Methodologies For Research at the Marketing / Entrepreneurship Interface

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Abstract: This paper discusses methodological issues relevant to research at the marketing/entrepreneurship interface. Based on analysis of 352 papers published in the proceedings of the annual International Symposium on Research at the Marketing/Entrepreneurship Interface, the paper highlights the importance of contextual issues in interface studies, the role of qualitative and mixed method designs, and the need for further cross-national investigations.

INTRODUCTION

To date, a significant body of research has emerged at the Marketing/Entrepreneurship Interface (MEI). This literature can be found in special issues of marketing journals (e.g. European Journal of Marketing, Journal of Business Research, Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice), as well as key journals in the field of entrepreneurship (e.g. Journal of Business Venturing, Journal of Small Business Management). Perhaps the most cohesive body of MEI literature is captured in the proceedings of the annual International Symposium on Research at the Marketing/Entrepreneurship Interface. This compendium of leading edge MEI research totals 352 papers (1987-1998 inclusive), and encompasses a diverse range of research topics and methodologies. This time frame includes conferences from 1986 to 1997. Proceeding for the 1998 and 1999 Symposia have not yet been published (and will appear as 1999 and 2000 publications.

Using the MEI Symposium Proceedings as a base, the purpose of this paper is to comment on a variety of methodological issues relevant to MEI research. More specifically, it draws on a summary and review of key trends in the MEI Symposia Proceedings, and offers guidance on how data
collection may be designed and adapted to reach an in-depth understanding of how entrepreneurs/owners/managers ‘do’ business, particularly in relation to marketing.

We begin the paper by discussing a key contextual issue for MEI research. This is followed by a review of general trends in MEI methodology, a discussion on methods appropriate for MEI investigations, and a commentary on cross-national research trends in the field. The paper concludes with ideas for future research at the marketing/entrepreneurship interface.

**RESEARCHING THE MARKETING/ENTREPRENEURSHIP INTERFACE**

MEI research is generally concerned with exploring and understanding how entrepreneurs/owners/managers perceive and undertake marketing in the context of doing business. Often, this is in the specific context of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

SME characteristics are widely discussed in the MEI literature, however most studies fail to incorporate contextual influences into their research design. Furthermore, given the unit of analysis is often the entrepreneur/owner/manager (rather than the firm per se), any research method should be cognisant of the individual’s characteristics and how these impact upon decision-making and behaviours. The difficulties of penetrating entrepreneurs/owners/managers’ thought processes in order to fully understand how they think when making decisions is well documented (Hills and LaForge 1992). Indeed it is the ‘process’ behind decisions and actions (i.e. how and why decisions are made and behaviours occur) that needs to be understood. Therefore, it is imperative that the methodologies employed in MEI research allow for penetration of such issues, in some depth. As part of this, MEI researchers should have a good appreciation of key contextual issues influencing their investigations.

**CONTEXT INFLUENCES ON MEI RESEARCH ENTREPRENEURIAL PROCESSES**

Entrepreneur/owner/managers intuitively gather information. Often they use a variety of apparently unconnected approaches to piece together a
picture of market information that serves as a foundation for decision-making and action. Indeed the entrepreneur/owner/manager’s mode of gathering information has been described as a ‘natural’ way to understand or make sense of the human environment (Carson and Coviello 1996). For example they may start with a ‘hunch’, react to an event, or an anecdote which raises their interest in a particular issue, new idea or market. This will cause the practitioner to begin to look around for confirmation or contradiction of the developing ‘hunch’; so s/he will begin to observe the market place, activities and interactions; and talk to others in the social or work environment. In this way entrepreneur/owner/managers often carry out market research for themselves, but they do it intuitively and would therefore not call it ‘market research’.

Concepts of rigour and validity seldom enter into the mind-frame of the entrepreneur/owner/manager. These individuals will have a ‘feel’ for the value and usefulness of information and its source, and will intuitively accept or reject information as it is gathered. Much of the information gathering (note the use of the term ‘information gathering’ as opposed to market research) may well be sub-conscious. Such research will be uniquely created by the individual and related specifically to his/her business.

Clearly, this will present some difficulties in penetrating entrepreneurial/owner/manager thought processes. It is however, aspects of these cognitive processes that are important to understand, and research methodologies need to allow for identification and penetration of issues related to ‘process’. As such, it is important to consider how research methods can be used to suit the practitioner’s needs, allow for convenience and/or expediency, and yet also provide meaningful information of high quality for academic research purposes.

