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Key words: Theory-in-use, marketing, micro firm, interactive research, germinal

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Exploring Marketing in Micro Firms

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Abstract

Purpose - The purpose of the paper is to explore the practice of marketing in micro firms. Which are the challenges micro firms encounter and how do they handle them?

Methodology - The research methodology is based on the theory-in-use approach (Zaltman, Heffring & LeMasters 1982) in order to inductively explore the practice of marketing in micro firms. The empirical findings rest on ten case studies, where data has been generated through repeated interactions with each case.

Findings - The empirical findings show that micro firms handle their marketing challenges in a distinctive manner, by creatively using available resources and network relations. Marketing in micro firms is largely about a long-term, gradual development of a position on the market. This process we label *germinal marketing*. Two key dimensions of germinal marketing were identified: “earning your position” and “being your brand”.

Research limitations and implications - The findings rest on an explorative study consisting of ten cases and the general applicability of the results need to be validated by further studies. These cases are however sufficient to illuminate the need for further research into the area.

Value of the paper - The value of the paper is twofold. First, it expands the theory-in-use approach, and presents a research method for successful inductive empirical studies of small firm phenomena. Secondly, the paper widens our understanding of the marketing reality and practice of micro firms, identifying new dimensions of marketing and revealing the strategic implications of ordinary business activities.

Keywords - Theory-in-use, marketing, micro firm, interactive research, germinal

Category of paper - Research paper

Introduction

Small firms constitute the ultimate basis of all economies (Bjerke & Hultman, 2002), since they bring employment and economic growth. Many of the small firms are, in fact, micro firms. According to the definition launched by the European Union a micro firm has less than 10 employees and an annual turnover or annual balance sheet less than two million euros (Commission Recommendation 2003/361/EC). The significance of micro firms is indisputable – nine out of ten enterprises in the EU are in fact micro firms (Schmiemann, 2006).

Research conducted during the last decades stresses the importance of marketing in small firms; marketing is vital for the survival and growth of the small firm (Bjerke & Hultman, 2002; Carson & Gilmore, 2000; Davis, Hills, & LaForge, 1985; Fuller, 1994; Romano & Ratnatunga, 1995). Thus, there exists a consensus among researchers that marketing is a key to small firm success; however, it cannot be managed in the same way as marketing in a large firm (e.g. Carson & Cromie, 1990; McCartan-Quinn & Carson, 2003; O'Donnell, 2004). These lines of reasoning also apply in a micro firm context. What distinguishes marketing in micro firms from marketing in large firms is the fact that marketing practices in micro firms are deeply embedded in the context of the firm; they are influenced by and adapted to the characteristics of the owner-manager, they are inseparable from other activities and the firm life cycle, and constrained by limited resources (cf. Carson & Gilmore, 2000). Moreover, micro firms similarly as small firms are today part of a competitive landscape that is characterised by change, complexity, chaos and contradiction (Morris, Schindehutte & LaForge, 2002), which makes marketing in the micro firm even more crucial and complex to handle.

Hence, the point of departure of this paper is firstly, that a noticeable share of traditional marketing concepts may not be applicable as such on the marketing practices of micro firms. Secondly, existing marketing theories may not cover all aspects of marketing identified in micro firms. It has been pointed out that there is a need for further research into understanding how small firms actually go about their marketing – it is maintained that research is separated from and contributes little to marketing practice (Hill, 2001; Morris et al., 2002). The current study seeks to redress this gap by developing a framework, which reflects the marketing practices as they are carried out in micro firms. Thirdly, the latent and multidimensional characteristics of marketing in micro firms demand a research approach and a methodology that capture the reality of micro firms. In this study a theory-in-use (TIU) approach (Zaltman, LeMasters & Heffring, 1982) is adopted; we view marketing as being guided by the TIU of the owner-manager.

The purpose of this paper is thus to develop a theoretical framework that furthers our understanding of how micro firms handle marketing. The guiding research questions are as follows: Which are the principles – the theories-in-use – guiding owner-managers of micro firms in their marketing efforts? Which are the marketing challenges micro firms encounter and how are they handled? The findings are based on ten case studies of micro firms, which include repeat interviews with each of the owner-managers of the micro firms.

