TITLE:

SMALL BUSINESSES AND MARKETING MANAGEMENT: SEEKING RELEVANCE THROUGH THE METAPHOR

ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that one way to make small business research more relevant to practitioners and academics is by using an approach based on the socially constructed metaphor. Drawing on some research which used a series of phenomenological interviews, this paper demonstrates how the 'metaphors in use' of a small group of marketing managers gives meaning to their world and informs action. Despite the limited scope of the research, what is revealed are ways of managing in small businesses which it is argued traditional methods of inquiry are largely incapable of uncovering. The varied insights into managers life worlds which are provided by analysing the metaphors in this paper, has enabled the researcher to suggest that the basis for a new type of creative theory exists. This theory, based on locally defined rationalities, has the potential to open up small business marketing and turn it into a contested area of knowledge. It is argued that the latter is not the case at present, due to the dominance of a need for replication and generalisation in many researchers' agendas.

Key words:

metaphor   social construction   phenomenology   theory   decision making

INTRODUCTION: SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION, METAPHORS AND RESEARCH

Much research into small business marketing is dominated by positivistic research approaches. In the area of marketing orientation, examples include Pelham (2000); Blankson and Ming- Sung Cheng (2005); Blankson et al (2006). In these papers, the worlds of individual managers appear to disappear into a swirl of structural equations. Apart from being a little better informed as to whether or not the organisations studied are marketing orientated or not, according to a range of prescriptive tenets, we come away from the papers with little idea as to how these organisations are actually managed in practice. In evidence is the acceptance of a discourse of small business marketing which effectively closes down debates about alternative notions of reality. So, despite there being a growing interest in the adoption of metaphorical analysis as a method of studying organisations, (see Oswick et al 2002; Cornelissen 2006), its application to the area of small businesses management is neglected. The purpose of this paper then, is to examine the usefulness to small business of using the metaphor as a frame for research, by drawing on the findings of a study carried out into marketing decision making. The study shows that the metaphor has great utility in uncovering aspects of small business management which more traditional methods of research largely ignore.

A key point to note early on is that with only a few exceptions, (Zaltman 1996; Davis and Chun 2003; McWilliam and Dumas 1997), there appears to be a dearth of studies of how metaphors are used by marketing managers in the execution of their work. What this paper does not seek to do however, is to impose its own metaphors on actors and events. In marketing, there are widespread attempts by scholars to do just this (Ardnt 1985; Hunt and Menon 1995; Dennis and Macaulay 2003). Instead, this paper adopts a perspective informed by a social constructionist agenda (see Berger and Luckman 1966; Ellis et al 2005). In this framework, we are interested in finding out what metaphors individual actors use and how they influence action in organisations. " the social world has a very precarious ontological status and what passes as social reality does not exist in any concrete sense but is the product of….experiences of individuals" (Morgan 1980 p608).

This paper takes issue then, with the notion that metaphors can be unambiguously imposed within a functionalist framework on organisational actors, and looks alternatively, at the `metaphors in use' (Oswick and Grant 1996). As El- Sawad (2005) notes, exploring the metaphors as used by organisational members seems an important analytical endeavour, as it should reveal how individuals make sense of their world. For Shankar et al., (2001), metaphors represent one of the main types of human argument, having a central place in the explanation of events. Drawing on accounts of practice, a restricted selection of the metaphors used by a small group of marketing managers are analysed in an attempt to understand how they influence thinking and direct activity. The notion of 'relevance' is not measured here against some objective absolute, but against what small business managers think is practical and workable in the local realities of their life worlds.

THE RESEARCH APPROACH

This study of metaphors in use is derived from data based on a larger study into the practice of marketing managers, which used the phenomenological interview as the

method of research. Conversations took place with senior marketing managers, who could speak for marketing activity in their organisation. This approach makes it possible to reveal deep aspects of management which surveys fail to comprehend (May 1997). Among respondents were a number of managers from the small business sector. All respondents and their companies have been made anonymous. Initially, marketing managers were written to, using a standard letter, asking for interview access. After transcription of the resulting interviews, what was apparent was the widespread existence of the metaphor. Managers would often resort to using these when explaining and discussing action and meaning. Importantly, the interview quotes used here seek to display and reproduce perceptions within specified social situations, in line with interpretative understanding (Giorgi 1992). As such, it is clear that within other social milieu different metaphors may well be employed in order to reproduce aspects of reality that individuals see as important.

