Issues which Impact upon Marketing in the Small Firm

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ABSTRACT. Defining the small firm is somewhat arbitrary as criteria used to classify entities as such include size, number of employees, sales volume, asset size, type of customer, capital requirements and market share. There is, however, general agreement that smallness and newness create specific difficulties for business. Furthermore, there is widespread acceptance of the notion that small firms typically possess certain characteristics, which serve to differentiate them from larger organisations. These characteristics include inherent weaknesses with respect to capitalisation and marketing awareness and practice. Small firms are perceived as vulnerable yet valuable entities, important both economically and socially. High failure rates of small firms are largely attributed to weaknesses in financial management and marketing. Many classical management concepts are unsuitable for application in a small firm context, with research suggesting non-implementation of theoretically based marketing practice is the rule rather than the exception in the small firm. This paper reviews issues pertaining to marketing practice in the small firm. It examines the absence of agreed definitions of "the small firm" and "success" or "failure" of such entities, offers definitions for these terms, acknowledges the importance of small firms to the economy, reviews small firm characteristics, acknowledges inherent weaknesses with regard to finance and marketing in small firms, reviews marketing practice in the context of small firm characteristics, and considers the roles of marketing educators and owner/managers in improving small firm's marketing practice.

Defining the small town

Definition of what actually qualifies a small business as "small" is a fundamental problem that must be addressed (Stokes, 1995) if more is to be understood about small businesses and the ways in which they operate. Defining the small firm is perceived as difficult (Stanworth and Curran 1981), with no consensus in the literature as to what constitutes a "small" firm (Ibrahim and Goodwin, 1986; Keats and Bracker, 1988; Kenny and Dyson, 1989; Cromie, 1994; Karlsson and Ahlstrom, 1997, and Deakins, 1999). Eyre and Smallman (1998) reproduce the Commission of the European Communities (1992) and the European Network for SME Research (1994) groupings as follows:

- Micro: Nought to nine employees.
- Small: Ten to ninety nine employees.
- Medium: One hundred to four hundred and ninety nine employees.
- Large; Five hundred or more employees.

The criteria used to classify a firm as "small" include, in addition to size by number of employees, are sales volume, asset size, type of customer and capital requirements (Ibrahim and Goodwin, 1986) and sheer organizational size or industry market share (Chen and Hambrick, 1995). On application however these criteria have proved to be somewhat arbitrary (Kenny and Dyson, 1989), allowing businesses with substantial turnover and/or profit to be classified as "small" (Willsmer, 1984). The lack of a clear and agreed definition of what a "small business" actually is mitigates against an accurate assessment of failure within the small firm sector, as the suggested rate of small firm discontinuance is described as "highly dependent upon the definition of what is or is not a small business" (Bates and Nucci, 1989). However, there is general agreement that smallness and newness create specific difficulties for businesses (Cromie, 1994), and that the failure rates of these firms is too high, with the onus resting upon those responsible for formulation of small business policy to develop appropriate programmes to assist small firms in avoiding discontinuance (Smallbone, 1990). The discontinu-

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ance of small firms is a significant issue given their importance to the U.K. economy as a whole.

The small firm defined

For this paper we define the small firm as: an independent owner/managed business organisation of limited significance within the industry, employing less than one hundred employees, where the owner/manager's omnipresence creates a highly personalised management style. This style impacts upon the type and nature of marketing activity that can be deemed to be that of small firm marketing which is different in a variety of characteristics to large company marketing. We relate to these marketing characteristics later in this paper.

