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# The Need for a New Paradigm for Small Business Marketing? – What is Wrong with the Old One?

A New  
Paradigm:  
What is Wrong  
with the Old One?

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**Abstract:** The entrepreneurial marketing paradigm is open to several interpretations. One such is that we should consider, in particular, the behaviour of small firms, and in particular, small entrepreneurial firms; another interpretation is to argue for the building of a completely new, and substantive, paradigm that builds upon, for example personal contact network development and focuses upon marketing activity being compressed, non-linear in outlook and application, and informal. In this article the author asks a fundamental question highly pertinent to the developing subject of marketing within small firms. Is conventional marketing theory and practice from the ‘classical school’ applicable to all types of organisations no matter what their size, or do smaller firms need a different sort of marketing, more suited to their particular needs? The paper concludes that in many cases the central core hub of marketing that has become known as the classicist philosophy of strategic marketing management (see Brennan, Baines, and Garneau, 2003) is appropriate and can often be employed to the smaller enterprise with beneficial commercial effects. However there may be some reluctance on the part of small firms to accept the notion that conventional marketing is of particular use. The author hopes that this short paper will provoke a subsequent debate about the current ‘state of play’ concerning the entrepreneurial marketing paradigm.

## INTRODUCTION

Many of those teaching and consulting using the conventional ‘classical school’ approach hold the view that it is merely a matter of standardisation verses adaptation. That is when dealing with the smaller firm one has to take the standard classicist philosophy of strategic marketing management as far as it can go and then make adaptations to suit the individual circumstances of the smaller firm such as a limited budget or limited marketing sophistication. Others writing in the field believe a new approach is required for the marketing of smaller firms and not simply the modification of the existing ‘classical’ approach. In writing this short article the author is hoping to contribute to the debate by submitting empirical evidence and conclusions relating to an important dimension of the subject area. The methodology of the work presented here is based on a form of triangulation. That is the research methodology employed uses four

separate approaches arriving at a set of results that when taken independently arrive at similar conclusions. When taken collectively the results present a strong case for the general applicability of many standard marketing principles to the smaller firm. Basically this paper attempts to demonstrate that conventional standard marketing approach is relevant to the smaller firm. Although a number of individuals and groups feel that conventional marketing is not really appropriate for the smaller enterprise, often because of the entrepreneurial and less conventional nature of many of the owners and /or managers in some cases (Miller, 1983), evidence from the author's own work suggest otherwise.

The question as to whether conventional marketing theory and techniques are equally applicable and relevant to the marketing management of smaller enterprises is central to work in marketing and entrepreneurship because many, if by no means all, smaller firms are managed by people who may be entrepreneurial in nature (Covin and Slevin, 1998). There seems to be an ongoing debate in the literature at the moment on whether there needs to be a new marketing paradigm for small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) (see Reynolds and Day, 1998). Many question whether conventional marketing re: the standard texts such as Kotler and Armstrong (2001) or Lancaster and Reynolds (1998, 1999) i.e. the standard business school 'classicist' teaching approach (see Whittington, 1993), can be made to fit the needs of SMEs with some pragmatic adaptation. Many working in the field of SMEs in general, think that the standard marketing approach is suitable for the smaller enterprise, albeit with some minor 'adjustments'. These 'adjustments' have to take into consideration the more modest budgets available to many SMEs and the limited technical knowledge of formal conventional marketing amongst the management of smaller enterprises (see Herrmann and Perreault, 2000). Other writers feel that owners and managers of SMEs, who may or may not be entrepreneurs, often have a different way of thinking about business problems compared to their counterparts working in larger enterprises. They claim that conventional marketing, usually developed for the larger firm, is not necessarily suitable to the smaller enterprise (Carson et al, 1996). Some go so far as to suggest that a new 'paradigm' of 'entrepreneurial marketing' is required (Hills, 1996). It is these issues that the author will discuss in this paper and in doing so will draw on the results of empirical work carried out in this field. In this paper the author is primarily concerned with small firms, however most of the literature in this area concerns SMEs and so literature covering medium sized firms is also considered.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The methodology employed relates to four separate projects. The results are then consolidated i.e. a triangulation approach, in order to gain a better insight as to whether small firms do need a radically new marketing paradigm. Triangulation is a key tenet of the 'anthropological' approach to data gathering (and therefore, education and training research, which is the subject of a large part of this paper). Most of this research has been based on studies conducted by the author into the sales and marketing training needs of small firms and into educational programmes into marketing for small firms. Hence an 'anthropological', triangulation approach was judged appropriate. In using this approach the researcher should gather a wide variety of evidence for the purposes of triangulation (Jacob, 1990; O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996; Wiggins, 1998). As opposed to relying on one single form of evidence or perspective as the basis for findings, multiple forms of diverse types of evidence are used (in the case of this paper four types) to check the validity and reliability of the findings (Jacob, 1990; O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996; Maxwell, 1996; Wiggins, 1998). Over-relying on any one form of evidence may impact validity of the findings. By using multiple forms of evidence and perspectives, a truer portrait of the subjects being studied can be developed (Wiggins, 1998). While the same biases in evidence collection still come into play, because more types of evidence are being used to form one's opinion about the subject under study, there are more cross checks on the accuracy of the conclusions inferred.

