AN INTERNET MARKETING ADOPTION FRAMEWORK FOR SMALL BUSINESS ENTERPRISES

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ABSTRACT

Small business enterprises are the backbone of economic growth and innovation. The existence of the Internet provides opportunities for these enterprises to gain the benefits of Information and Communication Technologies in their business operations. However, small business enterprises often face a variety of challenges such as limited financial resources, a shortage of skilled workers, and inadequate infrastructure (such as communication connectivity or electricity supply particularly in rural areas) in adopting new technology in their business operations. Many small business enterprises are not engaged with appropriate business strategies which lead to informal and mixed marketing approaches in their businesses.

This paper proposes an Internet marketing adoption framework for small business enterprises. The proposed framework of Internet marketing would be incorporated as part of the business strategies for small business enterprises in order to assist owners and managers (who are often poor planners). This paper presents a review of the main indicators in the proposed framework, which are e-readiness, aims and strategies (which will lead to the Internet marketing approach by small business enterprises), the Internet marketing approach and the evaluation of the Internet marketing performance. The 4C's (customer, communication, convenience, and cost) (Smith, 2003) are the factors that will be considered while implementing the Internet marketing approach for small business enterprises. These 4C's are the 'online' extension of basic marketing principles. The Internet marketing performance will be evaluated to indicate whether the Internet marketing approach contributes to the success of the businesses or vice-versa.

Keywords: E-readiness, Aims and strategies, Internet marketing, small business enterprises

INTRODUCTION

Small business enterprises are the drivers of economic growth and innovation (Kotelnikov, 2007). The Internet presents opportunities to small business enterprises to gain the benefits of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). Many businesses have sought to use ICT to sustain their competitive advantage due to their highly competitive environment (Sohal, et al., 2001). However, small business enterprises face a variety of unique challenges to enter the global market place including limited financial resources, a shortage of skilled workers, and inadequate infrastructure (Kodakanchi, et al., 2006). In addition, marketing approaches for small business enterprises are mixed and less formal, depending on how the owner runs the business, often their decision making may be haphazard and chaotic, based on either personal or business priorities at any given point in time (Scase & Goffee, 1980). This may be because many small business enterprises often do not engage in strategic planning for their businesses (Bode, 2003). This paper proposes an Internet marketing adoption framework for small business enterprises in relation to the readiness of businesses to adopt the Internet as part of their marketing planning and strategies to drive them towards business growth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

E-readiness

E-readiness refers to the ability of a country to develop technology-rich and knowledge-based industries for economic growth by advancing Information and Communications Technology (Pattinson & Low, 2006). Duncombe et al. (2005) developed an e-commerce development model focusing on developing countries and outlined the different stages of e-commerce development, which are: starting out, getting online, web publishing, web interacting, web transacting and web integration. Small business enterprises need to increase their awareness of e-readiness advantage in order to benefit from economies of scale which can help to reduce transaction costs, remove barriers of entry and reduce the optimal size of the businesses (Rizk, 2004). Rizk pointed out that many small business enterprises are low in their level of e-readiness because of lack of e-infrastructure and also barriers in term of awareness and human capital. Lack of suitable infrastructure, limited of financial resources, lack of technological advancement, skilled and educated workforces are the major barriers hindering small business enterprises' ability to succeed in today's globalised economy (Stephenson & Arinaitwe, (2006). Kodakanchi et al. (2006) indicated that most developing countries do not have adequate infrastructure to support the development of ICT; inability to invest in ICT due to lack of financial resources and less 'human power' with suitable ICT knowledge. Developing countries face major challenges in terms of e-readiness such as development of adequate infrastructure, their economic situation, their social and cultural environments, and business culture and are thus behind in comparison to developed countries (Kupurubandra, et al., 2004).

In developed countries, small business enterprises in urban areas benefit more than rural areas in terms of infrastructure, application and services (Chacko & Harris, 2006), and small business enterprises in rural areas face similar problems to those found in developing countries (such as lack of Internet communication services) due to restricted access in some remote areas (Burgess, 2002). For example, limited transport infrastructure (such as airports) makes it difficult for small business enterprises to transport goods and link to outside markets (Henderson, 2002). Furthermore, Kapurubandara & Lawson (2006) indicated that small business enterprises are hindered in adopting new technologies due to lack of telecommunications infrastructure, lack of skilled workers to support and develop e-commerce sites, limited penetration from banks, and low Internet penetration. Inadequate physical infrastructure such as electricity supply and communication connectivity infrastructure were also major factors contributing to inhibiting ICT diffusion.

