

IMPROVING CAPACITY UTILISATION OF FURNITURE MANUFACTURING SMEs THROUGH MARKET BASED VIEW: A CASE OF GWERU, ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

The growth and reliance on SME in Zimbabwe as well as the launch of the buy Zimbabwe campaign motivated the study in a bid to envisage if SMEs were able to improve their capacity utilisation by adopting market based initiatives. A structured questionnaire was adopted as a data collection instrument and the results are descriptively analysed through distribution frequencies. The study made use of a census sampling technique where 69 owner/managers of SMEs in the furniture manufacturing sector in Gweru Zimbabwe. Furthermore the study made use of furniture manufacturing SMEs clustered at Mkoba 6, Mtapu and DST complex as the key informants. A 100% response rate was achieved allowing the study to draw conclusions and generalize the research results. Results from the study indicated that SMEs have not been able to adopt effective market based strategies in order to improve their production capacity. SMEs in the furniture manufacturing sector do not carry out any market research activities and thus concentrate more of house hold consumers who bring their own special orders and instructions. The focus on household consumers affects the SME's working capital positions as they are charging prices below the desired markup policy in order to attract more customers. SMEs should carry out market research on new market and new product development. The study recommends the SMEs to engage in research and development on new strategies used to boost production output and how to implement the strategies effectively.

Keywords: Market based view, SME, Capacity, Productivity, Furniture

INTRODUCTION

The SMEs in the manufacturing industry play an important role in world economies. To the individual they provide employment and raise the standard of living and to the nation they complement large scale modern entities. According to Mathai (2015) the sector, whether formal or informal, is regarded as the heart of economic growth in the 21st century and a very important link in promoting economic development at all levels around the world including Zimbabwe. Despite the sector's high enthusiasm and potential growth, the industry is facing numerous challenges which include sub-optimal scale operation, supply chain inefficiencies, changes in manufacturing strategies, turbulent and uncertain markets, and technological obsolescence resulting in capacity under utilization. Thus it is against this background that the research aims to evaluate the effectiveness of marketing strategies adopted by SME's ability to improve their production capacity.

MARKET BASED VIEW

According to (Greasley, 2014), a market based approach is when an organization makes a decision regarding the market and the customers within those markets that it intends to target. Organisation's market position is one in which its performance enables it to attract customers to its products or services in a more successful manner than its competitors.

Product variety

Product mix flexibility is the capability to produce a broad range of products, modify the existing products, and to produce new products with variety, (Anderson,2001). MSMEs under normal circumstances if they practice product variety they tend to produce more products. However Kekre and Srinivasan (1990) and Brush and Karnani (1996) cited in Anderson (2001) analyze industry-level data and conclude that product mix heterogeneity does not increase costs or reduce productivity. In addition product variety causes performance to decline due to the changing mix of the products which are heterogeneous. The heterogeneity of the products increase costs on raw materials affecting the benefit of economies of scale.

Lim, Oo and Ling (2010) concluded that with fewer projects available during the prolonged recession, the fierce competition in the construction market is reflected here, when 88 per cent of the companies interviewed bid for projects with tiny or zero profit margins in Singapore. Thus the adoption of various product ranges entails that organisations will be able to vary their production lead times especially if they strive to manufacture products that have simple designs. The results of such decisions may include shuttering the cash operating cycle for the firms their by boosting their working capital positions. This assertion is supported by Lim,

Oo and Ling (2010) who envisaged that the objective of Singaporean contractors during economic recession was to win some projects that enable them to maintain cash flow and to keep their employees where more than two thirds of the companies interviewed had concentrated on short-term and fast-track projects as well as smaller contracts during the prolonged recession. They suggested that in the recession, in order to obtain turnover, companies had bid for more as well as smaller contracts.

On the downside of product variety strategy, SMEs tend to have little machinery to efficiently and effectively enable flexibility hence the same machinery and setup needs to be used for producing a wide range of output thereby creating a bottleneck. Furthermore, SMEs lack state of the art machinery thus affecting product variety negatively. Given the size of the SMEs majority of them do not have multiple process like big organisation and they also lack manpower thus product variety have a negative impact on capacity utilization due to the lengthening of the production time. Product variety also affect quality of the products produced by SMEs thus demand for the that business is affected because there is no specialisation in any product and in the end it affects the exact customer specifications .Product variety in SMEs might affect orders if orders come in at once taking into consideration that most SMEs are retrenching . This in the end causes orders to pile up and affect the delivery time.