### ***Research Approach One***

The first piece of work involved exploratory group discussions that were then followed up by the postal survey which is discussed below in Research Approach Two. The methodology involved exploratory, qualitative research based on three group discussions with people involved in running or advising people who run small firms. Carson and Gilmore (1999) consider qualitative research the most appropriate when examining SME phenomena generally and particularly the interface between marketing and entrepreneurship. Gibb and Davis (1990); and Hofer and Bygrave (1992) further support this position. The group members included entrepreneurs running their own small firms, counsellors from various organisations involved with advising or supporting enterprise, small business advisors from the commercial banks, consultants and trainers to small firms from both the private sector and such bodies as the (then) Training Enterprise Council (TEC). The latter have now been replaced by the learning and Skills Council. Each group discussion contained eight participants plus a moderator. Conversations within the group discussions were recorded and a

content analysis carried out. Transcripts were examined and various common themes identified and colour coded for classification and analysis. The information gained from this analysis was used to design a questionnaire.

### ***Research Approach Two***

The questionnaire discussed above was subsequently sent out by post to a representative sample consisting of 1,200 small firms in the Kirklees and Calderdale area of West Yorkshire, England. A combination of lists were used as a sampling frame including the local Chamber of Commerce small firms registry, local trade directories and a database held by the University of Huddersfield. The sample was stratified by the six broad types of industry found in the area: textile manufacturing; chemical processing and related industries; transport and distribution services; construction; light engineering; and other financial/ business services; and, in proportion to the importance of a particular sector to the local economy in terms of contribution to local GDP (see Alreck and Settle, 1995), (Everitt, 1995). Three hundred and twenty respondents mailed back the questionnaire in the pre-paid envelope provided. In order to ensure the sample of respondents matched the initial stratification design final post stratification of the marginals was conducted. Where a particular sector was under represented follow up calls encouraging response or if necessary a second copy of the questionnaire was sent to respondents. These were also selected randomly from the non-respondents on the original sampling list. Questionnaires were sent out in waves and so it was possible to 'fine tune' the eventual sample to bring it into an acceptable approximation to the composition of the local small firm population.

The questionnaire contained questions asking respondents to rate the importance, as they perceived it, of various marketing and sales topics which could, if selected and rated highly enough by a sufficient number of respondents, be incorporated into a training course, which they would be invited to attend at subsidised rates. The rationale for conducting this research in the first place was twofold. Firstly, it has been widely recognised for some years that there is an urgent national need within the UK to improve the marketing performance of British firms in general, and smaller firms in particular, especially those in the industrial sector. Secondly, poor marketing performance has often been cited as one of the main reasons for the often lacklustre industrial and business performance in the UK. Unlike many areas of functional training, marketing training can be a complex matter. There are a large number of specific areas of marketing,

which could represent specific training needs for different companies. For example even a basic course in marketing management could require a completely different orientation for an industrial company or a service company compared to say a producer of consumer items. Marketing training can therefore come in many forms, and thus investigation of marketing training needs is a very complex area of research. Few would dispute the need for many companies to improve their marketing performance. There would also be widespread agreement that training has a significant role to play in helping to improve the performance of marketing managers, or the owners of small companies. However it is only with the possession of detailed information on the specific training needs of smaller firms that training providers can have any realistic hope of offering programmes that are meaningful and appropriate for the management of smaller firms.

