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Market Orientation in a Rural Setting: A Study of Smaller Enterprises And the Significance of Interdependence in Northeast Victoria

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Abstract

This paper explores the relevance of conventional notions of market orientation and the broader marketing concept to smaller rural enterprises. Previous field research into smaller enterprises, concentrating on goods-oriented small and medium enterprises in urban settings, has shown that more context-rich interpretive frameworks are needed to accommodate the differences in ways of doing business between smaller and larger organisations. Using further fieldwork findings, this paper highlights the factors common to both urban and rural SMEs and those that appear unique to the rural setting

A context-rich interpretive framework for smaller enterprises in this rural setting is developed.



Introduction

There has been considerable generalisation in the marketing literature when employing such terms as ‘marketing’, ‘marketing discipline’, ‘marketing concept’, and ‘market orientation’. They enjoy - or perhaps suffer from – both an interchangeability amongst each other and differences in definition (Assael *et al* 1995, Borden 1964, Boyd *et al* 1998, Brownlie and Saren 1992, Buzzell 1963, Kotler 2000, Kotler *et al* 2001, McCarthy *et al* 1998, McColl-Kennedy and Kiel 2000, Stanton *et al* 1993, Zickmund and d’Amico 1996).

Since the 1990s some attempts to develop separate definitions have been made, initially and perhaps most significantly by Kohli and Jaworski (1990) and Narver and Slater (1990). Their work seeks to differentiate the terms and give one in particular, that of market orientation, a pivotal role in the determination of the degree to which an organization is likely to be successful. Their research argues that to be successful, one should embrace the notion of the centrality of marketing as a singular and universally applicable construct, then apply this belief into the functioning of the organization, within which the central set of activities is concerned with the implementation of the marketing concept. There must be evidence of organization-wide generation of actionable information and responsiveness to it. These researches have served as a philosophical platform for the development of an initiation – response framework for the analysis of the market orientation construct and the placement of planning and new product development activities within it, with a variety of studies making direct use of the market orientation construct (Roberts 1990, Ruekert 1992, Deshpande *et al* 1993, Jaworski and Kohli 1993, Pelham and Wilson 1996, Pulendran and Speed 1996, Greenley 1996, Narver, Slater and Tietje 1998, Deshpandé and Farley 1998, Avlonitis and Gounaris 1999, Harris 2000 and Harris and Ogbonna 2000, Steinman and Deshpandé 2000). Virtually all of the research into market orientation has been directed towards the bigger structures inherent in large enterprises. This paper considers the relevance of such constructs to smaller enterprises.

There is a certain teleological theme emerging in such market orientation studies. Intelligence generation, responsiveness to it and “necessary behaviors” (Narver and Slater 1990, p. 21) for a superior performance are cited as prerequisites for success. Yet in recent fieldwork (Enright and McDonald 1997, Enright 1997, Enright and Dhir 1999, Enright 2001) the contribution of such factors to success in small- and medium-sized enterprises (hereafter, SMEs) was less clear. The contribution of such factors to ‘success’ did not explain their occurrence. In other words, what market orientation does for success has not explained why success in smaller enterprises without any evidence of such market orientation has been achieved. There was no apparent cause and effect and an alternative interpretive framework, a context-rich framework that accounted for localized factors, was developed (Enright 2001). This context-rich interpretive framework provides an explanation of the workings of two, urban, goods-based industries, the mountain bike and the garden nursery industries. It portrays their ways of doing business and provides an insight into their ways of orienting to markets.

To what extent would such an interpretive framework apply to other settings? Both the mountain bike and garden nursery industries were operating in urban, local markets, located in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne. Whilst dealing in both goods- and services-based transactions, they were predominantly goods-based. This leaves two broad areas of inquiry. Figure 1 provides a simplified, initial illustration of the research gaps to be explored. What of services-based SMEs and what of SMEs in a rural setting? Of these two broad areas, this paper makes an initial inquiry into the non-urban goods and services quadrants.



