

INTRODUCTION: MARKETING COMPETENCIES AND THE SME MANAGER

In terms of marketing skill development, it is clear that a great deal of emphasis has been placed on the undergraduate student. Numerous articles over the years have discussed the skills marketing graduates require and whether or not current educational practices are adequately equipping them to meet the demands of a changing work environment (Cunningham 1999; Martin and Chapman 2006; Walker, Tsarenko, Wagstaff, Powell, Steel and Brace - Govan 2009). Recently, a special edition of the *Journal of Marketing Intelligence and Planning* highlighted the preponderance of this student perspective, when it examined the challenges facing marketing educators at the commencement of the second decade of this century (Brennan 2010; Ardley and Taylor 2010; Wellman 2010). Whilst this paper accepts that it is essential for undergraduate marketing education to be a central element of debate, attention also needs to be paid to the learning and competency requirements of those more experienced individuals carrying out marketing management roles in SMEs. Here, marketing competencies are taken to refer to observable and relevant skills that lead to effective performance (Carson, Cromie, McGowan, and Hill, 1995; Collinson and Shaw 2001). Despite small firm marketing being a subject of considerable interest with researchers (O'Donnell 2011), the academic literature surveyed for this paper suggests that the debate about the marketing competency needs of this sector is relatively neglected.

Parallels exist in other related areas of education. Rae (2005) has noted that research on entrepreneurship has emphasised young and graduate entrepreneurs at the start of their career, rather than those in the later stages. This notion of relative neglect, suggests that there is some academic literature on marketing education in SMEs, but even with some exceptions (Carson 1993; Carson et al 1995; Collinson and Quinn 2002), it can be perceived as appearing fragmented, often subsumed within other types of discourse regarding SME marketing (Brooksbank 1996; Simpson, Taylor and Padmore 2011). In terms of this paper, SME marketing education is viewed as an important issue. This issue is addressed by the authors here by way of analysing a course they were involved in delivering to a group of local SME businesses. This paper provides a rationale for the course, explains its context, discusses its content and evaluates the results in the light of feedback provided by course participants. In doing this, an aim here is to try and ascertain what sort of contribution a business school can make to the marketing competency development of the SME sector.

BACKGROUND TO THE WORKSHOPS

The relative absence of academic discussion about learning and training for manager's in SME marketing is not mirrored at a wider national policy level. For some time, government publications have been developing a discourse which strongly promotes the desirability of improving the skill levels in SMEs which in turn, contributes to the general health of the economy (Mumby Croft and Berman Bell 2006). The department of Business Innovation and Skills (BIS 2011) currently indicates the significance of the need to grow small businesses by advocating the setting up of Business Hubs to assist SMEs, for example. Over the years, initiatives like these have been set by governments in attempts to grow small and medium sized businesses and to foster skill levels within them, including marketing (Murdoch, Blackey and Blythe 2001). In this context, attention has been focussed on the role of Regional Development Agencies (englandsrdas2011). The East Midland Development Agency (which although ceasing to exist in 2012 at the behest of the coalition government) is tasked, like the others, with promoting economic growth through local initiatives. It is out of this scenario that this paper will consider the role of a university course that was set up in order to assist in developing

the professional marketing competencies of individual managers working with the SME sector in Lincolnshire, part of the East Midlands regional development area.

With funding provided by the East Midlands Regional Development Agency and the European Regional Development Fund, the University of Lincoln set up Access for Innovation. The latter is designed primarily, to give small and medium sized businesses opportunities to use the skills and knowledge of the University and its staff at little, or no expense. A key intention of Access for Innovation is to provide a range of business projects which will make a positive difference to the companies concerned. With various Access for Innovation projects running in the University - i.e. students working on company projects - a decision was made to offer initially, two three hour marketing workshops to local businesses, run from the University's purpose built Enterprise@Lincoln building. In order to access potential course attendees, a list of the top one hundred Lincolnshire companies was used, removing the non SME organisations and an email sent out to the marketing manager inviting them to the workshop. The invite was also posted on the Lincoln Business Club web site. The result was that fourteen local managers, from twelve companies, attended the 'Innovation and Creativity in SME Marketing' workshops. A diverse range of SMEs, was represented, covering management software, electrical wholesaling, printing, marketing data services, pet services, specialist cheese selling, recruitment, business and management consulting, environmental consulting, business directory services, web design and retailing.

WORKSHOP RATIONALE

A key issue for the authors, who were tasked with implementing the workshops, was to decide what to offer course participants, in terms of both content and experiences. Influenced by Schindenhutte, Morris and Pitt's (2009) observation that there exists an oversupply of accessible existing marketing knowledge available in textbooks, consultancy papers and academic articles, the workshop organisers thought that a different approach was needed. Also, with course participants being from the SME sector, it was considered that they might not appreciate a programme based on large firm marketing models that bear little relationship to their own context and experiences O'Donnell (2011; Hills, Hultman and Miles 2008; Jones and Rowley 2009). So, rather than providing a workshop diet rich in well known, well rehearsed strategic marketing flavours, with a hint of innovation added, the decision was made to base the programme content entirely around an entrepreneurial marketing perspective. Entrepreneurial marketing has as its very focus innovation, (Morris, Schindenhutte and Laforge 2002; Schindenhutte Morris and Kocak 2008), meaning that content was tied firmly into the 'Access for Innovation' agenda and wider government concerns regarding growth in small firms.