### ***Research Approach Three***

The third piece of work relates to consultancy activities carried out by the author (with others) over many years, in which a standard 'classical' marketing approach was employed. Basically the author has from time to time acted as a paid consultant to small firms in the Yorkshire area of the UK. These firms have generally managed to secure a grant from one of the government schemes to help pay for business consultancy, in this case marketing consultancy. Such work tended to follow a fairly standard format provided by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), a Government organisation overseeing the allocation of resources and evaluating the quality of the work carried out. Approved marketing consultancy generally involved a detailed analysis of the current situation, SWOT, PESTLE, segmentation, forecasting, portfolio analysis, market research etc., i.e. the application of general 'classicist' marketing principles and techniques based on strategic marketing management (Brennan et. al., 2003). Such work usually results in some form of marketing plan for the short, medium and longer term, which is then implemented by management with the help of the consultants. The DTI monitored progress and obtained evaluative feedback from the owner / manager of the small firm.

### ***Research Approach Four***

The final piece of work relates to work carried out on small firms by final year undergraduate business and marketing students studying 'Small Business Marketing' at the University of Huddersfield in the UK. Their work involved acting as consultants to small firms in the surrounding areas

(see Reynolds and Day 1999). The successful / unsuccessful application of basic marketing principles was then evaluated by the firm owners, the students themselves and the author acting as an assessor. The students had already taken at least one, often more, marketing courses as part of their degree studies. They were asked to purchase a copy of Carson et al. (1996) to use as a standard text. Student were also provided with additional material in the form of conference papers from Marketing / Entrepreneurship Interface symposia run by Professor Hills from the University of Illinois at Chicago; the Babson College Frontiers of Entrepreneurship Research conferences; ICSB conferences; and other entrepreneurial marketing texts such as Chaston (2003). They were asked to apply their marketing expertise to a range of small business case studies and eventually to act as consultants to local SMEs. The appropriateness of applying fundamental marketing principles re: the standard texts such as Kotler and Armstrong (2001) were then appraised.

### ***Results***

This research needs to identify for the reader why and how the analyses and interpretations were made and the way key concepts in the analyses evolved. In addition, ideally any researcher needs to "inform the reader of any unexpected findings or patterns that emerged from the data and report a range of evidence to support assertions or interpretations presented." (Stainback and Stainback, 1988:80-81). The author has attempted to do this in the discussion of results presented below.

## **EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE: GROUP DISCUSSIONS AND POSTAL QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY.**

### ***(a) Group Discussions.***

The make-up of the groups was discussed in the methodology section and included small firm owners as well as advisors and counsellors. The results of the three qualitative, exploratory group discussions showed that it was generally agreed amongst the group participants that small firms in the Kirklees and Calderdale area could benefit from a more professional approach to marketing. The group discussions were semi structured with the moderator making use of an interview schedule. No specific direct questions were asked to avoid influencing the group's opinions as to what type of sales and marketing training small firms in the area most needed. At no time was it suggested by any member of any of the groups that anything other than standard marketing courses would be appropriate. It was also

agreed that improvements could be brought about by the use of subsidised marketing training provided by University Business School academics and other private sector-training providers. The three groups produced a number of suggestions as to what would constitute the most useful marketing training programmes and other suggestions as to timing, duration, location, cost etc. The group discussion proceedings were analysed and the analysis formed the basis for a questionnaire, which was pilot tested and refined and eventually sent out to 1200 small firms in the area. The questionnaire contained a list of a number of what would be considered 'standard' marketing courses. Respondents were asked whether they would be interested in attending any of the courses if provision were made locally.

**(b) *Postal Sample Survey.***

A list of various marketing and sales programmes were listed on the questionnaire and respondents were asked to express their interest and rate the perceived usefulness of each of the items listed to their particular organisation. Basically the survey results supported the view taken by many working in the area of the marketing/ entrepreneurship interface and SMEs generally. That is conventional 'classicist' marketing re: the standard texts are not necessarily appropriate for use in smaller firms. Few of the small firm owners/ managers surveyed expressed strong interest in what might be called 'conventional marketing courses' and did not see the courses listed as being of particular relevance to their needs.

