

THE USE OF BRANDING WITHIN
SME's IN DONEGAL

Submitted by:
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I. Abstract

The motivation behind conducting this research was to become more aware of the activities within SME's in the area of branding. By analysing the existing literature it was evident that research, specific to branding in SME's, was not extensive and no research was conducted within Irish SME's. The research is of importance to SME's within Donegal and Ireland, to better understand what branding issues they are facing and how to overcome them.

The approach taken to gather the appropriate information was qualitative in nature; semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 11 companies in the four prominent sectors within Donegal. Their opinions, perceptions and real life situations were analysed and findings were produced.

The result of the research was that key findings were uncovered namely, SME's use a form of branding which is suited to their specific circumstances, resources, time and expertise, branding in SME's is integrated with other marketing activities such as service and value adding, SME's encounter many limitations to branding however they can be overcome, and all SME's try to create differentiation, through a name, concept, image or personality.

The implications of these findings is that the research allows a better understanding of the current situation of SME branding in Donegal and efforts can therefore be made to increase branding activity within these companies. The qualitative research conducted allows for further quantitative research to be carried out in the future.

II. Dedication

This work is dedicated to my loving boyfriend Johnny and my family who have helped me through the difficult times of this dissertation.

Without your support, encouragement and patience I would never have completed this dissertation.

I will always be grateful for what you have done for me.

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Introduction

Branding, according to the literature, allows a company to demand premium prices and increase market share, the possibility of stable earnings and the distinguishing of products and position relative to competitors is also mentioned. What this research aims to achieve is to gain insight into the branding activities of SME's and the usefulness branding has in the competitiveness of a company.

Overall objectives of the research were to analyse the literature available under key areas, namely benefits, limitations, strategy development and branding tools. Through the analysis, an approach was developed in order to investigate and gather data in these areas.

The author carried out qualitative in-depth interviews; semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 11 companies in the four prominent sectors within Donegal. Their opinions, perceptions and current situations were analysed. Key findings resulted from the research, which included; SME's use a form of branding which is suited to their specific circumstances, resources, time and expertise, branding in SME's is integrated with other marketing activities such as service and value adding, SME's encounter many limitations to branding however they can be overcome, and all SME's try to create differentiation, through a name, concept, image or personality.

The research allows a better understanding of the current situation of SME branding in Donegal and efforts can therefore be made to increase branding activity within these companies.

The author believes that all the outlined objectives are met from the data collection method applied. The data collection process used resulted in positive and informative findings and consequently some advice can be imparted to SME's on the area of branding.

1. Literature Review

This chapter focuses on the literature that is available on SME's and branding activities so to determine gaps in the research to date. The literature studied was a combination of published articles, journals and textbooks. The specific areas researched include, benefits and limitations of branding, differentiation, value adding and integration and also the various branding tools available.

1.1 Branding

According to Keller (2003) branding is used as a means to distinguish the goods of one producer from those of another. It is a combination of an effective product, a distinct identity that stands out and adds values that the customer can immediately identify with (Doyle, 1998). Brands are said to have the ability transform individuals into different and more desirable people, playing on our hopes, fears, dreams and anxieties (Solomon and Rabolt, 2004). What this point stresses is the important role that a brand can play in instilling and evoking emotions and feelings towards that brand and how it beholds the power to place that brand in a certain place in the consumers mind.

Wagner and Fillis (2004) note that in the UK 99% of business comprises of Small to Medium Sized Enterprises (SME's), and the figure in the United States is 99.7% (2005). The majority of these were unable to access branding help and their main problem was to identify a distinctive, clear message and establishing a clear position and personality.

1.2 Benefits of Branding for SME's

Doyle (1998) outlines numerous advantages of branding, including the increase in power to demand premium prices and increase market share, the possibility of stable earnings and the distinguishing of products and position relative to competitors. If customers attach themselves to a brand that awakens an emotion or feeling this may warrant spending more on any particular product or service, therefore this justification will result in premium prices being accepted by the market. The knock on effect of adding a personality to the product or service will be a more attractive point of differentiation and this will also increase market share for the product or service. Some guidelines for ensuring branding is effective include understanding that branding is more than a logo, printed stationery and a good reputation, it has long-term benefits that can accrue if branding is handled appropriately.

Cohen and Stretch (1989) revealed that marketing represents a significant challenge for owners of SME's. Kraft and Goodell (1989) believe this figure is 75% of SME's. However some of the advantages inherent in SME's can be used to increase market share and branding effectiveness. These advantages include flexibility, speed of reaction and an eye for opportunities (Carson *et al*, 1995; Glinsky *et al*, 2001; Hill, 2001)

Mowle and Merrilees (2005) in their investigation of branding of SME wineries in an Australian context identified 6 common features acting as foundation to branding SME wineries. By taking a qualitative approach the research sought to further understand branding from the perspective of an SME winery and in doing so, goes in some way towards addressing the deficit in the literature. The features identified were; producing a premium product, conveying an image of quality, using a identifiable name and symbol, forming business relationships and networks, participating in events and shows, and providing good service.

1.3 Limitations of Branding for SME's

Carson (1990) underlines that limitations for Small and Medium Sized Enterprise are stemmed from their unique characteristics that differentiate themselves from conventional marketing in larger organisations. The resulting limitations arising for SME's include limited resources within the areas of time, finance and marketing knowledge, as well as limited knowledge and limited impact on the marketplace. According to Scase and Goffe (1980), the results of these limitations are that decision-making is done by the owner/manager only and their marketing activities are haphazard. The growth volatility associated with the start up phase of a company is highlighted by Storey and Johnston,(1986). They concur that in these years there are differing activities for SME's to deal with and add that the initial years prove most difficult and turbulent.

Problems facing SME's conducting branding are mainly capacity and budgets (Krake, 2005). What was noted from Krake's (2005) study of medium sized consumer goods businesses is that larger marketing budgets resulted in effective marketing, on average 2-3 % of turnover was allocated for these purposes and this is significant enough to carry out a sufficient level of marketing.

The limitations and barriers that are put in the way of SME's success have a knock on effect on the perception of branding as being too difficult to pursue. It is an essential activity within any company seeking growth and distinctiveness, yet it is often considered unimportant and unnecessary. Some literature notes these perceptions, 'It is questionable whether small businesses need to practice marketing at all to survive and grow' (Hogarth- Scott et al, 1996). Simpson, Padmore and Taylor (2005) found that SME owners are not marketing specialists and marketing theories that are complex may not be appropriate for SME's and do not really aid their overall understanding of how to increase competitiveness.

Brodie, *et al* (1997) state that the varying opinions and notions of branding are so contrasting that authors have no agreed best practice approaches, ' there are

differences in approach to research marketing in SME's and there are different approaches adopted by SME's toward branding'.

Doyle (1998) highlights more limitations of branding including acquiring negative brand equity and having a high cost involvement. Negative brand equity can develop if there are negative connotations associated with the brand that would cause serious damage to the brand in the long run. A branded product that is involved in minimum wage investigations or health effects for example, will feel the greatest effect and damage from the negative perceptions and find it more difficult to detach the brand from that issue. Cost involvement is considered to be relatively high due to the long term investment needed to notice a return. Investment in perception building and differentiation may not be noted immediately and costs can escalate and grow at a rapid speed. It is important that consideration for the long term benefits of goodwill and competitively differentiated products or services is given.

1.4 Strategic Role of Branding

Krake (2005) highlights two pillars which marketing strategy is based on: differentiation and added value, a third, integration was added by Fill (2002). It has been suggested that those companies involving themselves in these activities will enjoy significant advantages over those that do not (Kohl and Stephens, 1997; Randall, 1997).

1.4.1 Differentiation

‘Differentiation refers to the task of identifying a distinctive attribute that will distinguish your product from that of competition. The brand strategy should contain an extremely competitive element such as, unmatched levels of expertise, location, patents, economies of scale or heightened brand awareness. A sustainable competitive advantage must then be communicated to the consumer’ (Fill, 2002). Sustainable competitive advantage refers to an attribute that will ensure competitiveness in the long term. Aaker (2004) also notes that brand awareness is an asset that can be extremely durable and thus sustainable.

