).

According to Imam Mahali (2016:278), marketing is a social and managerial process that involves essential activities enabling individuals and groups to obtain their needs and desires through exchanges with others, and to develop exchange relationships. The marketing process is strongly influenced by various factors, including social, cultural, political, economic, and managerial dimensions. As a result of these influences, individuals fulfill their needs and wants by creating, offering, and exchanging items of value with one another. In essence, marketing is a social and managerial process through which individuals and groups fulfill their needs and desires by generating, offering, and exchanging valuable products or services.

Marketing is not limited to delivering products or services to consumers; it also encompasses the satisfaction these products or services provide to customers while simultaneously generating profit.

In the context of educational services, marketing refers to a social and managerial process by which educational institutions identify and fulfill the needs and wants of learners and stakeholders through the creation and exchange of valuable educational offerings. The ethics of marketing within education involve offering quality intellectual services and comprehensive character development. This is due to the inherently complex nature of education, which must be carried out with great responsibility. Its outcomes are long-term and focus on shaping citizens and future generations (Imam Mahali, 2015:397).

Educational service marketing should not be viewed merely as a business activity aimed at increasing student enrollment. Rather, it represents the institution's responsibility to the broader community regarding the educational services it has provided, is currently delivering, and plans to offer. In this regard, customer satisfaction becomes a critical factor, as education is a circular and ongoing process of mutual influence and growth.

One of the key benefits of marketing educational services is to inform educational service users about the institution. Moreover, it increases public awareness of the institution's existence and identity. Marketing today is not merely about delivering products or services to consumers, but also about ensuring customer satisfaction and attracting new stakeholders (Risky Sahputra, 2019:84). Therefore, it can be concluded that marketing plays a crucial role in helping educational institutions project their presence externally while providing balanced information about their identity and offerings.

In addition to the marketing of educational services, institutions also require specific strategies to manage enrollment and attract prospective students as part of their input management.

Marketing strategy refers to the efforts undertaken to promote a product, whether goods or services, using specific plans and tactics aimed at increasing sales volume. It can also be defined as a series of actions carried out by an organization to achieve certain objectives, taking into account that the potential for selling a proposition is limited to the number of people who are aware of it (Rizki Syahputra, 2019:84). The role of marketing strategy in a company or business is crucial, as it influences the economic value of the organization, including the pricing of goods and services. Three key factors determining the value of goods and services are production, marketing, and consumption (Rizki Syahputra, 2019:85). Marketing strategy helps define the target market for a specific product or service. This includes identifying the appropriate demographic, psychographic, and behavioral characteristics of consumers. Through marketing strategy, businesses can establish a unique market position that differentiates them from competitors.

Promotion is one of the core components of a marketing strategy. It is defined as a communication activity carried out by an individual or organization to the broader public, with the aim of introducing a product (goods, services, brand, or company) and influencing people to purchase or use the product. According to Kotler (2019), promotion involves activities that highlight the uniqueness of a product with the objective of persuading target consumers to make a purchase. In general, the purpose of promotional activities is to increase sales and profitability. By emphasizing product strengths, promotion serves as a key element of marketing strategy aimed at increasing consumer awareness, influencing attitudes, and encouraging purchasing behavior.

Promotion can also serve multiple objectives, such as increasing brand or product awareness, shaping positive consumer attitudes toward the brand (creating a favorable image), and motivating consumers to take specific actions or make purchases.

Interestingly, the concept of marketing is also reflected in religious texts. As stated in the Qur'an, Surah Al-Baqarah verse 2: *"This is the Book about which there is no doubt, a guidance for those conscious of Allah"* (Wasim, 2013:2). In relation to this verse, the renowned Qur'anic scholar M. Quraish Shihab (2008:50) asserts that through this verse, Allah SWT "promotes" the Qur'an. Allah declares the Qur'an as a perfect and flawless scripture, offering guarantees of truth, well-being, safety, and happiness to those who follow it. This can be likened to the concept of a product reliability guarantee in the business world—a commitment by the producer or service provider to ensure that their offerings consistently perform as promised. This guarantee reflects the durability, reliability, and quality of a product or service in meeting established standards, and aligns with the claims made during the marketing process. Allah describes the benefit of the Qur'an as guidance (*hudan*) and specifies who can truly benefit from it. This reflects a principle commonly found in business practices—namely, that every product or service offered must provide clear and sustainable value. It can be understood as a

lesson for those engaged in commerce, whether in goods or services, to follow similar principles in conducting their business (Quraish Shihab, 2000:25). Azhari Akmal Tarigan (2014:69) affirms that *"It is evident that the second verse of Surah Al-Baqarah—often not associated with business—actually contains meaning closely related to business practices."* Promotion, in this context, is seen as essential to convincing consumers or customers of the value of a product. Companies often allocate significant resources for promotional activities, which are aimed at building consumer trust and encouraging purchase behavior.

