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SMALL FIRMS MARKETING: A QUESTION OF SUB-OPTIMALITY 1997-2002

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1 The 1997-2002 Hampshire-Dorset-Wiltshire Survey

During the period 1997-2002, and intermittently prior to these years, a survey of the attitudes of small electrical and mechanical engineering firms towards “marketing”, i.e.

- marketing policies,
- marketing training,
- market research,
- product development,
- advertising,
- exporting and
- purchasing and supply relationships

was undertaken in the Hampshire-Dorset-Wiltshire region of England.

A sample of 50 small companies with up to 100 employees provided some findings of interest.

All data were collected by personal, open, unstructured, face to face interviews with key personnel in the sample firms with selected follow-up discussions during the five year period.

The 50 firm sample was subject to eight tests of acceptability, i.e.

- population size,
- a range of sizes of firm up to 100 staff,
- different ages of company,
- electrical and mechanical engineering firms
- cluster locations,
- degrees of production run,
- independence and
- incorporation

The choice of sample also provided a cross-section of environments in which small firms operated and which had a variety of mixes of business approaches, e.g. specialist and non-specialist production units.

The summarised findings in this paper can only be regarded as an introduction to a subject of immense scope and complexity and a paving of the was towards further in-depth research.

For the purposes of this work “optimal marketing performance” may be defined as that performance laid down by the firms themselves as reasonably attainable.

2 Marketing Policies

The interviewees were asked to state the firm's marketing policies. Only 10% quoted sales expansion but some 38% had no real marketing policies at all. Others mentioned reliance upon repeat orders, striving for product quality, maintaining local reputation and attracting larger customers.

Only 12% felt that exporting was a major aspect of their marketing priorities although one firm had received the Queen's Award for exporting.

Conceptions of marketing success included only 14% claiming significant sales expansion, and only 24% declaring the generation of adequate profits.

When the main marketing problems of the 1990s were explored, 14% complained about the lack of skilled labour, 12% were worried about increased competition, but 24% experienced the problems of lack of orders or irregular work flow.

Overall it was mainly a question of ad hoc marketing decision making in response to current demand. Policies, if they existed, were more reactive than proactive. There were several reasons for this state of affairs, e.g. traditional methods employed by owners, lack of financial resources and reliance on existing local markets.

This need not be the case as, for example, Stevens (1987), Graham (1989), O'Brien (1990), Rogers (1990) and Rosen (1990) have all drawn attention to the relative ease of the implementation of basic marketing in the smaller business.

3 Marketing and Training

Some 40% of the firms employed no qualified marketing staff and the vast majority has no plans to change the situation. A "marketing officer" or "marketing director" was employed in 16% of cases, whilst the "managing director acting as marketing officer" comprised 26%. It must be emphasised that practically all of these had no formal marketing background. Only 6% of the 50 firm sample had an official marketing department. Many of the respondents felt that there was no need for formal marketing.

In examining the marketing education and training of other staff more closely, 78% had none and most of the remainder could only claim a marketing knowledge not beyond that necessary for normal production and routine selling.

Marketing appeared to be yet another neglected area, among other facets of small business management, in terms of formal training. Hankinson (1991) has also drawn attention to this lack of training problem.

3 Market Research

Market forecasting was not a requirement actively pursued by the firms under review. About 50% of the sample were able to state that market forecasting was not popular because the owner-manager had learned from experience that it was "not possible to forecast", especially under the recession conditions of the 1980s and particularly the 1990s. The other half had simply not given any attention to the problem. It has just not been viewed as an aid to marketing.

Hague and Jackson (1987) have demonstrated an effective self-help approach to market research that the firms in question could almost certainly have employed. Folsom (1991) has drawn attention to the importance of market intelligence in small businesses.

Virtually none of the sample firms had engaged consultants to help specifically with their market research. Interestingly, McDaniel and Courtney (1989) have highlighted these attitudes and perceptions of small businesses towards professional marketing services.

Only 6% of the sample were engaged in active market research and another 24% on an occasional basis involving the managing director's "expertise" rather than trained marketing staff. Despite the fact that many firms in the sample were local, a discouraging 70% undertook no market research of any kind. What the customer really wanted had also not been investigated with any degree of rigour. Most firms argued that the market was known. Customers approached the company with orders and the firm simply responded.