1.4.2 Value Adding

Aaker (2004) highlights the issue and importance of adding value for the consumer and discusses a tool to measure significant value-added components; the value chain. The Value Chain is a conceptual model developed by Porter (1985). A business’s value chain consists of two types of value-creating activities, primary and secondary, and should be considered when assessing competitors. If this tool is used correctly then value will be attached to the product or service and the company will become more likely to develop a sustainable competitive advantage.

The primary value activities consist of bringing materials into the business, transforming them into products, distributing them, marketing and servicing them. The support activities underpin the primary activities by providing the purchased inputs, developing the technology used in the product and process, hiring, developing

and motivating the firms personnel, and producing the infrastructure activities such as general management, finance and planning.

The various elements of the *primary value activities* are; inbound logistics, operations, outbound logistics, marketing and sales, and service. The elements of the *secondary value activities* are; procurement, technology development, human resource management and organisation infrastructure. Porter (1985)

1.4.3 Integration

An effective integrated marketing plan means using all marketing tools to support a brand. The messages that are used to convey brand values must be consistent, uniform and reinforcing. Integration as discussed by Fill (2005) is a list of elements that result in effective communication, he mentions the use of agencies, technology, employees, strategy development, marketing mix, messages and branding as the tools that prove most effective if integrated together. He notes that integration is not a theory of marketing, but the ideas inherent in the overall approach appear to hold value. What integration is to one person may be coordination to another and until there is a theoretical base upon which to build integrated marketing communications the phrase will continue to be misused, misunderstood and used in a haphazard and inconsistent way.

The elements discussed highlight how the strategic role of branding is determined by mainly, differentiation, adding value and the integration of all the marketing activities to pursue the strategic goal. Without these key pillars it is noted that branding would not be effective.

1.5 Role of Brands in SME's

Krake (2005) explains how responsibility for branding lies with top management; this one individual decides changes in brand policy or logo. The character of the owner/manager is also deemed of most importance; however the lack of human resources means there is may be no one else to take on the responsibility.

Krake (2005) discusses guidelines for creating a strong brand including: building one strong brand, a creatively developed marketing program on one or two important brand associations, an integrated mix of brand elements that support brand awareness and image, consistent communication, and a passion for brand within the company.

SME 's according to Krake (2005) are not branding their products and are missing out on this logical stage. What was identified as being an essential element to effective branding is an increased level of creativity particularly with relation to the marketing department and this must first and foremost come from the owner/manager.

Within the literature four main branding tools emerged which include, networking, reputation building, leadership and identity. Each element can help a business brand more effectively therefore, each of the elements will be evaluated in more detail.

1.5.1 Networking

Fill (2005) describes networks as relationships that are characterised by organisations who choose to coordinate their activities in such a way that their individual goals are achieved, but not necessarily at the expense of other organisations. This allows a company to gain information regarding different activities but does not give away any unique or valuable information that would allow competition to take advantage, the process works as a mutually beneficial setup. Mc Laughlin and Horan (2000) underline five main exchange elements that include financial and economic exchange, technological exchange, knowledge exchange, legal exchange and information exchange.

Networking as defined by Gilmore, Carson and Grant (2001) is a way for owner managers to conduct marketing activities effectively. Networking refers to developing relationships in order to promote your product or service through to your target market, it is a way of gaining information and contacts to help the owner or manager better reach their market. Brodie *et al* (1997) state that a company can carry out networking with competitors and customers for the benefits of maintaining work within a given area, to improve the industry activities within their competitive area and to build up strong relationships. The belief is that carrying out networking activities is a competency that owner managers of SME's should possess to carry out marketing effectively.

1.5.2 Reputation

Reputation refers to judgments about an organisations qualities, trustworthiness and reliability built up over time (Fombrun and Van Riel, 2004). Golberg *et al*, (2003) state that few small businesses follow a reputation-building strategy. A strong reputation is considered strategically important (Greyser, 1999) to act as a primary means of differentiation when there is little difference at product level, to act as a support facility during times of turbulence and to act as a measure of corporate value. In addition it has a positive impact on a company's share price (Cooper, 1999).

Fombrun (1996) highlights areas or attributes that need to be considered and nurtured in order to build strong reputation and they are credibility, trustworthiness, reliability and responsibility.

1.5.3 Identity

Organisational identity can be explained as an objective, aim, vision and coagulate, embodied in logos and symbols (Abimbola and Kocak, 2007). Hamel and Prahalad (1994) note that organisational identity facilitates management's ability to choreograph the process of creating and delivering brand value and propositions. The final result of effective company identity is the ability to link its internal and external environment through effective deployment of internal competence and capability. Schultz and Barnes (1999) also add that there is increased market acceptance of new offerings.

Abimbola and Kocak (2007) found that SME's are beginning to realise that building strong brands and reputations are as important to their ability to appropriate profitable gains from their enterprises as innovativeness; creativity and agility are to their competitiveness. Creative application of brand instruments such as patents, trademarks, and existing reputable name, symbols and logos could enhance market-based factors such as brand and reputation, which communicate competence and the capacity to offer superior value to customers.

1.5.4 Leadership

Like any plan or strategy a branding strategy needs to be managed and more importantly led in an organisation. Without a leader to bring the strategy through its various stages effectively, a plan may be developed and never implemented. Without the presence of a leader the task will never take full effect on the market place and the advantages and benefits of branding will never be realised.

What constitutes effective leadership is discussed by many authors including Vallaster and De Chernatony (2005) and Balmer and Gray (2003). They mention that through good company structures, expressed by corporate identity, the company is forced to successfully merge the corporate culture with management processes and systems, so that organisational thinking, behaviour and corporate design are aligned with corporate culture.

Vallaster and De Chernatony (2005) discuss the role of leaders in successful branding as having the responsibility for coherently defining the brand identity, mediating between structure and individuals and acting as the facilitator.

1.6 Typology

A number of models seeking to develop the marketing and branding activities of SME's have been developed and two of those are discussed in this section.

Wong and Merrilees (2005) underline the role that branding plays within small to medium sized enterprises. These roles are brand distinctiveness, brand orientation, brand-marketing performance and brand barriers. Using brand-marketing performance and brand orientation, 3 brand archetypes emerge; minimalist, embryonic and integrated branding. Minimalist branding activities are low key across the board. Embryonic branding reflects a business that is strong on marketing but not necessarily branding; branding is seen as optional, they mainly rely on word of mouth. While, integrated branding strategies highlights a business that carries out either formal or informal branding and has medium to high level of brand distinctiveness. Brand distinctiveness refers to the difference the brand beholds compared to that of competitors. From the matrix it is evident that the role of branding at each level is varying in importance and in value. See appendix 1 for this model.

It can be concluded that the role that branding plays in an organisation depends on where they are placed on the matrix. The important thing for an organization is to realise their position and to act appropriately in order to move towards a more integrated branding strategy approach.

A second model designed by Simpson, Padmore, Taylor and Frecknall Hughes (2006) ,using a matrix determines the role of marketing and the relevance of marketing within an SME. Again the organisation is placed on a matrix and depending on the level the company integrates the role of marketing and the relevance of marketing into their organisation, this results in the organisation being placed or noted as being marketing dominant, marketing independent, marketing weak or a marketing led organisation. See appendix 2 for this model.

Another way of determining the role of branding and development of branding strategies is by taking into consideration the age of the company and its stage within the product life cycle that the company is placed. Marketing levels change in relation to the stage in an organisations product life cycle 'Younger companies clearly adopt the principles and practices of marketing and have active business plans and a marketing budget. Older companies seem to be less aware of the benefits of marketing efforts and see it as an unnecessary allocation of time and resources' (Simpson, Padmore and Taylor, 2005).

By understanding the typologies available it can be concluded from the findings of the research if these very typologies could be applied to SME's within Donegal

1.7 Conclusion

The literature has highlighted the benefits and limitations as faced by SME's. By identifying two main pillars of branding, differentiation and adding value, it will form a structure for the in-depth interview process so to examine the situation within a certain geographical location.

From analysing the literature four areas that aid effective branding emerged and they include networking, reputation, identity and leadership. What is sought is to discover to what extent SME's use these tools to help in their branding efforts and the findings from investigations can be seen in chapter 3.