The interviews took place in comfortable settings, namely managers' places of work, a point made by Thomas (1993). Present in the interviews was a high degree of frankness, suggesting that managers had responded positively to the call in the letter asking for access, to 'tell it like it is.' In most cases, rapport was built prior to the interview stage, when arrangements for the latter were being made. This involved telephoning potential respondents and quite often this meant that conversations took place about the nature of the research. All interviews were transcribed professionally. The resulting transcripts were returned to the interviewee for verification, a process Bloor (1978) refers to as respondent validation. The final stage of research involved the process of phenomenological analysis, where the common mode of presenting findings is through the use of selected quotes. The latter were drawn from the interviews, enabling the process of meaning condensation to occur (Kvale 1996).

The respondents in this study are Robin Cawley, who is the marketing director of the general insurance division of Nelson Universals, which is a market leader in the industry. Clearly this is not a small business, but the metaphor in use here is a telling one, that enables us to distinguish between styles of management in different sizes of business. Clive Terry is the Sales and Marketing Manager of Thor Engineering, a small but successful company which is split into meat slicing, packaging machinery and bag sealing equipment. Nick Catt is responsible for the marketing at Merry and Right, solicitors, the latter deals mainly with commercial customers. Finally, there is Mary Stone, who is the marketing manager of Samsons, a local building contractor.

KEEPING A FINGER ON THE PULSE: MARKETING RESEARCH AND MARKETING DECISION MAKING IN A SMALL BUSINESS

The first metaphor to consider, unlike all the others, comes not from the small business sector, but from the marketing director of Nelson Universals, a large financial services organisation. It captures the idea that marketing is differently constituted in diverse business contexts, particularly the case of large and small firms.

"Big companies tend to be quite inward looking because they are like tankers you know, moving them around takes a long time and if they go off the track they could do a lot of damage. We would prefer to be a little flotilla, but we can't be, we are a big tanker and...I am not sure whether marketing for a big company can ever be viewed as the same as marketing for a small company."

Brytting (1990), supports this view, pointing out that for the smaller organisation, the models and theories which are applied to the big business setting do not work. He argues that concepts taken from management theory are rejected by small firm entrepreneurs. Working from a grounded theory perspective, Brytting's study shows that small firm owner - managers operate with a range of concepts that would probably not be recognised by the large firm manager. For example, personal goals like "having fun" (Brytting 1990 p57), are not part of the prescriptive marketing lexicon.

Within the rational technical paradigm, a central assumption is that a key requirement for virtually all organisations is the need to undertake formal and systematic marketing research. Copious warnings exist in both the research literature and the marketing textbook, suggesting that firms who fail to undertake this process are likely to perform poorly (see for example, Tammo et al 1996; McDonald 2007). Significantly, it can be argued that the proponents of marketing research are part conspirators in perpetuating the myth that the future can be adequately planned for. Alternatively, it can be argued that strategic opportunities cannot be preplanned, only assessed when they arrive (Weick 1995; Mintzberg et al., 1998). The metaphor used below by Clive Terry of Thor Engineering, suggests support for this claim. He was asked if his firm carried out formal marketing research.

"No. I mean most of our customers have contracts, short term contracts from the supermarkets, from different ones, say a bacon manufacturer will be supplying one contract of one type of our bacon to say, Superstores and another type of bacon to Supremestores and another to Savastores, and these things seem to be on three and six month longevity and they are chopping and changing all the time, so yes, they can lose it, just as easily as they can gain it and therefore, it keeps the market place very buoyant, so that's how it tends to work here. We just keep our fingers on the pulse of what is happening throughout the industry, even walking through a supermarket in the evening to see what is happening on the shelves, what new names are there..."

