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Marketing Practices in SMEs. Case Study: Romania vs. Malta

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyse the marketing practices embraced by SMEs managers to fulfil their organisation objectives in terms of profit. Based on a literature review, qualitative interviews and a quantitative research based on questionnaires implemented on Romanian and Maltese SMEs, we have acquired a broad image of the marketing practices used within these organisations. The primary pursued objective of the paper is to determine if the size of a SME (in terms of turnover and employee number), influences the marketing process. Moreover, the results of the case study (Romanian vs. Maltese SMEs) outline that SMEs managers, more or less, set short term marketing objectives based on “entrepreneurial instinct” or conjuncture, to overcome threats or to transform opportunities in short term profit. Thus, the study results represent a starting point for developing processes to help SMEs managers make a better use of the marketing orientation concept, in order to create long term business plans.

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Keywords: SMEs, strategic marketing planning, marketing strategy;

1. Introduction

Proper marketing activities determine a good unfolding of the sales force efforts for the company’s present and future. The difference between sales and marketing orientation is subtle and sometimes hard to notice. SMEs managers have to be aware of the difference between occasionally successes generated by increased sales efforts and to take advantage of emerged opportunities, with the help of strategic marketing planning for a long term stable growth.

It’s obvious that without successful sells a company will not be able to continue its activity. Equally obvious is that without undertaking a relevant marketing activity planning, both for short term (sales oriented), medium and long-term (oriented towards meeting consumer needs and desires), SMEs managers will not be able to adapt to internal and external environment changes in their specific field of activity.

Hill (2001) made references about the intuitive nature of SMEs based upon specific situations and the implementation of marketing activities, without a pre-planning activity. Moreover Marcati et al. (2008) suggests that these actions are evaluated subjectively based on the manager’s perceptions, conjuncture or mental marketing schemes. Moreover, four study cases conducted by Bettiol et al. (2012) show the fact that marketing strategy in SMEs is all SME manager driven and that it is not a result of a systematic search for opportunities or a structured analysis of the relevant market, and it is more a result of a reaction process towards business environment changes. According to Hammond (2001), companies have to adhere to a particular strategy and find new ways to improve it constantly. The marketing strategy also requires a clear understanding of how marketing

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works within a company. Thus, in a classic and broad approach, Kotler (2003) states that the marketing department of the company must perform the following activities:

- pursue the annual marketing plan (check the level of compliance with marketing objectives);
- profitability analysis (detecting areas where profit organization obtains and where losses);
- efficiency analysis (impact of marketing expenditures on tracking performance of the organization);
- strategic control (qualitative evaluation of marketing activities).

Wiig (2004) claims that the business environment is in a continuous development, both in terms of diversity and complexity, and businesses desire to operate on the global competitive market. This requires a clear focus on efficiency and flexibility (both for its external and internal environment).

Both Rust (2004) and Frösen (2008), argue that business performance and marketing performance in particular are both influenced by environment and competition. Clark (2001), argues that the role of marketing in understanding the market's needs and the development of new product concepts, is extremely important to a firm's innovation process. According to Doyle (2000), an organization's ability to achieve or maintain a competitive advantage in a constantly changing environment is the key to the company's economic value growth.

Kourakalis (2005) claims that in an increasingly complex market environment, characterized by dynamism, technological advancement and fierce competition, SMEs are in the central act of exchange and knowledge promotion. Thus they are able to face pressure from the competition through a continuous learning process regarding the acceptance of change and the continuous search of competitive advantage.

Carson (1990) notes the fact that in large companies, marketing decision-making tends to be more formal and more structured, while in SMEs, processes tend to be simple, informal, instinctive and different from the theoretical paradigms developed in literature. Moreover, Gellynck et al. (2012) argue that SMEs lack in organising marketing activities, namely planning and implementation, and moreover SMEs manager do not take into consideration long-term marketing perspectives, neither adapt the plan and especially the budget to market changes.