**Summary of survey findings.**

- 85% of respondents thought their firm could benefit from a more professional approach to marketing.
- 84% considered marketing training would be useful
- 48% considered a 1-day marketing course of no value.
- 53% considered a more in-depth course over several weeks of no value to them.
- 45% thought a 1-day practical market research course of no value.
- 65% expressed the feeling that a more in depth marketing research course, spread over several weeks would be of no value.
- 53% thought a new product-planning course of no value.
- 56% thought a one-day course on writing a marketing plan of no value.
- 53% thought a three-day course on planning and strategy of no value.
- 64% thought an in depth marketing communications course of no value.
- 60% thought a more extensive course on practical selling of no value.
- 55% thought a short course on telephone sales of no value.
- 62% thought a course on sales management of no value.
- 57% thought a short course on direct mail of no value.
- 58% thought a short course on exhibition planning of no value.
- 60% thought a short course on exporting of no value.

The most highly valued courses were 'Importance of the Customer' course - 62% rating as very or quite useful. A short course on practical selling - 64% rating very useful or quite useful. A one-day course on publicity and advertising - 63% expressed a rating of very or quite useful. As can be seen from the above summary of survey results, for most of the courses listed between 50% and 60% of respondents rated the course as having NO use to them at all. Some of their opinion was due to the duration and timing of the course listed. But even allowing for this there still seems to be a strong perception amongst the owners and managers of smaller enterprises that conventional, mainstream marketing courses are of little or no value to them. This is somewhat surprising because evidence from the author's personal experience of working with or being involved with small firms, some of which is discussed below, seems to indicate that smaller firms can benefit immensely by the application of quite basic marketing principles and techniques. In summary, the group discussions suggested that the participants felt that small firms in the area could benefit from standard sales and marketing training course. Many of the participants were 'experts' such as small business advisors and bank managers. Some participants were the owners of small firms. However when a representative sample of small firms were asked to rate the perceived usefulness of a range of 'standard' introductory and intermediate level sales and marketing course the majority of those responding thought such courses would be of little or no use to them. Given the variance of potential need across the sample and to see whether the SMEs views were related to the sector in which they were trading, the following hypothesis test was carried out.

Given that respondents had been asked to rate each of the eighteen courses specified (covering sales and marketing) in the postal questionnaire as either (1) Very useful, (2) Quite useful or (3) No use at all; it was possible to derive a simple consolidated rating. The 'highest' score across all 18 possibilities would be  $18 \times 1 = 18$  whilst the 'lowest' score would be  $18 \times 3 = 54$ . Hence the lowest numerical score was actually the most positive overall score in relation to the perception of respondents to the importance of marketing courses to help them achieve marketing improvements in the future. Thus the respondent's selection and rating of various sales and marketing topics gave the author a proxy measure of how respondents perceived the importance and usefulness of conventional sales and marketing topics to the running of their businesses. As a proxy measure this was taken as an indirect indication of respondent's attitude toward the importance of marketing to their business. In a sense using eighteen different dimensions is very much like the general approach used in commercial marketing research to measure attitudes (Waugh, 2000).

Because of the idiosyncratic component in peoples attitude set a multi dimensional approach is usually used (Amiel et al., 1999).

A Pearson Chi Square test was used to test whether there were any significant difference between the different commercial/ industry sectors, textile manufacturing, chemical processing and related industries, transport and distribution services, construction, light engineering and other financial/ and their perception of the importance of marketing to their firm. The Contingency Coefficient was used to test the strength of any statistical association. The Null Hypothesis (Ho) was that there was no significant difference between the groups in relation to the expressed interest in attending a course in marketing. The alternative hypothesis (H<sub>1</sub>) was that there was a difference. The data used was nominally scaled and hence a non-parametric test was considered appropriate. The frequency distribution of rating scores i.e. 1,2 or 3 were cross tabulated by industry sector codes nominally as 1 to 6 and a Chi square test carried out. The total score for each respondent in each of the sectors were totalled and averaged. Column One below represents a total average score of 1 to 1.5 representing ‘very useful’, none of the averages came to exactly 1 or 2 etc, and it seemed reasonable for an average total score around 1 to 1.5 to represent this response category. Likewise a score of 1.6 to 2.4 was deemed to represent a ‘quite useful’ category following the same logic i.e. none of the averages was exactly 2. Column Two represents this score category. Column Three represents ‘not useful at all’ which was categorised as a score anywhere between 2.6 to 3.

