

Effective marketing training provision for SME executives.

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In marketing education and training there is a significant trend in awareness and importance of marketing for company growth. This trend has been established over many years and has been fuelled by numerous reports underlining its importance. Currently there is a plethora of business support from government. However, questions must be asked about the range and suitability of the education and training provision for marketing development.

There are also many training providers covering the whole spectrum of business education and development. These providers can be grouped into two categories. Education establishments, namely further and higher education colleges; and private or semi-private training and consultancy companies.

The duration of a programme appears to determine the focus and content of marketing within a programme. A broad rule of thumb is that short programmes of between one half day up to three or five days tend to focus on specific topics of marketing. For example, programmes dealing with various aspects of selling and customer

services, such as "Selling Skills", "Customer Care and Customer Service", "Telephone Selling", "Complaint Handling Skills". These programmes can be classified as "introductory" type because the duration does not allow for in-depth education and training.

Longer term programmes of ten weeks and months or a year, or longer (part-time) tend to cover a wider spectrum. For example, "Introduction to Marketing", "Marketing Planning", Chartered Institute of Marketing certificate and diploma, and degree programmes. These programmes can be classified as either intermediary or in-depth, because there is time to develop the issues addressed. The longer programmes tend to focus on education rather than training, and are provided by education establishments, whereas shorter programmes are focused on training and are provided by private and semi-private organizations.

The descriptions of all programmes are wide and varied as are the organizations offering the programmes. It is difficult to assess accurately the type and style of training and the extent of coverage of topics. Equally, there is no common or standard format for describing programmes.

While there is a wide variety of programmes focusing on some aspect of marketing, there is a dearth of provision for business people working in marketing management or at least responsible for marketing decisions within an organization. Generally the following can be argued:

- Most education programmes are aimed at and attract young managers in relatively low levels of marketing decision making, or aspiring marketing managers. For managers, the average age of students on introductory or intermediate education courses in marketing is between 25 and 30.
- Most short programmes are of too short a duration to have a meaningful education and training benefit regardless of the management level of participants. Because of this short duration, these programmes can only expect to enhance management techniques and processes. The onus for the actual learning experience falls on the individual participant and such learning can only occur if that individual applies the technique to his or her own work situation. A majority of managers are unlikely to do this in a structured way.

Conclusions from this debate can be summarized as follows:

- (1) Managers taking decisions on marketing cannot avail themselves of a meaningful education and training programme on effective marketing management decision making, except in a most haphazard and disjointed way; that is, by either

Editor's note: Readers of this article may be interested in the Continuing Professional Development Programme offered by the Chartered Institute of Marketing, Moor Hall, Cookham, Berks. 5LG 9QH.

“going back to school” and enrolling in a further or higher education course or an enterprise development programme with a marketing focus. In the case of the former, middle and senior managers are unlikely to be able to devote time and commitment to such courses. In the latter, because of the resource-intensive nature of such programmes and the scarcity of skilled education providers, there is a natural exclusion for all but a select few. An alternative is for a manager to proactively trawl the short course provision. However, this is an unlikely scenario since it would require a manager to be committed proactively to continuous education. The vagaries of management are unlikely to permit such commitment.

- (2) There is a significant gap in the provision of a comprehensive education and training programme of recognized standing focusing on marketing management decision making. While the further and higher education academically certificated programmes carry standards of qualification, none of the private training programmes carries comparable assessment standards of qualification. Therefore, the learning experience will be dependent on the competence and quality of the training provision.
- (3) There is a need for a clear co-ordinated strategy for marketing education and training, particularly for guiding those managers with practical experience but little or no formal education in the area of marketing. Such a strategy would need to carry an attractive stimulus to encourage manager participation.
- (4) There is also a need for some radically new thinking in the provision of training programmes for marketing management. This new thinking is needed to overcome the known deficiencies of existing and traditional programmes, some of which have already been alluded to in this discussion.

While points (1) to (4) are all of equal importance let us focus on (4) and offer a description of a radical approach to learning effective marketing for owner/managers in SMEs.