Figure 1
Developing a Context-rich Interpretive Framework for SMEs

	Urban	Non-urban
Goods	mountain bikes garden nursery	a rural town in north eastern Victoria
Services	separate field research underway	↑ ↓

The Setting

To further investigate the ways in which smaller enterprises interpret markets and act upon them, a field survey of ten SMEs located in a rural setting was conducted in the town of Bright in northeast Victoria during August 2001. The definition of an SME in Australia is an organisation employing up to 199 people. Within this, small enterprises are defined as occupying between five and twenty. It transpired for this field survey that all respondents represented small enterprises. Before proceeding to the findings, it is appropriate to provide a description of both the location and the methodology employed.

The town of Bright lies some two hundred and eighty kilometres northeast of Melbourne by road. It draws heavily on this city and others for a flourishing tourist trade dominated by winter sports, a role it owes to its strategic position at the foot of the Ovens Valley that leads to the ski resorts of Mt Hotham and Falls Creek. Bright also serves a fertile hinterland characterised by dairy produce, vineyards and a variety of crops. With a population of around 3000, Bright is decidedly rural in character. The steep valley walls, the broad spreads of coniferous plantings and the cool climate are more redolent of European than popularised Australian landscapes. Larger, more populous and more industrially and manufacturing-based cities lie to its west and north. Whilst the town has an inflated market base during the winter months, it supplements this with Spring and Autumn carnivals, catering for a variety of other outdoor pursuits ranging from camping and bush walking to mountain bike riding and canoeing. The town is strategically situated on the banks of the Ovens River and straddles the main road to the mountain retreats beyond. It nevertheless draws a more regular support for its local businesses from its resident population and from those in the farming communities and hamlets in its hinterland. Local businesses in the town are aware of this dual set of markets and the interconnectedness of them. Local demand is in part dependent on tourism influxes. The Bright-as-arcadia construct is robust and used to the full to attract tourists from the metropolis.



Methodology

A sample of ten SMEs was drawn from the town centre, constituting a zone where no enterprise was more than perhaps 300 metres from another. This is a sample characterised by a strong physical concentration. As with the previous field surveys a qualitative assessment was made. In each case the principal, joint owner or senior manager was interviewed. Interviews were conducted on the premises during business hours. A semi-structured interview approach was used, relying in the main on a prompt sheet of issues to be discussed.

To what extent did the respondents display a conventional market orientation and did the rural SMEs evidence any difference from their urban counterparts?

The Findings

Table 1 provides some detail of the sample and some findings. It indicates that the sample is composed of are small- to micro-sized enterprises with less than five staff. All had been in the business for over five years and nearly all had prior industry experience before commencing the enterprise. The sample was relatively evenly divided between goods- and services-based organisations.

Table 1
Details of the Sample, Including Estimates of Competition and Source of Business

Type of business	Number of staff	Number of years in business	Number of direct competitors		Estimated source of business	
			town	hinterland	town %	hinterland %
Restaurant	12	15	12	-	95	5
Desk-top publisher	1	10	1	4	60	40
Upholsterer	3	11	-	1	60	40
Bicycle maker/retailer	3	7	-	2	50	50
Backpacker hostel	2	10	-	7	100	-
Electrician	7	15	2	2	30	70
Real estate agent	5	9	1	2	15	85
Pottery & craft retailer	2	7	3	7	95	5
Homemaker outlet	4	20	1	2	95	5
Ski sales/hire	4	15	5	10	100	-

Notes to the table

1. indicates equivalent full-time staff
2. years of experience in the industry itself usually longer
3. "town" refers to the immediate community within the confines of the town itself
4. "hinterland" refers to the surrounding area comprising all settlements in the Ovens Valley between Myrtleford at the lower foothills to Hotham Heights and Falls creek above.
5. these estimates include all tourist and local business. The allocation is according to the place of the transaction rather than the presumed residence of the buyer.



Market Orientation

All respondents held firmly to the view that they “knew their business”. They believed they understood who was their competition, both in the town and the hinterland. All could readily provide estimates of the source of their business revenue.

