

When marketing is everyone's business

Entrepreneurs and the practice of marketing

Entrepreneurship and marketing have a lot in common – especially in small firms (small to medium-sized enterprises [SMEs]). When there's nobody with a dedicated marketing role, then people all over the organization typically do things that contribute to the firm's marketing effort. And, when marketing becomes the sum of activities carried out by different individuals at different levels within the SME, it becomes "an all-pervasive way of doing business", rather like entrepreneurship, in fact.

Mind the gap – what existing research does and does not do

When academic researchers talk about what "doing marketing" involves, they may well end up with a long – and very comprehensive – list of activities. Unfortunately, this on its own may not shed much light on what actually happens, where and why it matters.

The concept of entrepreneurial marketing (EM) can be interpreted in several ways, depending on the theoretical starting point and assumptions:

1. the market perspective, where entrepreneurship and the discovery of opportunities are viewed as economic processes that influence the way the market operates;
2. the marketing view, which explains EM – "the entrepreneurial mode of marketing" – in terms of formal rules and routines; and
3. the entrepreneurial firm perspective that focuses on entrepreneurship – the ability to use innovative, autonomous and aggressive behavior to achieve strategic objectives.

These three approaches do have some common ground, but each research stream has its own focus, context and units of analysis. This raises the question of how people who are studying entrepreneurship and small-business research see EM in practice.

A practitioner's perspective

A survey of existing small to medium-sized enterprise (SME) marketing research uncovers an extensive list of authors who have looked at marketing from a practitioner perspective. Their work includes approaches such as:

- presenting a "toolkit" of different marketing practices based on entrepreneurial strengths;
- defining a set of marketing practice dimensions and identifying different types of marketing in large and small firms; and
- comparing the marketing undertaken by SMEs with that of larger firms.

Research into SMEs has identified how small-firm marketing differs from the style of marketing used by bigger firms. But, that still leaves a gap in understanding – these studies

may move away from marketing theory, but they often still take a theoretical approach to marketing practice. They are grounded in theoretical SME marketing practice rather than in investigating how it is actually carried out in real life. So, engaging more deeply in a “hands-on” study of marketing practice might be useful to fill the persistent gap in understanding of EM as an “all-pervasive way of doing things”. This is where social practice can offer a fresh view of EM – an alternative lens through which to view entrepreneurship and marketing activity in SMEs.

What is social practice theory?

Social practice theory looks at the link between practice and context in social situations. It developed out of social constructivist theories that assume that all social phenomena develop in social contexts. So, rather than generating lists of marketing activities, this approach tries to analyze and explain what is actually done to carry out EM and then theorize about the nature of EM practice.

Social practice theory has been used successfully in organizational research to provide a micro-perspective on activities. More recently, a stream of research known as marketing-as-practice has developed. This focuses on the actors, tasks and representations involved in the complex performance of “doing marketing”. But there is still a sizeable gap in the literature – especially for research into entrepreneurial and small-firm marketing.

Using social practice theory to explain the nature of marketing in small firms

At present, scholars of practice seem to agree that:

- their work is grounded in observable activities or activity theory; and
- that practitioners share some knowledge structures.

So, to find out how entrepreneurs carry out marketing and what meaning it has for them and other members of the small firm, researchers can look at tools and devices that people use to carry out EM and a micro-analysis of routines and objects associated with marketing. This includes non-verbal information – things like the movement patterns of those involved and habitual gestures. All of these elements can be used to let other people know that an individual is engaged in EM and to prompt further EM-related actions.

The entrepreneurial firms’ perspective on marketing practices

In a small entrepreneurial firm, marketing practices involve many people at different levels in the organization and are highly contextual. What the firm can and does manage to do depends upon its scope and the resources – material and non-material – that it has available. It also depends on the behavioral patterns typical of entrepreneurial firms: being opportunity-driven, innovation-focused and prepared to take calculated risks. Social practice theory highlights:

“Social practice theory looks at the link between practice and context in social situations”

“Rather than generating lists of marketing activities, this approach tries to analyze and explain what is actually done to carry out entrepreneurial marketing”

- the contextual nature of practices;
- the importance of shared understanding; and
- the importance of individuals' actions, attitudes and behaviors in demonstrating and “living out” their knowledge.

This suggests considerable overlaps between social practice theory and the way that marketing is carried out in small entrepreneurial firms – and that there are advantages to applying social practice theory to research into EM. The concepts outlined here shape EM practices and can be used to understand and build routines that shape the study of EM.

This study offers three distinct contributions concerning the practice of marketing in small firms. It:

1. identifies a gap within the existing research literature;
2. discusses ways of studying EM practice by applying social practice theory; and
3. explains how these can be conceptualized to improve understanding of the nature of EM practice.

With this as a starting point, researchers now have an opportunity to explore the nature of marketing in small firms in greater detail. Entrepreneurial practitioners may find that the resulting research provides useful insights into the significance of their marketing-related activities.

Comment

This review is of “Beyond rhetoric: re-thinking entrepreneurial marketing from a practice perspective”, by Gross *et al.* (2014). This exploration of the nature of marketing in small firms' reviews much of the related academic literature and identifies opportunities for further research. The authors draw a distinction between analyses of practice that are based on marketing theory and the activities that actually happen in small firms when they engage in marketing. They then propose the use of social practice theory as a way of closing this gap and developing a significant new research stream focused on EM.

Reference

Gross, N., Carson, D. and Jones, R. (2014), “Beyond rhetoric: re-thinking entrepreneurial marketing from a practice perspective”, *Journal of Research in Marketing and Entrepreneurship*, Vol. 16 No. 2, pp. 105-127.

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