Nevertheless, the empirical evidence of two case studies regarding marketing in SMEs, conducted by Franco et al. (2014) show that the importance of marketing activities is recognized, but it differs from a company size to another.

2. Research objective, data collection, research hypothesis

2.1. Research objective

Starting from the assumption that SME managers have their own perception regarding the size of their business and usually have a tendency to reject marketing optics dictates that they do not engage in strategic marketing planning activities, to the same extent in which managers of large enterprises get involved.

Therefore the question arises whether SME managers are influenced or not by their financial and human resources to initiate marketing activities for a competitive advantage.

Thus the research objective is to investigate the adoption and implementation of marketing practices in SMEs and the implications on their financial and human resources in this process. To accomplish the research objective, the authors have created four investigation directions for observing the influence of turnover and number of employees upon:

- The existence of a marketing activity responsible;
- Creating marketing plans;
- Strategic marketing planning;
- Marketing budget allocation.

2.2. Data collection

The necessary data for the study has been collected using an online survey. The questionnaire has been built upon structured questions with predetermined response options, which has ensured an easy and relative quick data gathering. Structured questions have the advantage to determine answers which are easy to be processed statistically. Additionally, the respondent may be brought to the same reference structure as the researchers involved in the study.

Following the analysis carried out by Euro Stat and The World Factbook for the period 2012-2013, the authors observed that both countries possess developing countries characteristics, making them eligible for the comparison study.

The aim of the study is oriented towards SMEs managers from Romania and Malta. A non-probabilistic sampling method was used to create databases and to send online invitations to participate in the comparative study.

To ensure the representativeness of the study (knowing the approximate number of active Romanian and Maltese SMEs in 2013), for an error margin of 5% and a confidence level of 95%, we have calculated with the help of an online application (<http://www.raosoft.com/samplesize.html>) the research sample needed for the comparative study, resulting a number of 381 needed SMEs responses. Table 1 shows the number of responses obtained (valid for the research) and the respondent's characteristics which determine the legal size of the SMEs.

Table 1. Primary data collection results

Primary data collection results	RO	MT
Data collection period	January – March 2013	April – July 2013
No. of SMEs in the database	424	326
No. valid responses	131	47
Response rate	30.89%	14.41%
No. of SMEs with a turnover ≤ 2 mil. €	106	38
No. of SMEs with a turnover between 2-10 mil. €	20	9
No. of SMEs with a turnover between 10-50 mil. €	5	-
No. of SMEs with ≤ 9 employees	70	21
No. of SMEs with 10 – 49 employees	43	17
No. of SMEs with 50 – 249 employees	16	3

The relative small response rate (in both cases) and the fact that a non-probabilistic sample was used suggest that the results are not representative for all SMEs categories (in terms of size). However overlooking the collected data, with emphasize upon company size, we can conclude that the study results are more representative for micro enterprises.

2.3. Research hypothesis

Based on the four research directions created for the research objective, the authors have created 11 research hypotheses, applicable and common for both countries. The 11 hypotheses of the comparative case study are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Research Hypotheses

H01	SMEs managers have at least one person responsible for marketing activities.
H02	Turnover, doesn't affect SMEs managers in assigning a person responsible for marketing activities.
H03	The number of employees doesn't affect SMEs managers in assigning a person responsible for marketing activities.
H04	Most SMEs managers have a marketing plan with clear objectives and allocated resources.
H05	Turnover, doesn't affect SMEs managers in setting up marketing objectives and allocating resources for them.
H06	Number of employees doesn't affect SMEs managers in setting up marketing objectives and allocating resources for them.
H07	Most SMEs managers get involved in strategic marketing planning, for at least short term objectives.
H08	Turnover, doesn't affect strategic marketing planning.
H09	Number of employees doesn't affect strategic marketing planning.
H10	Most SMEs managers allocate a distinct budget for marketing activities.
H11	Turnover, doesn't affect SMEs managers in the process of allocating a distinct budget for marketing activities.