Policies aimed to promote 'e-readiness' are unlikely to succeed in maximizing the benefits for developing countries if they fail to give full attention to specific characteristics and positioning of small business enterprises within global value chains, and online applications used to deal with operational challenges (Paré, 2002). Kapurubandara & Lawson (2006) found that small business enterprises are reluctant to invest in ICT, probably due to a fear of changing policies to suit changes of government affected by political barriers. However, Al-Qirim (2007) argued that government policies and strategies only have a small impact on the adoption of Internet in small business enterprises. Thus, it is important to highlight the factors that facilitate adoption of 'e' as the efforts of government and/or private sectors to be coordinated as part of a national policy related to taxes and other incentives (Yasin & Yavas, 2007).

Cross-country differences of culture can act as a barrier to ICT adoption (Erumban & Jong, 2006). Marquardt (2002, p. 27) refers to *culture* as an organization's values, beliefs, practices, rituals, and customs. It was important for small business enterprises' owners or managers to know their own culture and level of organizational learning, before promoting organizational learning to their employees (Graham & Nafukho, 2006). Graham and Nafukho also added that efforts should be made to understand the background of employees who are involved in learning processes. Thus, levels of education, skills, capital availability, business culture and other factors are keys for successful business operation. Many business development support programs, venture capital funds and business incubators are generated to promote business growth, however many developing countries lack of these facilities, therefore only a few businesses can survive (Agbeibor, 2006).

Kendall (2001) studied e-commerce adoption by surveying SMEs in Singapore. Almost eighty per cent of respondents agreed that e-commerce would be important to their business in the future. However, Kendall noted that respondents may not have understood what e-commerce is all about, nor its importance to the businesses. Kendall's studies also showed that most of the managers preferred to be followers rather than leaders in adopting e-commerce technologies in their businesses. The implementation of Internet in the business operations is significant to owners' attitude as the decision to adopt the Internet is depending on owners. The study conducted by Scupola (2009) on perceptions of Danish and Australians' SMEs found that all the decision to adopt the Internet in the businesses of Danish and Australian businesses been made by the owners, where the ideas to adopt the Internet had generated by the employees due to customers' pressure. Instead of that many small business enterprises perceived the adoption of ICT in their businesses do not provide value for their money and they also believed that the cost of ICT outweigh compare the benefits of ICT it selves (Chesher & Skok, 2000).

Finance could be considered a critical element to small businesses in their ability to invest in ICTs as small businesses are highly dependent on their financial conditions (Stephenson & Arinaitwe, 2006). Eyiah & Cook (2003) highlighted that banks view small businesses as being too risky and involving high transaction costs. There is also limited information on loan applications by small business owners or managers, causing difficulties for banks to assess their loan proposals (Eyiah & Cook, 2003). According to a study by Meas (2006) the start up capital for small businesses in Cambodia is approximately $USD 100,000, and family members typically play the role of providing the start up capital. Meas' studies found that the share of the banks is very limited in providing capital start up when compared to local lenders and family members. Most small businesses in Cambodia prefer to borrow capital from local lenders to satisfy their financial shortages rather than borrowing from the banks, even though interest rates of the local lenders are higher than the banks. This is because the small business owners find it is difficult to understand and follow banking procedures, which they perceive as too difficult.
The next section discusses the strategic planning and aims that may drive the small business enterprises to develop successful business performance. Such business performances may be driven by goals including growth strategies, strategic alliances, co-operative strategies, and their desire to maintain a certain lifestyle.

Aims and Strategies

Strategic planning is related to long-term business goals, the implementation of the goals, and the allocation of resources in realizing the goals (O'Regan & Ghobadian, 2004; Stonehouse & Pemberton, 2002). According to Wang et al. (2007) strategic planning leads to better business performance. However, Mazzarol (2004) noted that small business enterprises are typically lacking in strategic planning and long-term vision. Thus, small business enterprises may not achieve their complete planning goals and fullest performance, and their survival might be placed at risk when they neglect strategic planning for their potential growth (Berry, 1998).

