

Strategic Marketing Planning and Small Firms in Ireland

Abstract

This paper examines the strategic marketing planning activities of small firms in Ireland. We take the view that there is a need to evaluate current practice and make informed recommendations that can improve marketing practice. In this research, data was collected in three stages: firstly, depth interviews were conducted. The interviews were conducted with six marketing practitioners. Secondly, a questionnaire was circulated to examine the practices of small firms operating in the Republic of Ireland. In the third, and final stage an expert group was convened with three marketing specialists and three representatives from small business support agencies. The expert group used the findings from stage one and two to develop six recommendations for marketing practitioners working in and with small firms.

Keywords: Strategic Marketing Planning, Small Firms, marketing practitioners, Ireland

Introduction

This research investigates strategic marketing planning (SMP) in small firms in Ireland. Stokes (2006) tells us that small firms have unique characteristics that make the owner/managers of small firms differentiate their marketing from conventional marketing as applied in large organisations. Most existing SMP frameworks were designed for bigger firms with plentiful resources and therefore, should not be proposed as solutions for small firms who typically adopt strategies based on their resource constraints. The use of strategic marketing planning in small firms is a relatively new phenomenon (Lee *et al.*, 2002). Small firm owner/managers who are trying to apply SMP can be considered innovators. However, innovators very often experience problems while attempting new

approaches. Therefore, we have used the findings from this study to develop six recommendations for marketing practitioners working in and with small firms

Strategic Marketing Planning and Small Firms

According to Keegan (2004) in strategic marketing everything matters: not only the product and the customer, but everything in the external environment including competition, technology, government, culture and whatever the company controls including product, price, place, promotion and branding while ultimately value as perceived and experienced by the customer matters. Furthermore, Cravens (2006) explains that at the beginning of the century strategic marketing is confronted with an unprecedented array of complex challenges and exciting opportunities. These changes, according to the theorist, are the consequences of demanding customers with complex value requirements, aggressive global competition, turbulent markets, new technologies and escalating globalisation. In that context it is important to highlight that the strategic influence of marketing appears to have diminished as short-term revenue goals become more dominant (Webster *et al.*, 2004). Moreover, Court (2004) argued that an explosion of customer segments, products, media and distribution channels have made strategic marketing more complex, more costly and less effective. When describing the basics of marketing strategy Drummond *et al.* (2001) identified the concept of marketing as being inherently simple – business success via a process of understanding and meeting customer needs. Given this basic simplicity why do small firms need something as complicated and time-consuming as a marketing strategy? While the basic principle may be simple; achieving excellence in marketing involves many complex, interdependent or

even conflicting tasks. Furthermore, according to Hooley and Saunders (1993 p. 81) successful marketing strategy development is fundamentally a process of finding the optimum “fit” between the firm and the competitive environment in which it operates - not just today’s environment, but also that of the foreseeable future. Drummond *et al.* (2001, p.11) agree and characterizes marketing strategy as ‘the process of analysing the business environment, defining specific customer needs, matching activities/products to customer segments and implementing programmes that achieve a competitive position, superior to competitors’.

There are many other definitions of marketing and marketing strategy. Lambin (2007) for example, characterised marketing as both a business philosophy and an action-orientated process. Lambin identified two broad functions of marketing within the firm: strategic and operational. *Strategic marketing*, which is the side of the spectrum explored in this research, according to Lambin (2007, p. 42) is effectively leading the firm towards market opportunities adapted to its resources and know-how and which offer potential profit and growth in the long-term. However, Webster *et al.* (2004) offered evidence that the strategic influence of marketing has declined over the past decade and resources have been redeployed from strategic marketing planning to the sales force, driven by customer relationship and account management priorities. Ashill *et al.* (2003) summarize the evolution of SMP explaining that in recent years several conceptual frameworks have been developed to better understand the processes of strategy formulation.

Doohan *et al.* (2009) explain that due to limited resources, small firms have to prioritise their marketing activities and choose marketing direction even more carefully than large scale enterprises. However, according to Stokes (2006) the owner/managers of small firms give marketing a low priority compared to other business functions, even though it is believed by Blankson and Stokes (2002) that a firm with a strategic marketing orientation will perform better than another similar firm without such an orientation. Hart and Tzokas (1999) studied the impact of strategic research on the export performance of small firms in the UK. They concluded that using export marketing information is the key to success. The small firms that devoted more time, effort and resources towards collecting information about potential export markets showed healthier ratios of export sales and profits to overall sales and profits.