**PATTERNS IN THE MEI LITERATURE**

At first glance, the need to penetrate thought processes (in order to understand decisions and behaviours) might ordinarily suggest empirical methods rich in description, depth, and detail. Interestingly however, Exhibit 1 indicates that a large proportion of MEI studies (28%) involve causal rather than descriptive research. Similarly, Exhibit 2 shows survey techniques to be the most common form of data collection (31%) – a reflection of the level of causal research in the field.
EXHIBIT ONE

GENERAL RESEARCH APPROACH (percent shown)

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Note (a): Includes conference reviews/summaries (1990) or research proposals (19940

This apparent emphasis in the MEI literature is perhaps surprising given the previous discussion. However, it appears to be balanced by the fact that MEI studies (particularly in recent years) have tended to be more descriptive in nature (an overall proportion of 39%).

As seen in Exhibit 2, these descriptive studies involve a wide range of data collection techniques, with an increase in the use of case research and depth interviews. The use of personal interviews appeared to decline between 1994 and 1997, however re-emerged in 1998. Exhibit 2 also shows use of ‘mixed’ data collection approaches (i.e. combining quantitative and qualitative techniques). However, mixed approaches are quite sporadic, and in most instances, only the quantitative results are reported in the MEI literature. There has been some use of public databases, however the MEI literature shows very limited use of more qualitative techniques such as Delphi interviews, direct or participant observation, or focus groups.

Given the patterns in Exhibits 1 and 2, and the importance of research methods that are contextually relevant, it would appear that qualitative and mixed method designs warrant further attention. The following section therefore discusses a range of methodologies that might be appropriate for future research at the marketing/entrepreneurship interface.

APPROPRIATE RESEARCH METHODS FOR MEI INVESTIGATIONS

MEI research should try to mirror SME and/or entrepreneurial decision-
making processes - processes that are unlikely to be ordered and structured. In-depth understanding of the influences upon the series of processes involved in managerial decision-making and activity would benefit from a research approach that allows the phenomenon to be studied closely, longitudinally, and taking cognisance of an ‘insider’ perspective. The closer the researcher can get to the actual decision-making process, the greater the richness of findings, and the opportunity for genuine understanding. Thus, it is unlikely that conventional quantitative methods alone will reach the required level of penetration. To this end, we describe the use of qualitative interviews, a ‘combination method’ approach, and the ‘stream of research’ approach.

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

When carrying out MEI fieldwork, specific consideration must be given to the nature of the environment in which data gathering will take place; and perhaps more importantly, the characteristics of the individuals involved in the phenomena under study.
Ideally, data collection will be somewhat longitudinal in nature, involving multiple visits to key informants. For example, the first part of a study may involve face-to-face in-depth interviews with entrepreneur/owner/managers; with follow-up interviews at a later date. These interviews should be audio-taped with the respondent’s consent. The objective of such interviews would be to allow informants to describe their views in relation to what they do, how, why, when and where. Therefore, a suitable interview approach is one that takes account of the entrepreneur/owner/manager’s characteristics and individuality.

In-depth interviews which follow a relatively unstructured pattern using the ‘tell me about...’ approach for investigating business decision-making activity allow informants to describe opinions and views in relation to what they do, how, when, where and why, in their own words. These in-depth interviews can then provide an open, flexible, experiential and illuminating way to study complex, dynamic interactive situations, such as entrepreneurial decision-making. Such an interview technique provides all the advantages of in-depth interviewing in that they:

- cover a wide area of interest, allowing the researcher to become familiar with the areas of interest as the research progresses
- identify and explore key issues as they are revealed due to the open-ended nature of the interview protocol
- allow opportunity for further probing and examining until mutual understanding is reached.

