



Assessing The Effectiveness of Marketing Strategies of Small to Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Durban (South Africa)

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Abstract

South African Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) operate in challenging economic conditions that were made exceptionally more difficult by the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. This study investigates the effectiveness of marketing strategies employed by SMEs in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa. A quantitative study was conducted online using an anonymous questionnaire among informal SMEs operating in Durban. A systematic sampling method was employed in selecting the SMEs and the sample size of the study was 96. IBM SPSS 27 and descriptive and inferential statistics were employed to analyze data. The results indicate that most SMEs use a combination of digital and face-to-face marketing strategies and embrace online platforms and websites to increase sales. SMEs also frequently use telephones, email, and SMS as part of their marketing strategy. The study recommends that SMEs equip themselves with advanced knowledge about online marketing strategies as that will give them a competitive advantage over other SMEs that do not have such knowledge. SMEs are also encouraged to continue building connections with clients through face-to-face marketing.

Key words: Marketing challenges, South Africa, digital marketing, COVID-19, SMEs

Introduction

South Africa's economy is classified as developing, with millions living in poverty and the highest income inequality in the world (Moyo, Mishi, & Newadi, 2022). The country suffers from several structural economic issues (e.g., electricity shortages, unemployment, service delivery protests) that stifle growth and perpetuate hardships that have persisted since the fall of the apartheid government (Ansari, 2021). In addition, millions of South Africans lost their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic. These economic challenges are important for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMES) marketers for two main reasons.

Firstly, the nature of marketing has changed to be dominated by various digital strategies (Kim, Kang & Lee, 2021) and secondly, marketing budget expenditures must be effective as economic hardships prevail. Thus, for SMEs to thrive in this challenging environment, it is important that they utilize the most effective marketing strategies available. SMEs operate under resource constraints that large enterprises and multi-national corporations do not experience. Navigating these constraints requires marketers to be agile, flexible and have the capability to seize opportunities using effective strategies. Innovative marketing strategies also tend to be necessitated by crises (Wang, Hong, Li & Gao, 2020). Digital marketing communications have broadened their scope beyond the original media of websites and email, though not all digital marketing tools are effective (Labanauskaitė, Fiore, & Stašys, 2020). Even though social media does improve website traffic, Dolega, Rowe & Branagan (2021) find that it does not significantly increase product orders or revenue; the complexity, cost, and brand status of various products have different impacts on the success of social media marketing.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the marketing methods used by SMEs in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal province, and determine how effective they are. South Africa has 11 official languages, and the major cities tend to be inhabited by large communities from different African and European countries (Tewelde, 2021). Situated in the located in the Natal Bay of the Indian Ocean, Durban is a major trading port of entry to the African continent and is the third largest city in South Africa (United Nations, 2020). This cultural diversity along with the economic factors mentioned above, make this study relevant. While other scholars have assessed the effectiveness of South African marketing strategies (e.g. Sotiriadis, 2015; Duffett & Wakeham, 2016; Cant & Wiid, 2016; Oji, Iwu & Haydam, 2017; Duffett, et al., 2019), this study to our knowledge, is one of the first that looked at this issue since the pandemic struck at the beginning of 2020, as the socioeconomic environment is now vastly different and this affects the marketing function. In addition, these prior studies mentioned were conducted before the large digital transformation of marketing technologies that have become popularized over the past three years.

This study seeks to answer the following research questions. Firstly, what are the most effective marketing strategies utilized by Durban SMEs? Secondly, which practical recommendations for effective marketing strategies can Durban SMEs adopt?

Literature Review

Marketing strategies utilized by South African SMEs

The major objective of any marketing strategy should be to create a sustainable competitive edge in the marketplace over the long term (Nainawat, 2019). The marketing strategy serves as a guide for the direction and coordination of marketing efforts by summarizing the marketer's research and outlining the steps the business will take to reach its marketing objectives (Marshall, 2023). Implementing a marketing strategy requires taking the steps necessary to put the plan into motion and ensuring that its objectives are met (Ferrell, Hartline, & Hochstein, 2021). The effectiveness of a marketing strategy has a strong effect on the organization's success in meeting its revenue and profitability targets (Kalogiannidis & Mavratzas, 2020; Hunt, Mello, & Deitz, 2023).