It was claimed that there was no need to research customer requirements. Consequently the size of potential markets remained unknown.

4 Product Development

Out of the sample 50, only 16% were engaged in continuous new product development. Another 44% claimed to develop new components or to refine existing products on an occasional basis but this was less obvious and difficult to verify.

What was clearly observable was that 40% had not been engaged in product development of any kind over the years. And even the 60% involved, or claiming to be involved, in product development to some extent (with the electrical engineering firms tending to predominate here), were nevertheless operating at a sub-optimum level given their approaches to product development generally.

An associated problem was the lack of diversification. This, in the main, was regarded as risky rather than risk spreading, and was avoided. On this matter, Robson Gallagher and Daly (1993) support the premise that a related diversification strategy is useful for small firms that have first built a strong foundation in their primary line of business. This contention is held almost despite the Ansoff thesis that diversification is always tends to be risky. However, given that at least 50% of the

Hampshire-Dorset-Wiltshire firms had achieved a strong position in their main line, it seemed once again a question of missed opportunities.

Much of the product development that existed was more reactive than innovative. For example, just over 60% of the respondents felt that there was a shortage of funds (internal and external) for new product development in the U.K. Unfortunately, Hankinson (1984) and (2002), found that external finance tended to be avoided by small firms.

This somewhat introverted investment approach almost inevitably undermined progressive product development. Yet respondents complained of the lack of funds for new products. There was neutrality concerning the question that the small firm sector was characterised by many entrepreneurs with limited experience for product development. On the one hand it was claimed that product development expertise existed, but on the other hand the lack of actual product development could not easily be explained. The vast majority felt that consultants were unlikely to be helpful for product development purposes, especially at the level of fees charged. This was entirely consistent with the attitude towards consultancy generally.

The firms were critical of government assistance available for the development of new products. But few companies (22%) could identify specifically the extent of product development aid and assistance in recent years. In most cases it was clear that the "lack of government aid" perceptions by the respondents had been reached without supporting evidence.

Uncertainty prevailed regarding the difficulty or otherwise in selling new products. Since new product development was inclined to be at a sub-optimum level, this lack of confidence was not unsurprising. Very few firms had entered the new product development field, yet felt that there must be severe difficulties at the selling stage. The majority (66%) agreed that when a recession ended the firm tended to abandon new product ideas in order to manage the resurgent demand. Many owner-managers (78%) considered that small firms had little option in this respect. Whilst this might represent a degree of flexibility to take advantage of new opportunities, it also demonstrated rigidity as afar a product development was concerned. Respondents agreed that where product development occurred, the new product was expected to have a market growth far above their firm's recent sales performance.

This approach was broadly in line with the setting of targets by the firms themselves and then in the main, failing to reach them (Hankinson 1980). Had more product development been undertaken it was possible that the continual experience gained might have made product development expectations not only more realistic but also more likely to be realised. Bagby (1991) supports this contention.

Interviewees, i.e. 74%, believed that any proposed new product would obviously fit in well with their present lines of products. This was seen as an advantage and as an indication that the firm could integrate new products successfully. It was also regarded as a means of keeping clear of risk-bearing diversification. The majority (62%) also agreed that, for the proposed new product, their ability to develop this line in the very short term was critical to its acceptability. Given the firms' seemingly preoccupation with survival, it was not easy to accept that they would be sufficiently adaptive in the very short run to succeed with product development.

Where new products had been developed over the years (16% of the sample only) the majority from a technological point of view, saw product development in as a trio of advantages:

- product comparative advantage,
- a key to entering a new product class and
- as a move towards a more highly finished product.

On the other hand, the vast majority of the 44% claiming to be involved in component improvement or existing product fine-tuning felt that a new product idea would be revolutionary. Normally this group was involved, at best, with updating or enhancing current parts. There was general agreement in the product development firms that with regard to product production factors a new product initiative could be seen a economically feasible. It will be recalled that 40% were not involved in product development at all.

The component improvement group seemed to view a brand new product idea as economically less viable. But 82% of the whole sample concurred that once developed, a new product would be expected to serve a market or customer need not previously satisfied.

Whilst definitive conclusions were difficult to reach from this qualitative data it appeared that despite only 16% being engaged in rigorous product development, most respondents realised the true value of product development and the benefits for the firm. There was a basic awareness of the importance of feedback in that for the new product to succeed of fail, early market research data flow would be an essential requirement.