No difference was evident between the sectors and this is shown as Exhibit One.

**EXHIBIT ONE:  
AVERAGE SCORES: MARKETING PROGRAMMES BY  
SECTOR**

	Column 1	Column 2	Column 3	Total
	Very Useful	Quite Useful	Not Very useful At All	
Row 1	08	15	22	45
Row 2	12	15	28	55
Row 3	13	14	23	50
Row 4	14	17	24	55
Row 5	21	25	19	65
Row 6	11	15	24	50
Total	79	101	140	320

Degrees of freedom: 10; Chi-square = 8.68199002401283; None of the cells had expected frequencies less than 5.

For significance at the 0.05% level, chi-square should be greater than or equal to 18.31.

The distribution is not significant; *p* is less than or equal to 1.

The contingency coefficient and Cramer’s V were not calculated as their significance would be the same as for the Pearson Chi-square test i.e. not statistically significant.

## **EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE: AUTHOR AND STUDENT CONSULTANCY WORK**

### ***(c) Consultancy work.***

The author has been involved, with other colleagues, over the years in a number of consultancy projects for small firms. Some of these were subsidised by the Government (DTI) as part of their 'Enterprise Initiative', basically paying up to 70% of the consultancy charge. Firms have ranged from small electrical wholesalers; a family owned variety store, a small group of privately owned supermarkets and an engineering business. All of these projects were successful in that the general marketing competency and professionalism of the firms were improved in both the short and long run. The management / owners of all of the small firms concerned expressed satisfaction with the analysis and advice offered by the consultants of which the author was one. For each of the consultancy projects only basic, classical marketing principles were applied and fundamental strategic marketing analytical frameworks were employed e.g. Product Life Cycle, SWOT, PEST, Boston Grid, Ansoff Matrix etc. The consultancy work employing these basic marketing tools were also evaluated by the Department of Trade in the UK, to see how well their money had been spent. In each case their appraisal was positive. Hence offering consultancy advice to small firms on how they can improve their marketing and general commercial performance using standard, so called 'classical' marketing principles seems to work. The firms themselves benefit and the advice is also rated as appropriate and satisfactory by Government (DTI) appointed appraisal experts.

### ***(d) Student based projects and related work.***

The author has been teaching a final year undergraduate course in 'Small Business Marketing' over the past six years with another colleague. The course is a mixture of academic studies, including reading much of the published research work carried out at the marketing / entrepreneurship interface, and applied work. The applied work takes the form of students attempting to apply regular, formal marketing to a small business case study and having done this, finding a 'volunteer' small firm and offering the management 'free' consultancy. The students are in no way 'guided' as to what form of marketing to use when carrying out this work. The students work in small groups and attempt to apply what they have learnt in the case study work to an actual small firm with the object of showing the small firms management how they may improve various marketing aspects of

their business. Over the last six years the author has jointly assessed approximately three-hundred pieces of case work in which students attempted to apply what they had learnt earlier on standard marketing courses to a small business situation presented in the form of a case study. The case studies represented a wide range of businesses and industries. They were records of real small firms not simulations. In addition to the case study work the author has jointly assessed approximately one-hundred and twenty group projects carried out by final year undergraduate business students. Students went to local small firms in the Kirklees and Calderdale region and attempted to apply the lessons they had learnt in their case study work, basically trying to apply standard, formal marketing principles to small enterprises in the regions and offering advice on how their marketing performance could be improved in the future. In all cases conventional marketing principles could be applied perfectly well to all of the small business situations. Some adaptation was usually necessary to take into account limited budgets and limited levels of marketing and business sophistication often exhibited in small, local companies.

