A Qualitative Study of Social Media Marketing in Ireland: The Facilitating Role of Higher Education

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Abstract

In this paper we present a qualitative study of social media marketing by small business owners in Ireland**.** We present data from interviews with six owner/managers, six employees, and six experts. Exploring the three perspectives simultaneously facilitates a three-way narrative. We apply narrative structuring as proposed by Kvale (2006) in order to provide insight into the understanding, practices, motivations, behavior, and activities of small businesses as they relate to marketing; specifically, social media-based marketing. The delivery of skills to small businesses create challenges for higher education in terms of the design of curriculum, pedagogy and accreditation. A significant finding of this study is the influence that the attitudes, knowledge and capacity of the owners have on their propensity to engage with social media marketing. There is a role for higher education in bridging this gap. However, this is not just in the delivering of traditional skills, but working as facilitators and developing student, graduate and employee advocates through a comprehensive provision of experiential and work-based learning initiatives. This paper presents novel insights and improves our understanding of the role of higher education in supporting the training needs of small businesses. In our conclusion we present a series of recommendations on the design of customized training programs for small businesses.

Keywords: Social media, higher education, marketing, experiential learning.

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Introduction

The role of higher education as a means for facilitating the transfer of knowledge and skills into meaningful business activity for small business is documented in the academic literature (Lockett et al., 2008; Suleman, 2018; Wall, 2017). The perceptions of owners have been studied (Matlay & Addis, 2003; Scarmozzino et al., 2017; Troise & Tani, 2020); as has the experience of academics (Bieberhofer et al., 2019; Gordon et al., 2012; Hynes & Richardson, 2007) and those of the business (Adegbuyi et al., 2015; Ahmad et al., 2019; Öztamur & Karakadılar, 2014). This paper adopts a novel approach by examining the three perspectives simultaneously. This approach facilitates a three-way narrative and provides multiple perspectives on the purpose, process, benefits, and challenges of developing social media marketing capabilities within a small business setting. The rational for this study is that as the small business sector grows and diversifies so does its training and education needs. A key element of success is targeted, cost-effective marketing. The proliferation of social media platforms offers many opportunities for small businesses. However, there is a need to explore how higher education provision can best support engagement with social media marketing by small businesses.

Despite developments within the area of digital technologies including social media for business, there has been little research that has examined how small business owners engage and sustain their engagement with social media. Nambisan (2017) explained that existing research has largely neglected the role of digital technologies in entrepreneurial pursuits, although the emergence of new digital technologies has largely transformed entrepreneurial processes and outcomes (Jordan, 2020). Social media-based marketing is rapidly becoming a crucial business management platform, predominantly because it is accessible, low-cost, and there are limited technical requirements (Ainin et al., 2015; Cheung et al., 2020; Durkin et al., 2013; Jones et al., 2015). However, as Faherty and Stephens (2016, p. 351) explained, a typical small business will only have small numbers of staff who carry out a range of different functions, small operating budgets, and a management team who are preoccupied with the day-to-day survival of the business, rather than the development of any social media marketing strategy or campaigns. This is despite the fact that through social media, small businesses can grow their brand, diversify their offerings, expand their customer base, and increase their online presence (Chatterjee & Kar, 2020; de Vries et al., 2018; Inakova et al., 2019).

The challenge facing small businesses, and we propose also facing higher education, is that the availability of appropriate skills to best utilize emergent technologies, specifically social media platforms, is an important condition for the competitiveness and the innovation capabilities of entrepreneurs and small enterprises (Al Sharji et al., 2018). Therefore, in this paper we address three key research questions:

- *RQ 1:* What are the opportunities and challenges associated with small businesses engaging with social media?

- *RQ 2:* How do higher education institutions design and deliver education and training to small businesses?

- *RQ 3:* What new and innovative modes of delivery and methods of assessment can higher education introduce to support social media marketing in small businesses?

We begin by examining the issues associated with marketing in a small business setting, specifically, in relation to the use of social media marketing. Second, we present an overview of how marketing, and specifically social media marketing, are delivered within higher education. We then present the data from our interviews, after which we present our conclusions, recommendations, limitations, and future research directions.

Small Business, Social Media Marketing and Higher Education

The availability of appropriate skills for utilizing emergent technologies is an important condition for the competitiveness and marketing capabilities of small businesses. We propose that a small business that cannot or does not engage with social media-related business and marketing activities will lose competitive advantage, experience a reduced market share over time, and provide a diminished customer experience. Of course, we must acknowledge that the focus for many small businesses is on day-to-day issues and economic survival. The literature (Amabile et al., 2002; Colombo et al., 2012; Dobbs & Hamilton, 2007; Panagiotakopoulos, 2020; Williams et al., 2018) reports that in the small business workplace environment there is little focus on strategic issues (such as marketing).