This paper is structured into a discussion on the research approach and methodology of the study, thereafter the empirical findings are presented and discussed. The paper is concluded by elaborating on the theoretical and managerial implications of the study.

Research approach and methodology

In our opinion research in the chosen research area needs to be conducted in a humble spirit, with a keen interest for the reality of the micro firm. An inductive, qualitative approach is hereby a natural choice (cf. Patton, 2002). The ontological assumption guiding the study is the notion of the world as a social construction; every owner-manager perceives and makes sense of the world in a unique way, which naturally has implications on the principles guiding the owner-manager's marketing efforts.

Zaltman et al. (1982) claim that the problem of traditional marketing theory lies in the problem of it being too far from the everyday marketing reality. To remedy this gap between theory and practice, Gummesson introduces the concept of interactive research, described as follows: "instead of searching for strict and partial causality, I search for understanding of a systematic whole, a context, with individual and complex patterns of interactive relationships" (2005:322). Gummesson's interactive research and the research approach of this study share common ground. Interactive research rests on two main premises: close access to reality and valid results. Researcher involvement is a key feature of interactive research, as it is the only way of reaching a holistic, rich understanding of the phenomenon under study. The same lines of reasoning permeate this study, which is guided by generating results and building a theoretical framework that reflect the marketing reality of micro firms.

The theory-in-use approach

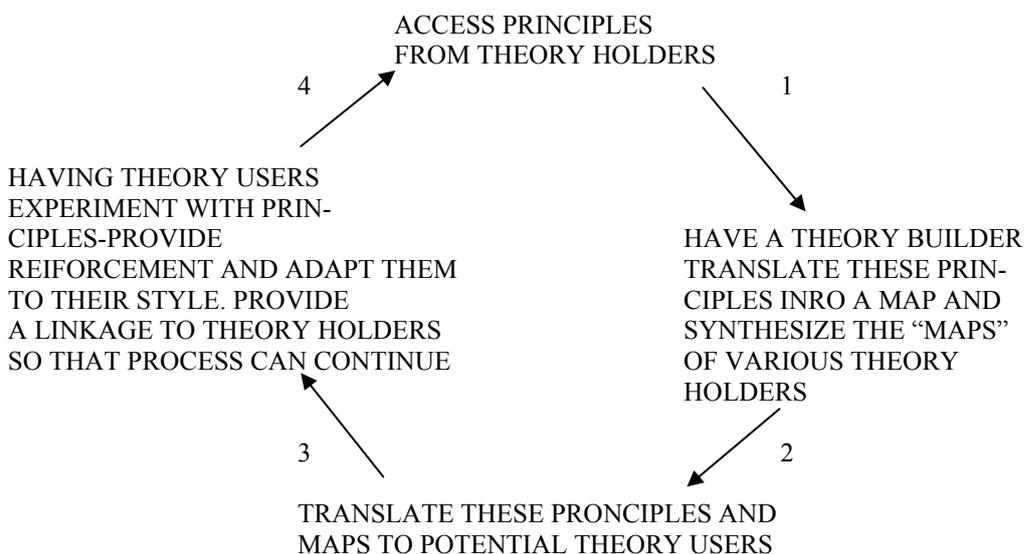
The purpose of the TIU approach is to identify the *principles* guiding individuals in different situations and contexts, in this case the principles guiding the marketing efforts of owner-managers of micro firms. TIU is by tradition a concept associated with theories of organisational learning (Argyris & Schön, 1996). Zaltman et al. (1982) and Heffring (1985) put the concept of TIU into a marketing context. Heffring (1985:108) describes TIU as a "personal map that managers develop of their marketing environment which guides and provides them with a basis for making marketing decisions, both successful and unsuccessful." Zaltman et al. (1982:127) consider the TIU approach an interactive and inductive research approach that aims for theory development. The TIU approach rests on case study methodology and grounded theory as developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The connection to case studies can be found in the manner the theory builder i.e. the researcher collects data from single subjects. The link to grounded theory can be found in the way the researcher builds a theory that is obtained from sound research and emerging empirical data.

