

***Dalihan Na Tolu* a Marketing Communication Strategy for PT Sipirok Nauli**

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Abstract

The business competition among bus operators is becoming more dynamic, therefore every bus company needs to prepare marketing strategies to attract customers and survive in the competition. This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach with in-depth interviews. The research participants include the Head of the Medan Representative Office, ticket officers, agents, warehouse staff, and 8 loyal customers. Based on the findings, the promotional strategy implemented by the Medan Representative Office focuses more on advertising promotion. This strategy is carried out by publicizing all types of routes and fleets used through the company's Facebook and YouTube accounts. Additionally, the company often distributes calendars to customers towards the end of the year. On the other hand, direct marketing promotion is done through the *dalihan na tolu* approach, which means ticket officers often use local greetings such as *ipar*, *lae*, *oppung*, *bapak uda*, *amangboru*, and *anggi* to address customers, with the aim of creating familiarity, building a sense of family, and establishing emotional connections through local approaches.

Keywords: Marketing strategy, Promotional Mix, Customer Interest, *Dalihan na tolu*.

INTRODUCTION

PT Sipirok Nauli Express is a land transportation service company that serves the *Medan-Pahae, Sipirok, Sipagimbar, Padangsidempuan, Pekanbaru, Jambi* route daily. The company was founded in 1997 with the status of Commanditaire Vennoochap (CV). Due to the dynamism in land transportation and the development of its bus fleet, its status was changed to a Limited Liability Company (PT) in 2019. In order to provide services to passengers and remain competitive, PT Sipirok Nauli Express has a unique strategy that prioritizes building familial relationships based on local wisdom known as *Dalihan Na Tolu*.

Dalihan Na Tolu is a Batak cultural concept that represents a three-pillared hearth, which symbolizes balance and harmony in familial relationships. The three pillars consist of *mora*, *kahanggi*, and *anak boru*. The customers of PT Sipirok Nauli Express mostly come from the regions of *Pahae, Sipirok, Sipagimbar, and Padangsidempuan*. The company's ticketing staff also uphold the values of local wisdom and *Dalihan Na Tolu* culture. By using communication based on the local wisdom of *Dalihan Na Tolu*, a cultural closeness is created between potential passengers and ticketing staff. Even determining postage and shipping rates is often agreed upon through a familial approach.

The competition in the land transportation business is becoming increasingly dynamic. With the increasing number of bus and taxi routes, as well as travel services, serving the *Medan-Pahae, Sipirok, Padangsidempuan* routes, many companies have had to close their routes. Since 2017, *PT. Siprok Nauli Express* is the only fleet originating from *Sipirok* that continues to serve passengers daily to and from *Medan-Pahae, Sipirok, Padangsidempuan, and Sipagimbar*. The existence of this company cannot be separated from the local wisdom approach of *Dalihan Na tolu*.

The research objective is to examine how the marketing communication strategy implemented by *PT Sipirok Nauli Express* attracts passengers' interest.

Marketing Strategy Theories

Business competition in the bus operator industry has become increasingly fierce from year to year. This competition not only occurs among bus operator companies but also involves other modes of land transportation, such as taxis, travel services, online transportation, and other private vehicles. In addition, the presence of air transportation services that apply ticket prices not much different from bus operators further exacerbates this situation. Therefore, in order to continue to maintain their business in the competitive market, companies are required to be more clever and skillful in attracting and retaining the interest of their customers, including through planned marketing communication strategies

According to Duncan (2005), marketing communication is a collective term that encompasses all the various types of planned messages used to build a brand. These include advertising, public relations, sales promotion, direct marketing, personal selling, packaging, events and sponsorships, and customer service.

A well-planned implementation of marketing communication strategies will surely result in positive outputs. On the other hand, if the marketing communication strategies applied by a company fail to achieve maximum results, it could be due to the ineffective strategies used in promoting their products. According to Kotler and Keller (2009), marketing communication is a means by which a company attempts to inform, persuade, and remind consumers, both directly and indirectly, about the products or brands that the company sells.