The importance of small firms to the U.K. economy

Small firms are currently recognised as major sources of employment (Bridge, O'Neill and Cromie, 1998) and innovation generators (O'Shea, 1998). Within the U.K. there are 2.8 million SMEs, 93.1% of which employ ten or less employees (Parkin and Parkin, 1996), with the number of these micro firms having doubled in the eighties (Deakins, 1999), and their continued growth widely predicted (Ahmadi and Helms, 1997). It is acknowledged that developed economies have a high proportion of small businesses and that such entities are particularly susceptible to failure (Carson and Mc Cartan-Quinn, 1995). Given that the small business sector is both economically and socially significant (Watson and Everett, 1993), the relatively high rate of small firm failure must be damaging to the economy as a whole (Elvy, 1991). The U.K. government has sought to address this problem through shifting the emphasis away from "blanket coverage to help start-ups" to policies directed towards assisting existing small and relatively new firms (Deakins, 1999). It is predicted that the number of small firms will continue to grow, due to the decline in manufacturing and the growth of service industries, changes in government policy, private sector initiatives, technological developments and their impact on economies of scale, and contracting out of public sector services (Burns, 1996).

General characteristics of small firms

Small firms tend to be considerably more creative and innovative than their larger counterparts (O'Shea, 1998), given the freedom of expression inherent in most small firms, which facilitates and encourages creative and innovative behaviour. They are close to their markets, have great flexibility which they value (Evans and Moutinho, 1999), have the capacity to operate on slim margins, and can instigate decisions quickly (Rogers, 1990). They also have limited financial, human, material and informational resources (Stasch and Ward, 1987; Shrader, Mulford and Blackburn, 1989; Rogers, 1990; Fletcher and Peters, 1997; Holmlund and Kock, 1998). Typically, small firms are relatively small within their given industry, are evolutionary, face continuous uncertainty, generally do not plan formally, can have a "bad attitude towards detailed day-to-day procedures" (Bennett, 1993), and most significantly have a highly personalised management style (Stokes and Fitchew, 1997).

Motwani, Jiang and Kumar (1998) highlight the differing operational priorities of small firms, (as compared with larger organisations), and synopsise small firm characteristics as follows (p. 8):

"On the one hand, small firms are believed to have an edge over larger firms in flexibility, innovation, and overhead costs, while on the other, they are limited by the amount of market power, capital and managerial resources".

Small firms typically have limited impact in their given markets, and limited network access (Mc Gaughey, 1998). Many small firm owner/managers experience problems with marketing, government regulations and bureaucracy, capital raising, taxation, and management of the organisation in general (Wilson, 1995). Employees of small firms are more highly motivated, carry out a wider range of tasks within the organisation and work more closely with their bosses than employees of larger organisations (Bennett, 1993).

The implications of the above are that while all small firms are not identical – small firms can be categorised depending on the industry within which they operate, their growth stage, and the owners' managerial style and/or growth goals (Ahmadi and Helms, 1997) – they do share inherent characteristics which impact upon the way in which they operate. These characteristics form a backdrop which, to a large extent, impacts upon the way in which such firms are managed (Kaplinsky and Manning, 1998).

Management of small firms

Literature regarding small firm management practice is somewhat limited (Keats and Bracker, 1988), and a lack of meaningful theoretical constructs and concepts regarding the small firm means that managerial conduct within the smaller firm may appear to be inconsistent, incoherent and largely incomprehensible (Brytting, 1990). Paradoxically, adoption of good management practice is deemed to be "vital" to small firms (Parkin and Parkin, 1996). Small firm management to a large extent is a function of the owner/manager and his/her managerial skills principles and expertise, and the structure of the firm.

Managerial competence in the specific context of the small firm has been defined as: "a body of knowledge, area of skill/ability, personal qualities/characteristics, set of awarenesses, attitudes or outlooks, or motivations/drives, that may, in their various ways, positively and constructively contribute to effective business/managerial thought or action" (Snell and Lav, 1994, p. 9). Small firms are typified by a relatively simple management structure (Hankinson, 1991), with few formalities (Ahmadi and Helms, 1997). Generally small firms manage the conceptual aspects of their business less ably than larger firms (Cohn and Lindberg, 1974), typically lack defined objectives and management skills (Perrigo, 1981) and young small firms in particular tend to overlook sound management principles through time constraints (Cromie, 1991). Planning and control systems and procedures in small firms tend to be either non-existent or "informal, irregular and incomprehensive" (Martin and Staines, 1994). The inherent deficit in managerial expertise of small firms increases their vulnerability (Elvy, 1991). Given these traits in management of small firms we now question the applicability of "classical" management concepts to the small firm.