There was agreement that in terms of corporate goals the new product represented, or would represent for the component improvement group, a good fit with management preferences, and could be seen as an aggressive in-house new product strategy.

Product development seemed to be recognised as essential for progress by the firms, but some respondents with few opportunities for product development tended to dismiss this. Also, the alternatives of developing service, speeding up delivery dates and improving existing product quality had not been given serious consideration.

Interestingly, several firms claimed to possess the facilities, resources and expertise to develop their own products, yet the problem remained that this potential had not been, and was unlikely to be, realised.

5 Advertising

The owner-managers were asked to state their advertising strategies. Only 18% were able to reveal strategies that were based upon an "advertising expenditure and related returns" approach.

Some 24% advertised intermittently as the need arose and maintained that this was their “policy”. However, 58% had no real advertising strategy or policy in place. Although McIntyre (1989) and Phillips and Rasberry (1989) suggest that the “Suitability, Acceptability and Feasibility” model (also Johnson and Scholes 2002) might be employed to identify advertising opportunities available for small-medium enterprises. Vaccaro and Kassaye (1990) regard advertising as vital for small businesses but through market segmentation.

Of the firms pursuing specific advertising strategies (18%) the effectiveness of these was especially difficult to assess. Further research in this area is clearly required. A number claimed that responses to their advertisements over time had been disappointing.

Were the firms advertising in the most optimum quarters? Unfortunately, 86% of the sample had apparently not analysed rigorously the effectiveness of their own advertising or promotions.

A few companies in the survey, most notably the larger ones, appeared to spread their service efforts too thinly by attempting to do too much. There was little evidence of firms concentrating on what they could do well, such as relationship marketing, specific product specialisation, etc., and advertising these.

Other firms (62%) whose service might have been improved tended to feel that their business record had been satisfactory. Several interviewees reported that: “Customers have not complained”, and this was the basis for the complacency. None of these firms had attempted to advertise even this perceived successful service. Only 20% were prepared to look at service, further improve it and ultimately advertise it.

Practically every firm in the sample had experienced some degree of excess capacity throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Some claimed to be in recession in 2002 and this explained current excess capacity. From time to time these unused resources had amounted to 50% and even higher in a few firms. No firm could claim zero excess capacity over the longer term.

Firms themselves admitted that if production had been raised to the 100% level then unit costs and possibly prices could have been held, involving the firm no financial hardship. Spare capacity would have been profitable to eliminate - by a host of policy initiatives, not least advertising. But the firms remained reluctant to pursue such a policy.

The response that full capacity working would have been readily undertaken if contracts had been available was not necessarily a valid point for a competitive firm to make. For example, to what extent did the firms actively seek out new business possibilities and move into and out of reasonably accessible markets? Hardly any interviewees could confirm that this was undertaken as a conscious strategy of the firm, although many considered that market seeking, for example by advertising and promotion, could be a profitable venture.

It was quite strongly held by the interviewees that small firms did not actually need to advertise. It seemed that the across-the-board problems of the typical small firm almost certainly could have been eased by the application of the basic advertising skills, lacking by implication, in the findings.

To be effective for the firms in question, advertising had to be specifically targeted to generate active responses. It had to stand out, identify the name of the product, the name of the business and provide a promise of a benefit to the customer, whilst also being consistent with the image of the business and other forms of promotion.

To achieve objectives, advertising had to be of high quality and the preparation and the production of artwork and display material should have been professionally produced. It would usually be worthwhile to commission an advertising agency to handle the work and target the relevant markets. In response to this suggestion, owner-managers claimed that it would be too expensive. Positive advertising was clearly regarded as a cost rather than an investment. Yet Quinn (1987) has articulated the secrets of low-budget advertising for small-medium companies.

There could be a choice from national, regional and local newspapers. Yellow Pages, trade journals, consumer magazines, local radio, cinema, television, mail shots, poster and transport advertising comprise the basis of discussions with the respondents. Furthermore, sales promotions, incentives, competitions, free offers, discounts and demonstrations would be useful supportive methods. But the reaction was low key. Marsh (1987) has also shown how small firms can benefit from practical “do-it-yourself” advertising. Advice from the various consultancy bodies, for example, the British Small Firms’ Service, the Department of Trade and Industry and Business Link would normally be available.