Literature on brand management systems, which include topics such as brand perception, brand loyalty, brand knowledge, brand differentiation, brand equity, brand awareness, brand proliferation and brand image, has been noted by such authors as Aaker (1996), De Charnatony (1992) and Keller (2003). The application of the appropriate tools, frameworks and approaches can result in a branding strategy to be developed in order to create a more competitive organisation.

As is pointed out, the theories analysed highlight that adopting new marketing tools such as networking, e-business and internet marketing can change, marketing weak companies to become marketing led.

From looking at these typologies it is now possible to discover if, the owner/managers would be able to take on board such typologies and apply them to their company or, is the complexity of them too advanced for the SME's. Looking at the typologies within this area of research it is helpful to become familiar with them in order to analyse, through the findings, if the typologies could be applied to SME's within Donegal. From the literature available it seems that the limitations that SME's encounter while branding, may result in the application of these typologies being unlikely, this question will be answered through the analysis of the findings.

From the literature that the author has reviewed, a structure is now in place to conduct exploratory research in each of the areas of limitations, benefits, differentiation, value, integration and each of the branding tools of networking, reputation, identity and leadership.

2. Methodology

This chapter aims to evaluate various methods and techniques available to the researcher in order to attain the appropriate information so that the objectives set out are met. The main area discussed focus on the merits of qualitative and quantitative research methods and their appropriateness for this research topic.

2.1 Research Objectives

This research undertaken aims to gain a greater insight into the branding activities of small and medium sized enterprises (SME's) within Donegal.

1. To discover the extent to which SME's within Donegal, utilise branding tools to remain competitive within their market.
2. To ascertain if branding activities are integrated within the business.
3. To explore the perceived barriers to branding by the company.
4. To determine the perceived benefits of branding for both the customer and themselves.
5. To examine the importance placed on differentiation in the strategy of the organisation.
6. To highlight how important adding value is to the long term brand strategy of the organisation.

2.2 Research Philosophy

The research philosophy adopted by the author is one of an interpretivist view in order to take into account the uniqueness of each organisations situation and the rapidity of change within each industry and organisation. It allows the author to explore the subjective meanings motivating peoples' actions in order to be able to understand these (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2003).

2.3 Research Approach

Hair *et al* (2007) note that taking an inductive approach to research means getting on the ground floor and conducting interviews in order to get a feel for the situation. This approach would allow numerous explanations to emerge from certain situations instead of just one.

2. 4 Research Strategy

By choosing an appropriate research strategy the quality of the outcome is greatly enhanced and the usefulness of the information is increased greatly. To determine which research strategy was most relevant an evaluation was carried out on all the various options and a choice was made.

An exploratory research strategy is appropriate for this research as it is a way of finding out what is happening, to seek new insights and to ask questions so as to assess phenomena in a new light (Robson, 2002). Exploratory research is flexible and adaptable to change in relation to the results that can be obtained. Adams and Schnaeveldt (1991) put across a point that counteracts exploratory researches main downfall namely lack of direction, noting that, using exploratory research does not mean the absence of direction to the enquiry but rather that the focus is initially broad and becomes progressively narrower as the research progresses. This is the aim of the undertaken research, as specific personal issues and situations need to be discussed once a broad picture is determined initially.

Exploratory research allows for a stepping-stone to be created, facilitating further quantitative research. As Malhotra (2007) noted, exploratory research can define a problem, identify alternative courses of action, develop hypotheses, isolate key relationships and variables, develop an approach to the problem and establish priorities for further research.

2.4.1 Qualitative vs. Quantitative Research

‘Qualitative data represent descriptions of things that are made without assigning numbers directly. Qualitative data are generally collected using some type of interview or observation. Quantitative data are measurements in which numbers are used directly to represent the characteristics of something. Since they are recorded directly with numbers, they are in a form that easily lends itself to statistical analysis. (Hair *et al*, 2007)

Malhotra (2007) classifies qualitative research into direct and indirect approaches. The direct approach means that the meaning of the research is not disguised, and within the direct approach focus groups and in-depth interviews are the main techniques.

As discussed previously the nature of this research is exploratory, the area of branding within SME’s is at an early stage of understanding and development, and therefore it is necessary to explore this practice further. The issue of branding and its usefulness for SME’s in Donegal is an area that needs greater insight as it is both the company’s individual situation and owner/managers opinions that drive the use of branding within SME’s. Quantitative analysis at this stage is not appropriate due to the nature of the topic; the stage of advancement in this area is not at an appropriate level to warrant extensive quantitative research but rather an exploratory approach to determine the future of research needed in this area.

Ambiola and Kocak (2007) carried out research on brand, organisational identity and reputation within SME’s, the primary data was gathered from in-depth interviews with a sample of firms. The research found that due to the nature of the research which is loaded with many possible meanings and interpretations, that issues are explored better through qualitative data in the first instance. Bryman, (1998), Kruger and Casey, (2001), and Patton (2002) noted that qualitative research methods have a tradition of generating richer and more meaningful information and interviews with respondents allowed for closer access to their realities and collection of rich data within a manageable process.

Once a decision is made to conduct exploratory research a choice must then be taken regarding the method in which this research will be carried out. The options most used and discussed by Malhotra (2007) are focus groups and in depth interviews.

2.5 Data Collection Methods

2.5.1 Focus Groups

An evaluation of focus groups and depth interviews by Stokes, D. & Bergin, R. (2006), noted that a trend began in 1990's whereby qualitative research took the largest share of the research budget and out of this qualitative research, focus groups became more frequently used. In fact two thirds of qualitative research was conducted through focus groups.

As the use of focus groups has become so predominant the decision to utilise this method is almost unchallenged the result is that there is little consideration given as to whether it is the best qualitative method to be used and therefore, is sometimes used inappropriately as suggested by Kruger and Casey (2000), Roe (1998) and Robson (1993).

Zikmund (1997) preferred seven core advantages of focus groups, they were synergy which produces a wider range of information, snowballing, which creates a chain of thoughts and ideas: serendipity, which means that ideas may drop out of the blue stimulation, whereby respondents views are drawn out by group process, security, respondents are more willing to impart information in a group situation with similar individuals, spontaneity, allowing for quick responses to various questions, specialisation, allowing for the expert to question more respondents, structure, which is advantageous because uncovered topics can be brought back up for discussion, speed, taking into consideration that focus groups are quicker than an individual interview and scrutiny, which allows members of the research team to analyse more easily as observation of the respondents is easier to achieve in a group situation.

These advantages seem attractive and applicable to the research topic in question however the merits of the other qualitative methods must also be considered. The one that will be chosen will be the one that best applies to the situation at hand and the restrictions that exist in order to achieve the desired outcome.

Hedges (1985) and Greenbaum (1998) feel that respondents may be inhibited by the group situations that they are faced with. Another point noted by Webb (1995) and Greenbaum (2003) is that many respondents may begin to over claim when in a focus group, exaggerating at certain points and on certain topics. One more downfall of focus groups noted by Robson (1990) is that agreement in the focus group situation may not follow through to private thoughts and opinions, the respondent may be encouraged to agree where they truly do not

2.5.2 Depth Interviews

An interview is a purposeful discussion between two or more people (Khan and Cannell, 1957). Malhotra (2007) defines in- depth interviews as another method of obtaining qualitative data. This is an unstructured and direct way of obtaining information. Unlike other qualitative methods such as focus groups, depth interviews are conducted on a one-on-one basis.

Some positive findings regarding in-depth interviews are noted by Robson and Foster (1989) as they highlight that the circumstances of each of the respondents can be unique and personal therefore they require a one-on-one interview situation. Other benefits include the control of the respondent selection, which results in more depth, context and flexibility (Cassell and Syman, 2004). The interpretation of the questions and the openness to answering questions can also be greater in an in-depth interview situation. Any ambiguity toward questions can be clarified and the one-on-one interaction and relationship development allows for a level of openness that a group setting may not develop. Some of the advantages of in depth interviews outlined by Malhotra (2007) are that greater depth of insight is obtained, the interviewer can attribute response directly to the respondent and also there is free exchange of information that may not be possible elsewhere, as again, the development of a rapport with the respondents allows for this. Others believe that in-depth interviews may possess as much relevance and produce as much information as focus groups due to the close interaction with the respondents and the ability to probe where necessary.