None had undertaken formal marketing studies. Exposure to the marketing discipline came from seminars, books or government-sponsored programmes. Four of the ten respondents had taken government sponsored courses, which had taught them some of the basics of marketing. For all of the sample, and this was especially emphasised by those that had no exposure to training, ‘market orientation’ meant a demonstrable success in having learnt about the techniques of their craft or calling, the ways of the industry and how to get and keep customers. This latter point was expressed in a number of ways, and there was constant reference to customers as a measure of success. As one respondent observed,

We are successful marketers because we have an average sixty-five per cent occupancy rate year-round. I would call that being market oriented. We do well because most of the town recommends us for cheaper accommodation.

And another,

Of course we’re marketing ourselves successfully. I have had to put on another electrician to cope with demand and we’re still booked out a week ahead. I’m knocking back work outside of town.

And another,

I guess we do alright. We are certainly making a living. Our success over the years is tied to the town and the people I have got to know in the area.

When discussing profitable business survival, respondents emphasised three factors: the respondent’s experience in the industry, the capability of attracting and keeping customers and the importance of networks within the drawing area. These were regarded as critical to success. Their definitions of ‘success’ were less succinct, alluding as much to maintaining a sense of independence of any overarching structures - especially urban ones – as they did to some measurable, material profit. Other important criteria for success were lifestyle and freedom of manoeuvre. This is not to say that the profit motive was somehow dormant or subsumed under a higher order goal: far from it. What was evident throughout the sample however was the desire for a seemingly contradictory state of affairs, social acceptance within the local community and personal independence.

These are not descriptions of actions consistent with conventional portrayals of market orientation. At no point during the fieldwork did there emerge any conscious and specific references to customer orientation, competitor orientation or inter functional coordination, the three pillars of the Kohli and Jaworski (1990) market orientation construct. Nor was the reference made to market intelligence generation, dissemination and responsiveness, in the style of Narver and Slater (1990). For these smaller enterprises, these were foreign concepts. During the interviews, these terms were described to each respondent and discussed. The universal opinion was that these were concepts for bigger structures, for international organisations. As one respondent observed,

We don’t do things by numbers here. This isn’t the city. You have to know everybody.

And another,



What works in Melbourne doesn't necessarily work here. We see our customers every second day in the street, whether they're spending or not.

Such comments resonated with the views held by operators in the two previous SME field studies, but here there was an added, rural dimension. The innate, intuitive understanding of markets that was so evident in the urban SMEs studies was here: so too was the disinterest in language of high marketing culture. What made these rural respondents distinctive was the concept of place.

The Notion of Interdependency

Marketing decisions were being made and innovative techniques being employed: new billing systems, upgraded menus, a change of suppliers who proved inefficient, disposal of slow moving stock to another regional outlet, deployment of field staff to specific, high demand areas, the winning of new business from a regional competitor and suchlike. There was one condition for any activity: as far as possible, it should maintain interdependency, not jeopardise it. This was interdependency at both an intra-town level and between town and hinterland. These were the zones of influence exercised by them and, equally, exercised upon them.

This interdependency affects rural SME marketing activity in two distinct ways. It is a self-regulatory device to control competition and ensure sufficient business for those connected to it. Second, it is an expression of deeper social rules in the community. It is evident from the interviews that all the respondents know each other, may like or not like the other to varying degrees and yet are bound by a clear desire to maintain a harmonious state of affairs between work, recreation and social obligation duties. The latter manifests itself in membership of tourist committees, local chapters of Rotarian and similar organisations and participation in community projects and suchlike. Such tributary relations characterise the rural SMEs. They make marketing activities subject to a range of limitations not evident amongst their urban counterparts. This limits new product development and innovative enterprise to what is acceptable within the town. At the same time, it secures very viable revenue flows for those who are connected to it. To date it has proved an excellent barricade to outside competition and an excellent response mechanism for the developing and changing demands of both local customers and the almost quarterly influxes of metropolitan tourists.