3. Data analysis and observations

3.1. H01 - SMEs managers have at least one person responsible for marketing activities

Table 3. H01 Results

Marketing activities responsibility	RO		MT	
	N	N%	N	N%
The marketing responsible is set on the spot	66	50%	21	45%
There is an employee that is responsible for marketing activities	49	38%	17	36%
There is a marketing department	16	12%	9	19%

In Table 3 we can see that in both cases (Romania and Malta) the transition from unorganized marketing activities to their conduct in an orderly manner (the existence of an employee, plus a department responsible for marketing activities) is not significantly visible.

In the case of Romanian SMEs the weights are equal (the existence of an employee, plus a department responsible for marketing activities). On the other hand in the case of Maltese SMEs, there is a slight difference of only 5%.

3.2. H02 - Turnover, doesn't affect SMEs managers in assigning a person responsible for marketing activities

Table 4. H02 Results

Marketing activities responsibility depending on turnover	RO						MT			
	≤ 2 mil. €		2-10 mil. €		10-50 mil. €		≤ 2 mil. €		2-10 mil. €	
	N	N%	N	N%	N	N%	N	N%	N	N%
The marketing responsible is set on the spot	60	56.60%	6	30%	0	0%	18	45%	3	42.90%
There is an employee that is responsible for marketing activities	39	36.80%	8	40%	2	40%	17	42.50%	0	0%
There is a marketing department	7	6.60%	6	30%	3	60%	5	12.50%	4	57.10%

Table 4 presents the second hypothesis results. Thus, for Romanian SMEs, the dependence between turnover and the marketing activities responsibility is stronger than in Malta where the driving behavior of SMEs managers is more trenchantly, either the responsible for marketing activities is set on the spot or there is a marketing department.

3.3. H03 - The number of employees doesn't affect SMEs managers in assigning a person responsible for marketing activities

Table 5. H03 Results

Marketing activities responsibility depending on number of employees	RO								MT					
	≤ 9		10-49		50-249		≥ 250		≤ 9		10-49		50-249	
	N	N%	N	N%	N	N%	N	N%	N	N%	N	N%	N	N%
The marketing responsible is set on the spot	42	60%	23	53.5%	1	6.3%	0	0.0%	13	56.5%	7	36.8%	1	20%
There is an employee that is responsible for marketing activities	23	32.9%	16	37.2%	9	56.3%	1	50%	8	34.8%	7	36.8%	2	40%
There is a marketing department	5	7.1%	4	9.3%	6	37.5%	1	50%	2	8.7%	5	26.3%	2	40%

For Romanian SMEs, the number of employees influences managers to assign marketing activities to an employee or to a distinct department, while in Maltese SMEs, the same trenchantly behavior is observed (as with the influence of turnover) where the number of employees influence managers to conduct marketing activities in a more orderly manner (Table 5).

3.4. H04 - Most SMEs managers have a marketing plan with clear objectives and allocated resources

Table 6. H04 Results

Planning marketing activities	RO		MT	
	N	N%	N	N%
There is no marketing plan	44	34%	12	26%
There is a marketing plan, but the activities don't have clear objectives and are conducted sporadic	42	32%	22	47%
There is an annual marketing plan, with clear objectives and allocated resources	25	19%	3	6%
There is a well-founded annual marketing plan, that is correlated with the annual business plan of the enterprise	9	7%	5	11%
There is a well-founded annual marketing plan, that is correlated with the strategic business plan of the enterprise	11	8%	5	11%

In Romania, two thirds of respondents do not have a marketing plan or have a "hasty" marketing plan, while only one third link their marketing plan with the company's annual business plan (Table 6). Although there are similarities between the two countries, in Malta a higher number of respondents (73%, compared to 66%), do not have a marketing plan or they carry out a "hasty" marketing plan.