The value of applying a TIU approach is threefold. First, in order not to impose formalised textbook marketing concepts and models on the micro firms under study, TIU builds on induction in contrast to deduction. Second, the *process perspective*, which emerges through repeated interactions with theory holders, is a characteristic of the TIU approach. This allows better access and more insight into the marketing practices of the micro firm as research becomes an iterative process where data

collection, analysis, reflection, and verification all revolve. Third, the TIU approach holds that *the developed theory or framework should be useful*.

The first step in a study adopting a TIU approach is to access the principles of the theory holder, see Figure 1. On a practical level, the principles of theory holders are illustrated in personal marketing maps created by the theory holder. In other words, the mental models guiding the theory holder are captured in an interview situation and concretely put to paper. Of utmost importance is not just identifying and describing the personal map of the theory holder, but for the researcher to translate the map into knowledge that can be disseminated to a broader community, so that the process can be continued.

Figure 1. A simplified view of the theory development cycle (modified).
(Heffring 1985:109)



Selection and description of the cases

The empirical study is based on ten case studies of micro firms. The method of sampling can be described as purposive (Patton, 2002), with a clear intention to attain diversified and rich data from firms operating in various businesses.

The firms operate within several lines of business such as tourism, retailing and different types of services e.g. physiotherapeutic, IT and graphical design services. The firms have been operating for an average of 9.3 years, ranging from 25 to 3 years. The number of employees, in addition to the owner-manager, varies from no employees to 7 employees in one of the firms. A majority of firms have 1-3 full-time employees and 1-2 half-time employees (owner/s included). Half of the firms can be characterised as family firms. Three of the firms are managed by couples and seven by individual owner-managers.

Data collection and analysis

The data was collected during three years, from 2002-2005, a period of economic growth in Finland. Data collection occurred in two phases: an *explorative* and a *verification* phase. The purpose of the explorative phase was to discover main concepts and principles guiding the theory holder in his marketing efforts. Firstly, a general discussion between the researcher and the theory holder/owner-manager took place uncovering the history of the firm and describing its current situation and operations. Thereafter the theory holder was asked to reflect on the following question: “what all is of importance for the survival of the firm?” The theory holder was asked to reason around the question aloud and to write or draw on a blank sheet of paper everything that came to his or her mind. The activity of drawing and writing is a tool for disseminating the TIU of the theory holder, and it has turned out to be an effective method of gaining access to the theory holder’s principles of how to handle marketing.

The term “marketing” was never used during interactions with theory holders. The core idea of the TIU approach is to discover concepts that are used by the theory holders. Therefore, it was decided that the term marketing, which has a tendency to awaken specific associations, would not be emphasised in any way. The reasoning of the theory holder is not necessarily a monologue – the researcher may have to comment and ask questions in order to keep the theory holder on track. The personal marketing map is hence a construction developed in a symbiotic process between the theory holder and the researcher. However, it is very important that the researcher in the explorative phase never imposes his or her own concepts on the theory holder.

The “internal dialogue” i.e. the aloud reasoning of the theory holder was always recorded, transcribed and analysed by the researcher. Thus, before entering the verification phase, the researcher had transcribed the discussion and created an own understanding of the map. The map generated in the explorative phase was in the second phase presented by the researcher to the theory holder for comments and verification. The theory holder was asked to reflect upon the map, as the theory builder went through it and gave the theory holder his or her interpretation of it. The discussion yielded a deeper understanding of the theory holder’s TIU and provided additional information that did not come up in the first phase. The map was hereby validated. After the verification phase the researcher reviewed the map again and as in the first phase, transcribed the aloud reasoning of both researcher and theory holder. Hence, the final map was created.

The fact that data collection was conducted in two phases has several positive implications. Firstly, a relationship is established to the theory holder, which means that access is enhanced. This in turn increases the quality of the study. Secondly, the method promotes the learning process of both the theory holder and the researcher. By sharing the interpretation of the map, the researcher stimulates the thoughts of the theory holder. Thirdly, the collected data is rich, in-depth and detailed, reflecting the reality and everyday work of the theory holder.