Sponsorship was another relevant form of sales promotion involving sports, arts and other companies. The use of editorial coverage and articles in trade publications covering new products could be employed in some cases.

Of all these promotional and advertising possibilities raised with the interviewees at the time, the majority demonstrated interest in the ideas, but not the implementation.

As far as sales constraints were concerned, as perceived by the firms, inadequate plant capacity predominated along with the lack of skilled labour. The largely imaginary recession, as indicated previously, was also regarded as a constraint beyond the control of the firm. At no point was advertising singled out as a possible weapon against these constraints by either the mechanical or electrical engineering firms.

6 Exporting

A quite different set of constraints apparently prevented exporting. There was recognition by the firms that exporting could be a crucial element in enhancing business performance, but there was significantly less acceptance of the need to actually integrate exporting into their marketing strategies.

Of the firms in the sample only 4% were exporting over 20% of their total output on a regular basis, another 8% exported between 5% and 20% of output and a further 20% exported occasionally but less than 5% of output. Notably, 68% had never sold abroad. However, Cannon and Willis (1987), Ogley (1987) and Silbert (1987) have outlined how small businesses can export successfully. The majority of these 68% sample companies, incidentally, fell into the 0-24 employee category rather than the 25-100 group.

It appeared to be the case that the larger firms were rather more export minded albeit from a low base. Additionally, there was no distinction between the mechanical and electrical engineering companies in this respect.

Why should the export records of the Hampshire-Dorset-Wiltshire firms be so disappointing? Most of the firms were content with the home market despite alleged and real recessions throughout the 1980s and 1990s. This attitude was entrenched in their basic approach to business and was unlikely to change easily.

Secondly, many of the companies claimed to serve local markets predominantly and had established reputations for quality products, service and reliability over the years. Exporting would draw heavily on resources currently needed to fulfil local demand.

Thirdly, most firms believed exporting to be fraught with pitfalls including legal requirements, currency complications, language difficulties, etc. The sheer effort required for successful exporting was not considered to be worthwhile for very small firms. The Culpan (1989) work investigating the export behaviour of firms with particular reference to firm size is of some applicability here.

Fourthly, some interviewees pointed out that they exported "indirectly". Their products, or part products, were exported eventually by the customer. This proved to be difficult to verify. But the work of Krotz (1987) covering the managing of foreign representatives is an example of research into this area.

Were the non-exporting firms justified in their attitudes against selling abroad? Was exporting feasible for the small firm? Of the 16 firms that were exporting at all, 6 claimed the activity to be "highly profitable". Eight companies assessed the outcome as "satisfactory". And just 2 firms had been "disappointed" but would certainly continue to export. The indication was that despite the obvious limitations of a sub-sample of 16 there was no reason why exporting should not be successful given, of course, that the procedures were followed, specialist advice taken and the mechanics of exporting were carried out effectively.

Too many of the sample firms had rejected exporting too readily and especially since some of these companies had excess capacities. These spare resources could have been utilised for exporting. Unfortunately, the firms simply did not feel the need to seek out possible overseas markets.

The finding that small firms made little effort to find lucrative new markets was, in fact, not too surprising. Small companies, as mentioned above, are not renowned for market research, forecasting, advertising, product development, etc., even within the home market. Clearly, if they were to research markets abroad they would require some assistance.

Had the firms ever approached export consultants to advise with exporting? Of the 50 respondents interviewed only 3 had engaged consultants for export purposes. Indeed, hardly any of the companies had employed consultants for any purpose, as indicated previously. And even where advice had been sought on occasions this had been at an elementary level, e.g. advice regarding government grants, interviews with the bank manager, discussions with accountants, etc. But there were no actual consultancy contracts. When informal recommendations had occasionally been made by bank managers, accountants, customers or suppliers, hardly any of these had been implemented, mainly on the grounds of expense. In fact, very nearly all of the firms felt that consultants for exporting purposes, or otherwise, were expensive, disruptive, interfering, inventors of problems and just inappropriate for the small firm. It did manifest itself that the typical small firm blatantly rejected consultancy when the advice available could have been crucial for a successful exporting launch.

For successful exporting to result the firm must essentially follow a critical path through the map of available opportunities. For example, firms may have never exported before because they did not know how to proceed. Yet there are numerous advice centres to assist with guidelines and documentation.