3.5. H05 - Turnover, doesn't affect SMEs managers in setting up marketing objectives and allocating resources for them

Table 7. H05 Results

Planning marketing activities depending on turnover	RO						MT			
	≤ 2 mil. €		2-10 mil. €		10-50 mil. €		≤ 2 mil. €.		2-10 mil. €	
	N	N%	N	N%	N	N%	N	N%	N	N%
There is no marketing plan	39	36.8%	5	25%	0	0%	10	25%	2	28.6%
There is a marketing plan, but the activities don't have clear objectives and are conducted sporadic	38	35.8%	4	20%	0	0%	20	50%	2	28.6%
There is an annual marketing plan, with clear objectives and allocated resources	16	15.1%	8	40%	1	20%	3	7.5%	0	0.0%
There is a well-founded annual marketing plan, that is correlated with the annual business plan of the enterprise	6	5.7%	2	10%	1	20%	4	10%	1	14.3%
There is a well-founded annual marketing plan, that is correlated with the strategic business plan of the enterprise	7	6.6%	1	5%	3	60%	3	7.5%	2	28.6%

For the Romanian SMEs, we observed equality in the mentality of having a "hasty" marketing plan or not having a plan at all. While 27.4% perform marketing planning activities for which resources are allocated to achieve the objectives (Table 7).

On the other hand Maltese microenterprises tend to have a greater interest upon marketing planning even though they set up "hasty" marketing plans.

For small enterprises (2-10 mil. Euro turnover) we have observed 42.9% respondents with marketing plans correlated to the annual or strategic business plan. In both cases, the increase of turnover, determines the existence of a higher level of entrepreneurship education.

3.6. H06 - Number of employees doesn't affect SMEs managers in setting up marketing objectives and allocating resources for them

Table 8. H06 Results

Planning marketing activities depending on number of employees	RO								MT					
	≤ 9		10-49		50-249		≥ 250		≤ 9		10-49		50-249	
	N	N%	N	N%	N	N%	N	N%	N	N%	N	N%	N	N%
There is no marketing plan	28	40%	12	27.9%	4	25%	0	0.0%	7	30.4%	4	21.1%	1	20%
There is a marketing plan, but the activities don't have clear objectives and are conducted sporadic	23	32.9%	17	39.5%	2	15.5%	0	0.0%	14	60.9%	7	36.8%	1	20%
There is an annual marketing plan, with clear objectives and allocated resources	11	15.7%	9	20.9%	4	25%	1	50%	0	0.0%	3	15.8%	0	0.0%
There is a well-founded annual marketing plan, that is correlated with the annual business plan of the enterprise	3	4.3%	2	4.7%	4	25%	0	0.0%	2	8.7%	1	5.3%	2	40%
There is a well-founded annual marketing plan, that is correlated with the strategic business plan of the enterprise	5	7.1%	3	7%	2	12.5%	1	50%	0	0.0%	4	21.1%	1	20%

In Table 8 we can see that for Romanian SMEs with a small number of employees (under 9), the lack of existence for marketing plans is of 40% or, in the best case there is a “hasty” marketing plan (32.9%). For SMEs with a larger number of employees (above 9), we observed a greater number of managers that understand the importance of marketing plans, even those created sporadically (39.5%). On the other hand for SMEs with a number of employees exceeding 49 there is an approximately equal division between those who do not get involved in marketing planning and those who do it in one form or another.

For Maltese SMEs with a small number of employees (under 9), we observed the same lack of marketing plans (30.4%) or, at best the existence of a “hasty” marketing plan (60.9%). For SMEs that have up to 49 employees we observed the same trend as for the influence of turnover, while for SMEs with a number exceeding 49 employees, we have observed a greater involvement in planning marketing activities, thus a better education and openness to marketing orientation.

3.7. H07 - Most SMEs managers get involved in strategic marketing planning, for at least sort term objectives

Table 9. H07 Results

Strategic marketing planning	RO		MT	
	N	N%	N	N%
There is a marketing plan for sporadic objectives	71	54%	19	40%
There is a marketing plan for achieving short-term objectives (up to 1 year)	36	27%	18	38%
There is a marketing plan for achieving medium-term objectives (1-3 years)	16	12%	6	13%
There is a marketing plan for achieving long-term objectives (over 3 years)	8	6%	4	9%

In both cases expressed in Table 9, we observed that strategic marketing planning is not in the focus of the SMEs' managers. In fact, their focus is oriented towards accomplishing sporadic or short term objectives (81% - Romania, respectively 78% - Malta). In other words, the tendency is to explore the strengths and opportunities or to handle the weaknesses and threats on short term, rather than towards a sustainable company growth.