"Classical" management concepts and the small firm

Tibbits (1981) questions the realism and relevance of the traditional, or classical, concepts of management to the small firm, a view which is reinforced by the testimony of Hills (1987) that some people believe that the very word "management" is incongruent with the word "entrepreneurship". The management process in small firms is largely a function of the beliefs and attitudes of its owner/manager and does not reflect management processes evident in larger organisations (Jennings and Beaver, 1995). Not for them the constant, planned procedures based on formalised principles, to achieve stated objectives (Brockhaus, 1983), with inherent informality in planning widely evidenced. Long-term issues tend to be neglected as the small firm owner/manager prioritises immediate concerns (Storey and Sykes, 1996), with the emphasis on (intuitive) "doing" rather than on strategic planning (Matthews and Scott, 1995). Management of the smaller firm is described as an adaptive process focused towards the maximisation of immediate and short-term advantage (Beaver and Harris, 1995). The main problem with small firm management usually manifests itself as the firm starts to grow to a stage where the original intuitive and autocratic management style of the owner/manager is inadequate (Pleitner, 1989). A problem is perceived to exist as "the perceived science of planning confronts the art of intuition" (Mc Kiernan and Morris, 1994), with this intuition often at the heart of the small business owner/manager's psyche.

Small firms and finance

A lack of capital is frequently the main deterrent to the prospective entrepreneur (Karger, 1981) with undercapitalisation recognised as a major weakness of many new and small firms (Barber and Manger, 1997), often leading to their demise (Job, 1983). Throughout Europe, it is recognised that the structure of financial markets mitigates against equity fund provision for SMEs (Cressy and Cowling, 1994) with internal sources of finance usually constituting the majority of working capital for the start-up firm (Deakins, 1999). The owner/manager generally has total control of resources determining resource allocation, with "the managerial ego [dominating] that of traditional accounting control]" (Barber and Manger, 1997). Typically small firms will have higher levels of creditors relative to stocks and total assets and lower levels of retained profit than larger organisations (Chittenden and Bragg, 1997). As small business ventures are generally believed to be high-risk, with poor financial control contributing to business failure (Barrow, 1995) high bank charges imposed by lending institutions (to compensate for the level of risk involved) add to the inherent problems faced by the smaller enterprise and may well lead to its premature death (Storey and Sykes, 1996).

It is recognised that small firms and banks, while important to each other, often experience difficulties in their relationship (Butler and Durkin, 1997), with the relevant personalities involved from both organisations lacking empathy for the other. Juxtapositioning of the viewpoints of Bird (1992) and Burns (1996) offer an insight into the differing perspectives of the small business owner/manager and the bank manager. "This is the situation in which, in order to obtain additional funding from the bank, the businessman agrees to provide regularly to the bank manager cash-flow forecasts, lists of outstanding debtors/creditors and other means to evaluate assets and liabilities. The result is that valuable time must be spent with the bank manager (who probably has no hands-on experience of running a business like yours) while he tells you what you can and cannot do" (Bird, 1992, p. 4). "The bank manager gains little from the success of the business but stands to lose a lot if it fails" (Burns, 1996, p. 186).

Deakins (1999) states that where uncertainty meets asymmetric information the bank has two main problems – adverse selection and moral hazard – when dealing with small businesses. He believes that the problem faced by entrepreneurial small firm owner/managers is particularly acute as banks are concerned with short-term rather than long-term finance; are unable to accurately gauge risk assessment when dealing with new technologies; are staffed by generalists rather than specialists, resulting in a lack of understanding of the business itself, and have no mechanism for calculating the asset value of research and development. Difficulty for the bank and the small business in building a sound and mutually satisfying relationship lies in fundamentally different characteristics, experiences, structure and behaviour (Butler and Durkin, 1998). The nature of the relationship between small businesses and the banks is perceived to have evolved "to a slightly disenchanted, uneasy alliance in the 1990s", (Stokes, 1995).