Increasing revenues is an important objective that SME owners to achieve as most South African SMEs fail within the first three years of their existence (Oni, & Omonona, 2020). Successful SMEs produce superior goods at reasonable prices and implement targeted marketing strategies to market their wares aggressively to consumers. This assists SMEs in maintaining strong brand identities (Amin, 2021). South African SMEs rely less on formal marketing planning resources and more on marketing strategies developed through informal channels, such as social and personal contact networks. The norm is ad hoc, short-term planning and this could be because of financial constraints, income disparities and varied demographics in different regions of South Africa, which influences the marketing strategies used (Makhitha, 2016; Chernev, 2019; Moodley, et al., 2023). Although innovation and good leadership is also important to be successful in business, it is more critical to have a good, targeted marketing strategy which

assists in selling products and thus increasing profits (Afriyie, Du, & Ibn Musah, 2019).

In the past, indigenous people in South Africa regarded global business activities in emerging countries negatively due to their frequent influences on human rights, cultures, and product consumption patterns (Githiria, & Onifade, 2020). As a result, it is vital for companies entering a new market to consider these apprehensions and emphasize customer needs while ensuring that profits are generated from the market (Paul, 2019). Cultural dissimilarities in South Africa can have a considerable influence on the outcome of message framing and pose challenges when formulating multicultural marketing communication strategies (Izogo, & Mpinganjira, 2020).

SMEs experience challenges with regards to inadequate management skills, poor access to funding and sub-standard marketing strategies being implemented (Madzimure & Tau, 2021; Makhitha, & Soke, 2021). This in turn has a knock-on effect on the choice and effectiveness of marketing strategies used by local SMEs. Consequently, there is a preference for cheap, cost-effective marketing strategies (Dolega, et al., 2021). South African SMEs frequently use “email campaigns, Short Message Service (SMS) campaigns, telesales to existing customers, telesales to potential customers; in-store promotions, billboard campaigns and radio campaigns” (Moodley, 2019:301). Together with this, a “personalized service to customers and relationship marketing are preferred. Additionally, “other” marketing strategies used by the participants include vehicle branding, distribution of handbills, E-commerce, marketing representatives, calling on customers by marketing representatives, newspaper advertising and website advertising” (Moodley, 2019:301).

Methods

Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive research design. The main reason the research design was selected was that it allows for the collection of systematic and quantifiable data which can be used for statistical analysis of the research problem. The descriptive research design allows researchers to measure trends and compare variables. As indicated by Cresswell and Cresswell (2018), this research design responds to study issues that are essentially factual.

Research philosophy

This study follows the positivism philosophy. Positivism is a single truth exists that can be explained by law-like causal generalization. The reason the study followed the positivism philosophy was the fact that the knowledge is objective since the SMEs’ owners state their own facts.

Research Strategy

This study followed a quantitative survey strategy using a questionnaire. The questionnaires were drafted and digitized using the Survey Monkey website. The online survey site was used to send a link to respondents. The respondents then used the link to complete the questionnaire. Consent forms which clearly explained the subject and objectives of the study were issued to all respondents before they began the survey.

Target Population

The study’s population was comprised of just over 5000 SMEs in and around Durban. These were owners in different business sectors including agriculture, hunting and forestry, manufacturing, construction, mining, electricity, business services, tourism & leisure, finance, transport, communication, health care, education, social services, wholesale, motor vehicles and repairs, customer services, retail industry and others.

Sampling Techniques

The convenience sampling method was used in surveying the selected business owners, CEOs, managers, managing directors, marketing managers as well as independent product distributors. Convenience

sampling is a technique involving the selection of the most accessible subjects; however, it is the least costly to the researcher, in terms of time, effort and money (Ellis, 2021). One hundred (100) SME owners were selected, and the sample was determined by time plus financial constraints factors as well as the institutional standards and 96% (96) of them filled them out.