New product development

Organisations both large and small can improve their capacity utilization through new product development. Coker and Helo (2016) denoted that Product development in refers to actions such as new product introductions, adjusting modular variations in functionality, or re-aiming the price-point for products to cover more customers. Furthermore, a new product can be referred as original products, product improvement, product modifications and new brands that the firm develops through its own research and development effort. Ewah et al (2008) defines new products as the life blood of companies, large or small. In addition he also states that new product can be defined as an innovation or modification or invention of an existing product to an extent that consumer perceive the modified version as a different or existing product just entering the market. New product development can contribute to the success of many companies who have a knowhow on the new product development.

Thus in new product development they is need for firms to manage their capacity as they take up excess space that are left by declining product or the void that is left by seasonal fluctuations in demand. During economic recession, many firms tend to also be characterised by rapid product demand declines that then creates an excess capacity management challenge for managers. Resultantly new product development can be used as a capacity utilisation

enhancement strategy through the launching of new related and unrelated products that share existing and or new infrastructure in the organisation. However, most firms especially SMEs do not experience these perceived benefits of increased product volume growth due to new product or product extensions due to a number of factors. Most SMEs in the manufacturing industry have very little information available on how to successfully design, develop, and commercialise a new product, (Senk et al 2010). Small businesses are constrained by limited knowledge, resources and skills. The lack of production and operations management knowledge would affect most SMEs when trying to rearrange their equipment to cater for new products as well as failure to manage production disruptions due to random machine set up. However, on the other hand they have to continuously develop new products in order to sustain their growth.

If companies can improve their efficiency at launching new products, they could double their bottom line. It is necessary that companies developed new products to replace those that have become outmoded or introduce completely new products that will be attractive before larger market for it constitutes a basic source for revitalizing and improving firm's competitive advantage, (Bowen et al 1994). In order to boost continuity business success there is need to practice new product development, (Bhuiyan 2011). However for MSMEs to be success in new product development they is need for enough resource so as to improve production output.

In capacity management perspective new product development span to divide between market based and resource based view. Subsequently, new product development as a strategy is effective when backed by adequate financial resources to carryout research and development in order to produce a desired product.

More so, most SMEs are small and they lack capital it is difficult for them to practice more of new product development. New product development as a Resource Based View output, is also a key aspect of capacity enhancement if the deploying organisation is capable of putting in place the right financial arrangements that affords it to acquire state of the art equipment. New product development also had to be promulgated in an organisation that boosts of highly skilled manpower. However, one of the major challenges faced by SMEs in recessionary environments is that they face difficulties in retaining and marinating a healthy staff establishment. The summation of all these challenges and many other macro fundamentals helps to confirm the ruthless realities are that the majority of new products never make it to market and those that do face a failure rate somewhere in order of 25 to 45 percent (Crawford, 1987; Cooper, 2001). Thus when failure rate is high, it also entails that firms concerned would have failed to manage their capacity levels.

SMEs intent on remaining competitive in the face of growing globalisation and competition will have to rely on increased innovation as well as research and development (R&D) to develop new products that are of higher technology and more in demand, (www.smeinfor.co.my). Such investments are in line with the Government's aim of moving manufacturers further up the value chain, producing goods that are differentiated by the increased level of technology used.

New Market development

Firms in recessionary environments can manage their production capacity through the developments of new markets for existing and for new products. Market development is taking current products and finding new markets achieved through opening up previously excluded market segments, new marketing and distribution channels and entering new geographic markets, (Ansoff 1987). Thus this strategy is a market driven idea that is aimed at stimulating demand for existing product that is aimed at increasing a targeted product's output. McCarthy (1960) developed two possible methods of implementing market development strategy as moving the present product into new geographical areas and expanding sales by attracting new markets. It is also a growth strategy that identifies and develops new market segments for current products.

Both Ansoff and MacCathy insinuate that new markets are predominantly defined by locating a new geographical area to distribute existing products. Thus the new market development strategy seems to imply that for it to be successful the firms should be able to drive it through a world class market based view that has huge investments in market research in order to identify a sustainable market. Company that follow this strategy will also have to possess internal capabilities such as a strong understanding of consumer needs and wants in order for them to be able to quantify the expected demand.

New market development can increase production output but have a cost of expansion thus the business would need capital to expand its market somewhere else. SMEs being small lack finance to expand somewhere thus there operate at one place for a long period of time. Developing new markets and expanding your business before your current market flattens will not only help your business survive through tough times, it could also give you considerable edge on the competition and improve capacity utilization in your business thus the production output increase.