Given that small firms typically have limited (and usually internally funded) financial resources at start-up, high bank charges and the general unwillingness of banks to lend to small firms without extensive security may well mitigate against adoption of creative marketing practice in the smaller firm, effectively stymieing the inherent creativity of such entities through emphasising risk reduction rather than expansion and growth.

Marketing characteristics of small firms

Small enterprises are generally started by hard working and highly motivated individuals, with vision and ambition, attributes which if integrated with a marketing orientation should increase the firms' chance of success (Kenny and Dyson, 1989). Initially, the small and young firm faces marketing challenges, which can and will ultimately determine its future (Romano and Ratnatunga, 1995). Small business success is dependent not only on the presence of products and markets, but also on the efficacious marketing of those products within those markets (Smith, 1990). While the underlying principles of marketing are equally applicable to large and small firms alike, a lack of sophisticated marketing is perceived to be problematic for smaller firms (Cromie, 1991).

While the successful small firm is seen as "a prime example of a marketing-oriented business" (Willsmer, 1984), insofar as the company will typically be close to its customers and flexible enough to respond quickly to changing customer needs, operationalisation of a marketing orientation will be determined by dimensions including management capability and key individuals' backgrounds (Liu, 1995), with their utilisation of marketing techniques and tactics generally inhibited by constrained resources (Stokes, 1994). The internet is currently considered by some to be one of the few marketing tools that can be used to enable small firms to effectively compete with larger organisations "on the same ground" (Hsieh and Lin, 1998), creating significant opportunity for affordable and effective dynamism and versatility (Poon and Jevons, 1997). Others view it as a mechanism through which small firms trying to operate within specific niche markets will be able to access the "critical mass of customers necessary for success" (Hamill and Gregory, 1997).

Given the constrained resources of the small firm, marketing tools suitable for utilisation by smaller firms must be welcomed if they can be effectively used to enhance marketing practice of these smaller organisations. It must be recognised, however, that small firms typically have different requirements with respect to marketing, with their inherent characteristics impacting upon the willingness/ability of the owner/manager to use conventional and/or contemporary marketing tools.

The marketing characteristics of small firms also include: the fact that small firms are faced with different market and competitive circumstances (Stasch and Ward, 1987); are believed not to (in general) engage in marketing or innovative practices (Matthews and Scott, 1995) although their organic organisational structure should facilitate innovation more readily than the more bureaucratic structure of many larger firms (Cannon, 1991); have inherent production and pricing flexibility, but generally lack strong brand names and market power (Chen and Hambrick, 1995); have less goal conflict, various sorts of flexibility, an imbalance between production and marketing, and are ineffectual in the use of marketing techniques (Brannen, 1983).

Small firms typically are flexible and can respond more quickly than large organisations to changing market requirements, this flexibility forming a vital competitive strength (Heathfield, 1997).

Additionally, small firms face marketing problems which are a function of the general characteristics of small firms including: a limited customer base; limited marketing activity, expertise and impact; an over dependence on the marketing ability of the owner/manager; reactive rather than planned marketing, (with marketing plans only produced to secure loans, LaBarbera and Rosenberg, 1989); and difficulties in exploiting marketing opportunities (Stokes and Fitchew, 1997). A further difficulty for the smaller firm is that fixed costs usually absorb a higher level of sales revenue, leaving proportionally less for marketing expenditures (Stokes, 1994). Evidence suggests that small firm owner/managers rarely rely on formal training to negate a deficiency in marketing expertise (Hankinson, 1991).