A successful sales and marketing strategy, according to Simpson and Taylor (2002) is the most important of all business activities and essential for the survival of small firms, and yet, as identified by Huang and Brown (1999), it is often *the most dominant* problem encountered by small firm owner/managers. Moreover, Stokes (2006, p. 47) suggest that marketing is particularly important to smaller firms because it represents 'a vital interface between a small firm and an uncertain, fast changing external environment, and a key internal management skill which differentiates between surviving and failing firms'. Hills *et al.* (2005) emphasise the importance of strategic marketing in small firms quoting a survey of venture capitalists who rated marketing management as important to the success of new businesses at 6.7 on a 7-point scale.

Freel (2000) explains that small firms have consistently raised the issue of poor management skills and more precisely, that poor strategic marketing skills have been a barrier to product innovation. Stokes (2006) also identified a lack of formalised marketing planning as a major obstacle to development. He argued that short-term considerations take priority over longer term planning making small firm marketing management reactive in style and oriented towards the operational rather than the strategic. Developing SMP practices is especially difficult when small firms continue to be plagued by high failure rates and poor performance levels (Jocumsen, 2004). These unsatisfactory performances may be caused not just by poor strategic marketing decisions (Kotler, 2000; Corman and Lussier, 1996) but also by an inadequate understanding of how modern small firms make strategic marketing decisions (Culkin and Smith, 2000).

This crisis of confidence in the marketing discipline, according to Brown (1995) has to a large extent centered round the lack of applicability of marketing theory to marketing practice. The basic tools and tenets of marketing management theory and their relevance for the modern business environment are coming under scrutiny. For example, researchers (Mohan and Krishnaswamy, 2006; Yang *et al.*, 2007; Hines *et al.* 2006) demonstrate that many of the differences predicted by the Product Life Cycle (PLC) model of marketing planning and analysis are not evidenced in their own research. Other theorists (Hill *et al.*, 1998) extensively criticise the Boston Matrix and consumer behaviour models. Furthermore, Hill *et al.* (1998, p. 74) who studied the combining of marketing theory and practice suggest that ‘the theoretical underpinnings of marketing thought are coming under an increasing threat and often they are being perceived as

lacking any relevance for the modern business environment, especially in the case with the small business sector.’ There have been a number of research studies into the relationship between planning and organisational effectiveness. However, the findings have been conflicting and, subsequently, Hill *et al.* (1998) had to conclude that without further empirical research findings in this area, the idea that a firm’s performance improves as a consequence of engaging in a planning process and applying well known strategic marketing techniques has not proved easy to confirm.

McDonald (1989) summarised difficulties in marketing planning in small firms under the following ten barriers: confusion between marketing strategy and tactics; the isolation of the marketing function from business operations; confusion between marketing function and marketing concept; prevailing organisational structures along functional lines; a lack of skills in in-depth analysis; confusion between process and output; a lack of core marketing management knowledge and skills; the lack of a discipline, a systematic approach to marketing planning; a need to prioritise objectives; and the need for a more appropriate marketing culture. Carson *et al.* (1995, p. 6) developed an extensive list of marketing skills or competencies required to address the above ten barriers and considered desirable for effective marketing decision-making. These include ‘vision, creativity, leadership, communication, motivation, initiative, intuition, adaptability, analytical thinking, judgment, organisational ability, knowledge and networking’. McDonald (1996) and Piercy (1997) have argued that decision making skills need to be taken into account in planning because marketing management tools and frameworks are open to misinterpretation and abuse. McDonald (1996, p. 15) explains that without an

understanding of some of the basic tools of marketing, the chances of coming up with strategies focused on achieving a sustainable competitive advantage are slim. He also suggested that communication and interpersonal skills are 'prerequisites for marketing planning success, since excellent marketing plans will be ineffective unless those on whom the main burden of implementation lies, understand them and are highly motivated towards their achievement'.