Marketing and promotions

Sales and operations planning (S&OP) has mostly been considered as a generic process implying that it is a one-size-fits-all process and independent from the context of the industry it is

implemented in (Noroozi and Wikner 2013). Thus this assertion points to the view that organisations regardless of size can adopt marketing approaches in order to boost their demand levels and subsequent production output. According to Meyer and Ujah (2017) over 30 US companies each spent over \$1 billion on advertising and thus making a marketers' decision making on advertising expenditures have lasting implications on the viability of the business via direct and indirect effects on sales and profitability. Thus from the views of Meyer and Ujah it can be hypothesized that a firms' marketing efforts have a direct impact on its level of production as marketing is aimed at stimulating product demand regardless of firm size and industry context as espoused as well by Noroozi and Wikner (2013).

In any economic behaviour firms are thus encouraged to develop sustainable internal capabilities (market and resource based) that allows them to be able to efficiently and effectively market their output. The decisions made by marketing managers have gained an increasing level of power within the business organization in recent years, and may also have an increasing level of impact on firm performance (Meyer and Ujah 2017). However, the existence of a lag time between marketing efforts and changes in sales may diminish marketing efforts of firms that do not have a strong financial backing. Most advertisement campaigns do not have immediate results whilst having huge cash outlays, but may offer significant long term carry over benefits that would lead to high production levels. On the reverse side carry over effects of a catastrophic advertisement can lead to an erosion of a firm's market dominance and subsequent market value of its products.

In addition the high costs of advertisement in both the print and electronic media outside the modern social media platforms attracted high expenditure levels that affected the marketing efforts of most small firms even though their owner/managers may be aware of the significant benefits that are brought by advertisement expenditure. More so, when viewed from an African context, most small firms find it difficult to market their product due to marketing channels knowledge gaps. Onyemah and Akpa, (2016) posits that Basically, a state of the art knowledge about channel structures, flows, partners, responsibilities, roles, expectations, power, etc., associated with making products available to end-users in Africa is rare. This scarcity of knowledge on how African firms market their products especially to unknown customers in furniture manufacturing affects SMEs capacity management through marketing interventions. The lack of marketing systems knowledge predominantly affects SMEs as they rely more on the direct selling of their final products even if they do not possess the right marketing skills. More so, small firms and their consumers have development a less culturally distant interaction behavior that create distributive flexibility and in turn promotes negotiation between the final consumer and the manufacturing and thus entailing that the manufacturing has to be a keen

marketer and negotiator in order to stimulate demand. The existence of direct contact with end customer thus creates an opportunity for smaller firms to be able to effectively manage their capacity as opposed to large firms whose key members of a marketing channel in accordance to Onyemah and Akpa, (2016) are manufacturers, intermediaries (wholesalers, specialized agents, retailers), and end-users (business customers or consumers).

Priced based strategies

When affected by prolonged economic hardships, developing economies tend to be characterised by high poverty levels that leads to price sensitivity amongst consumers. Subsequently to improve firm performance owners and managers are compelled to come up with pricing models that can stimulate product or service demand. According to Taher and El Basha (2006), price is also as a driver of demand and a lever for managing capacity, a critical issue in services. The hallmark of SMEs in any industry is their direct link with consumer and their high propensity to negotiate in order to secure sales.

SMEs during recession are favoured by the majority of customers due to their willingness to negotiate on pricing strategies and terms of business. Lim, Oo and Ling (2010) explained that Singaporean Contractors revealed that they made decent profit from projects that were priced at tiny or zero profit margins from the variation orders. Thus the firms would make marginal gains by striving to minimising the cost of rework by getting it right the first time through allocating the right tasks to the right personnel; negotiating with preferred suppliers and subcontractors for lowest prices; implementing competitive bidding to obtain lowest possible pricing for subcontracting packages; and direct sourcing of construction materials from other countries in an attempt to lower their cost. (Lim, Oo and Ling 2010).

