



Dalihan na tolu as a marketing strategy in attracting customer interest : Case study of PT Sipirok Nauli Medan branch)

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Received November, 01 2023/Accepted September, 20 2024

Abstract

This research aims to explore and gain a deeper understanding of the marketing strategies employed by PT. Sipirok Nauli Express in attracting customer interest. This research method used is descriptive qualitative, with data collection techniques involving in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation studies. The research informants consist of the Head of the PT Sipirok Nauli Express Medan Representative Office, ticketing staff, agents, warehouse staff, and 8 loyal customers of PT Sipirok Nauli Express Medan. Informants were selected using the snowball sampling technique. Based on the research findings, to increase the number of customers, the promotion strategy applied by the PT Sipirok Nauli Express Medan Representative Office focuses on three stages of marketing communication strategies. These strategies include the implementation of marketing communication objectives utilizing both conventional and digital promotional media; the implementation of segmentation and targeting through direct marketing strategies using local approaches such as local greetings (e.x., ipar, lae, oppung, bapak uda, amangoru, and anggi) to create familiarity, build familial and emotional relationships through regional approaches; and the implementation of differentiation and positioning. Amidst technological innovations and service improvements aimed at attracting customer interest, PT Sipirok Nauli Express adopts a unique approach by leveraging regional approaches to attract and retain customers.

Keywords: Marketing Communication Strategy, Customer Interest, Dalihan Na Tolu,

Introduction

The availability of adequate land transportation facilities in a region greatly influences the economic development of that area. Land transportation plays a crucial role in connecting the region with sources of raw materials, production areas, marketing areas, and residential areas where consumers live (Perangan-angin, 2022). In the city of Medan, there are 7,500 Inter-City Within Province (AKDP) buses serving various land transportation routes, operated by a variety of transportation service providers (Said, 2023). The large number of bus fleets has made the competition in the land transportation industry highly competitive.

One of the bus operators participating in the competitive bus operator business is PT Sipirok Nauli Express, also known as SINEK. The operator of SINEK buses was established in 1997 as a Commanditaire Vennootschap (CV). Due to the dynamic growth and expansion of its bus fleet, the status of Sipirok Nauli Express changed from a Commanditaire Vennootschap (CV) to a Limited Liability Company (PT) in 2019 (Muda et al., 2023). Since 2017, PT. Sipirok Nauli's Medan branch has been the only bus operator from Sipirok that serves the Inter-City Within Province (AKDP) route covering the areas of Pematang Siantar, Sipirok, and Padang Sidempuan. (Buspacu, 2021). This is largely due to the increasingly dynamic competition in the land transportation sector.

In response to the increasing competition in the land transportation industry, one of the efforts a company can undertake to influence purchasing decisions regarding its offered products is by developing an effective marketing strategy (Hutasuhut et al., 2023). According to (Kotler & Keller, 2013) Marketing communication is a means by which a company seeks to inform, persuade, and remind consumers, either directly or indirectly, about the products or brands that the company sells. Based on the research conducted, the researcher concludes that various marketing strategie

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are employed by bus operators to influence and attract passengers. These strategies range from providing more adequate buses with enhanced passenger comfort, offering pick-up and drop-off transportation services, setting prices lower than other bus operators with the same route destinations, to utilizing technology and information systems for online ticket booking.

The overall marketing strategies identified by the researcher seem to illustrate the increasing variety of strategies used by bus operators in their efforts to win the competition in land transportation services. On the other hand, The operator of SINEX buses Medan branch employs a different marketing strategy to influence consumer decisions. The marketing strategy adopted by the operator of SINEX buses branch Medan involves using Dalihan Na Tolu's local approach (Muda et al., 2023).