3.8. H08 - Turnover, doesn't affect strategic marketing planning

Table 10. H08 Results

Strategic marketing planning depending on turnover	RO						MT			
	≤ 2 mil. €		2-10 mil. €		10-50 mil. €		≤ 2 mil. €		2-10 mil. €	
	N	N%	N	N%	N	N%	N	N%	N	N%
There is a marketing plan for sporadic objectives	62	58.5%	9	45%	0	0.0%	15	37.5%	4	57.1%
There is a marketing plan for achieving short-term objectives (up to 1 year)	29	27.4%	5	25%	2	40%	18	45%	0	0.0%
There is a marketing plan for achieving medium-term objectives (1-3 years)	11	10.4%	4	20%	1	20%	5	12.5%	1	14.3%
There is a marketing plan for achieving long-term objectives (over 3 years)	4	3.8%	2	10%	2	40%	2	5.0%	2	28.6%

For Romanian SMEs, strategic planning (Table 10) is influenced by turnover, while for the Maltese ones the contrary applies, thus we observed that SMEs with a turnover below 2 mil. Euros manage to define a plan for meeting sporadic objectives (58.5% - Romania, respectively 37.5% - Malta). SMEs with a turnover between 2-10 mil. Euros, have the tendency to focus towards a

planning in favor of accomplishing short term objectives. In both cases, the focus is on accomplishing operational plans, thus we observed a slight confusion of the managers regarding the strategic marketing planning concept.

3.9. H09 - Number of employees doesn't affect strategic marketing planning

Table 11. H09 Results

Strategic marketing planning depending on number of employees	RO								MT					
	≤ 9		10-49		50-249		≥ 250		≤ 9		10-49		50-249	
	N	N%	N	N%	N	N%	N	N%	N	N%	N	N%	N	N%
There is a marketing plan for sporadic objectives	42	60%	24	55.8%	5	31.3%	0	0.0%	12	52.2%	6	31.6%	1	20%
There is a marketing plan for achieving short-term objectives (up to 1 year)	19	27.1%	10	23.3%	6	37.5%	1	50%	9	39.1%	7	36.8%	2	40%
There is a marketing plan for achieving medium-term objectives (1-3 years)	4	5.7%	8	18.6%	3	18.8%	1	50%	2	8.7%	3	15.8%	1	20%
There is a marketing plan for achieving long-term objectives (over 3 years)	5	7.1%	1	2.3%	2	12.5%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	3	15.8%	1	20%

If we compare responses from Romanian SMEs with less than 9 and the ones with 10 to 49 employees, we can observe that approximately 60% of them set up plans for sporadic objectives, while around 20% set up plans for medium and long term objectives. Two thirds of Romanian SMEs with 50 to 250 employees have plans for sporadic objectives and only one third are aware of the importance of strategic planning when it comes to medium to long term objectives.

Maltese SMEs with less than 9 employees behave similar with the Romanian ones, in the sense that more than 50% of them define plans for meeting sporadic objectives. Regarding the SMEs with 10 to 49 and 50 to 249 employees, a higher interest is observed towards strategic planning. We can conclude that the Maltese SMEs' managers are more aware of the importance of strategic marketing strategic planning.

