

Positioning Strategies of Islamic Senior High Schools Based on Pesantren Culture in Achieving Competitive Advantage

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to identify positioning strategies for madrasas to achieve competitive advantage at MA Ma'arid NU, Blitar City. This research employs a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data collection techniques include in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation studies involving the principal, vice principal, and teachers of the madrasa. Data analysis is conducted through data reduction, data presentation, conclusion drawing, and data validation using credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

The results of this study indicate that the market segmentation strategy is carried out through the classification of cultural aspects, community preferences, and the distribution of alumni and teachers. The madrasa's positioning strategy involves identifying the madrasa's strengths, building an image of pesantren competence and achievements, improving service quality, setting a vision and mission, analyzing the vision and mission in accordance with community needs, identifying principles of learning, implementing programs, identifying benefits, and evaluating program outcomes.

Keywords: Positioning strategy, Madrasah Marketing, Competitive advantage

Introduction

Various problems have brought humanity into an era of increasingly intense global competition driven by the advancement of science and technology (Prawiradilaga, 2004). Competition among institutions is inevitable, necessitating the implementation of marketing strategies based on an analysis of developments contributing to institutional competition. Globalization has caused not only cultural shifts but also changes in societal needs, leading to transformations in people's lifestyles (Junaidi, 2018). The existence of institutions striving to provide superior education aims to safeguard society in the global era (Lehner and Wurzenberger, 2013). The growing public awareness of quality education, encompassing academic achievement, skills, and moral-religious values, has intensified competition among educational institutions, requiring them to revitalize their strategies to remain competitive.

Madrasahs need to adopt appropriate marketing strategies through targeting, segmentation, and positioning to succeed in the competitive educational landscape (Mulyasana, 2008). Each institution requires a positioning strategy to market itself effectively and achieve success in the competition among madrasahs. The appeal offered to society, as consumers, should not only match competing madrasahs but also offer unique and distinctive products compared to competitors. This uniqueness can attract consumers to choose their products. Therefore, institutions must ensure that the products they introduce to the market have adequate points of parity and points of difference to compete effectively and

achieve desired market goals. A proper balance is essential for institutions to succeed in the market. They must not only fulfill the core needs of their target market by offering products of comparable quality to their competitors but also provide distinct value to consumers compared to their rivals (Gunawan, 2015).

According to Porter, as cited by James and Kalu (2015), the purpose of positioning strategies is to create or maintain competitive advantages in business competition. This strategy involves offering high-quality products, excellent customer service, lower costs than competitors, more convenient geographical locations, better-performing products than rival brands, more durable and reliable products, and delivering added value to buyers for their expenditures (a combination of high quality, good service, and affordable prices).

Institutions need to implement the right positioning strategies to gain market share, particularly if the institution is entering the target market for the first time or launching new products in an existing market. New products face significant challenges in capturing market share from established competitors. Therefore, institutions must offer innovative and attractive proposals to influence consumer purchasing behavior.

Based on the introduction above, this study formulates two research problems:

1. What are the positioning strategies of MA Ma'arif NU Kota Blitar?
2. How does competitive advantage function as a positioning strategy?

Method

This research employs a qualitative approach, as defined by Moleong (2001). The study will be conducted at MA Ma'arif NU in Blitar City, East Java, Indonesia. The sources of data in this research are the subjects from which the data are obtained. Based on their sources, the data are classified into two types: primary data and secondary data. The primary data in this study include: (1) human resource development planning; (2) the implementation of human resource development; and (3) the outcomes of human resource development programs. In this qualitative research, data sources also include words, language, and actions from the informants. The research subjects are the headmaster and the deputy headmaster of MA Ma'arif NU in Blitar City.