Dalihan Na Tolu is one of the cultural treasures of the Batak community. In *Dalihan Na Tolu*, the system of kinship and patterns of relationships in daily life-whether with God, ancestors, close family, neighbors, relatives, or peers-are meticulously regulated within this philosophy (Sihombing, 2018). In Batak society, *Dalihan Na Tolu* consists of *mora*, *kahanggi*, and *anak boru*, which is analogous to a three-legged cooking stove. The depiction of the three-legged stove reflects the balance and family relationships that must be maintained. If one of the legs of the stove is out of alignment, it cannot be used effectively (Firmando, 2021). The operator of SINEX buses uses *Dalihan Na Tolu* as a marketing communication approach for this research. This is because most of the passengers using PT SINEX services are people from the *Sipirok*, *Padangsidempuan*, *Sipagimbar*, and *Pahae* areas, the majority of whom are Batak. Similarly, the ticket counter employees at PT SINEX are also from the Batak ethnic group. Using *Dalihan Na Tolu* as part of its marketing communication strategy establishes a cultural closeness between potential passengers and the ticket counter staff. This creates a sense of comfort during the transaction process. Often, the rates for sending letters and goods are agreed upon through a familial approach. Based on the explanation provided above, this study aims to explore and gain a deeper understanding of PT Sipirok Nauli Express's marketing strategy for attracting customer interest.

Method

This research was conducted over four months, from November 2022 to February 2023. The study carried out at PT Sipirok Nauli's Medan branch, was based on the consideration that PT Sipirok Nauli Express is one of the long-standing bus operators, having been established for nearly 26 years since its inception in 1997. Amidst the trend of modern marketing strategies, PT Sipirok Nauli continues to maintain a conventional approach to attracting customers by using the *Dalihan Na Tolu* concept. This approach has proven successful, as evidenced by the continued operation of PT Sipirok Nauli Express at the time of this research.

The method used in this research is a qualitative method with a descriptive approach. The use of qualitative research is based on the researcher's desire to observe the *Dalihan Na Tolu* approach from the participants' perspectives in a natural setting. This approach aligns with the researcher's viewpoint (Creswell, 2021) Qualitative research aims to build meaning about a phenomenon based on the perspectives of the participants (Hennink et al., 2011). Qualitative research aims to build meaning about a phenomenon based on the perspectives of the participants. In qualitative research, the information collected by the researcher involves direct communication with participants and observing their natural behaviors toward the subjects being studied. As a result, qualitative research often yields more natural data due to its close interaction with the research subjects.

The research informants consist of the head of the Medan branch office of PT SINEX bus operator, ticketing staff, ticket agents, warehouse employees, and eight loyal passengers of the operator of SINEX buses Medan branch. Informants are selected using the snowball sampling technique. If the responses from the informants become saturated, meaning that the answers are repetitive, the interview process will be terminated.

This is consistent with (Bungin, 2010) who states that the snowball sampling technique can be used to determine samples of informants or social situations. When the information from the informants reaches a point where no new variations are found (information saturation occurs), the

selection of new samples is no longer necessary. In other words, the data or information collection in the field is considered complete.

The data collection techniques used by the researcher in this study are as follows: (1) Direct observation is a method used by observing the phenomena being studied from the research object. Direct observation is carried out by regularly visiting the operational office of the SINEX Bus Medan branch. According to (Moleong, 2013) in direct observation, the researcher acts as both an observer and an official member of the group being observed. (2) In-depth interviews, According to (Kriyantono, 2020) In-depth interviews are a method of collecting data and information conducted face-to-face with informants to obtain comprehensive and detailed data. (3) Literature study, According to (Sugiyono, 2018) The literature review is a theoretical study and reference to values, culture, and norms that develop in the social situation being researched. In this study, the literature review is conducted by collecting official documents from the PT SINEX bus operator office and research results closely related to marketing communication strategies.

The data analysis process in this study is conducted using a model (Miles et al., 2014) through the following stages:

1. *Data Collection*, The data, which are grouped and organized into a narrative format, are then used to create a meaningful sequence of information related to the research problem. In this study, data collection is carried out through several stages: the first stage includes observation, in-depth interviews, and a literature review.
2. *Data Condensation*, Data condensation refers to the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming.
3. *Display Data*. Display data is carried out to help the researcher understand the research objective, namely, Dalihan Na Tolu as a marketing communication strategy for PT. Sipirok Nauli Express in attracting customer interest. Data presentation involves organizing a collection of refined information to conclude. After collecting data related to *Dalihan Na Tolu* as a marketing communication strategy for attracting customer interest, the researcher then categorizes the results of observations, interviews, and literature reviews to be presented and discussed in more detail. At this stage, the researcher presents the data through brief descriptions of each informant separately, based on the research problems, to convey the information obtained as an analytical overview of Dalihan Na Tolu as a marketing communication strategy for PT. Sipirok Nauli Express in attracting customer interest.
4. *Data Verification (Conclusion)*. Once the data condensation and presentation stages are completed, the final step is to draw conclusions. Concluding is a process where the researcher interprets data from the initial collection phase, creating patterns and providing explanations or descriptions. This process serves as evidence for the research conducted. At this stage, after presenting data related to *Dalihan Na Tolu* as a marketing communication strategy for attracting customer interest, the researcher draws conclusions based on the information provided by the participants and the various stages of data analysis.

Results and Discussion

The representative office of the bus operator PT SINEX is located in Harjosari II, Medan Amplas District, Medan City. To optimize its marketing strategy, PT Sipirok Nauli Express continues to enhance the quality of service provided to its customers. This service is maintained by constantly monitoring the vehicles in daily operation. In 2023, PT Sipirok Nauli Express has a fleet of 60 units, including *Mitsubishi colt L.300 Minibus* vehicles, *Mitsubishi Single Axle 4-wheel*, *Mitsubishi 6-wheel*, and *Mercedes Benz vehicles*. The operation of these vehicles is adjusted according to the routes they serve.

The Mitsubishi Colt L-300 minibus fleet is used for short-distance routes, such as the Sidempuan-Sipirok route. Meanwhile, the 4-wheel Engkel type vehicles serve both short routes and intercity routes within the province, such as the Sipirok-Medan route. As for the 6-wheel Colt Diesel buses, they are operated on intercity and interprovincial routes, such as Sibolga-Pekanbaru,

Padang, Jambi, and Palembang, with round-trip schedules adjusted according to their departure times.

Another service provided by the bus operator PT SINEX to ensure customer comfort is the establishment of branch offices in several areas along the routes served by PT SINEX, such as Tarutung, Balige, Parapat, Siantar, Tebing Tinggi, and others. The purpose of these branch offices is to facilitate access for prospective passengers who wish to use the services of PT SINEX. The branch offices in various locations collaborate with local restaurants, and according to the Head of the Medan Branch Office of PT. Sipirok Nauli, this selection of restaurants as branch office locations is intended to:

“make it easier for passengers to access PT. Sipirok Nauli Express services. Additionally, the restaurants can be used for dining, drinking, and performing religious activities while waiting for the bus fleet to arrive for pickup.”

Based on the excerpt above, it can be concluded that the owner of the bus operator PT SINEX consistently prioritizes excellent marketing service to ensure customer satisfaction. According to (Aprillia et al., 2023) Good service will naturally lead to word of mouth (WOM) from customers. WOM is considered one of the most effective marketing communication strategies as it does not require significant financial investment. Since the information spreads from person to person, it is generally more trustworthy, making WOM a highly effective level of marketing. (Chandra et al., 2023).

According to (Gitosudarmo, 2017) Understanding the desires and preferences of consumers, as well as their lifestyles, is crucial for an entrepreneur in adapting the approach or communication with their customers. This statement has been realized by the owner of PT. Sipirok Nauli Express in setting ticket prices for each journey. The cost for each route using PT. Sipirok Nauli's transportation services are as follows

Table 1. Passenger ticket fare for SINEX bus operator.

From	Destination	Indonesian Rupiah (IDR)
City of Medan, North Sumatra, Indonesia.	Palsabolas, Padangsidempuan	Rp.150.000
	Simangambat, Sipagimbar	Rp.150.000
	Arse, Huta Padang, Rotcitan	Rp.140.000
	Simajambu, Sipirok, Bunga Bondar	Rp.130.000
	Pahae-Sipetang	Rp.110.000
	Tarutung	Rp.100.000
	Balige-Siborong-borong	Rp.80.000
	Porsea	Rp.70.000

Source: SINEX bus operator archive.

