Abstract: Based on a series of thoughts, heavily influenced by the sun and rum, this paper attempts to synthesise a number of disparate influences including micro-businesses in Barbados, marketing in rapid growth markets, mainstream texts, and creativity in marketing and in smaller firms. This journey is undertaken in order to seek inspiration for a theory of small firm marketing but questions are raised as to how far one all encompassing theory is either possible or desirable.

INTRODUCTION

“I’ve been to the mountain top. And I’ve looked over, and I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land. So I’m happy tonight. I’m not worried about anything”

Martin Luther King

The ideas for this paper started appearing in my head as I relaxed on holiday last summer (1999) in a little corner of Paradise known as Barbados. What then is it about? Well, as I soaked up the sun and rum I was periodically approached, or perhaps pestered, by an assortment of beach comers looking to turn a dollar or two. As I experienced and watched their behaviour, and the behaviour of the other holidaymakers around me, I began to relate their practices to my understanding of small firm marketing. Clearly these folks were at the ‘S’ end of small and medium sized enterprises and probably are more correctly termed micro-enterprises. Having said that, they were in essence, not that different to the craftspeople I had been working with in recent research in the UK. In the UK the jewellery makers worked with gold and silver while here it was shells and precious stones. Here was the
Interface in action. Entrepreneurial business activity juxtaposed with basic marketing flair. I felt I could see parallels between the craftspeople in the UK and the Barbados beach sellers; but how far would ideas about marketing theory hold up to the reality of life on the beach?

MARKETING IN PARADISE (BARBADOS STYLE)

Yes, it's true they even get CNN in Paradise. There is a big news story going on; J.F. Kennedy Junior's plane is missing and a huge search and rescue mission is underway. There I am watching CNN and feeling that the whole story reflects the dark heart of Marketing. Essentially there are little facts for the network to go on yet they manage to maintain round the clock broadcasting. Marketing what? Hope, fear, morbid curiosity, the heritage of a family's tragedy, a time warp to 1963; whatever it is, it draws you in.

Escaping to the sun and reflecting on marketing while sipping rum and gazing into the blue Caribbean, I see that a hallucinogenic cast of characters seem to occupy the island. A far cry from Economic Man, Marketing Man and the rest. Let me introduce you.

We have the sarong and shirt seller who walks the beach like a clothes rail selling her wares. The jewellery seller who carries his trinkets in two plastic bags cheerfully repeating “As the sun goes down the price goes down.”

The local sun cream man with his distilled mixture from the soft pulp of a cactus plant. His handshake is so firm that it leaves you connected to him for the sale pitch to begin. He draws you in and before you know your arm is covered with the mixture and he is rubbing it in. Saying “No” takes time and has to be repeated OFTEN! This guy also doubles as the coconut seller. He takes orders and goes off to find the appropriate fruit which is duly delivered to your sun lounger.

And then there is Ronnie the Jet Ski man, or one of many at least who for 50 Barbadian dollars will take two people on his Jet Ski for 15 minutes. His marketing technique consists of riding around at speed to attract attention, spotting people on the beach, coming in close to the shore and hollering, persistently. It works enough times to make it worth his while. He is not quite on his own in this market. He has plenty of competition in the Jet Ski market. One of the providers will even give a two-minute training lesson in Jet Ski use before turning the customers lose on their own. As the latest customers head straight out to sea I hope the principle of turning the craft
around has been covered sufficiently! More competition comes from the banana boatman who can take about six people on his ridiculous looking craft. The craft seems to attract the two extremes of behaviour; those who cling on for dear life and those who bounce up and down so much that they fall off every few metres. Customer service skills must be stretched to the limit here, after all time is money and there are more punters on the beach if only he could get finished with these guys.

Ah well, time for some exercise and a visit to the local supermarket. It has to be said that the supermarket had a very odd pricing structure. You can buy a single bottle of beer for $1.50 or 6 in a pack for just over ten dollars. Not quite a bargain!

Returning to the hotel and the beach I turn to my neglected book I start to read about marketing in a tornado.

MARKETING IN THE TORNADO

Tornadoes are destructive. They obliterate the old paradigm and send companies into market positions of which they had only ever dreamt before. Often one company is left dominating the market forcing others to play secondary roles. In studies of IT driven companies (Moore, 1995) has identified the role of discontinuous innovations which create the possibility of a paradigm shift and the creation of a tornado. Examples include Sony who in the seven years prior to 1992 shipped their first ten million CD-ROM players. The next ten million were shipped in the following seven months, and the ten million after that in following five months. Oracle Corporation which for the entire decade of the 1980s grew at an annually compounded rate of 100%.