It is also critical to consider the language used for researching entrepreneurs/owners/managers. The language used by the interviewer should deliberately exclude marketing terminology but focus instead on what the informant does in relation to various aspects of business. This is a vital prerequisite for understanding the entrepreneur/owner/manager’s motivations behind decision-making and various behaviours. Previous studies have shown that entrepreneurs will adapt the mode of the recipient to their views (Hills and Muzyka 1993). This is particularly so if the entrepreneur/owner/manager has had technology transfer or prior knowledge in an area of business or marketing management. Other entrepreneurial characteristics such as:

1. a need to be perceived to be in control; and
2. seen to be leading the company’s direction and in charge of his/her own destiny, also contribute to a situation where the entrepreneur will quickly respond to an interviewer in terms he/she thinks the interviewer will relate.
As a consequence of this, the entrepreneur will answer questions in the language in which they are put. For example, if a question refers to marketing strategy, the answer will be given using appropriate marketing strategy ‘jargon’. Analysis of previous empirical data shows a significant correlation between the language of the question and the language of the reply (Hills and Muzyka 1993). In avoiding such a circumstance, questions should therefore, completely avoid the use of marketing terminology.

Question variations and extensions used in such a study should encourage the interviewee to use his/her own language and terminology and expand on descriptions of marketing activities. For example, the first question in each interview may be deliberately open and general, allowing the informant to describe business activities in his/her own way. Thus the opening question might be: ‘How do you do business’? The ensuing description of business activities and evolution of these activities may be investigated by the use of some probing questions as and when necessary. Throughout the interview, the following guidelines are suggested:

◇ care should be taken not to interrupt the flow of informant’s response, regardless of relevance
◇ if the entrepreneur uses marketing jargon, this should be ignored if possible and non-jargon language used
◇ remain silent as much as possible when the entrepreneur is talking
◇ avoid engaging in conversations of agreement or disagreement
◇ remain detached but receptive (e.g. nodding frequently)
◇ maintain eye contact as often as possible
◇ where possible, use encouraging phrases such as: ‘can you tell me more about...?’ and means of clarification such as: ‘tell me what you mean by…’.

A COMBINATION OF METHODS

Given that entrepreneurs/owners/managers tend not to make decisions along functional frameworks, (Gartner et al 1992; Carson 1993) marketing decisions are likely to be intertwined and clouded in decisions concerned with the holistic running of the business. For example, a decision on pricing is just as likely to be stimulated by cash flow and cost considerations as it is to stimulate customers to buy. Therefore, decision-making should be researched in a manner which takes account of the holistic, contextual dimensions of the environment in which these managers operate.
There are many advantages of using a combination of research methods to understand entrepreneurial phenomena. A significant feature of using a combination of techniques is that data can be collected and analysed holistically. It allows the researcher to take account of the specific characteristics of the firm and decision-makers in question; and enables research to be carried out within a relatively dynamic business environment. Thus, a combination of methods will provide a useful means of studying the complex, interactive, and personal nature of entrepreneurial decision-making. Some of the most commonly used research methods include focus group discussions, surveys, observations, ethnographies, conversational analysis, content analysis and in-depth interviews. Combining methods will allow data to be gathered on verbal occurrences, observed occurrences, written reports and documentation, and data involving researcher experience within a specific context.

Overall, a combined approach can accommodate flexibility, variety and a "pot-pourri of interpretative techniques" (Hari Das 1983, p.301). Variability and flexibility will contribute to adaptation for organisational and managerial situations. In particular these methods can be readily adapted for research in entrepreneurial contexts and marketing situations to take account of specific industry and business contexts, individual owner-managers’ viewpoints and idiosyncrasies, organisational circumstances and the development of situations over time.

Indeed, the use of a combination of techniques will achieve a wider and more in-depth understanding of the complex, often vague processes and outcomes of managerial decision-making in the context of wider business activities. They will permit the study of the interactive and performance dimensions of decision-making activities studied within a natural setting over a longitudinal time period, which incorporates recognition of a dynamic or ‘change’ environment. This allows the researcher to learn about the ‘inputs and outcomes but also gain an understanding of the texture, activities and processes’ (Belk et al 1988, p.449) occurring in the day to day operations and activities and the impact of these occurrences on managerial activity. It also permits further experiential understanding of the worst and best scenarios in relation to the phenomenon under study. The concept for the use of a combination of methods is illustrated in Exhibit 3 (adapted from Carson and Coviello 1996).
Exhibit Three: Combination of Methods

Source: Adapted from Carson & Coviello (1996)

The number of methods used can be expanded and adapted as appropriate for the specific research topic to allow researchers to develop the 'best' possible methodologies for specific research problems or issues. To illustrate how this might be used in practice, a study could include, for example: a survey of owner/managers in a particularly industry context; in-depth interviews with 'key informant' owner-managers; observations of the marketing activity of a specific company; data comparison of competitive activity; and analysis of appropriate company records.