The data collection techniques include interviews, observation, and document studies, as outlined by Sugiyono (2005: 61-64). Repeated interviews are conducted with informants to obtain comprehensive information and data required regarding the madrasah positioning strategy at MA Ma'arif NU in Blitar City. The observation technique used is periodic notes, which serve to document activities, conditions, environments, events, and other meaningful aspects observed during the research. The data analysis technique employed is the interactive model by Miles & Huberman (1992:20), which consists of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Documentation data are obtained from sources related to the positioning strategy in the marketing of the madrasah at MA Ma'arif NU in Blitar City that support or are needed for this research.

Results and Discussion

1. *Positioning Strategy of Islamic Senior High Schools with a Pesantren Culture*

The positioning strategy aims to establish the brand in the eyes and minds of buyers while distinguishing the product from competitors (Cravens & Piercy, 2013). The result of positioning is the creation of a customer-focused value proposition, serving as a strong reason for the target market to purchase a product.

Market potential needs to be continuously mapped to highlight the unique features of products favored by the community, serving as a foundation to anticipate, respond to, and create opportunities in madrasah marketing. The presence of a pesantren culture within madrasahs becomes a distinctive feature unavailable in other madrasahs, making it an effective strategy to meet customer needs. This aligns with Rudiana and Dedi's assertion that the benefit of market orientation lies in uniting clear objectives and vision to focus company strategies on delivering superior value to customers (Rudiana, 2018).

Satisfied consumers of educational institutions will enhance outcomes and broaden marketing areas. Winning the market, according to Kotler and Keller, is not merely about finding customers but also about identifying the right products for them (Mulyasana, 2012). Therefore, the best-performing madrasahs not only practice reactive market orientation (understanding and meeting customer needs) but are also proactive, conducting research into customer needs (Hunger and Wheelen, 2003), observing market trends (particularly developments in educational needs), and addressing the demands of customers who no longer question the cost of education but instead focus on its quality.

Identifying the institution's segment is the first step before determining positioning strategies. According to Kotler and Keller (2016), positioning involves designing company offerings and images to occupy a distinct place in the target market's mind. The goal is to embed the brand in consumers' minds to maximize potential benefits for the company. Cravens and Piercy (2013) emphasize that positioning strategies function like business strategies, aiming to deliver greater value to customers. This encompasses all movements and approaches a company takes to attract buyers, withstand competitive pressures, and enhance its market position.

Efforts to maintain an institution's positioning in the public eye require building brand positioning. This plays a crucial role in brand differentiation and equity formation. Gaining and maintaining competitive advantage through brand positioning is a complex process, especially amid increasing competition. However, many positioning strategies fall into the trap of following market trends, failing to create significant brand differentiation (Cristea, 2014). According to Puccinelli, as cited by Catalin (2014), consumers are inundated daily with information about brands, products, and marketing activities. To simplify the purchasing process, they categorize products, services, and brands into memory clusters. Brand positioning is how consumers perceive a brand based on attributes, benefits, and values deemed important. Practically,

brand positioning strategies involve creating a specific and distinct place for a brand in consumers' minds (Keller, 2008).

Keller argues that the brand positioning model seeks to maximize a brand's competitive advantage. Once the target consumer segment and market competition conditions are identified, marketers can determine "points of difference" and "points of parity" effectively. Points of difference are attributes or benefits positively associated with a product, considered challenging or impossible for competitors to replicate. Strong brands often have numerous points of difference. Creating strong, favorable, and unique associations is a significant challenge and is crucial in building competitive brand positioning. For these associations to function as points of difference, they must meet three criteria: (1) desirability (desired by consumers), (2) deliverability (achievable and sustainable by the company), and (3) differentiability (perceived as distinct and superior to competitors) (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

Points of parity refer to shared attributes with other brands. There are several forms of points of parity, including: (1) category points of parity, essential attributes expected by consumers within a product or service category; (2) correlational points of parity, negative associations arising from positive associations (e.g., skepticism about low-cost products being of high quality); and (3) competitive points of parity, aimed at addressing perceived weaknesses relative to competitors' points of difference (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

To create a strong brand, companies must ensure their products stand out. Michael Porter suggests that businesses should build sustainable competitive advantages, offering something competitors find hard to replicate. Relevant brand differentiation is key to competitive advantage, ensuring consumers perceive something unique and meaningful in the products offered. This differentiation may relate to the product or service itself or factors like employees, distribution channels, image, and service (Keller & Kotler, 2013).