Negative aspects that have been highlighted by Robson (1990) is that depth interviews lack the interaction with others that focus groups allow, Zikmund (1997) also notes along with Malhotra (2007) that the speed of these interviews are slow and the costs involved are also higher than those of focus groups. Malhotra (2007) mentions some disadvantages including that the lack of structure makes the interview susceptible to the interviewers influence; the quality of the interview depends on the interviewer's skills.

So why chose one over the other? What Stokes & Bergin (2006) concluded was that both methods highlighted central issues, deeper attitudinal data is collected in in-depth interviews and the breadth of information is larger with focus groups. Depth and detail relating to the central issue were identified as not being as concise with focus groups. In-depth interviews are more appropriate for specific well-defined issues and focus groups are more appropriate for exploring a broad area. Upon consideration of the aspects of in-depth interviews such as, being able to avoid peer pressure, allowing probing of individuals, discussing sensitive areas, topics and motives and reasoning of individual's actions can be uncovered. It was decided that in-depth interviews were the most appropriate data collection technique for this research.

Depth interviews have been used in a number of similar studies as they allowed for closer access to their realities and collection of rich data within a manageable process (Kruger and Casey, 2001; Ojasalo, J. Natti, S. Olkenen, R., 2008).

2.6 Measurement Techniques

The type of in-depth interview that will be used will be semi structured in nature; they can be very helpful to find out what is happening and to seek new insights, especially in exploratory research (Robson, 2002). The pertinent areas highlighted in the literature will form the basis for the theme sheet such as, limitations of branding, benefits of branding, differentiation, value adding and branding tools. See appendix 3 for semi structured theme sheet.

Malhotra (2007) suggests that the interviewer should avoid appearing superior and put the respondent at ease, be detached and objective yet personable, ask questions in an informative manner, not accept brief 'yes' or 'no' answers and probe the respondents. Hair, J.F. *et al* (2007), discuss the various aspects of semi structured interviews. They note that there is a freedom to exercise the interviewer's own initiative which can result in insightful and unexpected information. Semi structured interviews possess an overall structure and direction but still allow for flexibility. Probing, which means the researcher delves deeply into a response to identify possibly hidden reasons for a particular behaviour can be conducted on a one on one basis with semi structured interview.

2.6 1 Semi Structured Interviews

Participants were thanked for accepting the request to meet, the purpose of the interview was briefly outlined, confidentiality was reiterated to the participant and also the issue of the participants right not to answer any question if they so wish. An offer was also made to all participants of written documentation of the interview and dissertation outcome. The method of documenting the interview was discussed and a decision was made to record the interviews by shorthand rather than introducing a recorder which later would have to be transcribed into text format. From the pilot interviews, interviewees were more comfortable with the manual recording as opposed to mechanical recording of interviews. The themes of the interview were introduced and an indicative timeframe of 30 to 40 minutes was outlined.

Two pilot interviews were conducted at 1.00 pm on the 13th May 2008 and 9.00 am on the 5th May 2008 with small to medium sized enterprises within Donegal. The companies interviewed were part of the retail and services sectors in Donegal. The pilot interviews were conducted in order to identify any problems regarding the question sequence, wording of questions, and overall response to the semi structured interview.

Issues arose regarding the repetition of questions and the length of the interview, it was perceived as being slightly long. The amendments were made to the structure before the primary research was conducted.

The theme sheet was driven by the research objectives and focused on the company's level of branding, their encountered barriers and benefits to branding. In addition, the role that branding played within their organisation was discussed at length. These areas are of importance due to the fact that the literature analysed identified these as specific areas that needed further exploratory research.

2.7 Sampling

The sampling frame is a complete list of all the cases in the population from which the sample will be drawn, therefore the sampling frame in question is all the micro and small enterprises (SME's) within Donegal in 2008. An accurate list was compiled from Data Base Ireland and crossed checked with the Donegal County Enterprise Board (DCEB) to ensure the list was fully comprehensive and complete. Data Base Ireland is a search tool that allows all businesses within Ireland to be filtered so that a specific result is obtained.

2.8 Population

The European Commission adopted Recommendation 2003/361/EC on 6th May 2003, to take effect from 1st January 2005 (published in OJ L 124 of 20.5.2003). The Commission outlined three categories of SME's, medium, small and a third category called micro enterprises. A micro enterprise has a headcount of less than 10, and a turnover or balance sheet total of not more than €2 million. A small enterprise has a headcount of less than 50, and a turnover or balance sheet total of not more than €10 million. A medium-sized enterprise has a headcount of less than 250 and a turnover of not more than €50 million or a balance sheet total of not more than €43 million. Due to the difficulties enacting specific turnover figures, the sample was selected on the basis of the number of employees only.

The population for this research was small and micro enterprises as the author felt that cost and time constraints and the reality that the problems facing SME's are more prevalent within smaller companies, as they experience issues such as lack of expertise, time and money.

Target Population

Male or female owners/managers of small or micro sized enterprises in County Donegal, Ireland in 2008.

Sampling Frame

Each of the four major sectors of SME's which comprise services, retail, manufacturing and construction. These were defined by the DCEB, and all the relevant companies within these sectors were retrieved and crossed checked from Data Base Ireland.

Sample Size

Out of the businesses listed the proportion of each of the sectors in relation to the total was determined; the total sample size was 834 companies with under 50 employees. The ratio of retail, services, manufacturing and construction was 4:5:1:1 therefore interviews conducted were in the same proportion (see Appendix 4 for letter from DCEB verifying proportions). 11 interviews were conducted in total, 4 in the retail sector, 5 in the services sector, 1 in manufacturing sector and 1 in construction sector.

Other branding studies have used depth interviews with a similar number of respondents as they allowed for the desired exploratory data that was required. Three examples of these studies are Ambiola and Kocak (2007), Stokes and Bergin (2006), Wong and Merrilees (2005).

Given that exploratory research is carried out with smaller sample sizes, it was decided that for this research a non-probability sampling technique was more appropriate than a probability sampling technique. Non-probability sampling relies on the personal judgment of the researcher. Examples of these are convenience sampling, judgment sampling, quota sampling and snowball sampling. Out of these options the chosen method was quota sampling as it is the most accurate form of non-probability sampling (Malhotra, 2007). Quota sampling involves segmenting the entire population into mutually exclusive sub-groups; in this case, these have been identified as being four main business sectors: retail, services, manufacturing and construction. Then judgment sampling is used to select a proportionately representative sample from each sub-group. This step makes the technique one of non-probability sampling.

2.8 Academic Opinion

Through correspondence with Prof. David Carson, who is a widely published marketing expert with over 30 years international experience in marketing education, research and consultancy, it was agreed that analysis of the research findings would be conducted and feedback would be given. See Appendix 5 for feedback.

This will allow the findings to be critically examined by an individual that has expertise and experience in a specific area of marketing, branding, and it will be determined if the research objectives were met and key findings were uncovered.

2.9 Analysis

By analysing the respondents' answers the author presents the findings under the headings of limitations, benefits, differentiation, and branding tools and a conclusion can be made as to the nature of branding that is taking place within SME's in Donegal. Similarities and differences between the identified sectors were also drawn to allow for specific information to be imparted from those sectors regarding that particular area of branding.

3. Findings

From conducting the 11 in-depth interviews there were 5 key areas which the interviewee sought to uncover information. The first area that was discussed fell under the heading of branding activities in order to discover to what extent the companies conduct branding and the perception that the companies have on branding. A background on these beliefs and opinions allow for further questioning in the areas of limitations, benefits, differentiation and value. Highlighting the company's limitations to branding helps to uncover any unique limitations and perceived benefits of branding within the varying sectors and alternatively what organisations have in common. This in turn may suggest steps can be taken to help overcome these limitations for other SME's.

3.1 Branding Activities

Krake (2005) discovered that responsibility for branding lies with top management and the character of the manager was also deemed important; this one individual decides changes in brand policy or logo. Respondents were asked to highlight the perception that the company has towards branding and the level of integration they have achieved.

Out of the 11 respondents 9 formally attached a brand to their product all at varying degrees of integration.