Additionally, as entrepreneurial marketing has only recently gained some popularity (Morrish and Deacon 2011), course participants would probably be exposed to a different set of concepts to those they were familiar with, or were expecting to hear about. For example, a number of studies suggest that entrepreneurial marketers construct successful strategies that fly in the face of traditional marketing precepts, including research that shows markets should be created and not just served (Berthon Hulbert and Pitt 2002); that customers are not passive but instead, represent creative resources to be used by the firm (Berthon, Pitt, McCarthy and Kates 2007; Pitt, Watson, Berthon, Wynn and Zinkham 2006). Entrepreneurial marketing can be seen to challenge traditional textbook approaches, so if course members had done business degrees and MBAs, they would be made to question their received knowledge. Furthermore,

studies illustrate that entrepreneurialism is a readily recognisable concept to those who work within the SME sector (Martin 2009; Stokes 2000; Hill and Wright 2000).

In terms of the approach to learning, it was thought appropriate to make the workshops as participatory as possible. The underlying premise was that participants in the course would learn best when they were active in the process and importantly, can relate and apply material to their own work contexts. This approach Gibbs (1995) describes as a student centred one, where the central philosophy emphasise learner activity, rather than passivity. This perspective relates primarily to the constructivist view of learning (Papert 1980). This view suggests that learners create their own understanding and knowledge of the world through various types of experiences and then reflect on those experiences. As a consequence, the intention was to build into the workshops a number of opportunities for learners to work in a participative fashion on issues relevant to their own businesses. Their experiences would then hopefully act as catalysts for future action.

THE WORKSHOPS: CONTENT AND DELIVERY

For *workshop one*, as an icebreaker, course participants completed a short questionnaire that provided the opportunity to work out some answers to a range of questions requiring a degree of creative thinking. This helped to facilitate an introduction to the workshop theme and also enabled course members to greet and talk to each other. Course participants were then exposed to the seven dimensions of entrepreneurial marketing by the tutors, as identified by Morris, et al (2002) and Simmons, Thomas and Packham (2009). Course members then interviewed each other, so as to determine to what extent their firms encompass these dimensions. The dimensions cover cultural and strategic factors found in businesses relating to entrepreneurial marketing activity, these being; risk management, innovation, value creation, proactiveness, customer intensity, resource leveraging and opportunity driving (Morrish and Deacon 2011). In order to carry out the above interviews, a questionnaire was made available to course members, where one person asked another to rank their own organisation on a scale of one to ten and to then provide some justificatory commentary. This process was then reversed.

Next, via the process of open discussion, an entrepreneurial business model was outlined (Morris, Schindenhutte and Allen 2005). This model is composed of six dimensions, relating to issues of new value creation, target markets, sources of advantage, revenue generation, internal competences and making money, all of which can be applied to a new venture or to strategic realignment. Course members were then split into small groups and asked to apply this latter model to a company that needed to revamp its existing marketing practices. The case company, 'Nettleton Dairy' was used as a vehicle to get course members to work together cooperatively, in order to analyse an existing business situation and to present orally some innovative strategies making it possible to bring the firm in question back to profitability. Finally, course members were given two projects to complete in their own time. Firstly, they were asked to undertake a fully structured innovation questionnaire on their own company, assessing issues of innovation management. Secondly, participants were requested to use the entrepreneur's business model in order to create an innovation in their own company and be ready to discuss both tasks at the start of the next workshop, due to take place in two weeks time.

For *workshop two*, the session started with some focussed discussion. This was about the above mentioned innovation questionnaire, encompassing issues of strategy tactics and

culture within SMEs, seen from an entrepreneurial marketing perspective. Course members reflected on the strengths and weaknesses of their own firms and then attention was focussed on how course participants had used the business model template to create an idea for innovation. The next aspect of the workshop involved tutors discussing the market driving debate in marketing (Schindenhutte, Morris and Kocak 2008). Here, course participants considered the differences in philosophy between a market creating innovation orientation and a market serving orientation, where the latter's primary focus is on immediate customer needs (Jaworski and Kohli 1993). The former orientation contends that a technological innovation orientation will create markets for firms and in the process, shape and lead customers. This turns the traditional approach to marketing on its head, where products precede customer needs and change the way they behave (Berthon et al 2002). This orientation chimes well with the central theme of this year's conference, with its emphasis on the supposed power of technology to shape marketing and society (Berthon Hulbert & Pitt 2005).