Key considerations in differentiation include: (1) Means of differentiation—any desired, deliverable, and distinguishable product or service that functions as a brand point of difference, often spurred by marketing environment changes; (2) Perceptual maps—visual tools that depict how consumers perceive products, services, and brands along various dimensions, offering quantitative insights into market conditions; and (3) Emotional branding—a well-positioned brand appeals both rationally and emotionally. Strong brands often leverage superior performance to influence consumers' emotional responses (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

In developing its positioning strategy, MA Ma'arif NU Kota Blitar adopts a pesantren-based cultural approach that integrates formal education with the distinctive pesantren values of Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah. This strategy aims not only to position the school as a formal educational institution but also as one that builds students' spiritual and moral character in alignment with pesantren traditions. The strategy can be analyzed using the brand positioning concept as outlined by Keller and Kotler.

1. Points of Difference

Points of difference refer to the unique advantages MA Ma'arif NU Kota Blitar has compared to other educational institutions in the region. Some identified points of difference include:

- a. **Integration of Formal Education and Pesantren Values:** MA Ma'arif NU offers a unique educational model that combines a formal curriculum with pesantren education, instilling strong moral, religious, and ethical values. This provides students with a more comprehensive character development experience, distinguishing the school from general schools that focus solely on academics.
- b. **Islamic Morality-Based Environment:** Daily teachings and practices at the school emphasize the application of noble moral values both within and outside the school environment. This creates a positive perception among parents and prospective students seeking education with a strong religious foundation.
- c. **Focus on Developing Holistic Muslim Generations:** The school's vision to nurture a generation of Muslims who are "kaffah, knowledgeable, and skilled" is a unique attribute not commonly found among competitors. This vision highlights the formation of well-rounded individuals, both in scientific and spiritual aspects.

According to Kotler & Keller (2016), points of difference must meet three main criteria: desirability (*desired by consumers*), deliverability (*achievable by the institution*), and differentiability (*distinct from competitors*). The positioning strategy of MA Ma'arif NU Kota Blitar satisfies all three criteria. The vision of nurturing "*kaffah Muslim generations*" aligns with consumer desires for value-based education; the school has the resources and systems to deliver this vision; and the pesantren-based education concept clearly sets it apart from other schools in the Blitar region.

2. Points of Parity

Points of parity are aspects shared by MA Ma'arif NU with other educational institutions but are essential for the school to compete in the education market. These include:

- a. **Accredited Formal Curriculum:** Like other schools, MA Ma'arif NU provides formal education that meets nationally recognized standards set by the government. This is a basic requirement for any educational institution to remain competitive.
- b. **Standard Educational Facilities:** Similar to many other schools, MA Ma'arif NU offers facilities that support the teaching and learning process, such as classrooms, laboratories, and libraries, which are basic expectations from parents and students.

The concept of category points of parity, as described by Kotler and Keller, states that institutions must meet the minimum requirements of their category to be considered credible options. MA Ma'arif NU fulfills these expectations by providing a high standard of formal education, similar to other educational institutions.

3. Brand Positioning in the Competitive Context

In the competitive educational landscape of Blitar, MA Ma'arif NU faces challenges from various schools and madrasas. To strengthen its market

position, its competitive positioning strategy focuses on reinforcing its unique competitive advantages, particularly its identity as a pesantren-based school. This positioning is solution-oriented for parents seeking character- and religion-based education, where moral and religious teachings are the primary values.

According to Keller (2008), strong positioning involves creating distinct and specific perceptions in consumers' minds. For MA Ma'arif NU, its position as a pesantren-based educational institution builds strong associations with the spiritual and moral aspects of student development. This represents emotional branding, where the school's image is not solely based on academic results but also on the emotional connections formed between the school, students, and the community that values religious principles.