Small firms typically spend modestly on marketing expenditures, and utilise few of the available marketing techniques (Stokes, 1995). Many of the more structured procedures necessary for "formal" marketing techniques would in fact mitigate against the inherent and advantageous flexibility of the small firm (Murray and O'Driscoll, 1996). Many owners/managers rely on previous experience and common sense (Lilien, Kotler and Moorthy, 1992), adopting a marketing orientation without the trappings through staying close enough to their customers to identify changing needs, and flexible enough to adapt to those changing needs (Stokes, 1994). Within the small firm, the boundary between marketing and selling becomes very blurred, as most small firms' marketing takes place during the selling process (Oakey, 1991) and for many small firm owner/managers the perception is that selling is marketing. Marketing practice is not easily standardised (Kenny and Dyson, 1989), with different facets of marketing of differing relevance to individual firms (Bennett, 1993).

Some marketing activities pose particular problems for the small firm. Research indicates that small firms find pricing difficult, relying on what are perceived to be industry norms for guidance (Carson et al., 1998), irrespective of their own firms' individual circumstances. They also invest proportionately less on sales training than larger firms with exploratory research conducted by Shepherd and Ridnour (1996) indicating that the small firms studied invested approximately one third as much time in sales management training as larger organisations. Ong (1997) perceives a major deficiency within small firms' marketing to be the inability to forecast future demand for products, resulting in a passive (and often slow) reaction to changes in the marketing environment and a consequential less than optimum deployment of production resources. Ineffective or inadequate forecasting will mitigate against effective marketing planning as forecasting forms the basis of operative managerial planning (Smith et al., 1996).

This, then, is the reality of small firm's marketing practice – informal, intuitive, and selling focused. Implementation of marketing principles is problematic with evidence of specific weakness with respect to pricing, planning, training and forecasting. There can be little doubt that evidence of marketing practice, as prescribed in text books, is rarely found in the small firm (Stokes, 1994; Gilmore, Carson and Grant, 2001). Owner/managers need to be generalists rather than specialists (Fuller, 1994), and this means that: "Formal marketing may be interesting to the entrepreneur but it is unlikely to relate closely enough to his/her situation specific requirements or to solve company problems" (Carson, 1993, p. 194). Marketing activity within the small firm will be related to the owner/manager's attitude to, experience of, and expertise in marketing.

The small firm owner/manager

The omnipresence in the small firm of the owner/manager is widely acknowledged in the literature (Stasch and Ward, 1987; Stokes, 1995; Dewhurst, 1996; Crick and Chaudhry, 1997; Hurmerinta-Peltomaki and Nummela, 1998). Support agencies have been slower to recognise the inseparability of the owner/manager from the business itself (Turner, 1997). This omnipresence means that, generally, the owner/manager and his/her limited (or absence of) understanding of marketing and its techniques (Stokes, 1995; Hisrich, 1989) is the marketing expertise of the small firm. Given that the managerial competence of the small firm owner/manager is one of the most significant determinants of the firms' success or failure (Jennings and Beaver, 1995), the pervasive influence of the owner/manager on the management of the firm (Dewhurst, 1996; Stokes, 1995; Stasch and Ward, 1987) cannot be overstated. Thus the beliefs, ideals, preferences, experience and expertise of the owner/manager will essentially be those of the small firm itself. Not all small business owner/managers are the same – there may be marked differences in their reasons for founding the firm, their education and experience, their strategic management capability and their attitudes to growth. The significant characteristic that links all small business owner/managers, however, will be the great extent to which they will superimpose their personality on their businesses making them highly personalised business entities.