Research Instrument

A structured questionnaire was sent to managers, marketing managers, product distributors, CEOs, and directors of the selected SMEs. The authors came up with the questions themselves and did not adapt an existing questionnaire. A tablet, computer, and cell phone were used to disperse a digital questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed primarily to address the aims of the study's research. The survey's 32 questions are organized around five different variables, and its demographic questions have multiple-choice answers. There were five responses to each item on the survey: strongly disagree, disagree, uncertain, agree, and strongly agree.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was done prior to this study with ten small medium enterprise owners in the Durban area. The pilot study was conducted to examine the feasibility of a research approach which was intended to be used on a larger scale. The number of respondents for the pilot study was 10 and they formed part of the final sample. The pilot study indicated that the online survey is more feasible especially in the state of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Data collection

The primary data was collected between in October and November 2022 using questionnaires to achieve the research study's main objectives. Secondary data was collected from journal articles, published materials, and internet sources in the study.

Reliability and validity

Validity is a measure of how well a measuring instrument fulfils its function, and it is concerned with whether the measuring instrument measures the behavior or quality that it is supposed to measure (Surucu & Maslakci, 2020). Heale and Twycross, (2015:66) also explain that in a quantitative investigation, validity is defined as the degree to which a notion is accurately quantified. Reliability is said to be a pointer to the suitability of the measured values attained in repeated measurements under equal circumstances utilising the same measuring instrument (Surucu & Maslakci, 2020). In this study, reliability was measured using Cronbach alpha. Heale & Twycross, (2015:67) states that "Cronbach's α is the most used test to determine the internal consistency of an instrument".

Ethical Considerations

All contributors were guaranteed confidentiality of the data collected in the study. Their participation rights were clearly explained to them at the beginning of the study. Participants were presented with a covering letter informing them of the aim of the study and any ethical considerations. Participants' voluntary permission was obtained through signing the letter of permission, which clearly outlines the research intention and processes. The questionnaires were structured in a manner that was inoffensive and not discriminatory to the participants. Clear and simple language was used to construct the questionnaire. All participants were treated with respect and dignity.

Data Collection and Analysis

Microsoft Excel was used to code the data obtained from the questionnaires. A contingency table was prepared by setting the data into segments of each respondent. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) using IBM SPSS 27 was used to analyze data after it had been coded. Demographic data was analyzed using frequency graphs. The data was analyzed with descriptive statistics, where mean of

variables was explained. Reliability of data was also analyzed using Cronbach alpha, with an acceptance of 0,70 to 0,95. The Mann-Whitney U test was used in the analysis. IBM SPSS 27 was used for the statistical analysis. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to gather information and advance the goals of the study.

Results

Demographics

Figure 1 below shows the business sectors that the sampled SMEs represented. The "other" commercial trade is the largest group, accounting for 33.3% of the market. The following important industry sectors were healthcare, manufacturing, construction, and agriculture. The three smallest sectors are banking, wholesale trade, and transportation.



Figure 1: Business sectors
Source: author’s calculations

Research Question 1 - What marketing strategies are utilized by SMEs in Durban?

Table 1.
Questionnaire for research question 1

Criteria	Strongly Disagree %	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Strongly Agree %
Use of digital marketing strategy	5%	6%	17%	41%	31%

Use of face-to-face marketing strategy	1%	8%	16%	52%	23%
Use of combined digital and face-to-face marketing strategy	3%	9%	14%	44%	30%
Marketing strategy employed sustain business	3%	4%	24%	57%	12%
Marketing strategies useful in obtaining high revenues in the company	1%	4%	19%	52%	24%

Source: by the authors

Use of digital marketing strategy

30% strongly agree that they use digital marketing strategy and 44% agree on using digital marketing. These findings are at odds with those reported by Salam, Imtiaz & Burhan (2021) who report on the use of digital marketing tools by SMEs in Pakistan during the COVID-19 pandemic; a large proportion of their sample expressed reluctance, skepticism, trepidation, and unawareness of the benefits of these tools. Pakistan is a poor country with a GDP per capita that is only one fifth of South Africa's (World Bank, 2023). South African SMEs are seemingly more willing and capable of adopting digital marketing than are SMEs in poorer countries.