According to Kotler and Keller (2009), there are three marketing communication strategies that can be used: (1) Pull Strategy, which focuses on the product and service to influence customers to buy them; (2) Push Strategy, which focuses on the products and services offered to influence the market and purchasing media to buy them; and (3) Profile Strategy, which focuses on messaging directed at the company and its stakeholders to build its image.

Before formulating what strategies a company will use to maintain and attract its customers' interest, the company must identify its customers using the Segmentation, Targeting, and Positioning (STP) method. Kotler (2005) defines (1) segmentation, as the process of grouping people into more homogeneous groups so that the company can choose the target market it aims for through the marketing mix, (2) targeting, as the process of selecting a market segment that a company will enter by considering priority, variability, and flexibility factors, and (3) positioning, as the effort to create a unique impression and image in the minds of users according to what they expect. Positioning is considered important because through positioning, brand awareness can be formed in the minds of customers. This is in line with the results of the study (Suswanto and Setiawati, 2020), where positioning is beneficial for a company to generate attention and concern from its customers.

To identify the marketing communication strategies used by PT Sapiro Nauli Express in order to attract customer interest, researchers identified them using the marketing communication mix, which is the primary promotional tool used by companies to achieve marketing objectives, including (1) advertising, (2) public relations (PR), (3) sales promotion, (4) direct marketing, and (5) personal selling (Firmansyah, 2020).

RESEARCH METHODS

This research was conducted at the *PT Sapiro Nauli Express* Representative Office in *Medan*. The choice of research location was related to the variety of users of the *PT Sapiro Nauli Express* bus fleet services. To obtain data, a qualitative historical approach was used, in which the research process was conducted with a natural or realistic background, forming a cycle that emphasized understanding the object of study using field research and the research team's frame of reference.

The research informants consisted of the Head of Representative Office of *PT Sapiro*

Nauli Express Medan, ticket counter officers, agents, warehouse personnel, and 8 regular passengers who use the services of *PT Sapirok Nauli Express Medan*. The selection of informants was done using the snowball throwing technique. If the informant becomes saturated, meaning that the answers given are the same, the interview process will be stopped.

This is in line with Bungin (2010) opinion that the snowball technique can be used to determine informant samples or social situations, where in its use, if the information provided by the informant has reached a limit where no more different information variations are found (information saturation occurs), then selecting a new sample is no longer necessary, in other words, the data or information collection activity in the field is considered complete.

The data collection methods used by the researcher in this study are as follows: (1) Direct observation, which is conducted to understand the condition of the object related to the service strategy of *PT Sapirok Nauli Express*. According to Moleong (2005), in direct observation, the researcher plays the role of an observer and at the same time becomes an official member of the observed group. (2) In-depth interviews, which according to Bungin (2010) is a way to collect data by directly face-to-face with informants, conducted carefully and repeatedly to obtain a complete picture of the research subject. (3) Literature review, which obtains additional data through written sources that have been previously made. The sources of literature study data include official documents from the *PT Sapirok Nauli Express Office*.

The mechanism for analyzing research data was conducted in three steps, namely: (1) Data presentation, which involves interpreting the data from informant statements related to the research problem. (2) Data reduction, which involves collecting important data related to the research problem. (3) Conclusion verification, which involves drawing conclusions based on the narrative structure that has been prepared to provide answers to the research problem.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Description Research Location

The *PT Sipirok Nauli Express* representative office is located on Jalan Sisingamangaraja, Harjosari II, Medan Amplas District, Medan City, North Sumatra 20147, Indonesia. At its inception, it had the status of Commanditaire Vennoochap (CV), based on the Decree of the Head of Traffic and Transportation Agency of North Sumatra Province Number: 551.21/3918/LL.I/TAHUN/1999, regarding the Public Bus Route Permit between Level II Regions in North Sumatra Province for CV Sipirok Nauli Express. As the land transportation business developed, its status changed to a Limited Liability Company (PT) in 2019.

In order to provide good service to passengers, in some areas along the route, subsidiary Branch Offices are established, such as in Pematang Siantar, Parapat, Balige, Tarutung, and others. At each Subsidiary Branch Office, prospective passengers can reserve seats if they want to use the transportation services of *PT Sipirok Nauli Express*. These Subsidiary Branch Offices are usually in the form of restaurants in the area, so that when passengers stop by, they can use their time to eat, drink, and also perform prayers for those who are Muslims.