A STREAM OF RESEARCH

A further extension of the use of a combination of methods can be developed from the idea that 'individual method studies should be carefully designed to build upon what has been learned in previous studies' (Davies et al 1985, p.31). It is where the researcher combines 'the most suitable research methods from the social sciences at specific and appropriate stages of the research' (Carson and Coviello 1996, p.55). Thus the use of a combination of methods can be linked with the concept of the 'stream of research' approach as described by Davies et al (1985). A stage by stage process of data collection and interpretation can aid development in the understanding of the entrepreneur/owner/manager’s decision-making and behaviours. This is particularly relevant in the context of individual organisations operating within a specific industry context, where the longitudinal ‘stream’ approach allows each part or ‘stage’ of the research to
build on what had been learned in a previous ‘stage’. At the end of each stage, specific interpretations and managerial implications can be drawn in relation to the findings of that stage of study (Gilmore and Carson 1996). Thus the longitudinal dimension is important in taking cognisance of the ‘holistic’ dimension of entrepreneurial, owner-manager decision-making practices, and how time impacts on business decisions and activities. This is illustrated in Exhibit Four (adapted from Gilmore and Carson 1996).

OTHER TRENDS IN MEI RESEARCH

Interest in MEI issues is global, and a review of Exhibit Five provides some interesting insight as to the cultural makeup of the MEI literature base. Until 1993, 91% of the papers published were contributed from the US. Since then, this figure has dropped to two-thirds overall, with approximately only half the papers in any given year being from the US. Marked increases are seen in the volume of contributions from the UK, along with Canada, Europe, Australia, New Zealand (as well as Asia and Africa).

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This pattern of increased international interest is encouraging. At the same time, (although not reported in Exhibit Five), it is also interesting to note that of the literature generated in the first seven years (1994 inclusive), only five papers were written by a "cross-national" team, and two used "cross-national" data. In comparison, during the next four years (1995-1998), twenty-nine papers involved a cross-national team, and nine used cross-national data. Overall, only 10% of the total MEI literature has been developed by cross-national teams of authors, and a mere 3% of the studies involve cross-national data.
Exhibit Four: Stream of Research
Source: Adapted from Gilmore and Carson (1996)

Stage One
One company case study

- Survey
- Observation study

- Conversations with staff
- Focus group discussion

Action
Redefine/expand/refocus research agenda
Develop new ideas/directions

Stage Two
Companies in similar industry and geographical location

- In-depth interviews
- Observation study

- Conversations with staff
- Content analysis of promotional material

Action
Add wider dimensions to agenda
Redefine/expand/refocus research agenda
Develop new ideas/directions

Stage Three
Companies in similar industry in different geographical locations or specific aspects(s) within one company

- Further probing / in-depth interviews
- Observation study

- Conversations with staff
- Content analysis of promotional material

Outcomes
Descriptive data which illustrate decision-making activities
Develops experiential knowledge of researcher
Ongoing interpretative analysis, allowing data to be initially coded in several ways, then re-analysed and interpreted as further data is gathered

Holistic perspective/understanding of phenomena
CONCLUSION – FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Given the history of research at the marketing/entrepreneurship interface thus far, and the relative newness of the research area, we would like to make two suggestions in relation to future investigations. Firstly, research at the interface should not be ‘method bound’. Instead, studies should be designed to suit the purpose and context of interface research, especially given the ‘processual’ and interactive nature of entrepreneurial marketing.

Secondly, interest in MEI research is global. Therefore, future research should aim to overcome the lack of cross-national studies. Research involving researchers and data from different countries will contribute to the relevance, value, refinement and understanding of the marketing/entrepreneurship interface.

Research at the interface is still at a developmental stage. As researchers in this exciting field we need to focus on ‘theory building’ and reaching a better understanding of marketing at the interface by exploiting the synergy that can be created by multi-method and cross-national approaches.

REFERENCES


Carson, D. and Coviello, N. (1996), Qualitative research issues at the marketing/entrepreneurship interface”, Marketing Intelligence and Planning, 14, 6, 51-58.