3.1.1 Manufacturing

The respondent formally brands their product and services and this was the intention from the outset so to attach a memorable and strong personality. The personality is communicated through all their forms of communication and the respondent tries to ensure that the personality reflects markets demands.'The objective from the outset was to conduct branding, to attach a logo that is memorable and strong, show our strong and quirky personality and to update the brand as the market demands new things'.

3.1.2 Construction

Branding within this area is of utmost importance, therefore the company's enthusiasm and expertise can be communicated to the consumers. The respondent is involved in branding the tangible elements of the service. They do so by informing customers and creating a great after sales service. 'Branding is very important as it incorporates all that the company believes in and makes the company more recognisable to our market'.

3.1.3 Services

Within the services sector the respondents (5), all identified branding as being one of the most important elements to success for the present and in the future. They noted that branding helps potential and existing customers to recognise their company and allows for clarification regarding what they do.

Credibility was underlined as being one of the reasons for getting involved in branding. As one respondent noted, 'branding also gives a company credibility and also adds value for the consumer', 'employees are part of the branding as they are the face of the services and companies realise the need to monitor this'.

Developing a strong personality, attaching strong emotions, feelings and perceptions is a desired outcome from. Respondents from the service (4) sector realise that branding is part of what the company will do both now and in the future. 'It means attaching some kind of personality, when people think of the our company they think of fun, modern, variety, this means we have a level of consistency'.

3.1.4 Retail

Contrasts within this sector were noted by the respondents (4) as the level of branding and the thought involved in branding activities varies greatly. One company relied on the existence of the store to result in sales and the formal process and strategy development of the brand was nonexistent, 'there is no formal process attached to our branding and the branding activities both now and for the future are not thoughtful'. One retailer, in contrast, created a brand to allow for future growth of their products and thought had gone into future development of the brand. 'Branding is more than a logo, it allows for augmented and new products to be introduced to the consumers. The company understand the benefit that branding can result in'. A background in the product and customer satisfaction meant the attitude the organization possessed allowed this respondent to realise customer's needs and deliver them.

Overall, retail companies (4) were not consistent in their branding activities as one company was actively involved in branding activities, while 3 companies were inconsistent.

Krake (2005) noted that branding is being missed out by SME's as a logical step and that this creativity must come from management or owner. What was noticed was that the level of branding was quite low and this provides reinforcement for the fact that branding is not at a high creativity level. This is perhaps the result of the owner manager not putting enough emphasis on branding and simply only adding a brand to the product.

3.2 Benefits in Branding

Benefits of branding found by Doyle (1998) include the ability to attain premium prices and increase market share as well as distinguishing the products and services from that of another's. The in-depth interviews sought to uncover the benefits that SME's within Donegal have encountered. Respondents were asked to detail the benefits that they have encountered from any branding they have conducted.

Out of the 11, 5 noted that branding allowed the company to develop and portray a personality and identity, 4 discussed how the credibility of the company is greatly increased if branded properly, 3 noted sales as a benefit, 3 respondents highlighted that consistency in how they operate and what the produce is achieved, 2 outlined that referrals resulted from having a brand, 1 highlighted the fact that branding creates heightened awareness, and 1 respondent realised that word of mouth was the result of the application of a brand.

3.2.1 Manufacturing

The manufacturing sector noted distinct advantages to branding their products as being increase in sales due to the recognisability of their brand and high levels of credibility to ensure future sales. It has also allowed a product to develop a personality, 'the main advantages for our company has been increased sales as well as the creation of a recognisable brand'.

3.3.2 Construction

In the construction sector the idea that branding can create awareness that the company is a competitor is the main attraction of branding, it allows the company to make a statement regarding what they do and what they stand for; 'I think our brand means we can increase awareness of who we are and what we do and make a strong statement about it'.

3.2.3 Services

Within the service sector the benefits derived from branding are lengthy in comparison to other sectors; the issue of intangibility is where branding helps the most are highlighted by three respondents.

Branding activities allow a credible corporate image and gives the company a distinct identity. As one respondent explained, ‘what we have noticed is that branding is enhances a credible corporate image, it allows us to tell people who we are and what we do and most importantly it distinguishes us from other competitors therefore giving us a competitive advantage’.

One respondent noted that the presence of a brand stimulates management to think more thoroughly about various decisions concerning the future of the business and that the issue of advertising is more thoughtful also as the message remains constant and recognizable, therefore portraying a more professional service; ‘when we looked at what we were doing and who we were serving it was much easier to develop a message to them and continuously portray that message and image, the branding exercises we undertook allowed this thought to be put into the advertising and service elements of our business’.

3.2.4 Retail

Within the retail sector some similarities with other sectors can be identified, consistency is the most prominent result of applying branding activities to their business; this was mentioned by 3 respondents. ‘ We have one message that we attach to our brand at all times, I think the customers understand what we do a little better by doing this’. One retailer, who has incorporated e-marketing into their strategy, found that by attaching a brand to their products has resulted in on-line referrals. The fact that they are on-line means the results can be measured more easily, ‘as the concept from the outset was to attach a strong brand that could grow in the future we have invested in our brand from the start, we notice that recommendations from previous

customers have resulted in sales, we have positive word of mouth attached to the brand and we are able to build augmented products to what we offer’.

Overall, there are varied opinions as to what advantages branding can bring to your company, however as Doyle (1998) notes, branding has the power increase market share, to increase likelihood of stable earnings and to distinguish products and services from those of another. Even though their responses were varied, the actual benefits respondents experienced from branding were in agreement with Doyle’s findings.

3.3 Limitations in Branding

This area sought to identify the various limitations that each of the sectors identified while trying to attach a brand to their product. Some suggestions as to how the respondents would overcome these barriers were also generated. Krake (2005) identified the problems facing SME's conducting branding as capacity and budgets. Simpson, Padmore and Taylor (2005) found that SME owners are not marketing specialists and marketing theories that are complex may not be appropriate for SME's.

Overall 7 of 11 respondents highlighted the time available to them to invest in branding was a major limitation, 6 respondents mentioned the level of expertise that they behold is not advanced enough to allow for branding activities to be integrated into their strategy, while 5 noted financial constraints as being a determining factor in effective branding. Another finding is that 2 respondents did not accept that any barriers were in place to brand effectively and cited the mindset of the owner/manager as being the reasoning behind this.

3.3.1 Manufacturing

This sectors respondent noted that there should not be any limitations to branding. The expertise needed is present and the background of the owner / manager played a key role in attaining this positive attitude toward branding. The respondent mentioned that once there is an awareness of the necessity for branding the limitations can become nonexistent, 'No I don't see any limitations as we have expertise present and everyone in the business is aware of branding and that it is an important part of our business'.

A suggested way to overcome possible challenges is to explain the importance of branding to the employees. 'By reinforcing the importance of branding activities to our employees they realise the consequences of eliminating this would be, the culture of branding we have is quite strong'. 'By using tactics such as highlighting the future

of the business without branding and giving real life instances will promote a branding culture’.

3.3.2 Construction

In the construction sector (1), limitations to branding were not considered to be a major area of concern. ‘No, I do not believe there are any limitations, you can brand to a certain extent on a small budget and with little time and expertise, you need to understand your customer and then sell to them’. Branding is seen as a benefit for the company and also an investment in the company’s future.

3.3.3 Services

Within the service sector, in general, expertise (3 respondents) and time (3 respondents) emerged as the greatest limitation to conducting effective branding due to the lack of knowledge in the area of branding and marketing. In addition, as underlined by one respondent, managements’ time spent on this area is minimal due to the large number of day to day tasks being taken care of within their service environment. The lack of marketing personnel results in this area being over looked and neglected to a certain extent’. The financial strain that these companies (4) find themselves under was main reason behind this and support of branding is minimal. However what the service sector respondents did suggest was ways of overcoming these barriers. All respondents (5) identified the need to become more educated in the area of branding and the need for branding in the future is very much realised. ‘I personally have no experience or insight into how to conduct branding, however having marketing personnel has meant that time has been spent on the area, everything isn’t a last minute decision and the expertise is present that was never there previously’.