The bus fleet of *PT Sipirok Nauli Express* continues to show an increasing trend. In 2023, it will consist of 60 units, including L.300 vehicles, Mitsubishi Engkel 4-wheelers, Mitsubishi 6-wheelers, and Mercedes Banz vehicles that are in operable condition. The L.300 vehicles are generally used to serve short routes such as Sipirok-Padangsidempuan round trip, while the Engkel 4-wheelers serve short routes and inter-provincial routes such as *Sipirok-Medan*.

Meanwhile, the buses serving the Medan-Sipirok route or vice versa are served by Colt Diesel 6-wheel buses and at certain times, Mercedes Banz buses are operated. The Mercedes Banz buses are regularly operated for routes such as *Sibolga-Pekanbaru, Padang, Jambi, and Palembang* round trip, while some also serve the *Padang Sidempuan-Padang, Pekanbaru, Jambi, Palembang* round trip routes according to their departure schedules.

Passenger service at the *PT Sipirok Nauli Express* Representative Office is provided every day. To make it easier for prospective passengers to contact the ticketing officers, telephone numbers and WhatsApp contacts are provided according to the information on the company's business card and website. With this electronic communication, prospective passengers can reserve seats without having to come directly to the *PT Sipirok Nauli Express* Representative Office. This is part of the marketing communication effort.

One of the parts of the total marketing communication process is promotion. Through promotion, those involved in marketing can improve their exchange relationships with others. According to Larry (2008), "integrated marketing communication began to be discussed in the advertising or marketing communication industry in the late 1980s." Integrated marketing communication is a new way of looking at the total reality, where we usually only see marketing communication programs as parts, such as advertising, public relations, sales promotion, purchasing, or communication activities at the communication level only, without being linked to marketing activities, even business, and other company activities.

Gitosudarmo (2017) states that "by knowing the desires, preferences, and lifestyle of consumers, entrepreneurs can adjust their approach or communication with the consumer more accurately, which is suitable for the respective consumer. All parties can then do better." "Marketing communication is a two-way exchange of information between parties or institutions involved in marketing" (Basu Swastha and Irawan, 2001).

Marketing communication allows companies to connect their brand with people, places,

events, experiences, feelings, and other things. They can contribute to brand equity by implanting the brand in memory and creating its image, driving sales, and even influencing stock value (Kotler and Keller, 2009).

For passengers who will depart to a destination according to the route taken by PT Sipirok Nauli Express, the ticket fare has been set, making transactions with ticketing officers easier. The ticket prices are listed in the table below.

Table 1. *PT Sipirok Nauli Express* Ticket Fare for Medan Route in 2022.

No	From	Destination	Ticket Price (IDR)
1	Medan	Porsea	70.000
2		Balige-Siborong-borong	80.000
3		Tarutung	100.000
4		Pahae-Sipetang	110.000
5		Simajambu, Sipirok, Bunga Bondar	130.000
6		Arse, Huta Padang, Rotcitan	140.000
7		Simangambat, Sipagimbar	150.000
8		Palsabolas, Padangsidempuan	150.000

Source: *PT Sipirok Nauli Express Medan* Representative Office.

To foster relationships with customers, *PT Sipirok Nauli Express* applies a marketing communication strategy through promotions. According to Tjiptono (2006), "Strategy comes from the Greek word Strategia, which means the art or science of being a general. Strategy can also be defined as a plan for the distribution and use of military force in certain areas to achieve specific goals.

Rangkuti (2013) suggests that strategy is an incremental and continuous action based on a perspective of what customers are expected to want in the future. Therefore, strategic planning almost always begins with what could happen rather than starting with "what has happened. The speed of new market innovation and changing consumer patterns require core competencies. Companies need to search for core competencies within their business operations.