Use of combined digital and face-to-face marketing strategy

Most respondents (44% + 30%) agree that they use both digital and face-to-face marketing. Because a higher percentage of respondents say they use both digital and face-to-face marketing, it's possible that they find both to be effective. Face-to-face communication has the benefit of actual, emotional engagement, such as interacting with shop workers in person, trying out relevant products, and mingling with other customers. Cost advantages of digital tools make them increasingly popular because disadvantages of "face-to-face interactions motivate firms to find innovative solutions in their pricing strategies" (Civelek, et al., 2021: 213). It is understandable however for South African SMEs to still have a high usage of face-to-face marketing because of the nature of the informal market products that these informal businesses are selling as shown by the sample of this study.

More businesses using marketing strategy

22% strongly agree that they get more business using their marketing strategies and 55% agree. This finding contradicts Shankar (2020) who reports that African SMEs are less like to adopt innovative marketing strategies during times of great economic and policy uncertainty. COVID-19 was the greatest crisis in recent

memory, yet it appears that South African SMEs were willing and able to use these marketing strategies in trying conditions.

Marketing strategy employed sustainable business measures

57% agree that their marketing strategy has sustained their business with 12% strongly agreeing. According to the respondents, their marketing techniques have the power to keep their company afloat. These findings mirror those of Blankson & Renner, (2021) who find that rural Ghanaian SMEs strategy of close communication with customers develops loyalty and contributes to sustainable business during unfavorable economic times.

Marketing strategies useful in obtaining high revenues in the company

52% agree that they find marketing strategies useful in obtaining high revenues in their companies with 24% strongly agreeing. Marketing strategy enables greater brand value, increased market share, competitive advantage, higher sales, and higher profits, all of which contribute to the firm's total success. There is a higher number of respondents who feel that marketing methods are useful in generating high profits, which aligns with Hu & Kee, (2022) assertion that marketing strategies do increase profits during uncertainty through reinvention.

Research question 2 - What are the most effective marketing strategies utilized by Small Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal province?

Table 2.

Questionnaire for research question 2

Criteria	Strongly Disagree %	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Strongly Agree %
Sponsorships as part of marketing communication	20%	31%	19%	27%	3%
Use of personal selling and networking	1%	7%	7%	54%	31%
Word of mouth for advertising		6%	31%	45%	18%
Use of telephone, SMS and email	2%	15%	15%	47%	21%
Online and website help in selling more products	2%	20%	24%	31%	23%
Advertise on television and radio	36%	39%	14%	9%	2%

Source: by the authors

Sponsorships as part of marketing communication

According to Table 2, most respondents (31% + 20%) disagree that they use sponsorships as part of marketing communication. Sponsorships are monetary or in-kind contributions to activities. Businesses frequently sponsor events, trade exhibitions, clubs, and charitable causes to achieve certain commercial objectives and gain a competitive edge. Though sponsorship is a type of marketing, it differs from advertising, which tries to encourage clients to buy a product or firm by conveying messages about it (Friedman, 2021).

Even in today's digital environment, some traditional marketing methods such as sponsorship remain useful and popular because of the personal connections they facilitate (Bobalo, 2018). However, the study's findings reported contradict that view as Durban SMEs do not seem to embrace sponsorship. The explanation for it could simply be that the SMEs sampled are very small and informal and do not attract much sponsorship.

Use of personal selling and networking

Most respondents (54% + 31%) agree that they use personal selling and networking. Personal selling is a procedure that is encouraged, and it can be defined as a salesperson's interpersonal interactions with a client to establish, grow, and deepen their connection with the purpose of meeting the client's needs. This goal is primarily met by successfully selling a product or service to a client (Bongers, Schumann & Schmitz, 2021).