The TIU approach similarly as other qualitative and inductively-driven research depends on continuous data-analysis. Analysis of each of the personal marketing maps

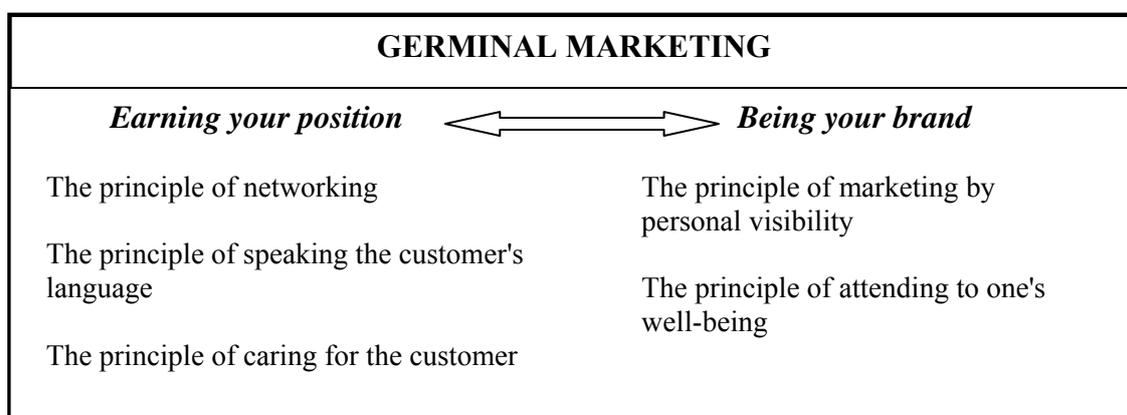
of the owner-managers was conducted after both the explorative and the verification phase. Each map gave an initial overall picture of the micro firm and its marketing activities. However, in order to be able to construct a theoretical framework, each of the individual maps were fused into one single map, which illustrated all the different dimensions put forward by each theory holder. Furthermore, the discussions were transcribed and analysed with respect to three guiding questions: 1) which are the key dimensions of marketing in the micro firm? 2) Which principles permeate the theory holders way of handling' marketing and issues concerning the survival of the firm? 3) How are these principles applied in practice?

Findings

Based on the ten case studies (2 tourism firms, 2 retail firms, 2 physiotherapeutic firms, 1 law firm, 1 IT-firm, 1 graphic design firm, and 1 textile embroidery – and printing firm) we conclude that micro firms handle their marketing challenges in a distinctive manner, by creatively using available resources and network relations to the full. Several differences in how marketing is handled in practice, as compared to scholar marketing literature, were identified.

The first important finding of this study is that marketing in micro firms is largely about long-term, gradual development of a position on the market. This process we label *germinal marketing*. Germinal marketing is a metaphor for the process, in which the owner-managers of micro firms build a position on the market: with a long-term perspective, gradually and persistently, from seed to plant i.e. from start-up to a viable business. This implies that the marketing process in a micro firm is characterised by organic growth, where the development of the firm occurs little by little in accordance to what the cash flow permits. Two key dimensions of germinal marketing were identified: “earning your position” and “being your brand”. These two dimensions can be regarded as theories-in-use, which each is permeated by a set of principles. The principles of the owner-manager serve as guidelines in handling marketing in the micro firm.

Figure 2. A conceptual framework of marketing in micro firms



Earning your position

A common feature of the micro firms studied is their cautiousness in making marketing decisions. A micro firm does not have the resources of “buying” a position on the market, rather it has to work its way through a wilderness of customers, suppliers, partners and other stakeholders and truly “earn” its position on the market. In the following sections we emphasise three principles that have been found important in earning one’s position.

The principle of networking

The most overarching principle characterising the TIUs of owner-managers is the principle of networking – not only with customers, but also with suppliers and partners. The principle of networking implies that the owner-managers of the micro firms participating in the study perceive the development of relationships to stakeholders as a way of building a position on the market. Networking is a way of doing business in a micro firm context. Networking is a dynamic part of everyday practice, which is sometimes intuitive and sometimes more elaborate. Typically it is the owner-manager that constitutes the driving force and in practice, it is the owner-manager who networks. Networking is a natural consequence of the embeddedness of the micro firm. The micro firm is part of different networks and relationships to stakeholders are continuously formed – this occurs either *proactively*, *latently* or in an *ad hoc* manner.