Gundry & Welsch (2001) indicated that key strategic success factors perceived by high-growth oriented entrepreneurs are: the reputation of their businesses, a strong focus on quality product or service, available cash to grow the business and effective leadership. Entrepreneur's attitudes and their decisions pertaining to a growth strategy can influence their business growth (Burke & Jarrat, 2004). Peacock (2004) pointed out that with growth strategies for small businesses much of the focus is on financing the businesses. Peacock added traditional small businesses with nil or moderate growth strategies tend to be satisfied with personal and internal sources of funds and short-term or medium-terms debts from banks or other financial institutions. However, high growth firms face the constraints of long-term debt and collateral by institutional lenders. Thus, there is a gap in the provision of risk capital for these firms due to lack of investment readiness on the part of owners. Hillbard (2006) proposed the "Growth Scorecard" approach that helps managers to determine the appropriate strategy planning and avoiding mismatch between the business environment and their management capabilities. Hillbard added that the 'Growth Scorecard' enables managers to determine the upcoming growth strategies from an internal perspective and to select the appropriate adaptations that suits with their strategic planning. Thus it manages to increase their managerial capabilities with the new business environment upon the existence or advance of growth strategies.

According to Elmuti & Kathawala (2001) a strategic alliances strategy can be an important tool to attain and maintain competitive advantage. Strategic alliance can be defined as " an agreement between firms to do business together in ways that go beyond normal company-to-company dealings, but fall short a merger or a full partnership" (Wheelen & Hunger, 2000, p. 125). Wheelen & Hunger (2000) added that the businesses commonly performed strategic alliances for gaining technology advancement, to penetrate specific markets, minimize financial and political risk, and to gain competitive advantage. The strategic alliances concept may appeal to businesses due to potential cost savings, quality improvement of business operations and cheapest labour or production costs. A survey by Jaouen & Gundolf (2009) on patterns and governance modes of alliances in South France found that micro businesses seemed not only to improve their financial position through their cooperation in achieving greater market shares but also seek to access complementary resources in helping them to overcome shortcomings. Systematic preparation and careful planning are very important for small business owners or managers to consider as it will determine the success of strategic alliances (Hoffmann & Schlosser, 2001).

The cooperation of SMEs may involve with various of relationships with other group, such as competitors and customers (Roy, 1998; Tuusjarvi & Moller, 2009). Roy added that these networks are generally more flexible and require fewer resources than do, such as strategic alliances. Pesamaa and Hair Jr. (2007) pointed out that the formation of cooperative networks could be one of the solutions for the small businesses to survive in the marketplace. They suggested a cooperative strategy is needed as small businesses can face difficulties when competing when located in remote geographical areas due to small local markets with similar product strategies (for example two bakeries produce the same pastry products). Thus these environments create less ability for them to develop a strong shared strategy and minimize the opportunity of long-term product development. Felzensztein & Gimmon (2007) study on small businesses in the salmon farming industry found that small businesses in Scotland were more proactive in building inter-firm cooperation for international marketing compared to small businesses in Chile. Small businesses in Chile faced constraints to cooperate with the national salmon-industry trade association as they could not afford the membership due to their small business size. Felzensztein & Gimmon (2007) indicated that small businesses are more likely than larger businesses to participate in inter-firm cooperation in marketing.

Lifestyle entrepreneurs typically seek independence and control over their own schedule (Henderson, 2002). Lifestyle entrepreneurs are fuelled by the desire to earn a respectable living, gaining satisfaction in career achievement and having quality time with family and friends (Henderson, 2002). Murry (2002) captures lifestyle entrepreneurs' desire for quality of life, suggesting a balance in family and business demands generally enhances one's awareness that life is meaningful and manageable.

The next section will discuss the use of the Internet as a marketing tool for small business enterprises to compete in competitive global markets.

Internet marketing

Internet marketing is defined as *the process of building and maintaining customer relationships through online activities to facilitate the exchange of ideas, products, and services that satisfy the goals of both buyers and sellers* (Imber & Betsy-Ann (2000) cited in Ngai (2003, p. 24). The terms *Internet marketing* and *e-marketing* are often used synonymously and are taken as having the same meaning (Gilmore, et al., 2007). The implementation of Internet marketing by small business enterprises could change the nature of businesses around the world as the Internet creates a faster communication channel for marketing (El-Gohary, 2007).

