Understanding SME Networking: A Qualitative Case Study Approach

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Abstract: This paper discusses the critical aspects of analysing qualitative data. It examines the data analysis process used in a longitudinal qualitative study of 12 SMEs within a distribution channel. The focus of this research was to gain an in-depth understanding of the marketing networking that occurs within the channel. The use of qualitative research methods using case study research, and the collection of data from multiple sources allowed an in-depth understanding of network activities to be achieved. This paper explains how the data were analysed to produce meaningful findings within a specific context. This resulted in a marketing network theory that was grounded in the views of the practitioners, as well as previous research in related topic areas of networking in SMEs and marketing in SMEs. The research showed that a case study methodology is an insightful alternative to the more conventional approach of studying network theory. Data was collected using in-depth interviews with manufacturing, intermediary and retailer firm types, of small and medium-size. The case study database was examined and summarised through the identification and interpretation of core patterns and themes. While there is no single way of analysing qualitative data, this paper summarises the fundamental basis upon which the data analysis process occurs. The process of data analysis was continuous during this research in moving from data collection to data analysis, to data interpretation in a cyclical manner. The use of multiple cases allowed cross-case comparison and replication. It provided valuable insight as to how firms interact within the distribution channel in both a horizontal and vertical dimension.