Proactive networking is about elaborate networking. It implies that there is an agenda on the behalf of the micro firm and the micro firm is striving to accomplish something through networking. The way the boutique for women’s clothing realised that arranging a fashion show together with other small shops would be a way to strengthen the market position of the firm is an example of proactive networking. In an elaborate manner the owner-manager of the boutique utilised her links to other firms.

Latent networking implies that a contact exists, but it is latent i.e. not currently being proactively used. The contact is slumbering, but can easily be activated. For example, one of the tourist firms has relationships to different suppliers of transport services and when encountering a situation, which calls for a transportation solution, the owner-manager activates his contacts.

Ad hoc networking is the kind of networking that is intuitive and sometimes without an explicit agenda. If it is without an agenda it typically is tied to the owner-manager’s personal social contacts. However, in some cases a clear goal is stated, but there is a strong element of coincidence. Overall, coincidence and lucky timing seem to play a major role in networking, which was experienced by the textile embroidery firm:

A while ago we paid a visit to a firm that prints textiles. We went in there and said: “Hello, we are from firm X. We would like to do embroidery jobs for you. ” And by that, we got a new customer and also a new co-operator. We were really amazed – can this be true?

The owner-managers of the firm had several times encountered the problem of accessing suppliers and customers because of the strong relationships that exist on the market. Later they learned why it in this case was so easy: the owner-manager of the

other firm had on the very same day had a serious clash with their previous supplier of embroideries because of delayed deliveries. The other firm's readiness to switch suppliers was thereby very high, and the embroidery firm was lucky enough to be at the right place at the right moment. This coincidence gave rise to a long-term co-operative relationship. This shows that ad hoc networking may develop into proactive networking.

The owner-managers participating in the study emphasise that the micro firm is "put to a test" every time a new relationship is established. The micro firm has to prove its worth – earn – the trust of the stakeholders. The micro firm does not have the benefit of being backed up by a strong brand and unconstrained resources when entering a relationship with a customer or supplier. The micro firm seldom has any bargaining power:

Often it is the customer relationships that are supposed to be difficult, and not the supplier relationships. It is as difficult to create a relationship with a supplier as with a customer. That was one thing I was very surprised about because you don't believe that it actually works that way. [...] You have to prove that you can manage the business in order to get something [from the suppliers]. (Embroidery)

During the interviews it became evident that micro firms often choose to co-operate with each other by e.g. exchanging information and contacts or by arranging events together. This study shows that co-operation between micro firms typically occurs on the basis of social, personal relationships of the owner-manager. In order to overcome the lack of power and influence, the micro firms network and often they network with each other. As a good example of micro firms enhancing their market position is the co-operation between one of the tourism firms and the IT-services firm. The owner-managers of the firms were at university together and have known each other for a long period of time. Hence, there is a latent contact between the firms. The IT firm was hired for developing web pages for the tourism firm. In connection to this, the tourism firm introduced the IT-firm to one of their clients that simultaneously was a new potential customer to the IT-firm. Soon the customer in question became one of the largest customers of the IT-firm.

The owner-managers underline the fact that relationships emanate from trust and networking is about building trust. Earning a position on the market with relation to customers, suppliers and partners occurs in parallel to building trust among customers, suppliers and partners.

It is integral that I know my partners in business projects where I'm responsible for the final result. I need to trust my partners – I need a complete chain with no weak links. Everything needs to be working. It is important that the business partner has the same types of values, so that we can work consistently, that we share the same opinions and goals. (Graphical design services)

The owner-manager of the graphical design services firm emphasises the role of shared values and implicitly he associates trust with values.