In the educational sector, marketing strategies are also widely recognized. In the era of globalization, increasing competition has compelled educational institutions to deliver excellent service to their stakeholders. As a response, the use of a marketing mix becomes essential. The goal is to generate positive outcomes for addressing various institutional challenges, one of which is student enrollment.

Meera Singh (2012:40–45) defines the marketing mix as a combination of marketing decision variables employed by a company to market its goods and services. The initial stage involves identifying the market and collecting basic information. The next step is market programming, which entails determining the appropriate tools and strategies to meet customer needs and respond to competitor challenges. The marketing mix aims to offer an optimal combination of all marketing elements so that the organization can achieve its objectives—such as generating profit, increasing sales volume, expanding market share, and improving return on investment (Meera Singh, 2012:45).

There are several components of the marketing mix: product, price, promotion, and place. Neil Borden states that "the marketing mix is grouped into four elements, namely Product, Price, Place, and Promotion." The formula for profitable marketing operations is that most elements of the marketing mix change according to marketing conditions and also in response to changes in environmental factors (IOSR, 2012:45).

Product refers to a physical good or service offered to consumers who are ready to pay. It includes tangible goods such as furniture, garments, daily necessities, etc., as well as intangible products like services purchased by consumers. Product is a key element of any marketing mix (Meera Singh, 2012:40). In the context of schools or Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), the product could be the students or santri themselves, as well as other tangible goods.

Next, Meera Singh (2012:40) defines **price** as follows: *"Price is the amount the consumer must exchange to receive the offering. As the price of a product depends on various factors and therefore changes constantly, pricing should be dynamic to accommodate changes over time. Important factors in pricing include determining the cost of the product, marketing strategy, expenses related to distribution, advertising costs, or any variations in the market. If there are changes in these variables, the price of the product will generally vary accordingly."*

**Promotion** is one of the strongest elements in the marketing mix. Promotional activities include publicity, public relations, exhibitions, demonstrations, and so forth. Marketing managers determine the level of promotional expenditure. Promotional activities are primarily intended to complement personal selling, advertising, and publicity. Promotion helps merchants and sales personnel to effectively present products to consumers and encourage them to purchase.

In the context of education, institutions nowadays benefit from the marketing mix model, considering the ever-changing conditions. Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) must evolve to sustain their lifecycle, one of which is by utilizing the marketing mix.



Zada, 2010:95). Over time, NU has developed into a highly popular social organization with various autonomous bodies, ranging from the smallest level of *anak ranting* (hamlet), *ranting* (village), branch or subdistrict level known as *MWC* (Majelis Wakil Cabang), to city and district levels (*PCNU*), regional/provincial levels (*PWNU*), and the central board popularly called *PBNU*.

Pondok Pesantren Nurul Ulum, widely known as MAMNU (Madrasah Aliyah Ma'arif NU), is one of the institutions under the auspices of PBNU. Therefore, in its development, curriculum, and ideological foundation instilled in students, it adheres closely to the directives of the Nahdlatul Ulama central board. The development of the pesantren and its education system is inseparable from organizational policies. As a popular organization and an institution under PBNU, the pesantren's development also follows the organization's directives. One of the advantages of this affiliation is the ease of new student admissions. Based on interviews conducted at the research site, it was found that the pesantren's promotion strategy for new student recruitment involves utilizing the NU structural network starting from *kiais* at the *Ranting NU* level, *MWC*, *PCNU*, and other autonomous bodies such as ISNU, Muslimat, Fatayat, IPPNU, and IPNU. This promotional strategy is effective, although other promotional channels are also utilized. As a result, enrollment consistently meets the target of at least four classes per grade level each year.

Meanwhile, Pondok Pesantren Bustanul Muta'alimin, whose caretaker is also a member of the Syuriah PCNU in Blitar City, indirectly benefits from the institution's identity being strongly attached in various events, which serves as a form of promotion in addition to other promotional efforts.

### **Word of Mouth Communication Among Village Kiai**

Word of mouth communication is a form of chain communication that naturally circulates within a specific community. One person conveys a message to another, and that message spreads as the recipient further disseminates it to different people (Rudi Harjono, 2008:223). Word of mouth generally refers to informal, oral communication between individuals, typically conducted privately between two or more people. This communication is dynamic and interactive, involving active questioning and responses (Rudi Harjono, 2008:224). Information exchange in word of mouth communication is a form of interpersonal communication that can occur face-to-face or through telephone or brief messages.

Word of mouth communication tends to overlap in the personal and oral dissemination of information. In organizations, this type of communication is often known as rumors, gossip, insinuations, or hearsay, and it can spread uncontrollably. In marketing, word of mouth functions as a natural activity where marketers promote products to specific consumers within a targeted audience. In this study, word of mouth communication was carried out by village *kiais*, who are structural officials within Nahdlatul Ulama, regarding the existence of the two pesantren at the study locations. This information was then passed on and received by prospective students' parents through interpersonal communication. It is undeniable that a significant portion of students enrolling in Pondok Pesantren Nurul Ulum and Bustanul Muta'alimin come from word of mouth referrals.