Based on the data in the table above, it can be seen that the fare paid by passengers is not too expensive for each journey. According to a comparative study conducted by the researcher with various bus operators on the same route, the researcher found that the ticket prices charged by PT SINEX bus operators are much cheaper. These research findings are supported by a statement from Mr. Julianto, the head of the Medan branch of PT SINEX bus operator's Representative Office, who stated:

“in setting the price for each route, PT. Sipirok Nauli Express typically conducts market segmentation by assessing the target consumers, and their economic capabilities, and comparing prices with other bus operators. Only after this analysis does the company set the final price.”

According to (Kotler et al., 2018) Price is one of the indicators in the promotional mix that marketers can control to influence buyers' or consumers' reactions. Referring to the above opinion, the strategy employed by PT. Sipirok Nauli Express in setting travel costs significantly lower than other bus operators indirectly has an effective impact as a marketing strategy to attract consumer

interest. This is supported by research (Farisi & Siregar, 2020; Pratiwi et al., 2019), Research from various studies has found that price significantly and partially influences consumer decisions to use a service or product. Additionally, price indirectly affects consumer loyalty toward a product.

Exploration into a deeper understanding of PT SINEX bus operator's marketing communication strategy involves using the concept of the stages of marketing communication strategy as a guideline for analyzing their approach to attracting customers. According to (Moriarty et al., 2009) three stages of marketing communication strategy need to be implemented: (a) Defining Marketing Communication Objectives, (b) Identifying Segmentation and Targeting, and (c) Determining Differentiation and Positioning.

Marketing Communication Objectives

The marketing communication objectives are the initial step in determining the marketing communication strategy (Moriarty et al., 2009), Based on the research conducted, the objectives of PT SINEX bus operator's marketing communication are to attract new customers and retain existing ones. Based on the research conducted, the PT SINEX Medan branch bus operator uses two types of promotional media as part of their marketing communication strategy: advertising and social media. The advertising strategy involves printing calendars. Calendars serve as a promotional tool because they display the company's visual identity and are frequently seen over time, making them highly effective for promotion. Additionally, the cost of printing calendars is relatively low (Saputra, 2012).

The printing of calendars by the PT SINEX bus operator is usually done toward the end of the year. The printed calendars are distributed to loyal customers of PT SINEX. In addition to being given to loyal customers, PT SINEX also displays the calendars at each of its branch offices to attract the attention of visitors, whether they are merely visiting or accompanying friends or relatives who are departing. Furthermore, the calendars are designed to be visually appealing, showcasing the natural beauty of the Sipirok area, which is the home region of the PT SINEX bus operator, and the buses serving each route. The displayed calendars serve as a media promotion tool for PT SINEX, promoting the company to the public who view them.

Based on an interview with the ticket counter staff, Mr. Ipen Tambunan, it was stated that "one of the promotions carried out by PT SINEX bus operators is the distribution of calendars to loyal customers of PT SINEX bus services on a voluntary basis." The distributed calendars include visual elements such as the bus operator's address, the ticket counter staff's phone number, and images of the buses serving passengers.

Figure 1. Calendar Design



Source: Research Archive (2023)

In addition to using advertising media as a promotional tool through the creation of calendars, other promotions are also conducted through social media platforms, specifically on YouTube and Facebook. These platforms feature content showcasing the journeys of PT SINEX buses in various regions along with images of the buses used. Utilizing social media for promotion is a breakthrough in the current digital age, as it allows content to reach and be viewed by a large audience without incurring high costs. Moreover, social media promotion enables the display of videos and products released by the company, which can attract potential customers. According to an interview with Mr. Ipen Tambunan, a ticket counter staff member, " According to an interview with Mr. Ipen Tambunan, a ticket counter staff, "Promotion through social media has a significant impact on customer awareness with PT SINEX bus." This is supported by the statement of Mr. Torkis Siregar, a loyal customer of PT SINEX, who acknowledged in an interview with the researcher that his deeper understanding of PT SINEX was gained through content social media. This is also supported by research conducted by (Dwijayanti et al., 2023) which found that using social media as a promotional tool can boost sales and reduce costs. Moreover, messages conveyed through social media are uniformly received by various segments of society.