The principle of speaking “the customer's language”

One of the most vivid principles described by the owner-managers is their effort of always tuning in and “feeling” how to handle a customer. One of the owner-managers described this as “speaking the customer's language”. The primary aim of the principle of speaking the customer’s language is to create an atmosphere, which appeals to the customer and in which the customer feels comfortable:

Something we're elaborate about is making customers feel at home, at ease, comfortable. And we have tried to not to be stiff... not a place where people wear a tie, but a place that is welcoming, that don't scare the customers. (Physiotherapy and training services)

There are four aspects to the principle of speaking the customer’s language: (1) using a shared language in interactions with the customer, (2) shaping the physical service setting in a way that strengthens the language that is shared with the customers, (3) choosing customers that share the same language and (4) choosing employees that share the customers’ language. These aspects create an atmosphere in the micro firm that makes the customers feel comfortable. In the long run the principle of speaking the customer’s language leads to a distinct position on the market.

Speaking the customer’s language is firstly about encountering the customer on the customer’s conditions and using a shared language that appeals to the customer. It is about literally adapting one’s behaviour and language to that of the customer. One of the owner-managers described this as being formal when the customer is formal, being informal when the customer is informal (embroidery). The couple providing physiotherapy and training services are very specific about not using unfamiliar or “fancy” words in interactions with customers – they emphasise that they should always talk so that the customer understands them. For example, they have excluded the word “gym” from their vocabulary:

We don't call it a gym [...] It's a training studio – or the matter of fact – we like to call it a “body workshop”. (Physiotherapy and training services)

The owner-managers of the physiotherapy and training services firm continue their lines of reasoning by explaining how they see their firm as a place for “ordinary people”:

O-M: It's for ordinary people. That's the whole idea. And we're doing this [leading training groups and gymnastics] ourselves and we're no super... we don't have big muscles and there are no “pin-up girls”. Our point of departure is that it should be simple and anybody should dare to come here. We have even groups for retired people. We had an 80-year-old pop that thought it was quite fun to train with the help of machines. So this is totally different – we're not interested in those that want to go to a gym. We don't have any “gym people” here. [...] So we have succeeded in that very well I think; we have no “body builders” but ordinary people. [...] We have consciously designed this place so that... they [body builders/gym people] come in and look around and then they say “no, this is not for me”. [...]

Interviewer: So it's a conscious choice not to have any “body builders”, but only ordinary people?

O-M: Well, I don't know... We haven't said it out loud. But its called a “body workshop” and our slogan is “train in a right and moderate way”. (Physiotherapy and training services)

What becomes evident from the lines of reasoning of the owner-managers of the physiotherapy and training services firm is that the principle of speaking the customer's language is not only about adapting language and behavior, but also about adapting and customizing the service setting. Practical, physical, everyday aspects of the service setting are part of speaking the customer's language. As the owner-managers state: "Some have diplomas and such things on the walls. We don't. [...] That's us." Moreover, the firm has an explicit dress code: jeans and t-shirt – everybody working at the firm should dress casually. This is consequent with the former statement of providing training services to ordinary people; the firm is being true to its core values and creates thus a distinct position on the market and in the customers' minds.

The owner-managers recognise the importance of other customers in the service setting; there should be a fit between customers. In other words, not only should the firm speak the customers' language, but the customers should share a common language. As the owner-managers of the physiotherapy and training services firm emphasise – they do not want "body builders" in their training studio, they want ordinary people. If the "wrong" kind of customers is attracted to the firm, the atmosphere is altered and the customers do not feel comfortable anymore. This leads to the weakening of the firm's position on the market.

The principle of speaking the customer's language comes to show in the owner-managers' way of reasoning around the role of employees. The decision to recruit a person for a job is a crucial and risky task for the owner-managers of micro firms. There needs to be a fit between employees and customers – the employees should speak the customer's language. As the owner-manager of a boutique for women's clothing stated when describing how she recruited an employee: "She was the type of person that fitted the boutique, she was a safe bet." The owner-manager of a law firm argued in a similar manner: "We don't necessarily look for the best lawyer, but we are looking for a person, who suits this place."