The pricing model adopted by firms also aims to ensure that repeat sales is obtained from its customers. Thus a price solicits for the customer's current and future purchases hence it has to be properly designed. This hypothetical view is supported by Avlonitis and Indounas (2004) cited in Taher and El Basha (2006) found that companies seem to follow a hierarchy of pricing objectives where their main focus is on the maintenance of the existing customers and the attraction of new ones, in order to ensure their long-term position in the market without, however disregarding financial considerations. Thus this study also aims to carry out an assessment of the impact of pricing arrangements adopted by SMEs in the furniture manufacturing sector on capacity management.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive research design. The study made use of a self designed 5 point likert scale ranging from agree to strongly disagreed with the data collected from a census population of 69 furniture manufacturing SMEs in Gweru-Zimbabwe's operating at Mkoba Village 6, Mtapa and DST complex. In order to boost the response rate the structured research questionnaire was self administered to the study participants and subsequently 100% response rate was obtained. Data from the study was presented in tables and frequency statistics were obtained in order to analyse and interpret the results.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Market based strategies for managing capacity

The study in its quest to understand in detail capacity management strategies adopted by SMEs in the furniture manufacturing sector in Gweru evaluated the effectiveness of market based strategies adopted by owner/managers. Strategies evaluated under this category included; focused marketing strategy, product promotions, new market development, and new product development.

Table 1. Effectiveness of market based strategies adopted by owner/managers

	SA	A	N	D	SD	Total
My organisation offers tailor made products to its customers	79%	15%	3%	0%	3%	100%
My organisation has the capacity to carry out market research	3%	31%	2%	45%	19%	100%
My organisation constantly looks for new market in order to improve its production capacity	4%	12%	4%	45%	35%	100%
My organisation has a person whose job description involved new market development	1%	12%	0%	39%	48%	100%
My organisation has produced a new product in the past year in order to enhance its production potential	3%	28%	1%	40%	28%	100%
My organisation accepts orders below target selling price in order to attract more customers and increase production	3%	77%	7%	1%	12%	100%
My organisation carries out promotions in order to boost product demand	3%	6%	3%	49%	39%	100%
My organisation offers discounts to repeat customers in order to increase demand	83%	12%	1%	1%	3%	100%

Focused marketing strategy

The study aimed to establish the frequency within which the market focused strategy was adopted by SMEs in the furniture manufacturing sector.

Table 2. Frequency of market focused strategy adopted by SMEs in the furniture manufacturing sector

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Home	44	64%	64%	64%
School	14	20%	20%	84%
Office	11	16%	16%	100%
Total	69	100%	100%	

Results from the study shows that 64% of the respondents targeted household customers, 20% schools and 16% targeted businesses. The study results thus indicate that SMEs prefer to trade in business to consumer markets as compared to business to business markets. More so it can be noticed that the majority of SMEs were targeting home based customers and this had a positive effects on their production output as there is a wide pool of customers in the category. However, it is the study's assumption that SMEs that target home customers charge low prices due to low disposable incomes of household furniture buyers. This assumption is further cemented by the notion that all study participants were located in high density neighborhood or areas where low income earners are generally clustered or located.

Further analysis of the study results indicates that 79% of the respondents strongly agreed that they offered tailor made products to their customer. 15% of the respondents also agreed to this mode of operations whereas, 3% strongly disagreed and 3% were neutral. Specialized products are intended for niche segment that is not big enough for mass marketers but has a strong customer orientation and exclusive offering (Zucchella & Palamara 2006). Firms that produce specialized products have a strong customer orientation and they must understand the needs of the target customer thoroughly (Hagen, Zucchella, Cerchiello & de Giovanni 2012).

Market research

The study sort to establish whether SMEs in the furniture manufacturing sector carried out market research for their products. Research results indicated that 45% and 19% of the respondents disagreed and strongly disagreed that their organisations had the capacity to

carryout market research. On the contrary 31% and 3% agreed and strongly agreed respectively whereas 2% was neutral. These results indicate that SME do not carry our market research for their products. This could also explain the reason why SMEs prefer to manufacture tailor made product as it is the customer who carries out the research on desired products. Most SMEs do not take into consideration the fact that markets are dynamic hence is continuously changing. Market research can identify market trends, demographics, economic shifts, customers' buying habits and important information on competition. If this is not done it affects the productivity output negatively.

New market development

The study further sort to establish whether SMEs in the furniture manufacturing sector placed some effort in the establishment of new markets in order to develop new products, or to establish new markets for existing products. Results from the study where 45% of the respondents disagreed and 35% strongly disagreed indicates that the majority of SMEs are not involved in new market development. It is believed that new market development can increase production output if properly instituted by firms. Market development is usually a capital intensive activity and thus given that the majority of SMEs are always poorly funded this exercise is rarely done and when it eventually gets carried out it will be less effective.