Methodology

Having reviewed and analysed several existing strategic marketing planning models we concluded that extensive research has been carried out to develop various models and approaches to SMP in the smallbusiness sector. The majority of researchers (Stokes, 2006; Ashill *et al.* 2003; Jocusmsen, 2004) when developing their models, focused more on describing how strategic marketing planning is currently carried out in Smallfirms. We take the view that there is a need to evaluate current practice and maked informed reccommendations that can improve marketing practice. Therefore, in this research, data was collected in three stages: firstly, depth interviews were conducted. The interviews were conducted with six marketing practitioners. The six interviewees included three academics and three business consultants. The interviews had two primary purposes: first, to define the gaps, if any between practical strategic marketing planning and theory studied during the literature review. Second, to identify challenges affecting marketing activities in small firms. The interviews were taped, transcribed, and superfluous material removed such as digressions and repetitions to assist the analysis. Narrative structuring (Kvale, 1996) was used to create a coherent story of the respondent's experience of

integrating marketing practices into business actions. Secondly, a questionnaire was circulated to examine the practices of small firms operating in the Republic of Ireland. Figures obtained from Enterprise Ireland identified 1000 Smallfirms. Of 1000 questionnaires posted, 213 valid responses were received; a response rate of 21.3 percent. The questionnaire examined three key issues: first, current practices employed by small firms in SMP. Second, challenges facing small firms who try and engage in SMP. Third, the process of marketing specifically, SMP in small firms. The data was coded and SPSS was used to produce descriptive statistics. In the third, and final stage an expert group was convened with three marketing specialists and three representatives from small business support agencies. The expert group used the findings from stage one and two to develop six recommendations for marketing practitioners working in and with Smallfirms

Findings

Lambin (2007) explains that the mission statement and the long-term marketing objectives should be the foundation of all businesses strategy. However, in this study 38.5% of Smallfirms had long-term marketing objectives and 41.3% had a written mission statement. Cross-tabulations indicate that the percentage of small firms with written mission statements and long-term marketing objectives is much higher among small firms that employ at least one marketing professional or have a manager with a marketing background. The findings of this research are in line with Hills *et al.* (2005) who identified that small firm owner/managers generally reject such formal research methods preferring more informal methods of gathering market information. During phase one of this research the marketing consultants identified the concept of “*intuitive*

marketing". According to the consultants, some small firm owner/managers are unaware of the formal process of segmentation, targeting and positioning, but at the same time they are very conscious of their target market. This finding was confirmed during depth interviews with small firm owner/managers. The literature (Ashill *et al.*, 2003; Hackley, 2000; Gilmore *et al.*, 2001; Stokes, 2006) highlights the importance of tacit knowledge and the existence of so called *intuitive marketing*. However, in this study the respondents displayed a lack of awareness of their customer base; target market; and the segmentation process. A third of the small firms surveyed apply basic tactical segmentation tools rather than strategic approaches such as adjusting the whole marketing mix to suit the particular market segment. Frequently the segmentation of the target market in small firms is limited to price discounts to larger or more valuable customers. As such there is a gap between small business sector practice and segmentation theory. According to the theory (Clarke and Freytag, 2008; Dibb *et al.*, 2002) segmentation should be one of the core concepts in contemporary strategic marketing planning. Furthermore, successful segmentation relies on a clear understanding of the market, with knowledge of consumer behaviour being the critical foundation on which market understanding is built. However, Drummond *et al.* (2001) found that in practice the two most frequently used descriptions of segmentation were much more basic: price differentiation according to volume; and price differentiation according to customer size.