The principle of caring for the customer

Shining through the lines of reasoning of the owner-managers is their pursuit of genuinely caring for the customer. Caring for the customer implies on a practical level that the customer should be shown consideration, interest and empathy. Caring about the customer is thus intertwined with speaking the customer's language. On a deeper level, however, it is also about caring in the sense of being able to provide something that is valuable to the customer. Not only are the owner-managers driven by a strong belief in the business concept, but there is a drive to "do good". There seems to be a hint of altruism underpinning the principle of caring for the customers:

I care. There are people that don't care, who only do this for money, but I really care. There's a part of my heart in everything I do. [...] I put my heart and soul into it.
(Graphical design services)

In order to be able to care about the customers and to be able to offer something of value to the customers, there needs to be an understanding of customers. In a micro firm context this understanding is not reached with the help of technological solutions for handling customer data or complex market intelligence systems, rather an understanding

of customers stems from personal interactions with customers. As one of the owner-managers of the industrial embroidery firm maintains: “Personal contact is crucial, because that is the only way of knowing what the customers want and how to make them satisfied.” Discussing with the customers and learning about customers are distinct features in the marketing practice of the micro firms of this study. Above all, taking the time to be personal and caring are essential:

This is a very social business. Sometimes it's like a social welfare office - you get to know each other, the customer contact becomes so close with some of the customers. You know their work and families... There are customers that you know when they come here, then you need to have time to talk to them for an hour. They come here to socialise. Of course they also buy things - I'm not denying that - but the social thing is very important. You have to have time to socialize. (Retailing, women's clothes)

The owner-managers participating in the study agree that the micro firm context allows unique contact to the customers to be established. The uniqueness of every customer contact is part of the phenomenon of germinal marketing, as it is through uniqueness the micro firm competes. During the interviews with the owner-managers, the concepts of knowledge and learning occur frequently in many different contexts. For example, the owner-manager of the law firm emphasises the importance of having general legal knowledge as well as customer-specific knowledge; the owner-manager of the boutique knows her customers so well that she can make customer-specific purchases one season ahead, which is highly appreciated by the customers; and the owner-managers of the embroidery firm state that learning about customers (and other parties) makes it possible for the firm to satisfy the other parties' needs and wants.

Being your brand

The owner-managers of the micro firms are the embodiments and personifications of their firms; they are their own brands. The second key dimension of our theoretical framework is “being your brand”, which is permeated by two principles. These principles will be elaborated on next.

The principle of marketing by personal visibility

The meaning of the principle of marketing by personal visibility is illustrated in the following verbatim:

O-M: Depending on how much work we have here... If we have a lot of work, then I don't dare to go to town, then I have to stay at home. But if we don't have that much work at the moment, then I go shopping to town and then at the same time I get a customer or two.

Interviewer: Just because you show up in town?

O-M: Yes, exactly. They come to you and say “I've been having a bad neck – the same thing as three years ago, so I probably need to book an appointment”. Then I say that I've got time, let's book an appointment, call me. (Physiotherapy and training services)

Marketing by personal visibility is about showing off the brand, networking and at the same time keeping oneself up to date concerning customers and other stakeholders. The owner-managers of the micro firm are living brand symbols and by putting the brand into motion and being visible certain momentum is gained. This can be done in a number of ways. Firstly, by choosing customers, jobs or projects that are visible and

that symbolise the brand. Secondly, by choosing a network that strengthens the brand and thirdly, by choosing employees that personify the brand's values.

The consequences of *not* being personally visible are elucidated by one of the owner-managers, who contemplates on the reasons why deals are lost to competitors:

It can be because I haven't been showing myself off, if I'm not working with being visible... And if you're not visible, you don't exist. You have to be able to face the facts; I've not been around, I haven't been communicating, I haven't been moving around, I haven't been active, I've been sitting in my studio month after month. (Graphical design services)

Visibility in all its forms is the building block of the dimension "being your brand". An example of how the brand is put into motion and how momentum is gained was provided by a retailer of exclusive women's clothing. The firm faced the problem of having excessive quantities of a product in stock. The product was quite obviously a seasonal product that would not be in fashion the next season. There was in other words a need to boost the sales of that product. The solution to this problem was provided by the owner-manager of the firm: she made an advertisement where she herself was posing wearing the product. The owner-manager motivated this clever move by stating that she is her boutique – people associate her with the boutique. The strong link between her and the boutique was a trigger for many customers to buy the product and she received a lot of positive feedback from her customers. By posing in an advertisement she puts her brand into motion. Similarly, as the provider of physiotherapy and training services does when there are no bookings: he goes shopping to town. Or as the owner-manager of the law firm hinted: sometimes one has to choose cases that gain visibility in order to develop the brand.