As for the marketing activity associated with such market activities its really quite simple. Once such a market change is underway the correct marketing strategy in a tornado is to “ignore the customer.” I probably need to repeat that for those readers recovering from nine editions of Kotler, IGNORE THE CUSTOMER!

The reason for this is quiet simple. In a tornado the customers are lining up for the product. They do not need or wish to be romanced. Demand does not need to be created; it simply needs to be supplied. They want to get
their hands on the first car, mobile phone, first palm top PC etc. They want the commodity. The internal focus of the company should be on delivery. Being distracted by an individual customer's particular needs as an end user is unnecessary. Concentrate on those players in the supply chain who allow a standard product to be deployed as fast as possible. Their motives for profit are the same as the manufacturer.

MARKETING CAN BE HELL IN PARADISE

Ok, enough sun bathing time to go for a tour of the island. In the north of the island there is a big dark cave (a la Father Ted) or as its billed locally the Animal Flower Cave. The attraction consists of a step descent to a cave hollowed out by the Atlantic waves. Giant sea anemones once were the focus of attention until a heavy sea washed they away. Now you can see bigger ones in your local rock pool. Of course no one tells you this until you have paid your money and stepped inside. Still it makes for an impressive cave and access to all areas is allowed and your movement is only limited by slippery surfaces. Marketing’s influence is minimal at the site some local craft sellers, a ramshackle toilet and a small shed containing a bar.

My mind drifted to Calanais on the Isle of Lewis off the West Coast of Scotland. I first visited Calanais in the summer of 1995. It was important that I made it before the opening of a new Visitor Centre at the sight. Why? Well similar sites have suffered from being packaged for visitors. English Heritage, for example, has marketed Stonehenge to death. Now its is fenced off for its own protection. Our view of this site is controlled by English Heritage, copyrighted, censored…a paradise lost. Each year at the summer solstice there is a annual ritualistic clash of those who wish to be near the stones and those who would keep them away.

Visiting Stonehenge has become a packaged experience, the site muted, a whisper of itself. Other sites are more fortunate partly because of geography. The Ring of Brogar on Orkney still allows free access despite the increasing number of cruise ship tourists bussed in between gift shop stops. At Calanais there is a request to stay outside the circle but that is no deterrent to a deeper calling from the stones themselves. As Fay Goodwin has said “May Calanais be protected from the heritage industry.”

Marketing is perhaps a victim too in all of this, appearing as it does to have a split personality between good and evil.
CREATIVITY AND MARKETING

So now all these streams of thought are winding their way through my increasingly intoxicated brain made worse by the heat of the sun. I find myself impressed by the creativity in the micro businesses I have seen on the beach and elsewhere. On my return home I do a mad thing; visit the University library to search out some basic making texts. Where better to start than with Kotler?

The first edition of Marketing Management: Analysis, Planning and Control appeared in 1967. It had 23 chapters focused on the “administrative processes of analysis, organisation, planning and control”. This was the first time I had ever looked at the original edition of this book. The formal definition of marketing was given as:

“Marketing is the analysing, organising, planning and controlling of the firm’s customer-impinging resources, policies and activities with a view to satisfying the needs and wants of chosen customer groups at a profit.”

While the definition is unremarkable for its time the real surprise was to find a chapter entitled “Marketing Creativity”!

“We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time. T S Eliot

Suffice it to say this had disappeared by the second edition of the text in 1972 where the content of chapter had been reduced and included in a New Product Development chapter. Creativity and marketing have never again emerged as a topic in all eight editions and sadly, The Millennium Edition, is no different.

CREATIVITY AND SMALL FIRMS

My little corner of marketing contains lots of SME’s being creative and marketing creatively. Being creative is seeing the same thing as everybody else but thinking of something different. Often by combining existing objects in different ways a new purpose can be discovered. For example, Guttenburg took the winepress and the die punch and produced a printing press. Another way of looking at creativity is as playing with the way things are interrelated.
Studies of creativity in the literature have drifted across a variety of aspects including looking at life histories and the antecedents of creative action; nature v.’s nurture; personality correlates; leaders and innovators; adaption; motivation and communication in organisations. Stern (1998) has identified six elements of corporate creativity and debate has taken place on whether creativity has its locus in the individual or the group. Amabile (1998) states that within every individual creativity is a function of expertise, creative-thinking and motivation while Bennis (1997) found teams of people in organisations where each member of the group, including the leader, is needed to create the collective magic. Ford (1996) produced a theory of creative action (Exhibit One) which combines information gathering and the attribution of meaning to the data with motivational characteristics of the individual together with knowledge and ability to think creatively. This, in turn, leads to an action which may be creative or habitual depending on the cocktail mixed.