Word of mouth for advertising

Most respondents (45% + 18%) agree that they prefer word of mouth advertising. Krishnan & Nene (2018) states that the word-of-mouth marketing approach is an oral, one-on-one contact between a receiver and a communicator about a brand, a product, or a service that the receiver sees as non-commercial. Customer satisfaction and open communication-based strategies shape word-of-mouth completely. The force and significance of word-of-mouth are related to the speaker's relationship with the product or service; speaker pleasure will lead to positive messages about the product and service being conveyed. Despite an increase in promotional activities and commercials, word-of-mouth communication continues to be more effective in presenting numerous characteristics that can impact customers' decision-making processes (Özdemir, et al., 2016). The percentage of agreement in the research demonstrates that word-of-mouth is effective as the marketing strategy.

Use of telephone communication, SMS, and email

Most respondents (47% + 21%) agree that they use telephone communication, SMS, and email with 21.9% strongly agreeing. Today's mobile channels allow businesses to customize messaging to attract more customers. SMS usage, particularly among young people, offers advertisers new chances. Mobile marketing is described as the use of interactive wireless media to supply customers with tailored, time and location-sensitive information that promotes goods, services, and ideas, resulting in value for all stakeholders (Ifigeneia, 2015).

Online and website help in selling more products

Most respondents (31% + 23%) agree that their online platform and website helps them in selling more products. Potential customers can also find and get product information through digital marketing simply by surfing the virtual world. Buyers are becoming more self-reliant in making purchasing decisions based on search results obtained at any time and from any location. Digital marketing may reach consumers from all around the world, regardless of their location or time. The results obtained show that more respondents agree and strongly agree with the fact that online websites help in selling more products.

Advertise on Television and Radio

Most respondents (36% + 39%) disagree that they advertise on the television and radio. Like most other mediums for delivering advertising messages, television and radio have specific advantages. With TV commercials, reach is a significant benefit. Despite criticism for prohibitive costs, advertisers who use television have the best possibility of reaching a broad audience. The entire number of people who are exposed to your advertising message is referred to as reach. Reach is a crucial goal for companies trying to raise brand awareness. Television advertising is quite expensive, and it can have a significant impact on a company's budget, with the latter having to pay enormous sums of money even for a single spot (especially if that spot might be aired during prime time) (Kuyucu, 2020). Costs may be the driving force for SMEs' significant opposition to the usage of advertising television and radio.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The focus of this study filled a gap in the literature regarding the effectiveness of marketing used by South African SMEs. The study found that Durban SMEs do not utilize traditional methods of marketing such as television and radio and rely heavily of on online platforms and personal selling to market their products. This combination of digital and face to face marketing strategy suits the SMEs that were sampled as it allows for creating strong ties with customers. The study's findings also imply that digital platforms are cheaper (an important consideration for the informal SMEs that were sampled in terms of managing costs to maximize profitability) and more flexible considering the pandemic induced restrictions. The study also found that SMEs generally understand the importance of having a marketing strategy to sustain their enterprises. This awareness provides hope that more SMEs will survive beyond the first year or two, to thrive and grow, creating much needed South African jobs.

The first recommendations pertain to the use of digital platforms that SMEs harness to market their products. While this trend is common, SMEs are encouraged to invest more time in developing innovative digital campaigns that maximize the impact and reach of the adverts used. There are industry experts who conduct advanced level courses that last for several days on utilizing the power of social media for business beyond what the average person is doing. This involves understanding how social media algorithms work, how to monetize channels and how to use images, colors and slogans in ways that appeal to the psychology of consumers.

The second recommendation pertains to the role of face-to-face marketing in a post pandemic environment. Whilst the rise of digital platforms has increased and simplified the reach of the marketing function, informal SMEs have a unique advantage over large corporations; that is, SMEs are small enough that the owner can personally communicate with clients. These types of connections are essential for maximizing word of mouth marketing as SMEs operate with a shoestring budget compared to large firms. SMEs are encouraged to continue developing personalized marketing experiences through communication with clients, though it is harder to do so after the pandemic made people less social.

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