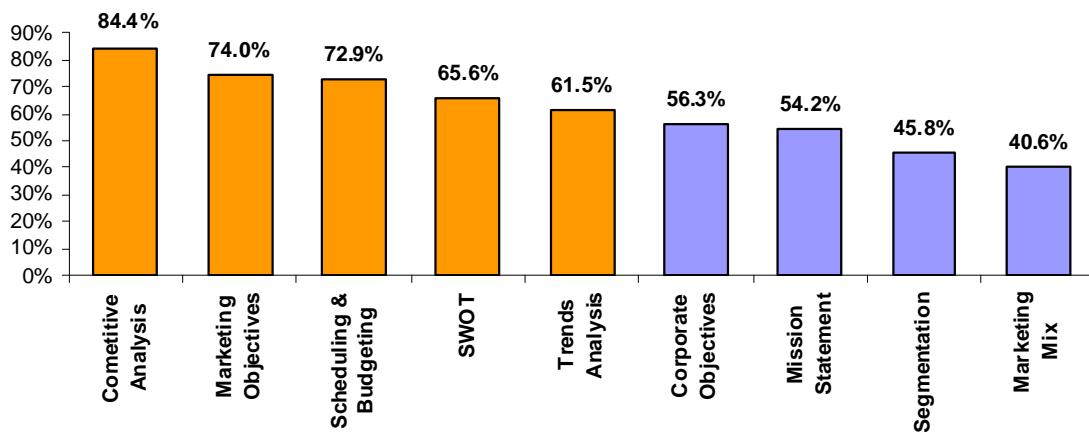
According to (Mohan and Krishnaswamy, 2006; Yang *et al.*, 2007; Hines *et al.* 2006) the basic tools of marketing management theory, including the marketing mix concept, tend to be viewed sceptically. Having established the levels of awareness of the marketing mix

concept we focused on the analysis of the suitability and complexity of this strategic marketing planning concept as viewed by the small firm owner/managers. The survey results suggest that 66% of the small firm owner/managers who were aware of the marketing mix concept felt that this approach was suitable for the small business sector, furthermore, 26% suggested that it was very suitable. However, the application of the marketing mix concept in practice cannot be viewed as simple because 58% of respondents identified it as being a complex process. Based on these findings we conclude that the application of the marketing mix concept, albeit a very complex issue, is viewed by the practitioners as suitable for small firms. During phase 1 of this research the business and marketing consultants indicated that formal SMP approaches are applied, but these usually are simplified for small firm owners by County Enterprise Boards or other similar organisations. Stokes (2006) also argued that most existing SMP frameworks, including the marketing mix concept, were designed for bigger firms with plentiful resources and should not be applied to small firms without adaptations. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that if adapted, simplified or explained, the marketing mix concept would have a wider application by small firms.

Lambin (2007) tried to illustrate the importance of written strategic marketing plans. He believed that sound strategic thinking about the future must be clearly stated in a document which describes the ends and means required to implement the chosen development strategy. Having identified the proportion of small firms that have a strategic marketing plan we evaluated the quality of the plans based on Lambins (2007) who proposed nine essential areas: mission statement; corporate objectives; SWOT

analysis; competitive analysis; trends analysis; marketing mix; marketing objectives; segmentation; and scheduling and budgeting. The majority (58%) of the small firms included a combination of between 5 and 6 of the nine essential areas in their SMP. 22% of the small firms that drafted a SMP included less than five essential areas. Initially we concluded that the majority of strategic marketing plans drafted by the small firms were relatively complete. However, this conclusion changed when we explored which of the nine areas were normally included or omitted. To identify which of the nine areas were more frequently included we calculated the number of the SMPs including each of the nine areas individually (i.e. we identified what percentage of small firms covered SWOT in their plan, what percentage of small firms covered segmentation, and so on for each of the nine areas individually). Our results indicate that in 84.4% of SMPs competitive analysis was included and the least popular was the marketing mix (41%). Figure 1 illustrates the percentage of Lambin (2007) essential areas include in the SMPs.

Figure 1 Percentages Lambin’s Essential Areas in the SMPs of the small firms



It is important to note that the five areas that are included the most are all tactical marketing tools and the four least popular areas are all of a strategic nature. These findings indicate the primary problem with SMP in the small firms. There is confusion between short-term marketing tactics and long-term strategy. When engaged in strategic marketing planning small firms in Ireland focus on tactical, short-term approaches such as competitive analysis, SWOT, scheduling and budgeting. Therefore, important strategic marketing planning approaches such as the Marketing Mix, Segmentation and Mission Statement are not emphasised. These findings are consistent with Stokes (2006) who also argued that in small firms short-term considerations take priority over longer term planning thereby making small firm marketing management reactive rather than strategic in style and operation. Simkin (2002) argued that the perceived lack of applicability of marketing theory to small firm practice is a result of implementation difficulties caused by the inadequate skills of small firm owner/managers and a lack of marketing knowledge. To test this statement, we cross-tabulated the data from the question on the perceived applicability of marketing theory to practice with: (i) MDs' background, and (ii) Marketing staff. The result was a strong correlation (+0.67) between the degree of agreement with the statement about the applicability of marketing theory to practice and the existence of marketing staff in a small firm.