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Source: Adapted from Ford (1996)

In endeavoring to explain internationalisation behaviour of the craft firm, researchers have embraced both traditional methods of conceptualisation and explanation such as Transaction Cost Analysis (Anderson and Gatignon 1986; Reid 1983), the Stages approach (Ortiz-Buonafina 1991; Rao and Naidu 1992), and the more recent Network approach (Coviello and Munro 1995). However, in this age of postmodernism, it seems fitting that we should seek to explain behaviour by examining possible contributions from disciplines outside international business and marketing. Since creativity is also central to success in the arts and crafts, it appears even more fitting to explore its contribution to micro and small firm marketing.
MICRO AND SMALL FIRM MARKETING: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

So then what is the relevance of this musing to micro and small firm marketing? A survey of the literature would suggest that the basic principles of marketing apply to both small and large firms. It is perhaps in their application that differences emerge particularly due to variations in available resources. While there has been much written on marketing for the smaller firm there has not been a systematic study of the subject under agreed research aims and objectives. Thus, much of the material either overlaps or fails to be sufficiently focused to allow comparison. In addition to this the exploration of the Marketing/Entrepreneurship Interface has only recently begun. This can be traced to the activities of the Marketing and Entrepreneurship Symposium since 1987 under Professor Gerald Hills and the Marketing/Entrepreneurship Special Interest Group (SIG) of the American Marketing Association. Likewise, the SIG attached to the Academy of Marketing will have its sixth annual meeting in 2001. While progress has been made in identifying research directions and attempts have been made to develop common methodologies incorporating cross-cultural studies much yet remains to be done to bring this work to fruition.

Perhaps one of the best overviews of research into this area is by Siu and Kirby (1998). In this work the authors summarise the research into small firm marketing under four approaches, namely:

- Stages/Growth Model
- The Management Style Model
- The Management Function Model
- The Contingency Approach

The authors identify a number of disparate approaches within each of the four overarching categories but conclude that most have limitations. Siu and Kirby then argue for an integration of the contingency approach with the process models as the best way forward. This, they argue, would involve:

- exploring the strategy-performance relationship
- using quantitative techniques to understand marketing practices in small firms
- understanding how small firms make marketing decisions through qualitative research methods

The end goal of these objectives is to build a theory of small firm marketing. But then is this possible? One coherent all encompassing theory of small firm marketing which would cope with the experience of micro and small
firms around the globe? A theory capable of dealing with the small craft based businesses in the UK and with the Barbadian entrepreneurs not to mention small firms in developing or transition economies.

The potential for variation in patterns of micro and small firm behaviour is illustrated here within one short journey from the UK to Ghana. Given the beginning of the new millennium there has, naturally, been much focus on the meaning of time in our lives in the media and elsewhere. One of the more innovative approaches to this was by the UK broadcaster Channel 4 in their series 'On the Line' first screened at the end of 1999. This was a unique millennium project which celebrated the similarities and differences of the eight countries found along the Greenwich Meridian - the UK, France, Spain, Algeria, Mali, Burkina Faso, Togo and Ghana. These countries, lying along zero longitude, share the same morning, noon and night, but the people who live in them lead very different lives. In watching some of these programmes I was struck by the often huge gap in experience even down to the level of a discussion with a driver in Mali about the fact the earth was curved and not flat as it appeared.

One programme in particular comprised Jon Snow (who first devised the idea of On the Line) travelling up the Greenwich Meridian from Accra in Ghana to Timbuktu in Mali, where he meets Ekow Eshun, who has travelled down the line from Grimsby. En route, both spend time with local people with widely divergent cultures. Owners of small business, for example, a bakery and a local liquor producer were interviewed and shared experiences about working in very contrasting environments. In this one small transect the feeling was brought home to me that what we as academic researchers said about the internationalisation process was potentially very limited in coverage. This one journey along the Greenwich Meridian had exposed such variety that it left one feeling rather small, ant like, beneath a towering colossus of the unknown. Is there a lesson here for research into the micro and small firm marketing? There would appear to be such potential variation in experience along the line that I wonder how far our understanding of the micro firm would stand up to scrutiny in the eight countries on the line? This would make for a fascinating study.

My suspicion is that one theory of small firm marketing is a bridge too far. It may not even be desirable, such would be the level of reductionism. Instead what is more likely to emerge from our research efforts is a theory of micro and small firm marketing based on a segmentation approach. Our ideas of small firm marketing must forever be more flexible and believable than those carried in mainstream texts. The scientist is creative in terms of his/her approach in moving theory forward while the artist/craftsperson uses
creativity to indulge in his/her own version of truth. The people on the beach in Barbados are being just as creative with their marketing activities. We have in synthesising these elements together the opportunity to, in a wider sense, think in an abstract and creative fashion and perhaps create new conceptualisations of existing business practices and a theory of small firm marketing at the Interface.

REFERENCES