Marketing is about interacting and identifying human and social needs. In the globalized world nowadays, there are many market opportunities available to enterprises. Managers may try to shift from traditional commercial approaches and search for innovative ways to compete in the market, particularly on a local, regional and global basis (Paul, 1999). Marketers often refer to the marketing-mix which consists of four P's; product, price, place and promotion as the main elements in order to meet the needs of customers within the target market (Pride, et al., 2006). *Product* offers the attributes to satisfy the customers while *price* relates to the critical components in the marketing mix as the customers are more concerned about the value obtained from price (Pride, et al., 2006). Pride et al. also added that the product should be available at the right time and in a convenient location (*place*) to satisfy the customers and that *promotion* is needed to increase public awareness of the business and new or existing products.

As mentioned earlier, limited financial resources and time, and levels of marketing knowledge and expertise impact small business enterprises in the marketplace (Gilmore, et al., 2001). Gilmore et al. added that the marketing approaches for small business enterprises are typically informal, loose, unstructured, and spontaneous as owner-managers often make a decision on their own as well as responding to current opportunities and circumstances.

Internet-marketing does affect the four basic P's and adds its own four correspondent objectives that extend beyond these basic four. The 4C's, namely *customer, cost, convenience and communication* define a web site's primary purpose (Smith, 2003). Smith suggested that the businesses should know what the *customer* needs and wants instead of the product itself. The new era of marketing approaches via the Internet can offer improved customer service by customizing offers for customers, personalizing sites and providing added value which leads to customer loyalty rather than the traditional marketing approach which is much more concerned on physical presence and creating a totally new shopping experience (Walsh & Godfrey, 2000). Businesses should consider the *cost* born by the customers as well as making profits. The use of Internet gives *convenience* to the customers as they could purchase the products from home (Smith, 2003). Internet marketing can offer services 'around the clock' and around the world which means people could potentially access goods wherever they are located (Walsh & Godfrey, 2000). Businesses also need to focus on developing two-way communication with customers instead of having one-way communication (Smith, 2003). Businesses can take the opportunity of the Internet as a *communication* channel to exchange and communicate information with customers (Kiang, et al., 2000). The Internet could allow the businesses to quickly respond to market changes and customer preferences. The usage of the Internet in the business may reduce the advertising and promotion costs; increase communication speed between buyer and seller; shorten the traditional supply chain, minimize the transportation obstacles and reduce delivery cost; provide savings in transaction costs; and minimize the physical limitation of time and space (Chan, 2001; Schneider, 2002).

The next section will discuss an evaluation method that can be used to measure the success of Internet marketing approaches by small business enterprises in developing and developed countries.

The evaluation of e-commerce activities

In the context of developing countries, small business enterprises are crucial to the development of economies and cannot be left behind as many of them demonstrate their entrepreneurial strength by grasping opportunities offered by e-commerce (Payne, 2002). According to Wen, Lim & Huang (2003) the financial measure is one of the methods to measure e-commerce efficiency. The financial measures include indicators of profitability and capital utilization as below:

i. Profitability is measured with two indicators:
   a. Profit margin percentage (net income/revenue)
   b. Price earning ratio (average share market price/earning per share)

ii. Capital utilization is assessed by three factors:
   a. Return on equity (net income/equity)
   b. Return on investment (ROI)
   c. Days receivables (account receivable/ (revenue/365 days)

Larsen & Bloniarz (2000) identified the steps to access and measure the performance in determining the benefits of using the Internet in businesses through the use of a performance worksheet. This model is primarily for businesses that have not yet decided whether or not to deliver online service. This model is also appropriate for businesses considering expansion of their Web sites with additional services. In accessing and measuring performance, the major

benefits are characterized into three categories; better, cheaper, and faster. Indirect benefits may include increased public visibility for the business and improved staff morale.
Payne (2002) suggested some features that can be used to measure the expected result of e-commerce performance:

- Increase of revenue per employee
- Increase of customer satisfaction
- Reduce of inventory
- Increase sales per salesperson
- Increase of market share
- Increase of profitability

The suggested method of measurement by Payne (2002) is more or less similar to Larsen & Bloniarz (2000) and Wen, Lim & Huang (2003). However, they have been presented in a simpler way, particularly for small business enterprises in developing countries when measuring the success of Internet marketing.

AN INTERNET MARKETING ADOPTION FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework is developed with a purpose to assist small business enterprises who are often poor planners to adopt Internet marketing as a part of strategic planning in their businesses. Figure 1.0 is the conceptual framework of this study which consists of two main factors; e-readiness and aims and strategy. These factors will lead to the Internet marketing approach and the evaluation of the Internet-marketing performance of small business enterprises.