4. Means of Differentiation

As suggested by Michael Porter, sustainable competitive advantages must stem from aspects difficult for competitors to replicate. In this context, the pesantren culture at MA Ma'arif NU Kota Blitar is a unique feature that general schools, which lack a strong religious foundation, cannot easily adopt. Furthermore, the Islamic moral education model implemented in this school provides added value highly relevant to market segments prioritizing religious education.

5. Emotional Branding

Following Kotler and Keller's (2016) concept of emotional branding, MA Ma'arif NU Kota Blitar positions itself not only through academic excellence but also by fostering emotional connections with the community, particularly with parents. These parents feel that the school can help shape their children into morally upright and knowledgeable individuals. This emotional branding is a critical element of the school's positioning within a competitive education market.

2. Competitive Advantage as Positioning

Before delving deeper into positioning strategies, it is essential to understand the competitive landscape. Kembara (2007) defines mapping as a way to visualize and plan, while "mapping" itself refers to the process of creating a map. Thus, a competition map represents a depiction of the competitive environment among competitors. Competition occurs in various aspects of life, including the education sector. Educational institutions compete to dominate the market by leveraging resources and capabilities to achieve success. The right strategy is crucial to winning this competition.

MA Ma'arif NU Kota Blitar began its product positioning process by identifying the school's advantages over competitors. One way to attract the market is by aligning its vision and mission with market needs, such as producing a generation of Muslims who are comprehensive (kaffah), knowledgeable (alim), and skilled, while integrating formal education with a pesantren-style education based on Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah principles. The good behavior of students and teachers, both inside and outside the institution, also serves as a competitive advantage in building its position against competitors.

According to Kasali, positioning is a communication strategy aimed at penetrating consumers' minds so that a product or brand holds specific meanings and reflects superiority. However, MA Ma'arif NU Kota Blitar's efforts thus far remain at the level of preliminary analysis and have yet to be documented in detail. Kasali also emphasizes that communication strategies must align with product advantages through a positioning statement, which in this case is reflected in the school's vision and mission.

Kasali outlines several key aspects in determining positioning. Positioning must be dynamic and continuously evaluated, closely tied to event marketing, and based on product attributes that consumers consider important. These attributes must be unique, distinct from competitors, and conveyed through a clear positioning statement.

In essence, positioning is the effort to instill an image in the minds of consumers. MA Ma'arif NU Kota Blitar aims to create an identity that resonates with the market through its positioning strategy. Kasali identifies several positioning approaches, such as focusing on product differences, product benefits, usage, product category, competitors, imagination, and the problems the product solves. The cornerstone of this strategy is perception, where individuals store information in associative links that help them interpret the world around them.

Kasali highlights that human perception of the world is stored in associative connections. These connections assist consumers in understanding and interpreting information related to products or brands. Therefore, a successful positioning strategy must create strong emotional and imaginative associations between the product and the consumer. An interesting example is the emotional bond between the band Slank and their fans, known as Slankers. This closeness is reinforced through the daily behavior of Slank members and their song lyrics, which deeply resonate with the feelings and experiences of their fans.

An effective positioning strategy requires attention to various factors, such as the unique differences a product offers compared to competitors, the benefits experienced by consumers, and how the product is used or categorized. Additionally, positioning strategies can rely on imagination, connecting the product to situations or values relevant to consumers. For example, new products are often positioned as solutions to consumers' problems, focusing their positioning on solving real issues.

In the case of MA Ma'arif NU Kota Blitar, the school has identified several competitive advantages, such as a clear vision and a mission relevant to market needs. However, to solidify its position in the market, the school needs a more in-depth and documented strategy, as suggested by Kasali. By developing a clear positioning statement, defining the unique attributes of their "product," and continuously evaluating and adjusting their strategy to align with market changes, MA Ma'arif NU Kota Blitar can strengthen its position amid

competition.