Kotler and Keller (2009) stated that marketing communication is a means by which a company strives to inform, persuade, and remind consumers, both directly and indirectly, about the products or brands that the company sells. In the context of marketing communication, according to Kotler and Keller (2009), there are three strategies that can be used: (1) Pull Strategy, to influence customers by focusing on products and services with the aim of getting customers to buy them, (2) Push Strategy, to influence the market and purchasing media by focusing on the products and services offered, with the aim of getting customers to buy them, and (3) Profile Strategy, to influence various stakeholders by focusing on messages directed at the business and company with the aim of building an image.

Promotional Mix Theories

To determine the marketing communication strategy used by *PT Sipirok Nauli Express*, the researcher used the marketing communication mix as a guideline for analysis. Firmansyah (2020) stated that the marketing mix is the main promotional tool used by companies to achieve marketing goals, which includes (1) Advertising, (2) Public Relations (PR), (3) Sales Promotion, (4) Direct Marketing, and (5) Personal Selling.

Marketing Strategy Advertising

In this case, the marketing communication strategy mix implemented by the PT Sipirok Nauli Express Medan Office refers to two types of promotions, namely promotion through advertising and direct marketing. The advertising strategy is carried out by printing calendars, which are distributed to customers who frequently use the *PT Sipirok Nauli Express* transportation services in Medan. The calendars are printed towards the end of the year and are also displayed at each of the company's branch offices, serving as a form of publicity for the public who see it.

Based on the interview with the informant, "One of the advertising promotions carried out is by printing calendars, which are then distributed for free to customers, especially those who frequently use the company's transportation services. The company's address is included in the calendar advertisement, which covers the office telephone number, the mobile phone numbers of the ticketing officers, and a picture of the bus fleet that serves passengers.



Image 1. Calendar Promotion
Source: Archives of PT Sipirok Nauli Express

In addition to advertising promotions through the printing of calendars, *PT Sipirok Nauli Express* also utilizes social media such as YouTube and Facebook to promote their services. The content published on these platforms includes the routes operated by *PT Sipirok Nauli Express* at various branch offices. The use of advertising as

the most effective promotional tool in attracting customers is supported by the research of Alimudin and Dharmawati (2020), where their study found that advertising through social media has a significant impact in increasing tourist interest in visiting Pari Island, with a percentage of 63.9%.

Based on the interview with Mr. Tambunan, an administrative employee, he stated that “promotions through social media have a significant impact on the existence of this company, many passengers or potential passengers get to know about this company through social media”.

Direct Marketing Marketing Communication Strategy Based on Local Know

The second type of promotional tool that is utilized is direct marketing promotion using a local wisdom approach. This is done with the aim of attracting the target audience, who are the native community of Sipirok, Muda (2022). Local wisdom that exists in people's lives does not appear immediately, but rather through a lengthy process, so as to create a sense of familiarity within it.

This local wisdom approach is carried out when potential passengers are purchasing tickets. When potential passengers buy tickets or send their shipments, the language used by the ticket counter staff is usually the Angkola Sipirok language. For those who are not fluent in the Angkola Sipirok language, the staff will use Indonesian language instead. By using the Angkola Sipirok language, the staff greets the customers with terms of endearment, instead of using their names. For example, "*ipar*" is used to address a brother-in-law, "*lae*" is used to address a brother-in-law, "*oppung*" is used to address someone who is of the same age as one's grandfather, "*bapak uda*" is used to address someone who is of the same age as one's uncle, "*amangboru*" is used to address someone who is of the same age as one's aunt's husband, "*tulang*" is used to address someone who is related to one's wife's parent or mother's younger brother, "*anggi*" is used to address someone who is younger than the speaker, and so on. It is hoped that this marketing communication strategy, which uses a local wisdom approach, will attract the interest of customers to use PT Sipirok Nauli Express services.

This is supported by research conducted by Muda and Suharyanto (2020), which found that "through *dalihan na tolu* in the framework of *Mora* (wife's family), *kahanggi* (sister's family in patrilineal clan relations), and *anak boru* (husband's family), each has rights and obligations in social life, customary activities, and daily social relations." Therefore, each element of *dalihan na tolu* has a different role and meaning in traditional activities that have been passed down from generation to generation in the community.