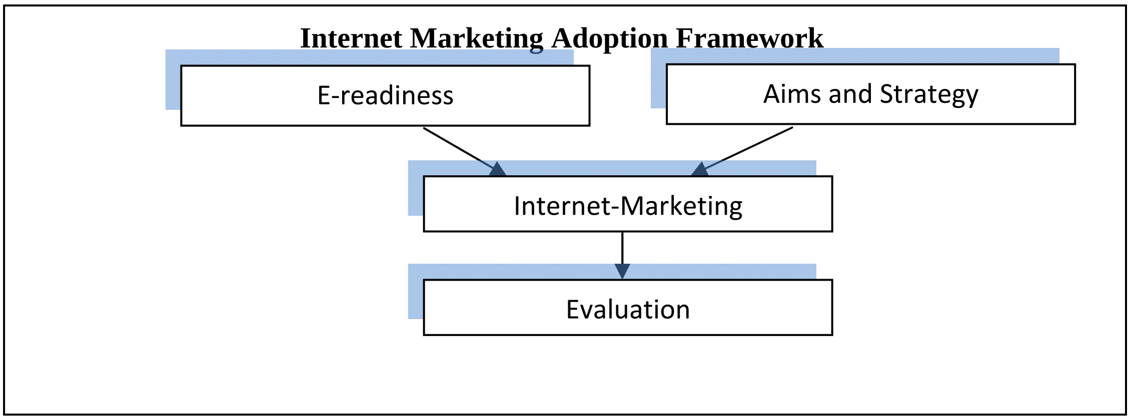

Figure 1.0 Internet Marketing Adoption Framework

Figure 2.0 illustrates a detailed version of the overall framework for this study. In the e-readiness section, six factors have been listed based on the literature review, which are infrastructure, policy, culture, owner's attitude, shortage of skilled workers and limited of financial resources. This study will explore the e-readiness of small business enterprises in different regions. Each column consists of level of impacts. The small business enterprises could be considered 'e-ready or not to be 'e-ready' if there are many major impacts on the related factors. The aims and strategy section consists of four strategies, which are growth strategy, strategic alliances, co-operation strategy and life-style strategy to choose from if it is applicable to small business enterprises in generating long-term goals. The e-readiness and aims and strategy will be the main indicators for the implementation of the Internet-marketing approach to the small business enterprises. The customer, communication, convenience and cost factors are elements to be considered in implementing an Internet-marketing approach for the small business enterprises.

For this study, Internet marketing performance will be evaluated based on revenue per employees, customer satisfaction, inventory level, sales per person and market share which applicable to small businesses in nature.