The entire sample saw little need for formal planning structures: there was no evidence of short-, medium- and long-range planning being conducted in a fully formal fashion. Planning was considered unnecessary, as each believed their businesses to be stable entities, operating in stable environments. There was little desire to increase turnover or increase profits for their own sake. Gradual improvements in both were only deemed appropriate if the town benefited, not one enterprise at the expense of another. It needs be stressed that whilst this was not a universal belief, it was clearly very prevalent. It was less a matter of altruism than one of social constraint. Material success was intertwined with the broader social construct. Accelerated success was effectively a taboo.

Knowledge of Customers and of Competitors

Respondents displayed a very clear understanding of their customers and their most typical customers and were able to describe these target markets in terms of certain variables, such



as age, occupation and gender. Respondents were asked to assess the degree to which they relied on tourist transactions within the town. This has been shown in Table 1. Like their urban counterparts, the rural SME operators were more inclined to merge the concepts of customers and the products directed at them. It is not clear why and how this merging occurs but it seems increasingly likely that the mental maps of the market drawn by SME operators are quite distinct from conventional market wisdom.

There appears to be a co relational tendency between this merging and the general reluctance to expand the business. This emerged in the previous urban SME studies but in the case of the rural SMEs was even more pronounced. After all, they argued, if they were to increase their customer base, demand would possibly exceed supply and they would eventually have to expand. What was more important was to keep three interacting groups satisfied: themselves, the customers and the other operators in the town. This speaks directly to the issue of the social obligations they acknowledge to the community and this in turn relates to the earlier mentioned social and community contacts. How was market information gathered and how was it disseminated? It was done communally.

Although having an awareness of competition and the broader environment is deemed crucial to a conventional market orientation it was considered less favourably in this rural context. Such knowledge was certainly acquired but putting it to full, competitive use was a conditional matter. They believed that reacting to the limited local competition would damage their business. Within such a small community one needs all the support one can get in order to survive. In Bright other enterprises – even those in direct competition – form part of the market. The town was too small, too interconnected, to risk losing any local support through overt competitive action.

Great importance was attached to the maintenance of strong relationships with the local community, especially within the town. This was seen as an imperative to business success. In order to maintain positive relationships, at least eight of the respondents are members of clubs and committees such as the Chamber of Commerce, Rotary, the Springtime Festival, and the Autumn Festival. Here, markets, products and social obligation converge.

Issues of Success and Failure

Respondents were asked their views on the reasons for success and failure in SMEs in Bright. Exactly what was meant by “success” and by “failure” was deliberately left to the respondent to explain. It was already clear at this stage in the field work that, as with their urban SME counterparts, purely material manifestations were not the sole criteria and that in this rural scenario social obligation and acceptance played an important role. Indeed, it proved decisive. One observation summarised the view shared by the respondents.

Business in little country towns is a lot different to business in Melbourne, here it's a lot more personal

The respondents consistently cited three factors for success. In order of significance they were

1. industry experience
2. capacity to attract and keep customers
3. maintenance of good relationships in both town and hinterland



Each issue was dependent on the others. Without good relationships, there would be no opportunity to gain experience and hence no custom.

The three factors given for failure were

1. getting too big
2. getting too independent of those one should be relying upon within the town
3. evidence of laziness, deception or stupidity on the part of the operator

The remaining objective was to assess the extent of difference, if any, from their urban counterparts. What follows is an account of areas common to both urban and rural SMEs and then an account of those factors found to be specific to the rural SME context.

Factors Common to Rural and Urban SMEs

Both rural and urban SMEs display the following characteristics.