Segmentation and Targeting

Direct Marketing Strategy with the *Dalihan Na Tolu* Approach

According to (Morissan, 2010) Segmentation is the process of identifying specific market groups whose desires and needs can be met by the company's products. Segmentation is done by dividing groups based on demographic, geographic, geodemographic, psychographic, behavioral, and benefit aspects. Targeting, on the other hand, involves selecting one or more segments to focus marketing and promotional activities on (Morissan, 2010), Based on the research conducted, the market segmentation of passengers using PT SINEX bus services consists of consumers from the Simalungun, Toba Samosir, North Tapanuli, and South Tapanuli regions. This aligns with the fact that employees of PT Sipirok Nauli Express also come from the same areas, speak the same language, and share similar ancestral ties.

(Aulia et al., 2024) The Batak people follow a patrilineal system, which is a lineage based on blood relations from the father's side. From this lineage, genealogical kinship groups known as *marga* are formed. A *marga* is a type of kin group whose members are descendants of a common ancestor, and thus, in essence, all members of a *marga* are bound by blood ties. About this research, it is often observed that consumers and employees of PT Sipirok Nauli Express share the same *marga*. To attract customers, the company has decided to employ targeting strategies using a cultural approach that leverages the relationship of *Dalihan Na Tolu* between consumers and employees.

This regional approach is employed when prospective passengers are about to purchase travel tickets. When passengers are buying tickets or sending shipments, the ticket counter staff typically use the Angkola Batak language. However, for passengers who do not understand the Angkola Batak language, the staff switch to using Indonesian. When using the Angkola Sipirok language, the greetings do not call the person's name but rather use terms like "*ipar*" (which is equivalent to "older brother" or "younger brother" from the caller's wife), "*lae*" (a term for a husband's younger brother), "*oppung*" (a term for someone of the same age as our grandparents), "*bapak uda*" (a term for someone of the same age as our father's younger brother), "*amangoru*" (a term for someone of the same age as our aunt's husband), "*tulang*" (a term for someone with a blood relationship to our parents or our mother's younger brother), "*anggi*" (a term for someone younger than the person addressing). The regional approach is expected to attract and foster a sense of comfort among passengers using the services of PT SINEX bus operators.. According to (Darmastuti et al., 2016) Local wisdom is effective as a variation in promotion because it can bridge a sense of togetherness in a community and act as a unifier between citizens, religions and beliefs. This approach can also help relieve homesickness.

With terms like "*ipar*," "*lae*," "*oppung*," "*bapak uda*," "*amangoru*," "*tulang*," and "*anggi*," he actions of PT SINEX bus operator employees toward their customers indirectly create a sense of familiarity, which leads to a feeling of comfort between the employees and the customers. The sense of comfort that develops between the employees and customers fosters an emotional

connection rooted in regional backgrounds. This relationship helps maintain and nurture a sense of family and belonging, as well as the feeling of being from the same hometown. In the study of non-verbal communication, distance reflects the closeness of the interaction. If communication occurs without distance, there is typically comfort in the process; conversely, if there is significant distance, one party involved in the communication likely feels discomfort. About this study, a shared regional identity automatically creates familial bonds and alleviates homesickness, fostering close communication among passengers, couriers, visitors, and employees of PT Sipirok Nauli Express without barriers. This can be observed in the image below.

Figure 2. Interaction Process Before Departure of Passengers of PT. Sipirok Nauli Express



Source: Research Archive (2023)

Passengers who plan to use PT SINEX bus services usually wait for their departure at the PT SINEX bus terminal located in Harjosari II, Medan Amplas District. In this terminal area, there is a restaurant where passengers often spend time drinking Sipirok coffee—a specialty product of Usaha Karya Serasi while waiting for their departure time. The accompanying family or friends usually wait until the bus leaves as well. According to the researcher's observations, the bus departs at 7:00 PM WIB. Before this departure time, passengers and their companions often sit together, enjoying coffee as depicted in Figure 2. While savoring the warmth of Sipirok coffee, passengers also greet other customers or PT SINEX bus operator employees in the distinctive Batak Angkola dialect. Based on direct observations by the researcher, the common topics of conversation among the passengers typically revolve around their experiences and activities in Medan, the situation back in their hometowns, and the condition of their families, given that most passengers using PT SINEX services are people who still have patrilineal blood ties.