The 'fingers on the pulse' metaphor emphasises the volatility of this market and captures to a large extent the nature of the decision making processes used by this marketing manager. Failure to quickly follow changes in customer demand could mean losing the customer entirely, as with a nurse or doctor failing to monitor changes in a patient's condition. Clive Terry seems to implicitly recognise that long term formal market research cannot keep pace with the fluid demands of customers. Information and strategy is emergent, where action is derived from events in the here and now (Weick 1995; 2001). The latter points out that decision making are a retrospective activity. This feature of his sense making ability enables Clive Terry to know what is worth pursuing and as a consequence, he does not need to use formal marketing research. The latter constructs the future now and projects it forward, failing to see that events cannot be predicted in any meaningful way (Stacy 1993;Weick 2001). In many standard business texts and articles, there exists a key emphasis on the notion that forward planning in small businesses is entirely possible provided that a range of analytical tools and technologies are employed (see Brooksbank 1996; Lancaster and Waddelow 1998). The metaphor in use here suggests that the latter approach is certainly not the only to conceptualise this activity.

'IN OTHER PEOPLES SHOES': TALK, NETWORKS AND DECISION MAKING IN SMALL FIRMS

Hales (1986), notes that much management activity consists of face to face verbal communication. Realistically then, a serious consideration of small business marketing decision making cannot be considered devoid of a discussion of talk. It can be argued with some conviction that organisations are made, sustained and then subsequently changed, through the process of talk. Watson (1994) argues that management is largely an oral tradition, where leaders spend most of their time talking. Managers are portrayed by Grint (1995) as 'fire-fighters', where in the course of their work, they constantly have to attend to emergency situations. Grint suggests that what managers do is to linguistically asphyxiate this eruption of fires, where the latter become metaphorically suffocated by words. At the building contractors Samsons, Mary Stone, the marketing manager, uses an interesting metaphor to try and capture the role that she sees talk has in the business. As part of a comment about talk, she mentions putting herself "in other peoples shoes", Gummesson (2002), notes that successful personal and business relationships involve having a mutual understanding of what the other party requires. Guiding Mary Stone through her talk activity is the principle of reciprocity. She has to empathise with significant others in her network and understand what they require. This is achieved through the process of talk and without the mutual understanding which accompanies it, decisions would be very difficult to make.

"You know, we always try to be very nice to people, because you never know what you might need yourself. I mean, I have to speak to people and try and get work from people, so I always put myself in other people's shoes..."

Boden (1994), points out that in organisations actors are always adjusting their actions to those of others. Reciprocity is a recurrent and recursive feature of social action. This means that managers are constantly trying to fit their agendas and time frames into those of others. Significantly, it can be argued that the rational analytical domain of marketing is not central to the process of decision making. Knowledge of markets and strategic operations are based in local talk and local relationships. Mary Stone the marketing manager, when asked what value strategic decision tools had and she made the point that they do not really capture reality.

"...this is it, we do live in the real world. And with the best will in the world, all these sorts of things are not going to bring you work; at the end of the day they really aren't..."

Gilmore et al. (2001), suggest that SMEs do not conform to the conventional characteristics of marketing textbook theories. Their study indicates that SME marketing decision making is built around spontaneity, reactivity, informality and looseness. Central to the decision making process are personal contact and social networks. As Ellis and Meyer's (2001) detailed and multilayered study of networks shows, it its very difficult for survey methodologies to provide this sort of depth of understanding. For Ellis and Meyer (2001), much of the strategy process in industrial supply chains is driven by complex relationships and networks. In this perspective, decision making is based on negotiations from many different units, where networks are gradually built around a long term interactive relationship. The case is that people in organisations find themselves `thrown' into situations (Weick 1995; 2001). The world is on going and dynamic. If an organisation has a multiplicity of relationships, there is then a constant

stream of problems choices and solutions which need to be faced. As Weick (1995) points out, we can adapt the idea of the hermeneutic circle to activity in organisations. This perspective indicates that decision making does not start and end with formal planning. Organisational members are always in the middle of complex things, which they are constantly trying to disentangle. In these circumstances, people have to deal with whatever comes up and the effects of action cannot be predicted.

For Nick Catt of Merry and Right, dyadic relationships, are seen to be as equally important as networks in doing   business in professional services.

"...I think people are happier in a relationship than out of a relationship. There is a lot of nice warm cuddly reasons why to go to somebody that you went to six months ago, is probably better, or the fact that if you have got somebody working on something on a continuing basis, then it is easier to go back to somebody you know. People are naturally gregarious and relationship driven, we like to relate to people that we have met before. So I think within that concept, clients are happier in relationships, as we lawyers are."