Firstly, the firm must attempt to identify markets abroad that would be suitable for the firm to enter. Market intelligence is patently required. There may be social, political and cultural problems to explore as well as economic. The fact remains that the export division of the Department of Trade and Industry is a possible starting point. There is also the British Overseas Trade Board, the British Market Research Bureau Ltd., the British Export Houses Association, not to mention the embassies of foreign countries, the City Business Library in London, the Financial Times special market surveys and statistics produced by Her Majesty's Stationery Office and trade associations.

Secondly, the financial aspects of exporting must be understood. Credit insurance must be taken on all exports. Such insurance is available from the commercial sector as well as from the Export Credit Guarantee Department of the Department of Trade and Industry. The Export Credit Guarantee Department, as well as the banks, also offers assistance regarding export procedures. There is no shortage of help, especially online. Had any of the firms availed themselves of this assistance?

Just 16 firms were involved with exporting and only 6 of these exported to any significant level. It was surprising to learn that not all had used the facilities on hand. Only 7 had sought expert advice despite the fact that some of the counselling was free of charge. Once more the insular survival philosophies of operation of the small firm was apparent.

In most instances there was not even an interest in the possibilities of exporting. With the European Single Market effective from 1993 and now well established, the position in 2002 seemed inexplicable. This situation, by any standard, should not be the case as Brown (1991), for example, with his strategies for Europe's new market testifies.

7 Purchasing and Supply Relationships

Why do firms engage in partnership practices? There could be several reasons: direct or indirect economic interests connected with an increasing awareness of environmental responsibility, the need to develop an image, the belief that partnership could be a positive factor for the business climate generally, a means of expanding the research and development base, to share expertise and, perhaps not least, to pool certain risks in the marketing field.

However, in the Hampshire-Dorset-Wiltshire sample only 4 firms (8%) were able to demonstrate an attempt, if no more than that, at informal partnership with larger purchasers and suppliers. This was largely based on the fact that the small company in question was somewhat over committed to a major purchaser in terms of the percentage of output produced. It was almost a necessary imposition. The remaining 92% (46 firms) appeared to have given the purchasing and supply relationship little serious thought. They believed that high interest rates for small firms irrespective of occasional reductions in base rate, business rates, lack of skilled labour, competition, difficulty of securing new orders, and implementation of the national minimum wage from April 1999 were far more important considerations. The reduction of corporation tax to 19% in the April 2002 budget hardly raised a mention in the firms interviewed at that time.

For example, inbound logistics (receiving, storing, inventory control and warehousing) and outbound logistics (collection, storage and distribution) had not been communicated in any was to purchasers or suppliers by the sample firms. They, in turn, had never requested purchasers or suppliers to advise them of their logistic procedures. Indeed, in some cases there appeared to be a conflict of procedures that negotiation could have eased.

Moreover, few of the sample firms had queried the service offered by purchasers and suppliers and they had not, in most instances, questioned the service provided to them. Thirteen of the firms (26%) worked to BS5750 (now ISO 9000), and considered that this in itself was an aspect of guaranteed quality. But it must be noted that other firms were less happy with both the administration involved and the basic philosophy of ISO 9000 for reasons beyond the immediate scope of this survey.

The firms had not researched their suppliers to any noticeable extent. Most of the suppliers in the chain were well known to the firms and they believed there was no pressing need to investigate. Yet 23 firms (46%) claimed to have been let down to varying degrees by suppliers in the recent past and agreed that researching might have avoided these problems. Despite this, the firms had not been ruthless enough with unreliable suppliers. If a contractor quoted a delivery date the firms simply accepted this – they did not research it. Five firms admitted, however, that certain large major purchasers did research them.

In essence there was little partnership demeanour between the firms and their purchasers and suppliers. Where power clearly resided in a major purchaser the sample firm could see little prospect of developing partnership under such conditions.

The placing of contracts with purchasers tended to revolve around price. Once price had been established (Stage 1) then delivery, fine tuning of design, quality, etc., (Stage 2) followed. Partnership attitudes were far more apparent at Stage 2 than at Stage 1. The sample firms suggested that partnership barriers clearly existed and pricing was an example of this. Apparently, one could negotiate in a partnership frame of mind more freely on design, quality, etc., but much less on price.