1. they see their enterprise as a means to independence from bigger structures and the oppressive atmospheres they would otherwise endure. In this respect they appear to place limits on growth at an often indecipherable point where they sense that further growth would compromise their sense of independence
2. they generally do not adhere to any aspect of marketing for its own sake, eschewing such notions of conformance in favour of reliance on experience in the industry, a seller's eye for the main chance, personal skills, expertise in running a business and wherever possible, working within existing networks. Their interpretations of markets, of customers, of product offering issues and of innovations are essentially intuitive, with little recourse to discursive approaches.
3. whilst dismissing formal marketing procedures as irrelevant to enterprises of their size, they nevertheless undertake what marketing adherents would possibly view as marketing-like activities. They plan, they implement and they re-evaluate. They collect information and use it in innovative ways. They set and seek to achieve business goals and they are aware of their strengths and their weaknesses. However, their approaches are less formal and rely less on theoretical principles.
4. there is little evidence of a desire to expand business at the expense of others in the market or at the expense of their personal sense of independence. Given that thirty in-depth interviews across three field surveys have now been conducted into SMEs it is perhaps surprising that this is the case as smaller organisations can and do grow to become large organisations. Yet these respondents had no such desire. The reason for this may lie in the fact that no respondent had been in their business for less than five years. It is tempting to hypothesise that those that outgrow their small beginnings do so within the first five years but this is an area for separate study.
5. they have innate understandings of their customer base that they are not readily able to openly describe. Perhaps they choose not to so do.
6. operators of SMEs may have difficulty in clearly differentiating between themselves as managers, their customers and their product mix. These factors converge in their thinking. Similarly do they converge long-, medium- and short-range planning functions. Nor do they have the desire or the need to separate these factors into constituent parts.



They are within their markets and their business and have no desire to formalise their approaches to decision making. Immersion, not formal, external observation is deemed the key requisite for success. They are engaged in context-rich marketing.

Factors Specific to Rural SMEs

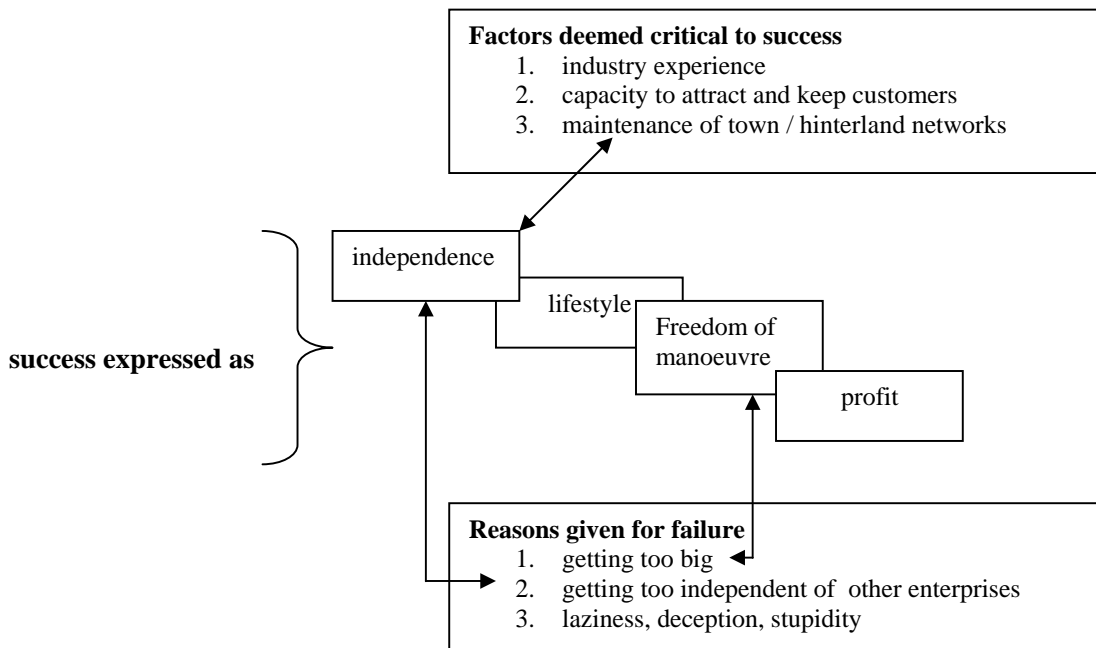
The rural SMEs in this study differ when social forces emanating from both township and hinterland are brought to bear.