Intuition versus planning

The small firm owner/manager has little time to think strategically about the business (Brown, 1995), with resource constraints necessitating intuitive decision-making (Tibbits, 1981). Generally he/she does not believe that formal strategic planning will benefit his/her business (Orpen, 1994), despite recommendations that the small firm owner/manager should "adopt a judicious balance of the formal and informal in their planning systems" (Mc Kiernan and Morris, 1994). Evidence suggests that many successful small businesses do not practice what is conventionally described as strategic management (Pleitner, 1989). Complicated theories and highbrow formal processes are deemed to be unsuitable for small firms as owner/managers will not use them (Hogarth-Scott, Watson and Wilson, 1996), opting instead ". . . to engage in informal management practices than to adopt sophisticated planning and control techniques for good reason" (Martin and Staines, 1994, p. 26). Much of the available literature on marketing planning is written for and about large business (Brooksbank, 1996; Lancaster and Waddelow, 1998) and is of little use to the small business owner/manager.

Attitudes to growth

One of the difficulties for the owner/manager is that while an autocratic management style may prove successful while the firm remains small, there is a need for both management style and organisational structure to change to as the firm grows (Burns and Harrison, 1996). Growth itself, however, is not necessarily a goal for small firm owner/managers (Stokes, 1995), as they attempt to maximise success (as defined in their own personal terms) while restricting the size of the company to a level with which they are comfortable (Burns and Harrison, 1996). The size of the business will be a function of two factors – the owner/managers' image of the business itself and the marketplace within which the firm operates (Birley, 1996). The goals and aspirations of the owner/manager have significant implications for small firm growth.

Entrepreneurs and/or small business owner/managers?

While the literature does not definitively distinguish between the entrepreneur and the small business owner/manager, the essential differentiating characteristic of principle purpose, is still largely supported (Chell and Haworth, 1993). The small business owner/manager starts and manages the firm in an attempt to further personal goals, the entrepreneur does the same in an attempt to make profit and expand. Burns and Harrison (1996) reiterate that the reason for starting the business is the key differentiator between the small business owner/manager and the entrepreneur, a view which is compatible with Burns (1996), who distinguishes between two different kinds of small businesses; the "life-style" business set up to provide an adequate level of income for the founder; and the "entrepreneurial" business which is founded to grow. Deakins (1999) perceives the main distinction between the two types of small business owner/manager to be vastly differing managerial objectives. O'Shea (1998) distinguishes between entrepreneurial and non-entrepreneurial small businesses from the perspective of their likely impact on economic equilibrium, with entrepreneurial firms exerting a "spontaneous, discontinuous and a qualitative influence", and non-entrepreneurial ones representing "a static, inert and quantitative influence".

Small firm success and failure

Different measures of small firm "failure" are used with no consensus on a definition of what actually constitutes failure per se in the context of the small firm (Watson and Everett, 1993). Additionally there is no consensus on what "success" within small firms is, with employment created, profits, turnover and/or financial assets often arbitrarily used as success indicators (Deakins, 1999). Indeed, different stakeholder groups could simultaneously judge the same firm to be both a success and a failure depending on the criteria being used for evaluation (Jennings and Beaver, 1995). The result is a degree of confusion surrounding small business failure rates (Burns, 1996), with largely unqualified and sensational failure statistics masking the fact that small businesses often cease trading due to the personal (and often positive) choices made by the owner (Barrow, 1995).

While the problems of a definition of failure and consequential inaccuracy in determining failure rates persists, there is no doubt that small firms are considerably more vulnerable than larger businesses largely through undercapitalisation and inadequacies in marketing (Job, 1983), the former problem often an identifiable cause of the latter, and arguably vice-versa. Additionally, current bankruptcy regulations require that secured creditors be paid first resulting in the collapse of one firm often causing the subsequent collapse of other (usually small) firms (Deakins, 1999), exposing small firms to still further inherent financial vulnerability. These inherent weaknesses, combined with factors such as unfavourable economic conditions, inadequate business planning and managerial capability are often associated with failure of small firms (Martin and Staines, 1994).

Small firm failure defined

For this paper we define small firm failure as: the involuntary decline in or termination of an independent owner/managed business organisation of limited significance within the industry, employing less than one hundred employees, where the owner/manager's omnipresence creates a highly personalised management style.

Growth in the small firm

"Growth" in the small firm is usually related to an increase in turnover, profitability, number of employees, and/or financial assets – the same criteria in fact as is used as "success" indicators.