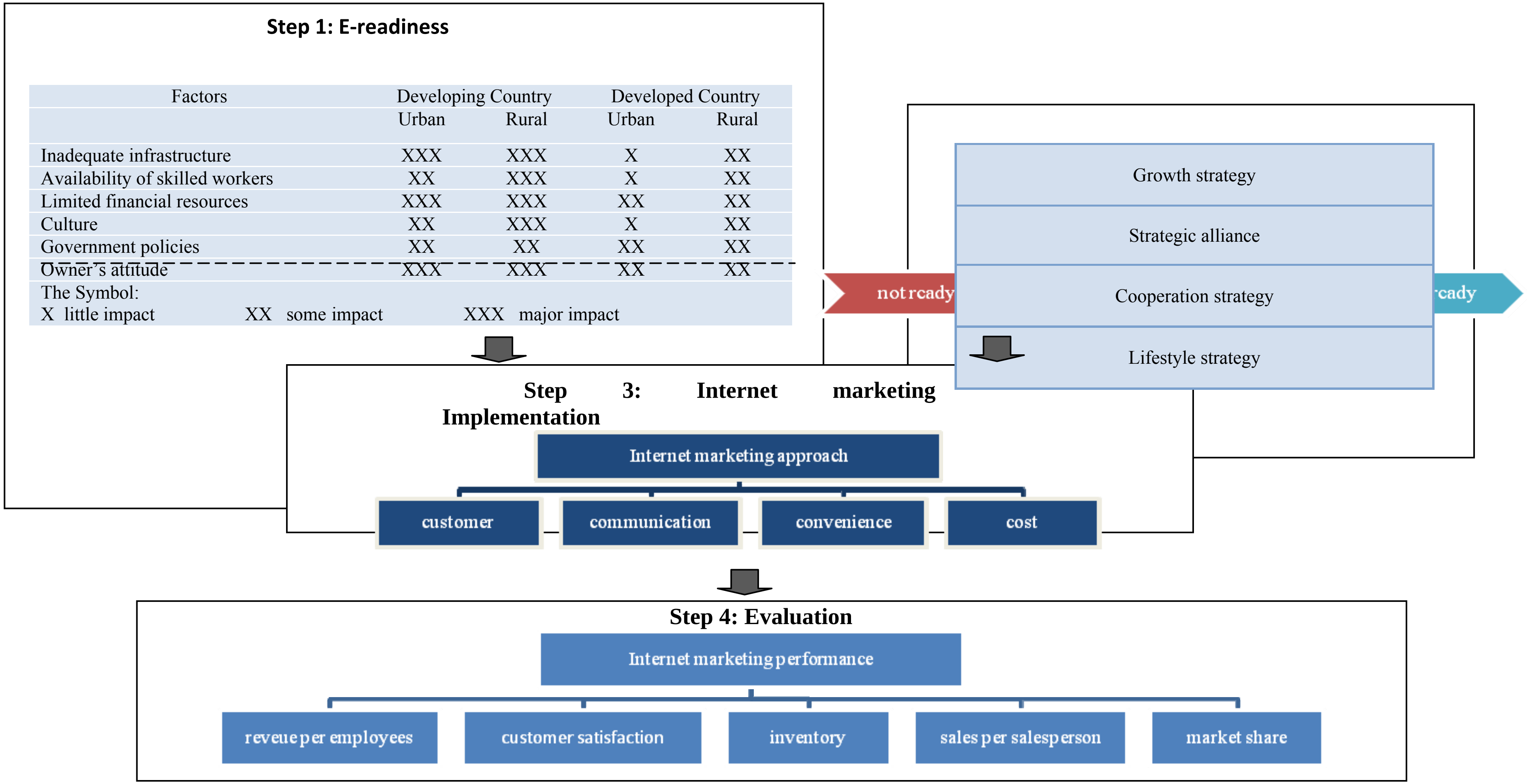

Figure 2.0 Detailed Internet Marketing Adoption Framework

FUTURE STUDIES

El-Gohary, Trueman et al.(2008) highlighted that most research methodologies used in e-marketing are 33% applied in quantitative methodology, 28% applied in qualitative methodology and 29% conducted in conceptual and theoretical studies. This study will apply multiple research methods which particularly focus on qualitative research to evaluate the framework.

In the first phase of data collection, an online focus group will be conducted which involves experts in ICT, marketing and small businesses to provide their thoughts and feedback of the framework. The feedback from the expert panels will be analysed and the proposed framework will be adjusted based on the findings. The second phase will be followed after the modification of the framework has been made. For multiple case-studies, interview sessions from Australia, Malaysia and Brunei will be conducted with small business owners or managers. These countries are chosen as Australia will represent as sample from developed country, while Malaysia and Brunei represent as sample from developing countries. These countries are selected as the sampling frame based on overall network readiness for 2008-2009 ((Forum, 2009) which indicates Australia, Malaysia and Brunei scored 5.29, 4.76 and 3.87 out of 7 respectively. The owners or managers of small business enterprises are targeted as respondents as they are the most responsible persons to oversee and decide the future direction of the business. The interview questions will be developed from the first phase based on the expert panels' feedback. In the second phase, this study will explore the readiness of small businesses in adopting Internet-marketing in their businesses that complies with their business strategies.

CONCLUSION

This paper introduced an Internet marketing adoption framework for small business enterprises. The work reviewed is based on the indicators from the framework which is derived from the literature review. The framework has been developed to assist small business owners or managers to improve their businesses by adopting the Internet as a part of their marketing strategies. Thus, with better understanding of Internet-marketing, owners or managers will be able to encourage their employees to shift their traditional marketing approach to a new one that contributes to increasing productivity and competitiveness. This study also fills a knowledge gap identified in researching into Internet marketing of small business enterprises in developing and developed countries and will extend knowledge about Internet marketing adoption in the global small business enterprises market.

It is concluded that Internet marketing can be the new approach for the small business enterprises to market their products and services. The new marketing approach will appropriate to fill the gap in personalizing the customers and providing more added values that leads to customer loyalty. However, it much depends on the level of readiness and business aims and strategies in adopting new technologies in their business operations.

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