THE BLACK ART OF DECISION MAKING: TACIT KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENTIALLY BASED EXPERTISE

Leadbeater (2000), describes tacit knowledge as something that is not written down and which can be hard to articulate. He further suggests that it is often intuitive, also that it habitual and reflexive. The ambiguity and uncertainty of a socially constructed world cannot be collapsed into and resolved by, traditional analytical models of business - it is not planning technology that makes decisions, but people, in the context of wider organisational processes (Hackley 1999). Important areas of business knowledge are acquired by doing and communicated by example Nonaka (2007). An interesting example of this, and of the recondite nature of tacit knowledge, is provided by Clive Terry when he mentions a marketing consultant who was brought into Thor Engineering for a period of time. The consultant clearly felt that much of the knowledge base in the company was of a nature that was built into the capabilities of people in the industry, and not easily acquired in any overtly explicit fashion. For Clive Terry, the metaphor in use in this section highlights the importance of esoteric, experientially based knowledge.

"Our marketing chap came in, and one of the first things he did was say, `look, there seems to be so much black art in this company, in slicing generally, I am going to put together a catalogue for a salesman to go out and ask the right questions'... but the problem with that is it varies from one factory to another."

In other situations, to suggest in metaphorical terms that someone in an organisation practices the 'black arts' in their business strategy, might imply that generally unacceptable social practices are being carried out. It can be argued here in this context, that Clive Terry means something different by the use of the term. It is as if the knowledge about the meat slicing industry is closed largely to all but practitioners, as is the case with the black arts of witchcraft' (Bullock et al., 1998) Here, the 'black art 'of meat slicing marketing is   not easily acquired. It is secretive, esoteric and not widely disseminated. To fully understand the codes and ways of the industry, one would have to be initiated into it and learn from others in much the way suggested by Wenger (1999), when he discusses the notion of communities of practice. In the case of the latter,

vocational learning is primarily acquired in the work context. Rather than through explicit rational technical tools, it is apparent here that tacit knowledge represents an important way in which Clive Terry makes sense of the world and carries out his activities.

CONCLUSION: METAPHORS AND NEW THEORY

The metaphors used by the managers in this study reflect the notion that small business marketing is above all else about locally contingent phenomena. For Robin Cawley of Nelson Universals, the latter starts with the understanding that there is no one size marketing to fit all, as small and large firms are inherently different. For Clive Terry of Thor Engineering, judgements about marketing strategy are based around the tacit, the intuitive and the general flow of discontinuous events. Nicks Catt's marketing decisions in his law firm revolves around relationships and this approach is extended by Mary Stone of Samsons. For all of these managers, understanding and action is not based on a simple grasp of planning principles and processes, but on a detailed appreciation of a socially constructed world. What has been offered here is an obviously limited, highly contextualised framework for interpreting small business marketing. Whilst this paper only discusses a very small number of responses, it raises important issues, with the suggestion that this type of research could be used more extensively in order to generate different types of insight.

Potentially, an argument exists which suggests that socially constructed metaphors could be used to build some new theoretical perspectives in the area of small business marketing. Marketing, if viewed from a social constructionist perspective, whether in the context of small or large businesses, is not a fixed set of unassailable beliefs, but provisional and hence should be subject to analytical inspection, as much as any other type of information (Hackley 2001). Furthermore, as von Ghyczy (2003) has pointed out, the great value of the metaphor lies not in offering definitive answers, but in provoking a rich and rigorous debate. The dominant model may work for some, but should not be regarded as providing the definitive and only account in the field. Given some development then, the basis for differentiated theories of small business marketing exists. Long narratives could be constructed, based around the meaning and actions that small business marketing managers work with. These would provide a different conceptual and practical framework to the functionally driven theories of small business marketing which appear to currently dominate the field.

What this paper has sought to do has been to try and work up towards an alternative rhetoric of marketing management in small businesses and to question the prevalence and relevance of the rational technical model. This paper advocates the further use of alternative approaches to research in small business. It may have been revealed through a traditional survey that managers do not use rational decision making tools, but it is questionable to assume that the same survey would have been capable of uncovering in any detail how decision making is enacted and given meaning; to some extent the research reported on here has achieved that. A social constructionist approach too research into small business marketing then, offers up the opportunity to uncover highly relevant findings that could be of great utility to the practitioner and academic alike. It is suggested that this initiative be grasped, despite the fact that it brings into question the relevance of our traditional view of what constitutes real knowledge in marketing.

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