One respondent highlighted that the barriers for their company were also nonexistent as the respondent has a mindset that she will succeed both now and in the future, ‘I am self motivated and have a strong desire to be successful, I started with creating a logo and built my brand around this image, being positive and hard working all the

way'. This respondent felt that this ethos was a form of strong branding and the results were successful to date. The background of this individual was in business and marketing, which resulted in a more consumer orientated organisation.

3.3.4 Retail

Financial stress from branding and marketing costs was highlighted by the respondents (4), because of the advertising needed in order to compete. 'The industry that we compete in means that we must invest a lot of money into being competitive, sponsored reports, advertising, website construction and upkeep all require constant monetary investment'. This respondent (1) suggested, in order to remain competitive a company must take advantage of internet marketing. 'Having a marketing background or having marketing expertise is the best way to overcome any barriers to branding, taking advantage of internet tools such as Google analytics and having online advertising campaigns can immediately propel your company into more success due to the huge amount of potential customers that it reaches'.

Other constraints that were highlighted singularly included the daily pressures and human resources; 'we have a lot of day-to-day activities that the employees take care of and any long term planning is not really considered, the availability of money to put into branding or advertising is not available to us and we sporadically advertise when sales are low'. Without allocating personnel to the responsibilities of branding then the issue is once again not taken into consideration as the driving force of the business.

Suggestions were predominantly based around technology allowing greater interaction with existing and future customers, 3 respondents mentioned this point. Some help from expert bodies was suggested as another way to gain information and assistance.

Half of the respondents (2) are aware that there are support networks and information available from the county enterprise boards, however the way in which this help can be obtained is not known.

Doyle (1998) mentioned that when beginning to brand, the cost involvement is considered to be relatively high due to the long-term investment needed to notice a return. Investment in perception building and differentiation may not be realised immediately and costs can escalate and grow at a rapid speed.

For those companies that have positive 'can do' attitudes coupled with a basic marketing knowledge, these companies (2) do not consider branding being a problem but rather a necessary element of their business in order to succeed.

.Support agencies are available for SMEs and the County Enterprise Board as an information gathering forum was suggested by 2 respondents, Educating employees on the benefits of branding also allow a culture to be developed that means products and services become customer orientated and meet the customer's needs more specifically as highlighted by another respondent.

Differences between sectors can be identified, the retail sector mentioned the issue of financial investment, other sectors that are different, namely manufacturing and construction, both felt that the limitations are limited and they depend on the personality of the owner/manager.

3.4 Level of Differentiation

The two main pillars that Krake (2005) based marketing strategies on were differentiation and added value, questioning respondents on these two pillars allowed Krake's (2005) ideas to be tested. All respondents (11) believe that they produce a differentiated product or service, the utilisation of differentiation however is varying through all companies.

3.4.1 Manufacturing

By having a deep culture that promotes branding the competitiveness of the company is greatly increased. The respondent elaborated, 'we place emphasis on our personality and it add an element of quirkiness to what we produce, we do this not only through a logo but also in what variety we offer the consumers, we are different from competitors, in that we are smaller and have the ability to adapt to the market quite rapidly without having any major impact in our operations'.

The respondent placed their own personal name to the product and they felt that this alone made the produce stand out as the credibility attached to this outweighs the other competitors traits; 'I attach my own signature to the product allowing a closer relationship with the customers and a direct commitment is made to delivering freshness and quality, this is another way that we stand out and be different'.

3.4.2 Construction

In this sector the company identified after sales service and the use of their name that suggests they are to be different, 'by using our Irish name as well as the English version we can portray that we are local and very much an Irish company and we provide all the services a customer could need in order to complete the job at hand'.

3.4.3 Services

In the service sector the respondents used a point of differentiation to help promote their brand and this was centered on their reputation as being the best at what they do, as noted by 3 respondents. One respondent highlighted that, 'we do it more efficiently, more cost effectively and at a higher standard than competitors'. Further differentiation into specific aspects of their service however was not identified clearly. What was noted by 3 respondents was that by attaching a personality that reflected that markets demands resulted in repeat purchases. 'We seen a gap in the market and decided to change what we offered and to who, we discussed how to reach these customers best, the whole process meant we were becoming something different in the market'.

3.4.4 Retail

Within the retail sector the differentiation placed on the products is quite high and many point of differentiation were listed by the respondents (4) such as price, usability, new technology and unique product. What can be noted is that within this sector the respondents were able to identify their differences quite easily and the attributes were incorporated very strongly as being their competitive edge within their business promotions. One respondent explained, 'the difference we have amongst our competitors is that we have the superior software, we are easy to use, have one solid price and offer a lifetime guarantee'. Not only did the respondents list product attributes as points of differentiation but also named service orientated attributes, such as their location, level of product expertise and home delivery as further points of differentiation.

Out of the 4 respondents, one mentioned that while they identified how they were different, this was not always communicated through the various forms of media, therefore there may be confusion with regard the customers perception around what they do. 'We are competitive on price however the message we send out is not always consistent, we have no budget so therefore the message of competitive price is not continuously communicated to the potential customers'.

Overall the level of differentiation created by the companies is varying and sporadic in places, differentiation is desired but not always fully achieved. Once again the retail sector has put a lot of emphasis on being different in the eyes of the consumers.

3.5 Importance of Adding Value

Aaker (2004) noted that value could be added in both, the primary and secondary activities of the company, the primary activities being everything from, operations, marketing and service while secondary activities include the technology development, organisational infrastructure and Human Resource Management. Respondents were asked if and how they of add value for consumers.

Out of the 11 respondents, 10 agreed that value is being added to their product or service and only 1 believed that they do not add value or need to add value.

3.5.1 Manufacturing

Manufacturing sector respondents realised that the customer is the key reason why the company is in operation and therefore every aspect of the business is centered on the customer. ‘The customer is king within our company, we try to think of the customer at the product development, branding service and sales stages, if we are weak in adding value within any of those areas then we are not serving the customer correctly’.

The main areas identified, where value is added, were within the service area in after sales and ability to contact company, and the product itself ensuring high quality and superior levels of technology, these areas must at all time be strong and competitive.

3.5.2 Construction

Within the construction sector it was identified that the product quality itself is a distinguishing success factor for any business operating within this sector therefore emphasis was then placed on after sales service. This was identified as being the driver of positive word of mouth as the customer feels they received much more than just the product itself. Without after-sales service the competitiveness of their company would fall and future sales would be in severe jeopardy; ‘our after sales is so important to us, we try to outdo competition with our after sales service. Word of

mouth is so uncontrollable once the message is out there, this is the reason we try to ensure every message about our company is positive’

3.5.3 Services

Service sector respondents were aware that value is added for the customer at the point of consumption, on using or availing of the service, therefore making the service more tangible helps service organisations to add value for consumers. One respondent listed the premises as being of utmost importance and what the customers really valued was quality, modern surroundings coupled with exceptional customer service. ‘If we have new and modern surroundings with hi-tech equipment and highly trained and approachable staff we can add value to the customers availing of our service’.

Areas that value was added in for other service companies (2) were in the training of their employees in the area of product knowledge. As one respondent elaborated, ‘If my employees can sell themselves then they can sell our service, their personality and attitude adds value to their purchase therefore we put an emphasis on that’.

3.5.4 Retail

The key finding from the retail sector was that the three respondents identified that value must be added to both the product and the service before they can become competitive in the first instance. Once again the customer is the centre of their business and that without customer satisfaction there will be no sales, therefore value is at the forefront of the owner/ manager’s mind; ‘we add value by updating our product and trying to become more customer orientated and aware of their needs, we try to increase its usability to customers and this is what leads to future recommendations for our company’.

A long standing owner/manager believes that there is no value being added to their product, ‘we don’t feel like we should add value to what we offer, the product sells itself and our prices are competitive’.

Overall, at the various stages where value could be added, the respondent predominantly mentioned that value needed to be added at the production stage and also at the sales and marketing stage. Value adding is perceived as being important however some companies are not as articulate at describing exactly how they attach value, in some instances value is being added without the company actually being aware they are doing so.

Porter's (1985) stages of primary and secondary activities of adding value are being carried out but not consistently. Systematic value adding, using a model such as Porter's could be used by these SME's to help ensure that they continuously add value to their offerings.