3.10. H10 - Most SMEs managers allocate a distinct budget for marketing activities

Table 12. H10 Results

Marketing activities budget	RO		MT	
	N	N%	N	N%
There are no sums allocated for marketing activities	25	19%	8	17%
The sums allocated for marketing activities are set on the spot	61	47%	25	53%
The annual budget contains a rubric for sums allocated for marketing activities	17	13%	3	6%
There is a distinct budget for marketing activities, but insufficient	13	10%	4	9%
There is a distinct marketing budget, but not structured on clear and consistent objectives	3	2%	0	0.0%
There is a distinct marketing budget, well-structured on clear and consistent objectives	12	9%	7	15%

Table 12 presents the results of the 10th hypotheses. Therefore, in both Romanian and Maltese SMEs, a high percentage of participants (47% - Romania, respectively 53% - Malta) allocate the necessary budget for marketing activities on the spot. This shows that the marketing activities are oriented towards taking advantage of an opportunity or towards overcoming a threat.

3.11. H11 - Turnover, doesn't affect SMEs managers in the process of allocating a distinct budget for marketing activities

Table 13 expresses the marketing budget depending on turnover. For Romanian SMEs with a turnover lower than 2 mil. Euros, 45.3% of them allocate a budget for marketing activities on the spot and only 7.5% of them allocate a distinct budget (that turns out to be insufficient). A higher turnover (2 to 10 mil. Euros) shows a higher percentage of the SMEs that allocate budgets on the spot (60%), but there is also a higher percentage of ones that allocate a distinct budget (25%).

Table 13. H11 Results

Marketing activities budget depending on turnover	RO						MT			
	≤ 2 mil. €		2-10 mil. €		10-50 mil. €		≤ 2 mil. €		2-10 mil. €	
	N	N%	N	N%	N	N%	N	N%	N	N%
There are no sums allocated for marketing activities	25	23.6%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	6	15%	2	28.6%
The sums allocated for marketing activities are set on the spot	48	45.3%	12	60%	1	20%	23	57.5%	2	28.6%
The annual budget contains a rubric for sums allocated for marketing activities	17	16%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
There is a distinct budget for marketing activities, but insufficient	8	7.5%	5	25%	0	0.0%	2	5%	1	14.3%
There is a distinct marketing budget, but not structured on clear and consistent objectives	2	1.9%	0	0.0%	1	20%	4	10%	0	0.0%
There is a distinct marketing budget, well-structured on clear and consistent objectives	6	5.7%	3	15%	3	60%	5	12.5%	2	28.6%

In the case of Maltese SMEs with a turnover lower than 2 mil. Euros, there are more respondents that establish a budget on the spot (approx. 60%). For a higher turnover, the percentage of respondents that do not have a marketing budget is equal with the ones that allocate a budget on the spot (28.6%), while only 14.3% have a distinct budget for marketing activities.

When it comes to allocating a marketing budget, even though it is influenced by the turnover, a more balanced behavior is observed in the responses from Romanian managers.

4. Conclusions

As a general observation, regarding the SMEs managers' behaviour on both countries, we can affirm that they are more influenced by their turnover, than the number of employees, in organizing and planning marketing activities. Thus, the amount of financial resources is an essential element that fuels the marketing activities, and not the know-how that can be obtain from own employees.

In other words, managers from both countries assume that a high quantum of financial resources is an essential decision factor for initiating and maintaining a healthy marketing process, which can assure their competitive advantage. With the increase of the annual turnover, we have observed a higher interest in organizing marketing activities, planning marketing strategies and budgets. There is a slight interest growth in management education.

The authors argue that not only the lack of financial resources leads SMEs managers to a weak strategic marketing plan, but also the lack of openness to marketing orientation and marketing research. A good understanding of marketing orientation and research principles can lead to successful strategic marketing plans, rather than a large quantum of financial and human resources without a clear purpose.

Moreover, the results show that marketing activities in SMEs are informal, reactive to market opportunities and in most cases managers have an influence on the marketing decision-making process, usually based on their financial performance. SMEs manifest a specific form of marketing activities that differ from the conventional and structured form typical for large organisations

A solution, for SMEs managers is to seek external partners from business or university environment. Together they can create inter-disciplinary teams, which are able to diagnose the marketing potential of an SME with the following tools: a customized process and an appropriate marketing strategy (taking into consideration the available financial and human resources and the company's business environment).

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