We used cross-tabulation to test if there were significant variations in the SMP concepts applied by various types of small firms. Based on the data generated it is possible to identify four distinct groups of small firms: 1) Product firms mainly targeting private consumers; 2) Product firms mainly targeting other businesses; 3) Service firms mainly

targeting private consumers; and 4) Service firms mainly targeting other businesses. Wilkinson, (2006) and Morgan *et al.*, (2007) explain that business-to-business firms tend to allocate more resources towards networking activities. Our findings are consistent with this view. Furthermore, we identified that the majority of Irish business-to-business small firms (69.8%) are proactively trying to generate positive word-of-mouth. Molinari *et al.*, (2008) suggested that most previous studies in the area of word-of-mouth were carried out in business-to-consumer setting. The findings, as well as the recent study by Lacey and Morgan (2009) confirm the involvement of business-to-business firms with word-of-mouth seems to be a new trend. Variations in SMP strategy were also discovered between small firms that provide service(s) and those supplying product(s). Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988; Irmie, 2005; Gilligan and Wilson, 2003 all argue that the marketing of services differs to a great extent from that of products. This research indicates that service providers are indeed more involved in SMP activities than product suppliers. Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) suggested that potential customers tend to rely more on the information from personal sources, rather than advertising, when evaluating services. Gilligan and Wilson (2003) confirmed these differences and went on to suggest that the traditional marketing mix concept (4Ps) is too limited for strategic marketing planning in service provision and that the extended 7Ps concepts should be applied in any SMP framework designed for service providers.

Recommendations for practice

Based on our experience of working with and in small firms and the evidence from this research we make six recommendations to marketing practitioners who work with and in small firms. First, it is important that marketing practitioners emphasise the importance of SMP approaches when working with small firms. Second, marketing practitioners should work to aid the proper use of tactical marketing instruments within the strategic marketing planning process. Third, marketing practitioners should emphasise the importance of word-of-mouth in services marketing. Fourth, by developing a clear plan of the marketing process, practitioners can better explain how and when operational marketing tools should be applied within broader strategic marketing concepts. Fifth, it is important that these marketing planning tools and concepts are properly incorporated into the marketing strategies of small firms. Sixth, and finally, formal models from strategic marketing theory can be successfully applied to small firms. However, theory needs to be adapted, simplified or explained in vernacular understandable to the small firm.

These six recommendations were presented to the expert group. Based on the survey findings and work of the expert group we divided the small business sector into four distinct groups: 1) Product firms mainly targeting private consumers; 2) Product firms mainly targeting other businesses; 3) Service firms mainly targeting private consumers; and 4) Service firms mainly targeting other businesses. After completing the first three stages of the strategic marketing plan design process (corporate strategy; external and internal analysis; and marketing objectives) It is paramount that in stage four (formulation of marketing strategy) different strategic marketing approaches are

employed depending on whether a small firm is a service provider or a product(s) supplier. Indeed, using the extended 7Ps marketing mix for service providers and utilising the Pareto principle (80/20 rule) during the segmentation process in business-to-business companies, these choices offer a solution for the marketing professionals. However, these are not obvious choices for the small firm owner/managers for who an explanation is necessary as to which of the strategic marketing concepts should be employed by their particular business.

Conclusion

This investigation identified that the percentage of small firms with a written mission statement and long-term marketing objectives was much higher among small firms that employed at least one marketing professional or were managed by an MD with a marketing background. In addition, the researcher concluded that the application of the marketing mix concept, albeit a complex issue was viewed by practitioners as suitable for the small business sector. Therefore, the researchers suggest that if adapted, simplified or, even better, clearly explained, the marketing mix concept would find a wider application across the spectrum of small firms. Further examination of the findings revealed that, when engaged in strategic marketing planning, small firms in Ireland focus more on tactical short-term approaches while often omitting strategic marketing planning concepts such as the Marketing Mix, Segmentation and a Mission Statement.

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