A Case Example of Radical Learning for Effective Marketing in SMEs

Traditionally, marketing learning in small- and medium-sized companies has focused on learning standard marketing techniques, but the University of Ulster has devised a programme that differs radically from other small business development programmes in that it uses a

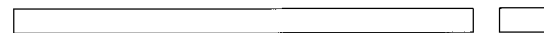
fundamentally different learning approach. This learning approach consists of the following key component parts:

- marketing technology transfer (learning) specifically “adapted” to small business marketing requirements and capabilities;
- proactive utilization of the entrepreneur’s “personal contact network”;
- proactive development of appropriately identified “marketing competences”;
- joint learning between entrepreneurs and young graduates through interactive exchange of views, ideas and opinions.

These key component parts are explained more fully below.

Marketing Technology Transfer

The format for this technology transfer combines informal lectures, question and answer sessions, peer group “discovery” learning, and “self-completion” workbook tasks.



The programme focuses on competency learning

The informal lectures address issues of marketing which are particularly relevant to small firms. Most of the technology transfer is “jargon”-free and avoids “formal” descriptions of marketing aspects. Instead, topics are “adapted” to suit small firms and entrepreneurs characteristics. There is much emphasis on the discovery learning dimensions whereby entrepreneurs have the opportunity to raise and discuss, among their peer group, issues of marketing important to them personally. An emphasis is placed on a consensus view, determined after careful consideration. Strong personal views on any aspect can be freely expressed in the entrepreneur’s personal workbook on marketing for his/her own firm.

Use of the Personal Contact Network

The concept and existence of the entrepreneur’s “personal contact network” is well-documented in the literature. But this programme not only seeks to raise and discuss such networks, but also entrepreneurs are required to identify those members of their network who could help them most in relation to issues of marketing. These members form the nucleus of the “marketing network”. The entrepreneurs are required to utilize proactively their marketing network by taking counsel of ideas for

marketing. The object is that such ideas will enjoy refinement and change and improvement as a result of the proactive consultations.

Marketing Competences

It is increasingly being recognized that the development of management competences is the key to improvement in management, rather than for individuals to learn only management principles and tasks. This programme acknowledges this hypothesis and focuses on competency learning. This philosophy professes that entrepreneurs have an inherent, commonsense knowledge of the marketing concept which simply needs to be “released” through enhanced competency skills in management. However, it goes further by identifying specific “marketing competences” which are deemed appropriate for entrepreneurial marketing development.

Joint Learning

This aspect draws on opposite perspectives which form the basis of compatible strengths. These perspectives are typified by the following statement:

Young managers are formal in their approach to marketing, entrepreneurs are informal. They focus on theory, are strong on recent academic experience and low on real experience. Entrepreneurs focus on practical dimensions, are low on recent academic experience but strong on real experience. Young managers need to relate theory to experience and apply theory by considering real marketing in theoretical terms, whereas entrepreneurs will question theory, will focus on their personal experience regardless of theory and see real marketing in intuitive terms.

Accepting this argument, this programme introduces young graduates to the entrepreneurs through a series of in-depth discussions in the entrepreneurs’ business premises. The purpose of the discussion is to allow both

parties to learn from each other by discussing issues of marketing and asking questions of clarification from both perspectives.

An added advantage of this joint learning is that it adds considerably to the resource limitations of the prime facilitators. In the “class” sessions, only the base framework of relevant issues in marketing can be addressed. The joint learning approach enables entrepreneurs to add meaningful flesh to their embryonic learning.

Research Framework

In addition to the learning process described above, there is an ongoing experimental research study. The foundation of this framework is a longitudinal dimension which focuses on the effectiveness of the combined learning processes employed in the programme.

An added dimension of the research study is data gathering from a control group of small firms not receiving any marketing technology transfer. The data from this control group is gathered by the young graduates using exactly the same in-depth discussion approach. The young graduates will therefore have the opportunity to compare findings both from companies receiving Technology Transfer and those not receiving any.

Generally, the results from this programme are encouraging in that entrepreneurs feel they *can do* effective marketing. This programme will not solve all the problems raised in this discussion, neither does it address all the issues, but it does go some way towards breaking new ground and offers an improvement in “reaching” marketing management with an effective approach.

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