The principle of maintaining one's personal well-being

Personal well-being was heavily emphasised as a driver for business continuity and the principle of attending to one's personal well-being indirectly permeates the marketing practice in micro firms.

And then we have this... personal well-being. You need balance in life. [...] So if you have to go on a sick leave, then the firm will suffer. And personally... Your personal presence in the company is important. My [physical] presence in the company becomes very important. I notice when I'm in court - and a week may pass without me being there more than one morning - then everything starts halting. (Law firm)

The first thing that came to my mind [when asked about what is important for business continuity] is personal health. [...] We have really invested in that by insurances and such things. In the beginning we had all kinds of insurances [...], but then we realized that if a machine breaks down it doesn't really matter, but if I break down it doesn't matter how many machines that are working – then we would be in trouble. [...] It is incredibly important for us to be in good shape. (Embroidery)

Personal well-being is about keeping the brand intact. In a micro firm, the brand is maintained only if the person behind it is physically present in the firm's everyday operations. Not only is the well-being issue connected to keeping the brand intact, but it

is also about preserving and developing knowledge. Without the presence of owner-manager there is no business.

Theoretical and managerial implications

The unique characteristics of micro firms have been brought to the fore by several researchers (Carson & Cromie 1990; Morris, Schindehutte & LaForge 2002; McCartan-Quinn & Carson, 2003; O'Donnell 2004). In this study we chose to follow the theory-in-use research approach as developed by Zaltman, Lemaster och Heffring (1982) and Heffring (1985). This research approach stresses that an understanding of a firm's business practices can be gained only by close interaction with the firm under study. A longitudinal approach will also be necessary. Both Grønhaug (2002) as well as Gummesson (2005) support interactive research approaches as means of enhancing the validity of research. According to the authors, existing knowledge can be further developed mainly by the diversity that can be found in qualitative data.

In our study we found that the basic premise of marketing in a micro firm is the germinal nature of the marketing process. The position on the market has to be achieved through long-range and purposeful marketing activities. This is of course the fact in any company, but in the micro firm it is a living condition. The main theories-in-use to manage this, we chose to call "earning your position" and "being your brand". These theories-in-use can be carried out by mastering activities such as networking, speaking the customer's language, caring for the customer as well as marketing by personal visibility and attending to one's well-being. Compared to existing research and scholar marketing literature, marketing activities like "personal visibility" and "attending to one's well-being" have not earlier been mentioned. For a micro firm the impact of the owner's own visibility is decisive from a marketing point of view. The owner is in fact *the* brand symbol. The owner's well-being has not to our knowledge earlier been brought to the fore in marketing literature either. The well-being of the owner is however something that can be related to any marketing issue in a micro firm, as the empirical evidence shows. Networking, speaking the customer's language and caring for the customer has on the other hand little novelty as such. The lesson to be learned here is the strategic significance these activities have. Traditionally these types of activities are considered tactical, i.e. something you have to take into account in for instance customer interactions. In a micro firm these activities can constitute the habitat of the whole business. The framework that was generated in this study could be developed and further validated by future research efforts into further exploring the purport of "marketing by personal visibility" and "attending to one's well-being", but also into discovering more theories-in-use.

Concluding remarks

Marketing in micro firms is indeed an intriguing phenomenon. Taking an outsider perspective one can by mistake jump to the conclusion that marketing in micro firms is just a miniature of marketing in larger firms. Micro firms do in fact wrestle with the same types of challenges as do any other firm or organisation. Moreover, common goals and purposes of marketing seem to be attained by both micro firms and larger firms.

However, when diving into the marketing realities of micro firms a somewhat different view opens up. Despite the fact that marketing in micro firms is highly context bound, a general framework of marketing in micro firms was identified in this study. The proposed framework is by no means exhaustive. Our aim was above all to highlight those specific elements that contribute to the existing body of knowledge. Taking into account that the research area has emerged quite recently, all findings that contribute to previous research must be considered valuable.

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