A high growth rate within small firms is not unusual because if the firm is small a relatively modest amount of growth may result in a high growth rate. Thus the main reason for the high rate of growth may be more to do with the original size of the small firm (Brown, 1995), than with "tripling a little [being] much easier than doubling a lot" (Heller, 1988). It is generally accepted that smaller organisations grow more quickly than larger ones, and that young firms grow more quickly than old ones (Deakins, 1999).

While growth within small firms is often eulogised (Cohn and Lindberg, 1974) it is not without risk. Rapid growth within (even highly profitable) smaller firms has often led to their premature collapse through cash flow imbalance, with immediate finance requirements causing a cash crisis and crippling the firm (Barrow, 1995; Bennett, 1993). It is recognised that as a small firm grows instinctive management becomes insufficient (Pleitner 1989) with the need for well-designed and managed systems, controls and procedures becoming paramount (Stewart, 1990). The firm must become more "institutionalised" (Cohn and Lindberg, 1974), more bureaucratic (Stanworth and Curran, 1981), and systematic (Ackelsberg and Arlow, 1985), these kinds of structures and systems being the antithesis of many small businesses which paradoxically have flourished while being flexible with inherently informal management processes. Growth of the firm to beyond a level where the owner/manager can manage it effectively often sparks a crisis (Stewart, 1990).

The pervasive influence of the small firm owner/manager has already been noted. His/her capacity to change as the company grows will have a significant bearing on the success of the company. More fundamentally, his/her attitude to growth of the firm will largely determine whether or not the firm is actively "grown". Evidence suggests that the many owner/managers seek to restrain the growth of their firm and that this is connected to their attitudes towards growth and control (Gray, 1993; Cannon, 1991).

Small firms' marketing education

It is recognised that developed economies have a high proportion of small businesses that such entities are susceptible to failure often due to inadequacies in marketing (Carson and Mc Cartan-Quinn, 1995), and that marketing deficiencies constitute one of the recognised characteristics of the small firm in general (Carson, 1990). Whilst it is recognised that marketing is not an elixir to cure all business problems and that it has limitations (Brown, 1995), it has its part to play in assisting the large and growing number of small firms by reducing their vulnerability through increasing their marketing capability, and improving their practice of marketing. This paper suggests that improving marketing practice in the small firm can only be achieved through education of small firm owner/managers, given their omnipresence within the organisation.

Management education in general, and marketing education in particular for small firm owner/managers is inherently problematic. These problems must be acknowledged and addressed by marketing educators endeavouring to use marketing education as a means of improving small firm marketing practice.

Managerial education – inherent problems

With no consensus amongst educational facilitators as to the "best method of teaching management" (Whetten and Campbell Clark, 1996, p. 152), a belief that equipping small business owner/managers with an outline of managerial concepts developed in large organisations "may be more harmful than useful" (Tibbits, 1981, p. 186), an understanding that the very word "theory" implies impractical, grandiose, academic rhetoric (Mohan-Neill, Narayana and Hills, 1990), and the recognition that there are inadequacies in both the nature and provision of training (Kirby, 1990), those involved in small firms' management education face many difficulties in educating small firm owner/managers. Perceptions of the need for – and the best method of delivery of – management education need to be examined from the perspectives of the key players.

Small firm owner/managers and education

Owner/managers believe the best education to be through experience (Kirby, 1990) with the small business inexperience of some small business programme providers recognised as limiting their capacity to understand the specific and practical problems faced by the small firm (Banfield, Jennings and Beaver, 1996), resulting in the incomplete learning that comes from instructors not balancing understanding with application (Whetten and Clark, 1996), thereby compounding the scepticism of the owner/managers. Additionally, it is recognised that historically, many business courses have been largely structured around large business paradigms.