SMEs generally employ very few people that makes task allocation difficult. The study further sort to establish if SMEs in the furniture manufacturing sector in Zimbabwe allocated new business or market development responsibility to any of their employees. SMEs do not formerly allocate market research responsibilities to any staff members. Results presented in table 1 above indicate that only a meager combined total response rate of 13% (agree 1% and strongly agree 12%) agreed to having someone responsible compared to a very high negative response rate of 87% (disagree 39% and strongly disagree 48%). SMEs cannot afford an extra person to look for new business. Due to the leaner manpower arrangements in many small firms the majority of the work is one by the owner/managers who also are part of the key manpower. Thus it is against these results that the study further makes an assertion that lack of adequate human resource establishments in small firms can be used to explain the study results as to why SMEs lack of new product development as a strategy to improve their production capacity.

Table 1 results above is indicative that generally SMEs in furniture manufacturing sector do not produce new products. Results show that only 31% (combined agree 28% and strongly agree 3%) of respondents had done new product development as compared to 68% (combined disagree 40% and strongly disagree 28%) whereas 1% were neutral.

Most SMEs in the manufacturing industry have very little information available on how to successfully design, develop, and commercialise a new product, (Senk et al 2010).

If companies can improve their efficiency at launching new products, they could double their bottom line. It is necessary that companies developed new products to replace those that have become outmoded or introduce completely new products that will be attractive before larger market for it constitutes a basic source for revitalizing and improving firm's competitive advantage, (Bowen et al 1994). In order to boost continuity business success there is need to practice new product development, (Bhuiyan 2011). However for MSMEs to be success in new product development they are need for enough resource so as to improve production output.

The researcher further looked at sales strategies that are accepting orders below target profit in order to improve capacity utilization through stimulated sales volumes.

Sales growth strategies

The study aimed to establish the effectiveness of sales growth targeted strategies adopted by SMEs in the furniture manufacturing sector. In this section the following strategies were explored and results presented; accepting orders below target profit, product promotions, offering discounts.

Table 1 research results indicate that the majority of SMEs accept orders that are below their target profit levels in order to either boost demand or maintain existing production levels as evidenced by a combined total response rate of 80% (agree 77% and Strongly agree 3%) as compared to 13% (combined- disagree 1% and strongly disagree 12%). The remainder of only 7% of the respondents was neutral. Offering products at prices below target profit margins can help SMEs to boost their production levels, however, this strategy is detrimental to their working capital levels as most small firms do not get trade discounts from their suppliers.

Results extracted from table 1 indicates that the majority of SMEs do not carry out any form of product promotions to boost their sales and subsequent production capacity as shown by 88% (combined disagree 49% and strongly disagree 39%) of the respondents who disagreed to holding product promotions compared to 9% who offered some form of promotion (combined agree 6%, strongly agree 3%). the remaining 3% of the respondents were neutral as to whether they offered promotions or not.

The research further looked at offering discount to repeat customers and the results were presented in table 1. Data presented in table 1 above where a combined total of 95% (agree 12% and strongly agree 83%) agree to offering discounts to repeat customers as opposed to 4% (combined disagree 1% and strongly disagree 3%) and neutral of 1% is

indicative that SMEs in the furniture manufacturing sector try to boost their levels of activity through offering discounts to repeat customers.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The conclusions on the effectiveness of marketing strategies used to enhance capacity utilization by SMEs in the furniture manufacturing industry indicates that SME finding it difficult to boost their production output. This is so because the SMEs have no capacity to continuously carry out market research to meet demand, the SMEs do not carry research on new markets for its products, they have not frequently produced any new product, SMEs do not carry out promotions in order to boost product demand, they are unable to withstand competition from other cheaper imported products, they do not have a person dedicated to looking for new business (orders). The research concludes that SMEs marketing strategies are not effective in enhancing capacity utilisation as seen by the outcomes.

SMEs should carry out market research on new market and new product development. The study recommends the SMEs to engage in research and development on new strategies used to boost production output and how to implement the strategies effectively. Ansoff and MacCarthy (1960) states that new market development can increase production output but have a cost. Ansoff (1987) states that firms in recessionary environments can manage their production through the development of new markets. Ewah et al (2008) defines new products as the life blood of companies, large or small. In order to boost continuity and business success there is need to practice new product development, (Bhuiyan 2011).

The research is restricted to one location in Zimbabwe and it evaluated the use of market based view approaches in a single sector. Therefore it is implored that more geographical coverage be carried out in order to fully generalize the results to all Zimbabwe furniture manufacturing SMEs.

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