There were, in any event, other basic problems regarding pricing which inclined to be based almost exclusively on the cost plus percentage method. Flexible pricing was rare. Contribution pricing was virtually non-existent. Endemic problems of under-pricing were apparent (Hankinson 1987). On a more positive note, Clugston (1987) and Mitchell (1990) have, for example, intimated how small businesses can avoid such problems.

The respondents reacted to change "as required". For instance, the possibilities of Just-in-Time with partners, or general partnership ideas across the board, had been ignored largely on the grounds of "difficulties". But Ettkin, Raiszadeh and Hunt (1990) claim that Just-in-Time offers opportunities for small firms rather than problems.

One company in particular had over 1000 suppliers on its database as at 2002. Its relatively few customers were large and prominent. The owner reported that he was familiar with these customers by their reputations, and was content with this. On the other hand, his 1000 suppliers were "unknown" in partnership terms. The firm was dependent on its large customers. It was less dependent on its 1000 suppliers. Therefore, the partnership relationship could afford to be weak. The possibility that some of the 1000 suppliers could have been dependent on the company was not thought to be a major issue by the firm. Obviously, there are limits to backward integration. This could be both expensive and a long term commitment for the firm. But the managing director was not specifically looking for new, or even better, suppliers. He preferred to rely on the existing ones. The search for the new supplier tended to be occasional at best. Partnership was held to be inappropriate by the owner-manager. The cutting down of the number of suppliers and the targeting in on quality and reliability of supply involving partnership had not been considered by the firm, or indeed, by most of the other firms under review.

There was little evidence of the firms offering subsidies to assist their small suppliers to meet requirements. Contracts once placed were left to the supplier to comply with and deliver. Discounts had been offered to customers from time to time but this practice was more in line with necessity rather than partnership.

With regard to purchasers and suppliers' systems, the sample companies had not researched how they might integrate their own systems and procedures in partnership. There was, as expected, an awareness of Just-in-Time by all the firms. Most thought that they should be moving towards this although at different levels and paces. Unfortunately, it was believed that purchasers and suppliers would simply not co-operate, although this had not been investigated by the owner-manager-directors. Long run changes would be needed and the sample firms were not optimistic about unknown trends. Basic forecasting, for example, as earlier reported, was considered to be particularly difficult. It was also stated by most of the interviewees that small firms had to operate on a day to day basis since long term indicators tended "not to exist".

The external market and economic climate influenced a host of activities and decisions for individual firms and the partnership ideal could not readily fir into this pattern. Twenty three firms (46%) felt that partnership would most likely catalyse conflict rather than harmony.

If partnership were established with purchasers and suppliers, co-ordination of investment, pricing, output scheduling, marketing, advertising, training, product development, etc., would be expected to harmonise albeit to varying extents. But the sample firms demonstrated a major problem here. The attitudes to decision making were conditioned principally by the necessity criterion. This confined the firms to operate at an insular survival level that rendered the prospects of partnership remote.

8 Conclusions and Recommendations

The 1997-2002 Hampshire-Dorset-Wiltshire Survey exposed notable weaknesses in the small firm. The summarised findings suggested that the firms' general attitudes to marketing were somewhat inconsistent with any reasonable yardstick of optimality. The small firms under review appeared to ignore, and even avoid, opportunities for improved financial performance through marketing effectiveness.

Perhaps the cornerstone of this "marketing problem" lies within an educational impasse. The universities, for example, with their short courses, undergraduate and postgraduate work, together with the professional bodies' backup facilities could provide the framework for far more opportunities for the small firm owner-manager-director to address the marketing deficiencies outlined in this paper. The Confederation of British Industry, the Institute of Directors, Local Authorities, the Engineering Associations and specialist consultants could look again at more positive ways of persuading small firms to seek advice as a routine rather than when it is usually too late.

Small firms tend to react favourably to personal one to one contact with the local consultant who is on hand over the longer term, who knows the firm well and in turn is well known by the firm. They also respond to reasonable fees preferably on a "payments by results" basis.

But above all the firms themselves must start to diagnostically appraise and monitor their own marketing performances, advisedly under guidance, far more effectively than they appear to be doing. The importance of this guidance, and effective training generally, cannot by over emphasised for the smaller firm especially for the twenty first century with almost certainly unknown, yet more demanding, challenges ahead.

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