Ultimately, positioning is not just about providing information about a product but also about building strong and relevant emotional connections between the product or institution and the consumers. The key to successful positioning lies in how a product or institution influences consumer perceptions, creates a strong image, and differentiates itself from competitors. If executed well, a positioning strategy will help institutions or products achieve long-term success in competitive markets.

Rhenald Kasali (1999:539) explains that positioning strategies can be carried out through several approaches, such as:

1. Positioning Based on Product Differentiation: Marketers highlight the unique differences of a product compared to its competitors. This characteristic makes the product stand out and attract consumers in a special way.
2. Positioning Based on Product Benefits: The important benefits of a product for consumers become the focus in the positioning strategy. These benefits can be economic (e.g., affordable price), physical (e.g., product durability), or emotional (e.g., enhancing the user's self-image).
3. Positioning Based on Product Usage: Marketers encourage consumers to use the product by illustrating how it is beneficial in certain situations or meets their needs.
4. Positioning Based on Product Category: This strategy is usually applied to new products that emerge within a specific product category. In this way, the product occupies a distinct position within that category.
5. Positioning Based on Competitors: This strategy focuses on how a product is positioned in relation to competitors. Competitive positioning is important to demonstrate a product's superiority in facing competition.
6. Positioning Based on Imagination: This strategy uses imaginative associations to position the product. For example, linking the product to a place, person, object, or situation relevant to the consumer.
7. Positioning Based on Problems: This strategy is relevant for new products or services that are not widely recognized. The product is positioned as a solution to a problem faced by the consumer, thus attracting attention by addressing real needs or issues.

Kasali Kasali emphasizes that the success of a positioning strategy depends heavily on a deep understanding of consumer perceptions. As stated, "Humans store information in the form of associative relationships, and these associative relationships help humans interpret the world around them" (Kasali, 2003:523). This understanding forms the foundation for designing effective positioning strategies, where marketers must ensure that the product or brand has positive and relevant associations in the consumer's mind.

It is important to note that positioning is about instilling the image and identity of a product or institution in the consumer's mind. In the context of MA Ma'arif NU Blitar, the right positioning strategy will help them stand out in the

educational market. By utilizing a vision and mission that aligns with market needs, identifying the uniqueness of the products or services, and building strong emotional connections with consumers, they can create a sustainable competitive advantage. Continuous evaluation and adjustment of the positioning strategy are necessary to remain relevant and effective in facing market dynamics.

In building a competitive advantage, MA Ma'arif NU Blitar emphasizes the pesantren culture, which serves as the main foundation for their positioning strategy. This competitive advantage is a key factor in differentiating the madrasah from other schools or educational institutions. This strategy can be analyzed using the concepts of points of difference, points of parity, and brand positioning outlined by Kotler and Keller.

1. Competitive Advantage as Points of Difference

Points of difference are the unique aspects that distinguish MA Ma'arif NU Blitar from its competitors. Key aspects of competitive advantage that create differentiation include:

- a. Pesantren Culture: MA Ma'arif NU stands out by integrating formal education with pesantren education. This system not only prepares students academically but also forms strong spiritual, moral, and ethical character, which becomes a unique selling point compared to general schools.
- b. Focus on Islamic Character Education: This advantage is reflected in the madrasah's vision and mission to form a "comprehensive, knowledgeable, and capable Muslim generation." The focus on educating students in noble character, both inside and outside of school, is an advantage that is difficult to match by competitors. This advantage reflects a strong positioning strategy because the madrasah is able to create an emotional connection with the community that values moral values.

According to Kotler and Keller (2016), for points of difference to be effective, they must meet three criteria: desirability (desired by consumers), deliverability (achievable by the institution), and differentiability (distinct from competitors). MA Ma'arif NU Blitar meets these criteria. Desirability is reflected in the demand from the community for religious-based education; deliverability is realized through an integrated formal-pesantren education system; and differentiability is clearly seen in the educational model that combines academic curricula with pesantren values, something that general schools find hard to replicate.