3.6 Branding Tools

Within the sectors mentioned above, manufacturing, construction, retail and services, the various branding tools were evaluated through in depth interviews. The various tools that were evaluated were networking, reputation, leadership and identity.

Mc Laughlin and Horan (2000) underlines five main exchange elements that include financial and economic exchange, technological exchange, knowledge exchange, legal exchange and information exchange.

Out of the 11 respondents 6 used networking as a way of promoting their brand and 5 respondents did not use this tool. 'Entering into Ernest and Young competition has boosted the recognisability of our brand significantly', commented one respondent, whereas another noted the use of an affiliated government body, 'we are in constant contact with the Construction Federation of Ireland and also avail of Enterprise Irelands facilities'. Enterprise Ireland was also commented as a way of networking, by another respondent also.

Reputation refers to judgements about an organisations qualities, trustworthiness and reliability built up over time (Fombrun and Van Riel, 2004). Out of the 11 respondents 9 believed they have a reputation while 2 believe they do not. One respondent highlighted how they developed their reputation and how this has impacted on their brand." By acting professional, having a website, being contactable, delivering quality and constantly punching above our weight we have created a solid reputation, and this is now strongly incorporated in our brand.

Vallaster and De Chernatony, (2005) discusses the role of leaders in successful branding as; having the responsibility for coherently defining the brand identity, mediate between structure and individuals and they must act as the facilitator. Out of the 11 respondents 6 understand a leader must exist for effective branding and 5 respondents did not identify this as being an effective tool to branding. From this analysis it is evident that the lack of leadership is a reason behind minimal branding activities taking place.

Organisational identity can be explained as an objective, aim, vision and coagulate, embodied in logos and symbols (Abimbola and Kocak, 2007). What the 11 respondents noted was that 10 companies had an identity that included an aim, objective, vision, logo or symbol. Only 1 of the respondents did not create an identity for their company.

From looking at these four areas it can be seen if the SME's in Donegal are branding their company to their full potential. It is evident that there is a lack of implementation of these four tools and this gap must be narrowed to increase the branding activities taking place.

Interview with Academic Expert in SME Marketing and Branding

Prof. David Carson is a Professor of Marketing at the University of Ulster School of Marketing, Entrepreneurship and Strategy. He is a member of the Chartered Institute of Marketing, holds a Diploma in Education – International Teachers Programme; Masters in Business Administration and a PhD in Marketing. Prof. Carson is President of the Academy of Marketing UK, the foremost representative body of marketing academics in the UK and Ireland. He is also a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM) and a member of the CIM Academic Senate. He has been a Visiting Professor at numerous universities abroad and has wide experience in middle and senior management training in service industries.

A widely published marketing expert with over 30 years international experience in marketing education, research and consultancy, David has extensive knowledge of modern marketing management and marketing communication. His research interests lie in marketing for SMEs and quality of marketing in services industries. He has published widely in both of these areas. He has wide business experience both in consultancy and directorship roles, as well as advice to numerous SMEs in a variety of industries.

Due to this extensive profile, it was felt that the opinions and comments from Prof. Carson would be very valuable, as the area of research undertaken is specifically centered on SMEs.

Result

After analysing the finding, Prof. David Carson had some comments to present to the author. I was found that there is enough evidence to confirm in varying degrees, your research objectives. Prof. Carson highlighted, what he believed to be the key findings that the author has unearthed while conducting this research. He believed that the key insights were that SME's use a form of branding which is suited to their situation specific circumstances, resources, time and expertise. Branding in SME's is not a stand alone marketing aspect, more it is integrated with other SME marketing activities, such as personal service and value added initiatives.

SME's try to create differentiation through a name, concept, image and a personality which is unique to the company. Branding Theory is extremely complex and the findings acknowledge that SMEs have limitations and therefore can only do SME Branding.

The feedback obtained reassures the author and the reader that the information gathered is of relevance and importance to SME when branding their product or service. The support from the academic analysis that the findings are valid and valuable implies that it is possible to that the research conducted could be applied to SME's in general and not just with Donegal.

See Appendix 5 for e-mail correspondence.

3.7 Conclusion

Depth interviews with 11 owner/managers yielded some very interesting findings predominantly services are less tangible therefore need extra branding attention in order to add a personality to the brand. Branding activities, although being carried out are haphazard and generally not entrenched in the companies culture or mindset.

The main limitations SME's in Donegal face are lack of resources, time and expertise, the same limitations were identified in researched literature.

The benefits of branding are dependent on the owner/mangers level of expertise or background in the. The advantages of credibility, increased sales and repeat sales and positive word of mouth were the most recorded benefits. Stable earnings, increased share of the market and increased differentiation were all noted in the literature and these advantages are encountered by SME's in Donegal also.

The level of differentiation achieved by SME's is not at an advanced stage; however there are efforts to create an element of differentiation as they realise that competition exists.

Value is being added at various stages in the companies; however there are no strategies in place to ensure value is created. Porters value chain is not used by SME's, although there are elements of it present within each of the 11 companies. A more structured approach to branding must be conducted by SME's within Donegal.

The branding tools highlighted in the literature are not all used by the companies and their true benefits are not realised.

4. Recommendations and Conclusions

Recommendations

Although the respondents branded their product or service, the degree to which they branded was not enough. Companies should try to create a branding strategy for both the short and medium term so as to become more competitive within their industry. Although a logo may exist for the organisation, the growth of the brand should lead to the creation of a personality, the development of a message and the communicating of this message to current and potential customers.

Barriers to branding were predominantly limited resources; time and expertise. Taking these limitations into consideration one recommendation is, as supported by the findings, to develop a culture or a mindset amongst employees to foster a branding and marketing attitude. Educating employees on basic branding activities, such as points of differentiation, will allow a stronger and more positive mindset to emerge. In addition, attending seminars and keeping in contact with bodies such as the County Enterprise Board, this would enable SMEs to gain expertise in very specific areas of business including effective branding.

The benefits of branding that SMEs can enjoy, as found in findings, should be communicated to all SMEs. Through realising the advantages that are attainable, investment in and application of branding activities become more likely. Such benefits could be communicated through the local County Enterprise Board and Chamber of Commerce.

The lack of a sustainable differentiation for SMEs is visible from the findings and efforts must be made to identify real and sustainable points of differentiation for the company. Without this many of the companies may lose their competitiveness

Value adding activities need to be more structured within SMEs in order to ensure value is added at every possible stage in the production and selling of the product or

service. By applying Porters (1995) value chain companies could more easily identify where they could add value.

To take into consideration the lack of human resources identified, the use of consultancy is recommended. Allocating a small budget to an expert in marketing and branding would make the most of an apportioned budget.

Expertise and experience within the areas of customer satisfaction and marketing or branding leads to a more competent marketer, as highlighted by the findings.

Therefore, getting educated in marketing and branding activities even at a basic level would help the owner/manager to understand the need for branding and lead them to communicate this through to all employees.

The Typologies available to increase levels of branding, as noted in the literature, are too complex for SME's within Donegal taking their resource limitations into consideration. A basic branding strategy should be drawn up for the organization which incorporates the points of differentiation and value, while taking resource limitations into account. The 4 basic tools of reputation building, networking, strong leadership and strong identity should be included in this strategy. From analysing the findings it is evident that those SMEs who took these factors into account have been successful in their branding efforts, while those who did not are struggling to compete and remain different.

Limitations

The main limitations the author encountered were time and finance.

The timescale created at the outset of this research was demanding. More time would have allowed for the selection of a larger sample of respondents.

Finances restricted the research from being conducted outside County Donegal due to the amount of travelling that would be required, another reason behind this was due to the vastness of the country and the amount of SME's, it would not have been feasible to interview them.

While the findings were analysed by an academic expert in the field, the views of regional industry experts in the area of branding may have added further insights to this research. However, due to the timescale for this research, it was not possible.

For this dissertation the sample was chosen taking all these limitations into consideration and if time and finances allowed the research could be extended to a larger geographical area.

Research Reflections

From conducting this research I found there were lots of challenges but also many benefits derived from it.

Although time, finance and scope restriction prohibited the author from carry out various activities, the only major problem encountered was the organisation of in-depth interviews with the relevant respondents.