An evaluation the appropriateness of conventional marketing to smaller firms came from four sources. Firstly the author evaluated all of the pieces of work mentioned above in terms of how well students could apply marketing principles (whether conventional or unconventional) to the case studies and small business 'consultancies'. Secondly the students asked the management of the small firms used in the student consultancy exercises for 'feedback' in order to evaluate the perceived usefulness of the work carried out and recommendations made. Thirdly all students participating on the 'Small Business Marketing' course were asked to rate the appropriateness of conventional marketing to the case studies and real firms they had seen. Finally students were asked to evaluate the value of the Small Business Marketing Course by questionnaire. Each of the four separate evaluations were positive, in the opinion of the small business managers / owners concerned, the students and the author of this paper that conventional marketing can be usefully applied to a wide range of small firms.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Evidence from the group discussions with managers of small enterprises, advisors, counsellors and others suggest that those people actively involved in advising and dealing with the problems of small business clients think that sales and marketing 'training' would be a good thing. In their opinion the management of many smaller firms, at least in the local Kirklees and Calderdale region, are generally poor in terms of their ability to apply sales

and marketing principles in a professional and effective manner. Although the groups could not be specific as to what they thought these training needs were, they were at least able to list possibilities, and all agreed that some form of formal training in marketing would be likely to improve the competitive position and business performance of small firms in their region.

However evidence from the survey carried out amongst the owners and managers of actual small enterprises in the regions gives a different picture. When presented with a specific list of sales and marketing topics and asked to evaluate the usefulness of attending a course (of different lengths, times, types etc. to suit the respondent and for a very small fee) on each of the specific subject areas, many of the respondents showed little or no interest. On average, for all of the marketing topics presented for evaluation approximately 50% to 60% of respondents said that attending such a course would have no perceived benefit at all to their business. Basically the group discussions with the advisors etc. demonstrated that those professionals dealing with small firms on a day to day basis felt that many of them would benefit from formal training in sales and marketing. Whereas when questioned, the owners and managers of small enterprises in the region were less convinced with the majority of them expressing no interest in taking the opportunity to learn formal sales and marketing techniques and methods. Many of them (around 60% on average) considering that attendance on such a programme was of no value at all to their particular business.

Evidence gained from the authors own consultancy experience with smaller firm over many years and reported elsewhere (see Reynolds and Day, 1995), suggests that conventional, formal marketing principles and techniques can be applied with beneficial effect to a wide variety of smaller firms. The author has been involved in offering marketing consultancy to small firms under the subsidised Department of Trade and Industry scheme. After the consultancy period the small firm is 'followed up' by the consultants and the DTI assessors in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the consultancy advice and the implementations of the recommendations resulting from the consultancy. Further DTI work is dependent on a good assessment. In all of the small business DTI sponsored work carried out by the author all of the firms involved received a positive assessment and feedback from the management of the firms up to two years post consultancy was also positive. In all cases conventional marketing principles and techniques as found in many standard texts such as Blythe (2001), Palmer (2000) and Davies (1998), were applied directly to smaller firms with positive, beneficial effects on performance both in the short and longer terms.

Finally the author's experience in developing and teaching / assessing a 'Small Business Marketing' course at Huddersfield University suggests that basic conventional marketing has a positive role to play in enhancing the performance of a wide range of smaller firms. This conclusion was based on the personal assessment of many pieces of work based on real firm case studies or real firm student consultancy exercises in the University region. The firms participating in the students' 'consultancy' exercises and of course by the students themselves have also provided assessment as to the appropriateness of standard marketing to the smaller firm. Nearly all the members of both these groups believe that conventional marketing with some adjustments is appropriate when applied to the marketing situation found in smaller enterprises.

In conclusion, in the author's own experience, it does seem true that many working in smaller firms see the conventional marketing approach as being of little interest or relevance to their firms. However other evidence cited suggests that ordinary, standard, conventional marketing can be beneficially applied, almost without exception, to virtually any kind of small enterprise. There does not necessarily seem to be a case for a new small business 'marketing paradigm', although some adjustment and alteration might be appropriate in many cases. Thus the issue of standardisation versus adaptation (either marginal or radical) remains a topic central to the entrepreneurial marketing debate.

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