The characteristics of passengers and customers who use the freight services provided by the bus operator PT SINEX are loyal customers who have entrusted the security of their goods to the staff. Some of them have been customers for up to 10 years. This trust grows because of a sense of kinship in the principle of "*dalihan na tolu*", even though there is no blood or direct family relationship with the staff. The kinship between employees of the bus operator PT SINEX and passengers or visitors who come to the Representative Office of PT SINEX Medan branch is formed spontaneously. The factor of spontaneity is closely related to the use of local dialects and the local wisdom greeting of *Dalihan Na Tolu*. Under these conditions, this place is also frequently used by Sipirok residents living in Medan as a meeting spot among themselves. The company supports this practice, which positively impacts the loyalty of these residents in using the services of PT SINEX bus operators.

According to an interview with the informant, Andi, "Even after the bus has departed, many people still sit at the counter, enjoying coffee and sharing stories based on their experiences living in Medan." This situation occurs almost every day, creating a lively atmosphere. Due to its strategic location, it also serves as a pickup point for online motorcycle taxis waiting for passengers coming from Terminal Amplas to the center of Medan.

Differentiation and Positioning

According to Kartajaya in (Kotler et al., 2019), differentiation involves all efforts made to distinguish oneself from other competitors, both in terms of content (what to offer) and infrastructure (how to deliver). In this study, the differentiation employed by PT. Sipirok Nauli Express sets itself apart from other bus operators through the use of a regional approach based on Dalihan Na Tolu to attract and retain customer interest.

The local approach is implemented through the use of regional greetings with specific meanings, such as "ipar," "lae," "oppung," "bapak uda," "amangoru," "tulang," and "anggi." According to the eight passengers interviewed by the researcher, the use of these regional greetings influences the closeness and comfort of passengers with the staff at PT. Sipirok Nauli Express. Additionally, there is no concern about the safety of their belongings and shipments, as this is not an issue for senders due to the shared regional background. Moreover, the Batak community has a genealogical kinship system known as "marga," which further strengthens these relationships.

The positioning of PT. Sipirok Nauli Express involves using regional languages during transactions when the consumers are fellow Batak people. Another aspect of their positioning is the naming of the bus operator, where the name is derived from Sipirok, a region in South Tapanuli and the home area of the owner of PT. Sipirok Nauli Express. The Sipirok brand is intended to bridge the connection between the Sipirok region and Medan in the distribution of local commodities such as rice, palm sugar, durian, and traditional Silungkang fabric.

Conclusion

The marketing communication strategy employed by PT SINEX bus operators to attract customer interest involves three key stages: Marketing Communication Objectives, Segmentation and Targeting, and Differentiation and Positioning. Marketing Communication Objectives are achieved through promotional media, such as advertisements in calendars featuring the company's visual identity, and leveraging social media platforms like YouTube and Facebook by posting content about PT. Sipirok Nauli Express's travels as a breakthrough in the digital era. Segmentation and Targeting are handled through Direct Marketing Strategies with a local approach known as Dalihan Na Tolu. This local approach involves using regional greetings such as ipar, lae, oppung, bapak uda, amangoru, tulang, and anggi. These greetings create a sense of familiarity between ticketing staff and passengers using PT Sipirok Nauli Express's services. Amid technological innovations and service improvements aimed at attracting customers, PT. Sipirok Nauli Express employs Differentiation and Positioning distinct from other bus operators by utilizing regional approaches to attract and retain customers.

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Versi Online: <http://journal.ubm.ac.id/>
Hasil Penelitian

Bricolage ; Jurnal Magister Ilmu Komunikasi
Vol.10 (No. 2) : 283 - 292. Th. 2024
p-ISSN: 2502-0935
e-ISSN: 2615-6425