Small firm owner/manager education is rarely systematic and formal. Few appreciate their training requirements, and fewer still actively solicit formal training (Kirby, 1990). Their learning (which is described as "accidental") largely stems from informal contact with peers, customers and reference groups (Murphy and Young, 1995). Evidence suggests that new small firms will have undergone little by way of formal training prior to business start-up (Smallbone, 1990). Implementation of quality programmes, (another means by which educational transfer might be achieved), in small firms has proved inherently problematic due to a lack of commitment, resistance to change, and a preoccupation with the costs of such programmes on the part of small firm owner/managers (Bilston and Sohal, 1995). While it is true that some quality-related investments would be unsuitable in the context of the small firm given their general structure and organisation (Noci, 1995), the concept of quality itself (which includes accurate assessment of customer needs) should be just as applicable to the small firm as the large one.

There can be little doubt that management education programmes, generally, are less than favourably rated by small firm owner/managers, with the costs perceived to outweigh the potential benefits that such initiatives might deliver.

Small firms' marketing education – traditional methods

Many (often interrelated) factors mitigate against the application of traditional educational techniques and methods for small business owner/manager marketing education. Small business owner/managers do not actually "manage" their businesses adhering to accepted textbook management principles (Carson, 1996); have neither the time nor the inclination to contemplate complicated theories or processes (Hogarth-Scott, Watson and Wilson, 1996); are highly sceptical of the value of existing management training and development programmes in general (Banfield, Jennings and Beaver, 1996); and may be afraid of exposing their "educational deficiencies" by participating in a programme which they perceive to be of dubious benefit to their organisation (Kirby, 1990). Additionally, owner/managers need to be generalists rather than specialists (Fuller, 1994), and this means that – "Formal marketing may be interesting to the entrepreneur but it is unlikely to relate closely enough to his/her situation specific requirements or to solve company problems" (Carson, 1993, p. 194).

Thus, the negative perception that small firm owner/managers have of management education in general are further exacerbated in the context of marketing, given the perceptions that they have of marketing, what it is, what is can do and what it might cost.

What does the small firm owner/manager need?

In examining marketing education from the perspective of the small firm, given the omnipresence of the owner/manager, a fundamental question must be what do these owner/managers need from marketing education? From a marketing educational perspective, the small business sector has been neglected (Brannen, 1983). Easily implementable concepts that will contribute positively to the firm are deemed necessary but seemingly elusive (Shuman and Seeger, 1986), with the inability of small business research to reach a sufficiently systematic plateau documented (Brockhaus, 1983). A more fundamental question than "What teaching/learning methods provide the best means for effective [marketing] educational communication to small business owner/managers?" (Carson, 1990) is what do owner/managers of small firms actually want from marketing? For, if marketing education technology transfer to small firms is to be improved, and the gulf between marketing theory and practice is to be bridged in the situation specific of the small firm a prerequisite will be to better understand the marketing requirements of the small firm (Carson, 1993), with training and organisational development adapted to the specific requirements of the individual firm (Cromie, 1994), rather than "broad-based content courses" (Murphy and Young, 1995).

"In summary, our greatest challenge as educators is to creatively adjust to an unstructured, demanding and changing educational marketplace. New educational markets, approaches and channels are needed for the decade of the 90's to further enhance the exciting interface between marketing and entrepreneurship" (Weinrauch and Liska, 1993, p. 441).

Summary

The premise of this paper is that small business needs *something* from marketing, with that "something" coming from marketing education, in a format that is compatible with small firm characteristics and is acceptable to the small firm owner/manager. For most small firms, existing marketing theories offer little of practical use in day-to-day marketing activities. Many firms are unnecessarily vulnerable through inadequacies in their marketing practice. Educators and owner/managers view this situation from very different, and often incompatible perspectives. Educators need to establish what it is that small firm owner/managers need from marketing in general, and from marketing education in particular, and how this can best be delivered. This endeavour to generate customer satisfaction through identifying owner/manager needs and creating and delivering the appropriate educational product would essentially mean marketing educators marketing small firms' marketing to small firms.

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