### **Alumni Network (Alumni Visits to Students)**

Over time, pesantren strengthen their influence in various fields. Following graduation ceremonies (*imtahan* or *haflah muwada'ah*), alumni disperse to their respective regions. Pondok Pesantren Nurul Ulum and Bustanul Muta'alimin are well-known in Blitar City, each having

undergone several leadership changes. Nevertheless, they continue to produce committed graduates who serve as religious cadres in their local communities. Observations during the study showed that many alumni (*muthakhorijin*) become religious leaders (*kiai*) in their villages, while others become entrepreneurs, teachers, lecturers, bureaucrats, economists, or pursue various professions. Regardless of their careers, alumni maintain strong ties to their pesantren alma mater. The alumni network forms a dedicated community that feels a strong sense of ownership (*handarbeni*) and is involved in the welfare of the pesantren. This bond leads to various activities, such as alumni visits (*anjangsana*), monthly religious study sessions (*kajiaan selapanan*), and other gatherings. During these events, the pesantren leaders (*kiai pengasuh*) often attend to provide religious lectures, share updates on pesantren development, new student admissions, and related matters. The pesantren alumni network plays a vital role in facilitating new student admissions and contributes significantly to the development of pesantren facilities and infrastructure. Besides serving as a promotional medium, the alumni network indirectly strengthens the pesantren's existence outside the institution, enhancing its brand image through successful graduates active in society. Alumni play an essential role in improving and advancing Islamic religious education by offering solutions to various social problems related to religion.

In general, pesantren alumni help guide, direct, and motivate the community to live according to Islamic law (*sharia*) and to rely on Allah SWT. Additionally, alumni become agents of change within their smallest social units — their families — and in the wider community by promoting correct Islamic teachings and countering erroneous practices not aligned with *sharia*.

### **Optimization of IT (Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Pesantren Website)**

In the digital era, the role of information technology and social media in promotion is indispensable. Traditional promotional methods have shifted to online platforms. Promotion is a marketing communication activity aimed at informing, persuading, and reminding target audiences to accept and remain loyal to an institution's offerings. Currently, promotion through social media channels such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Telegram, YouTube, TikTok, WhatsApp groups, and official websites has become a key strategy (Ad-Dara, 2022; WeAreSocial, 2022). Nurul Ulum and Bustanul Muta'alimin pesantrens actively implement these online media strategies to optimize new student admissions and institutional branding.

### **Giant Billboards**

Complementing online promotion, the pesantrens employ offline media such as flyers, brochures, and strategically placed giant billboards. These billboards, located at key entrances and public areas in Blitar City and Regency, display pesantren advantages and registration links. This approach effectively increases pesantren visibility among local residents and visitors and remains a relatively unique strategy among pesantrens in the area.

### **The Role of the Kiai Figure**

The kiai is a central figure in pesantren, serving as a spiritual leader, educator, and community influencer (Dhofier, 1982; Sukamto, 1999). Kiais filter information and drive social-religious change within pesantrens and the surrounding communities (Horikoshi, 1999). Change initiated by kiais is gradual to minimize cultural disruption. At Nurul Ulum, the kiai functions primarily as a supervisor within the Nahdlatul Ulama framework, ensuring institutional continuity beyond any individual. In contrast, Bustanul Muta'alimin leverages the

charismatic founder's legacy as a promotional asset, supported by a strong lineage of religious leaders. The pesantren's historical prestige fosters community trust and attracts new students. Across Javanese and Madurese societies, pesantrens historically held significant social influence, largely due to the moral authority and charisma of kiai (Abdurrahman Wahid, 1988; Kuntiwijoyo, 1991). Kiai are viewed as spiritual guides, problem solvers, and sources of blessings (Geertz, 1993), reinforcing pesantren prominence in both religious and social spheres. The findings from the two research locations related to the analysis of pesantren promotion strategies in increasing new student admissions strengthen and further develop Philip Kotler's Marketing Mix Theory of 7 Ps (product, price, place, promotion, person, physical evidence, process). The focus on promotion strategies revealed various promotional types (mass, personal, and digital) delivered through both media and online platforms, detailed as follows: promotion via the NU structural network, word-of-mouth promotion, alumni network promotion, IT maximization, giant billboard promotion, and kiai figure promotion.

### **Conclusion**

Based on in-depth study, the research on marketing strategies to increase new student admissions can be concluded as follows: The analysis of product promotion strategies identified various forms of promotion (mass, personal, and digital) through both online and traditional media, detailed as promotion via the NU structural network, word-of-mouth, alumni network, IT maximization, giant billboards, and kiai figure promotion. Findings from both research locations regarding the pricing strategy analysis of pesantrens in increasing student admissions further develop and expand Philip Kotler's 7 Ps Marketing Mix theory. The promotion strategy includes mass promotion, personal promotion, and digital promotion. A key formal finding of this study is the integrated community-based marketing strategy, which represents a community network-based promotion model.

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