2. Competitive Advantage as Emotional Positioning

According to Kotler and Keller (2016), emotional branding is an important part of the positioning strategy that focuses on building emotional relationships with consumers. MA Ma'arif NU uses this competitive advantage to form a strong positioning through emotional aspects:

- a. **motional Connection with Religious Values:** The madrasah offers an advantage that emotionally resonates with parents' desire to provide their children with strong religious education. Pesantren-based education becomes a symbol of moral and spiritual strength that is trusted by the community.
- b. **Strong Pesantren Image in the Community:** The position of the madrasah, which upholds the values of Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah, creates deep trust among parents who prioritize religious education. This strengthens the madrasah's image as an institution that not only prioritizes academic results but also the religious character development of students.

This strategy aligns with the brand positioning concept that emphasizes the creation of a unique perception in the consumer's mind. The advantage in moral and spiritual education is not only an academic aspect but also a strong emotional point to build closeness with the local community, especially parents who prioritize religious-based education.

3. Competitive Advantage Based on Product Differentiation

In the context of Means of Differentiation proposed by Michael Porter, MA Ma'arif NU's competitive advantage arises from differentiation that is hard to replicate by competitors. The products offered by the madrasah include:

- a. **Holistic Approach in Education:** In addition to offering formal academic curricula, the madrasah also teaches character education, making students not only intellectually competent but also morally sound. This provides a significant competitive advantage because other educational institutions may focus only on academics without emphasizing character.
- b. **Education Based on Pesantren Values:** By combining formal education with pesantren education, the madrasah creates a unique educational environment where students learn not only worldly knowledge but also religious knowledge in depth. This makes the madrasah more appealing to market segments that want to delve into religious and moral education.

Porter's concept of differentiation emphasizes that competitive advantage must be difficult to replicate and relevant to market needs. In this case, MA Ma'arif NU has a strong advantage because it is able to create character-and religion-based education that is highly needed by certain segments of society.

4. Points of Parity and Competitive Advantage

In addition to points of difference, MA Ma'arif NU also pays attention to important points of parity to remain competitive in the market. Points of parity include:

- a. **National Formal Curriculum:** Although the madrasah offers pesantren-based education, it also provides a formal curriculum recognized by

the government. This allows the madrasah to compete with other schools offering education that meets national standards.

- b. Standard Educational Facilities: MA Ma'arif NU also has adequate educational facilities, such as classrooms, laboratories, and libraries, which meet consumer expectations for educational institutions. Although these points of parity are similar to those of competitors, the existence of points of difference based on pesantren culture ensures that MA Ma'arif NU Blitar maintains a strong competitive advantage in the local market context.

5. Building Brand Equity Through Competitive Advantage

The concept of brand equity is also highly relevant in discussing the competitive advantage of MA Ma'arif NU. Kotler and Keller emphasize that strong brand equity is built through meaningful differentiation. MA Ma'arif NU uses its competitive advantage based on religious values to build brand equity among parents seeking pesantren-based education. Trust and Loyalty: By offering unique pesantren-based education, the madrasah builds loyalty among parents and students who value religious values. The trust developed through this positioning provides long-term benefits because the madrasah can create a deep emotional relationship with its community.

Conclusion

The positioning strategy of MA Ma'arif NU Blitar City in the context of pesantren culture is very much in line with the brand positioning concept by Keller and Kotler. By emphasizing points of difference based on religious values and morals, as well as paying attention to points of parity to remain competitive in the education market, this madrasa has successfully created a strong and unique identity. Differentiation through pesantren values, which are its main competitive advantage, helps the madrasa build a strong positioning in the minds of consumers, especially for parents who prioritize character education based on religion.

The competitive advantage of MA Ma'arif NU Blitar City as a pesantren-based educational institution is highly consistent with the brand positioning and differentiation concepts by Kotler and Keller. By leveraging points of difference based on religious values and character, and combining them with relevant points of parity, this madrasa has managed to build a strong position in the local education market. The distinctive pesantren culture serves as the main foundation for the madrasa's positioning, which not only attracts the community seeking religion-based education but also adds value in shaping the students' character.

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