The use of local wisdom as an effective marketing communication tool in increasing customer interest is also supported by research conducted by Darmastuti, Susilowati, and Martono (2016). The results of their study showed that local wisdom is considered as one of the ways that can be used as a promotional tool, given the uniqueness of the local wisdom, which can arouse the curiosity of visitors to come and see it directly.

With such a greeting, a sense of familiarity is established between the ticket counter personnel and the passengers who will be using the services of *PT Sipirok Nauli Express*. Emotional connections based on regional backgrounds, familial ties, and a sense of shared community are maintained effectively, thereby allowing a sense of kinship and longing for the passengers' or potential passengers' hometowns to be expressed. This is supported by the findings of a research conducted by Waridah (2016), which suggest that effective communication through language can enhance performance and impression obtained from the communication process.

Passengers who depart from the *PT Sipirok Nauli Express* Medan branch office usually wait for departure at the *PT Sipirok Nauli Express* restaurant while enjoying a cup of Sipirok's signature coffee, a product of Usaha Karya Serasi. Similarly, those who accompany the passengers usually wait until the bus departs. Based on observations made by the research team, "the bus usually departs around 7:00 PM, and the passengers and their companions sit and enjoy coffee at the restaurant. They greet each other using local dialects to talk about their whereabouts and activities in Medan. Usually, the topics discussed are about their family's condition and the situation in their hometown."

The characteristics of the passengers and customers who use PT Sipirok Nauli Express transport services for shipping goods are that they are loyal customers who have entrusted the safety of their shipments to the company's personnel. Some of them have been using the

service for up to 10 years. This trust grows from a sense of kinship within the *dalihan na tolu* system, even though they may not have direct blood or familial ties with the personnel. The familial relationship between the ticket counter personnel and the passengers or visitors who come to the PT Sapirok Nauli Express Medan branch office is spontaneous. In addition to using local dialects, the use of local wisdom from Dalihan Na Tolu also contributes to this relationship, as mentioned above. With such a setting, the location is also often used by Sapirok residents living in Medan as a meeting place for their fellow residents, and the company supports this, resulting in a positive impact on their loyalty to using PT Sapirok Nauli Express transport services.

According to an interview with the informant, Andi, "even though the bus has already departed, many people who brought their relatives or friends to the terminal are still sitting at the ticket counter, drinking coffee and sharing various stories about their experiences living in Medan." This kind of situation happens almost every day, so the atmosphere is always lively. With its strategic location, it also serves as a waiting spot for online motorcycle taxis to pick up passengers traveling from Terminal Amplas to the center of Medan.

As for promotion through sales promotion, public relations and publicity, and direct marketing, the PT Sapirok Nauli Express Representative Office does not engage in these activities. Therefore, the promotion strategy focuses on advertising and face-to-face ticket sales (personal selling). With this marketing communication strategy, the PT Sapirok Nauli Express bus can still exist and serve its route from the Representative Office in Medan. Meanwhile, several other bus fleets such as *Sapirok Dolok Hohe* (SDH) and Sibualbuali, which previously had the same route as *PT Sapirok Nauli Express*, have closed their services due to their inability to compete with other types of transportation fleets that are increasingly varied.

Based on the interview results with the informant, Inal Siregar, the ticket officer at the Representative Office of *PT Sapirok Nauli Express* in Medan City, stated that "the increasing number of transport services that serve the same route as PT Sapirok Nauli Express has an impact on the number of passengers and goods delivery services. The types of transportation are not only taxis, but also travel and truck transportation that serve courier services."

Inter-city bus companies such as *PT Antar Lintas Sumatera*, *PT Makmur*, *PT Bintang Utara*, *PT Satu Nusa*, *PT Bintang Utara*, and others, are also competitors of *PT Sapirok Nauli Express (Sinex)*, as these large bus fleets often pick up passengers or offer short-term rentals between districts, which should be the priority target passengers of *PT Sapirok Nauli Express*

CONCLUSION

The marketing communication strategy applied by *PT Sapirok Nauli Express* to attract passenger interest is through advertising promotion, direct marketing at representative offices through the approach of local wisdom *Dalihan na Tolu*. Meanwhile, sales promotion and public relations are still not utilized by PT Sapirok Nauli Express due to limitations faced by the bus operator.

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