1. they have a pronounced sense of obligation to the community, particularly the town. This is not necessarily altruistic in origin, although its effects often are. The sense of obligation is first to the townspeople and then to those in the hinterland, although it is often difficult to separate the two. Visitors to the town are by no means treated in a lesser way, at least in a nominal sense. Townspeople enjoy greater service levels and where pricing is by quotation, are given more favourable prices. Of course such favouritism is neither narrow minded nor unique. Better service to preferred customers is common in urban SMEs as well. The difference here is in the scale on which such preferred treatment operates in a rural scenario.
2. rural SMEs use the community – both town and hinterland – as a source for information for decision making about business direction, innovation and new product development. If the purpose of market research in larger organisations is to perform such information for decision-making functions, then it is performed here adequately and economically, through community contacts. The community, especially at the town level, performs a *de facto* or perhaps more appropriately, communal form of market orientation for all enterprises. Through the variety of social outings, recreational activities, councils, groups and societies to which they engage in or belong to, the people of the town have developed an intricate response-initiation framework that performs the intelligence generation / dissemination / response roles that emerge as such important themes in the initial Kohli and Jaworski (1990) and Narver and Slater (1990) researches. These enterprises are market oriented: they achieve the same goals through different means.
3. the market is the community. The “community” may hold substantial numbers of tourists at various periods throughout the year and as such they are deemed to be a component part of that community. Rural SME entrepreneurs do not differentiate between tourist and resident when transacting business other than to provide more favourable terms to some selected residents. SME entrepreneurs only deal with tourists when they enter their physical location, be it the hinterland or the town. And who brings the tourists in to Bright? It is the same entrepreneurs, now serving on tourism and town promotion committees and working with government tourist authorities. But this is not done for the individual SME operator: it is undertaken by each operator, working communally for the town and the hinterland. What is achieved for the common weal returns to reward them all, individually, through the medium of their own SME.
4. there is tension between the desire for independence and the necessity for interdependence. This probably remains unresolved and is subject to frequent swings in favour of or away from the fortunes of the SME operator. There are also tensions between sufficient and excessive levels of material success. This tension emerged with varying severity in every fieldwork interview. To clarify this, respondents were asked to discuss three issues. The first was their views on criteria for success. The second was their views on reasons for failure. As noted earlier, it was difficult to determine what they meant by “success” so the



third issue was to ask for examples of success. The most common reasons and explanations are shown below in Figure 2.

Figure 2
The Conflicting Demands of Success and Failure



Three arrows show immediate areas of conflict. It is within this rural, social environment of competing expectations and demands that SME enterprises need operate. As described by the respondents, these obligations increase as the need for interdependency increases. In turn this depends on whether one is transacting within the town, the hinterland or beyond. The rural SME is expressing the same desire for independence as their urban counterpart but is doing so in an environment more ready to judge performance on non-business grounds. The elusive, immeasurable “success” must manifest in socially acceptable forms, striking a balance between doing well and doing poorly. If profit for its own sake was insufficient motivation in urban SMEs, it is even more pronounced in rural settings.

Conclusions

The framework developed in Figure 2 speaks as much of social obligations as to free market activity. It also portrays an SME operator’s contribution to the common weal than to individual material gain.

Further down the valley, beyond the hinterland, lie such regional centres (once country towns) as Wangaratta and Albury. There, many smaller businesses have been wrecked by the chains of mass-merchandisers from the cities. Further up the valley in the snow resorts at Falls Creek and Mt Hotham, a brasher, faster lifestyle exists. In several cases, those working in Bright and those



working in the resorts are from the same immediate family. But what counts for good marketing in the resorts is different to what counts for good marketing in the town. This is context-rich marketing. Demand has been met and competitors have been blocked by embedding business in a broader social framework uniquely suited to this rural town.

Such fieldwork may be seen to constitute a sort of proto-anthropological inquiry into the uses of business in such communities. In this rural context, a picture of the rich varieties of marketing that exist develops and serves as a counterpoint to assimilationist stances that might well hold these small enterprises to be non-marketing in character. There is no immutable essence of marketing. As with the previous field studies into urban SMEs in the mountain bike and garden nursery industries, these rural SMEs show marketing can operate concurrently at a number of levels and in a variety of ways. They illustrate how businesses place their marketing activities in a wider social context.



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