This focus on the creation of customer needs through innovation, then led to a consideration of a particular tool - the Innovation or Customer Orientation Grid for dealing with strategic issues of innovation in organisations (Berthon et al 2002; Pitt and Nel 2007). The ICON grid identifies four different strategic innovation modes. Companies can follow, interact, be an isolate, or a shaper. The first of these involves innovating by focusing on those things customers want, the second is about co production with consumers. Thirdly, there is an inward looking orientation and finally, as shapers, the product the firm sells becomes essential in defining a market Berthon et al (2002). Course participants were then encouraged to think about the factors effecting a firm's position on the grid. They were then asked to select and comment on their own examples of organisations that fitted in to each of the four quadrants, bearing in mind that a firm can have a primary mode of innovation, but still incorporate elements of the other quadrants. Finally, to close the programme, the workshop attendees were asked to complete and reflect on an ICON checklist for their own organisation (Pitt and Nel 2007).

WORKSHOP EVALUATION

From the perspective of the two tutors involved in delivering the workshops, the latter had been successful both in terms of the material covered and the style of learning adopted. Course members had readily engaged in discussions listened to ideas and had enthusiastically applied entrepreneurial marketing frameworks to their businesses. Within the context of the entrepreneur's business model from workshop two, whilst no organisation managed to identify a discontinuous innovation, the range of new ideas generated was nevertheless impressive. An assortment of ideas for new value creation was shared. As examples, the specialist cheese shop selling to consumers, decided that it could now target the trade market in terms of conferences; the local recruitment agency wanted to develop its business in a new geographical area; the electrical wholesaler decided an entirely new approach to CRM was needed and the business directory decided to focus efforts on additional elements to include in its booklets, e.g. seasonal features and healthy living pages. Possibly, these ideas had been nascent for some time, but the workshop succeeded in getting them articulated and discussed.

At the end of the workshops the fourteen course participants were asked for their views in terms of evaluating the programme. This was done using a questionnaire. This contained three open ended questions and three closed ones, the latter based on a seven point Likert scale, with one being strongly agree and seven being strongly disagree. A mean averaging

system was then used to analyse the responses. The first closed question was about the suitability of the venue and the result was a score of two. This suggests that courses of this type are well received in purpose built venues, like Enterprise@lincoln. For the second question, in reaction to being asked if the workshop would help the respondent to improve their companies marketing, the response was a three. Finally, the last closed question was about whether or not course participants would recommend the workshop. Here, the score was again a three. Whilst not the top grade, these are good scores, considering the fact the workshops were new.

The open ended questions asked respondents for their feelings about the opportunity to take part in the workshop, whether expectations were matched and for any other general comments. Again, responses were generally positive. Participants appeared to recognise the importance of innovation to their own firm's development, as indicated by the following respondent. "It has encouraged me to look at innovation within our company and to look at it differently...on the whole very enjoyable." Another respondent picked up on the importance of the customer as a resource, in terms of innovation, clearly seeing it as new useful concept. "I have enjoyed the workshop and it has made us look deeper at our marketing, we need to use our customers more for ideas." The creative elements of the workshop were also appreciated, as evidenced by the following two respondents. "The workshop was excellent and we were forced to think in different ways". And... "It sparked new ideas" For one respondent the workshop "Has made me think more about our companies marketing strategy". Further positive feedback came from the administrator of the programme who organised a buffet for the course respondents after the workshop. "The feedback I got from people last night...was that they had really enjoyed it and had got a lot from the experience." (C. Hodgson, personal communication 7th May).

CONCLUSION: BUSINESS SCHOOLS AND SME MARKETING COMPETENCIES

Positive publicity was generated about the original workshops by the local press (Lincolnshire Echo 2010). The relative success of these meant that they were repeated again shortly, in another part of the county. The newspaper article noted that sixty percent of businesses in the region are likely to undertake higher levels of skills training. Figures like this suggest that a potentially large market exist locally and nationally, for University business schools to make a contribution to the development of competent managers in the SME sector. In looking again at the main aim of this paper, a reasonable claim to make, based on the evidence, is that a clear contribution has been made by a business school, to the marketing competency development of SME managers. This statement does need qualifying however. Whilst it is apparent from the evaluations that the workshops impacted positively on the perceptions of managers, it is also clear that further research needs to be carried out. This would also assist in determining the extent to which the workshop material has had a noticeable impact on actual business practice, in much the way called for by Thorpe, Eden, Bessant and Ellwood (2011). In line with this, there is an ongoing project underway to review the original two workshops, with the intention of establishing the extent to which managers have implemented ideas, models and practices covered by the programme. Finally, it is worth noting two additional points. Firstly, it is important to note that learning appears to work well when it is participatory in style and content. Secondly, the choice of delivering entrepreneurial marketing workshops, as opposed to the more traditional type of marketing content was vindicated, as it visibly suited and stimulated what might be regarded as a fairly demanding and astute set of course participants.

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