Benefits obtained from this research were plentiful and beneficial. I have gained confidence and competency in organizing and conducting in-depth interviews with company owner/managers and this will help me in future roles. I have developed my organisational and time management skills significantly and my confidence in carrying out research has improved immensely.

The completion of this research has been the highlight of the process and the results that emerged were most satisfactory in the author's opinion.

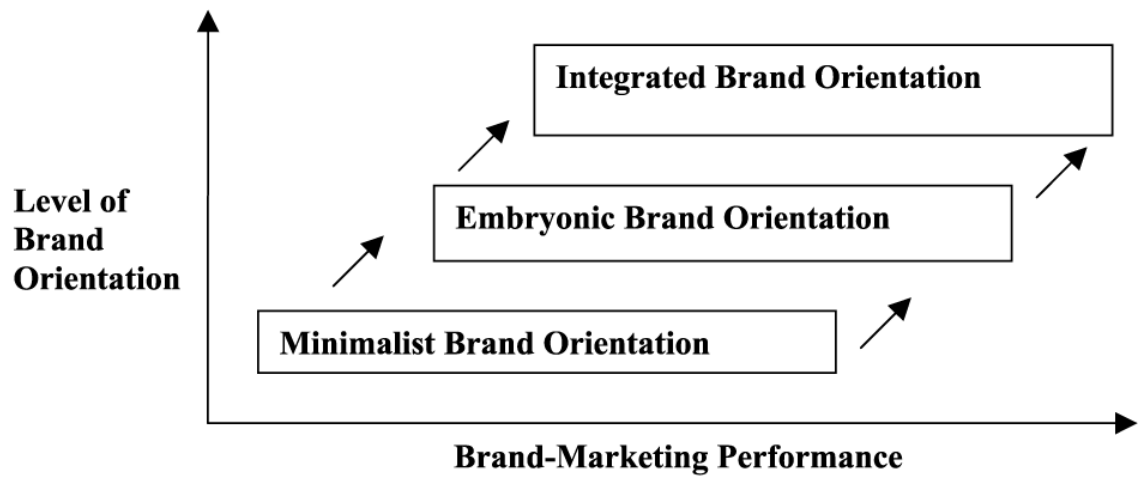
What I felt worked well was the way the sample was developed and the interviewing of companies within 4 of the major sectors within Donegal SME's, as this allowed for a more even spread of responses.

Undertaking such a task again, the author would enter it with confidence and enthusiasm as the process has proved very rewarding.

Areas for further research

There is an opportunity to develop this research further, possible conducting more qualitative research nationwide, with a view to carrying out some quantitative research subsequently in order to propose a distinct branding strategy for SMEs.

Appendix 1: Branding Model



Appendix 2: Branding Model

ROLE OF MARKETING (Internal Focus)	Major	Marketing Dominated Organization	Marketing Led Organization
	Minor	Marketing Independent Organization	Marketing Weak Organization
		Minor	Major

RELEVANCE OF MARKETING
(External Focus)

Source: Adapted from Simpson and Taylor (2002)

Appendix 3: Theme Sheet

Branding is defined as distinguishing the goods and services of one product from those of another.

Q. What does branding mean to your company?

Q. Do you formally brand your products or services?

Benefits

Q. In your opinion are there any benefits to branding your products or services?

Q. Describe some of these benefits?

Limitations

Q. In your opinion are there any barriers or constraints to branding?

Q. Can you suggest some ways that these limitations can be avoided?

Q. Do you see branding as an expense or a benefit?

Strategic Role of Branding

Q. Do you produce a differentiated and competitive product or service? What makes your product or service different from competitor's offerings, how do you make it stand out?

Q. Has using a name or symbol helped you distinguish your brand from that of another?

Q. Does your organisation feel it is important to add value to your product or service for your customers? If so, why?

Q. At what stages in the development of the products or services, from production to sales, is value added? List the stages that value adding occurs.

Q. Has branding encourages you to attach better service to your product or services?

Q. Do you try to ensure that you send out a consistent message, one that compliments each other through all your forms of media and communication within the organisation?

Role of Branding

Q. Have you formed relationships and networks with other businesses to help promote your business and gain information?

Q. Has your company developed a reputation, what benefits of having this reputation have you encountered?

Q. What skills or knowledge do you possess that makes your business more sustainable in the long- term? Would branding activities help sustain your business in the long-term?

Q. What are the key factors or attributes that your company must have in order to compete within your industry? Would branding your product or service help compete more effectively?

Appendix 4: Donegal County Enterprise Board Letter



Donegal County Enterprise Board | Bord Fiontar
Chiontae Dhùn na nGall
In business, to help your business

31 July 2009

RE: Helen Carr
MSc Marketing Practice
Letterkenny Institute of Technology

To Whom It May Concern,

I wish to confirm that information was retrieved from Data Base Ireland from Donegal County Enterprise Board in Ballyraine, Letterkenny.

A search was conducted under the four main sectors the Enterprise Board consider as the primary small to medium sized business sectors within Donegal. They are retail, services, manufacturing and construction.

Four searches were conducted filtering the information to small businesses with under 50 employees and in the location of Donegal.

The results for all four were as follows:

Retail: 310 companies
Services: 415 companies
Manufacturing: 61 companies
Construction: 22 companies

A total of all the companies result in a total of 831 companies.
Retail accounts for 40.77%
Services accounts for 48.14%
Manufacturing accounts for 7.07%
Construction accounts for 2.84%

Yours sincerely,


Ceine MacCléir
Office Manager

Donegal County Enterprise Board
& Board
Letterkenny
Donegal

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Donegal County Enterprise Board
2009
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Appendix 5: E-mail Correspondence

Hi xxxxx,

Nice to meet you yesterday.

I read through your work. I haven't made any notations on the hardcopy, I thought it better to make the comments more completely here.

I think you have enough evidence to confirm in varying degrees your research objectives, so well done on this.

I think the key insights you have unearthed are that:

- SMEs use s FORM of branding which is suited to their situation specific circumstances, resources, time and expertise.
- Branding in SMEs is not a stand alone marketing aspect, more it is INTEGRATED with other SME marketing activities, such as personal service and value added initiatives.
- All SMEs try to create differentiation, through a name, concept, image, personality which is unique to the firm. It is unlikely they will practice brand development techniques in arriving at this unique characteristic.
- Branding Theory is extremely complex you acknowledge that SMEs have limitations and therefore must/can only do SME Branding.
- Branding Theory is probably too complex for SMEs but SMEs do a form of branding, SME Branding indeed which is made up of name, concept, image, personality, personal service and added value which is unique to the firm's context.

Here you have a result of significance.

Good luck on completion.

David C

Appendix 6: Interviews

Company Name: Doolittle's Food Manufacturers

Owner Jenny Timony

Date of Interview: July 2008

Length of Interview: 45 minutes

Company Name: Earagail New Homes

Manager, Patrick Boyle

Date of Interview: July 2008

Length of Interview: 35 minutes

Company Name: Nvolove Solutions

Marketing Manager, Annemarie Doohan

Date of Interview: July 2008

Length of Interview: 45 minutes

Company Name: Golden Grill Ltd

Owner Manager, Paul Mc Glinchey

Date of Interview: June 2008

Length of Interview: 45 minutes

Company Name: Elite Marketing

Manager Joanna Dockute

Date of Interview: Aug 2008

Length of Interview: 40 minutes

Company Name: Wilhare Distributers

Owner Johnathon Wilhare

Date of Interview: June 2008

Length of Interview: 35 minutes

Company Name: Oceans Entertainment
Owner Manager, Joanne Mullen
Date of Interview: July 2008
Length of Interview: 40 minutes

Company Name: Classic Blinds
Store Manager, Owner Owen Clerkin
Date of Interview: June 2008
Length of Interview: 40 minutes

Company Name: 3D Issue
Marketing Manager, Sarah Diffley
Date of Interview: August 2008
Length of Interview: 45minutes

Company Name: Planet MaMa
Owner/Manager, Karen Mc Ginley
Date of Interview: August 2008
Length of Interview: 40 minutes

Company Name: Mc Bride Wholesalers
Owner/Manager, Shaun Mc Bride
Date of Interview: August 2008
Length of Interview: 35 minutes

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