The solution comes in the form of three interrelated options. First, subject to resource availability, small businesses can recruit a specialist to lead their marketing function. Where this is not economically feasible, a second option is to upskill an existing member of staff (or themselves) by registering them for training at a Higher Education Institution (HEI). The third alternative is some form of student placement, apprenticeship, or graduate internship. We believe that higher education policy now emphasizes a need for HEIs to collaborate with employers in the design and delivery of programs of study for both current employees and potential future employees. There is significant evidence in the literature (Ferrández-Berrueco et al., 2016; Linehan & Sheridan, 2009; McGunagle & Zizka, 2020; Neier & Zayer, 2015) that until recently, provision in higher education was almost entirely designed to offer *for-employment* rather than *in-employment* education and training. We propose that a flexible education and training system can support small businesses to maximize their potential.

Atwong (2015, p. 28) explained that marketing faculties need to provide effective learning experiences in social media marketing in order to prepare students to meet industry's demand for talent. With intense competition for traditional learners, many HEIs are focusing their attention on those already in employment. Employers want skills delivered at a cost they can afford and often at short notice. Simultaneously, employees want initiatives that offer genuine prospects for career progression (Major, 2016; Manning & Parrott, 2018).

The extant literature (Merrill et al., 2020; Nicolescu & Cristian, 2009; Roth et al., 2014; Tomlinson, 2017) provides examples of how the alignment between the requirements of employers in terms of the abilities and skills they need from graduates does not match with the abilities and skills developed by individuals who attend HEIs. Many government-based initiatives have been introduced in a bid to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Indeed, HEIs are engaged in significant work with stakeholders to support the development, design, and delivery of programs that can furnish learners with the competencies required by the business community. Furthermore, the preparation of graduates for the workplace by HEIs through formal learning processes is now increasingly open to scrutiny. The changes being brought about by technology, specifically, the emergence of social media as a

specialized platform for marketing, requires us to reassess the role of higher education in skilling, reskilling, and upskilling small businesses in all aspects of marketing (OECD, 2019). The impact on the design and delivery of higher education has and will continue to be significant (Berkovich & Benoliel, 2020; Granitz & Pitt, 2011; Mason et al., 2009; Paul, 2019).

HEIs are now more than ever involved in purposeful engagement and collaboration with employers (big and small) in the design and delivery of programs of study. Therefore, it can realistically be expected that in the coming years there will be a surge in demand internationally for work-based learning (Ferrández-Berrueco et al., 2016; Reeve & Gallacher, 2007). Doherty and Stephens (2019, p. 331) proposed that this expected increase in demand has been influenced by three factors: 1) the rise in non-standardized work for employees; 2) the recognition by employers that knowledge is a source of competitive advantage; and 3) HEIs seeking exposure to real-life business problems, as well as improving their reputation amongst external employers. A common aim of work-based learning is to simultaneously meet the learning needs of employees and the needs of their employer. The extant literature (Major, 2016; Plewa et al., 2015; Rouvrais et al., 2020; Sobiechowska & Maisch, 2006) presents numerous accounts of the challenges that designing and delivering work-based learning poses for HEIs and academics who are accustomed to the traditional mode of teaching and learning. Major (2016) explained that academics gain from work-based learning by acquiring industry knowledge and exposure to real-life business problems which can then be passed on to traditional fulltime learners. Billett and Choy (2013) explained that employees gain by participating in learning that is embedded in the workplace and aligned with the needs of their employees. In the context of this article we propose that work-based learning offers small business owners the opportunity to upskill employees whilst successfully completing work packages that are of strategic importance and sustainable beyond the duration of the study program (Clifton et al., 2015; Rosenberg et al., 2012).

Methodology

Individual in-depth interviews were conducted with six employers, six employees, and six social media experts (a mix of academics and consultants). Ethical approval was sought and received from the respective HEIs of the authors. There were no conflicts of interest arising. In partnership with our faculty offices we were able to identify 30 potential participants (10 in each of the three target groups) We made initial contact via email and then followed up by phone. The initial response was positive and supportive. For a variety of reasons (time pressures, seasonal issues, holidays, and general calendar availability) not all the individuals we approached were able to participate.

The owner and employee participants represent the diverse nature of small businesses in Ireland. The six experts each have extensive experience of working with a wide range of small business owners and their staff. An opportunistic sampling approach was employed. The benefits of using opportunistic sampling is that it allows for a cost-effective and time-effective approach to gaining generalizable insights from a readily available target population. The interviews were audio-recorded and then subsequently transcribed. Narrative structuring (Kvale, 2006) was used to encourage the interviewees to recount their experiences as freely and unguided as possible. This approach enabled the interviewees to provide highly contextualized and relevant accounts through a narrative (presented in the findings) which was then structured according to the interview schedule. A profile of the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants

Role	Gender	Age	Experience	Education	Sector
Expert 1	Female	49	24 years	PhD	Higher Education
Expert 2	Female	42	12 years	MBA	Government Unit
Expert 3	Male	56	22 years	PhD	Higher Education
Expert 4	Female	38	11 years	PhD	Higher Education
Expert 5	Male	33	7 years	MSc	Policy/Funding
Expert 6	Female	36	10 years	PhD	Higher Education
Owner 1	Male	55	30 years	MBS	Consultancy
Owner 2	Female	41	20 years	BEng	Health & Safety
Owner 3	Female	30	5 years	BSc	Fitness
Owner 4	Male	32	10 years	BSc	Computer Games
Owner 5	Male	55	30 years	MBS	Cafe
Owner 6	Female	40	20 years	MBS	Prof Services
Employee 1	Female	26	3 years	MBS	Prof Services
Employee 2	Male	31	8 years	2nd Level	Design
Employee 3	Male	34	10 years	BBS	Prof Services
Employee 4	Female	24	2 years	Dip in Bus	Retail
Employee 5	Female	32	10 years	MSc	Building Provider
Employee 6	Male	20	1 year	2nd Level	Car Sales

Exploring the three perspectives simultaneously facilitated a three-way narrative. The result gave 18 differing perspectives on the purpose, process, benefits, and challenges of adopting social media-based marketing within a small business setting. The structure of the interviews (which were used to structure the findings) was as follows: with regards to attitudinal beliefs, the participants were asked about the advantages and disadvantages of owner/managers using social media as a marketing tool in their business. A further question was used to identify individuals or groups who might encourage or discourage the use of social media as a marketing tool. Next, we explored factors which small businesses perceive as either facilitating or as barriers. Finally, we asked about the return on investment (ROI) for a small business who invests in social media marketing training.

Findings

The interviews started with a review of the main benefits of using social media (SM) for marketing in a small business setting. A number of benefits were identified:

If they are trying to enter a foreign market or even their own domestic market, how does a small company with a novel offering get its head above all that noise…social media is one of the ways to do that…to punch above their weight. [Expert 4]

It's the first place people search about us and what we do…but it can be hard to keep up with the messages…email and phone are still the best. [Owner 2]

SM for a business is available 24x7, open around the clock, even if they are closed they are engaging with customers. [Expert 1]

People have started using the online marketplace a lot, and so we are able to sell a lot of materials to homeowners and people doing small projects via our social media accounts. [Employee 5]

Social media is great…it puts out a message very quickly, and promotion is a big thing; that is why you get involved, getting something back, being a known provider. [Expert 2]

Overall the key benefits that were identified include a lack of barriers to development, and limited setup costs and an ability to virtually interact with and sell to customers. However, the interviewees also reported a number of limitations and challenges:

Depends on the business and its adoption of SM: if B2B or B2C…for B2C it's very important to promote the business, keeping your customers informed of what's going on. [Expert 2]

We have tried to use it but it took a lot of time to set it up and I don't have the staff to maintain it…to be honest when you do look at it all the messages are just another headache. [Owner 1]

I always say to them it's not always free as you are spending your time monitoring and managing it…some people's [SME owner/managers] *perspective is strange; they don't see their own time as having value.* [Expert 5].

It is time-consuming…staff become distracted from their main duties…it's a balance as it depends on the SMEs size…having the resources and the time is important. [Owner 4]

SMEs need to understand what they are doing…a lack of understand of the permanency of what is out there and a lack of understanding of search engine optimization. [Expert 4]

Bad news, negative comments, one random experience that a customer claims to have had can become a real problem…I prefer to deal with customers over the phone and when I visit in person. [Employee 3]

It really is like having another business. I have to spend so much time interacting with my clients and commenting on their posts…I mean, it all helps but it takes up so much time. [Owner 3]

It depends on the sector; transport and logistics don't use it as its more of a B2B sector, and so SM tends not to be used…maybe they use Facebook just to get their brand out there. [Expert 4]

Time resources, and manpower, but mostly time, they [SME owners] *have a perception that…they don't have the time.* [Expert 3]

My customers don't want to use Facebook and tell everyone their problems, especially if they have a serious issue which we need to handle in private. [Owner 6]

Overall the key challenges relate to the: appropriateness/usefulness for the industry; the potential for negative outcomes; and most significantly, the amount of time required either by the owner and/or their staff to manage their social media presence. Next, we explored how social media was "managed" and by who with the small business setting.

Its peers or people within the same area you're in…networks, people in your own groups or networks you're in…fellow companies or people you have met during the process [of starting up] *would be interested in what you're doing.* [Expert 2]

That would be peer pressure...in the context of small firms you can ask them why they did it [engage or adopt with social media]...*because everyone else has done it, but they may not know why they are doing it.* [Expert 4]

Like most things here, I do it all...not all day, but most evenings and maybe a blitz on a Sunday evening. [Owner 5]

Younger family members where family learning can shed some light on the use of social media. [Expert 1]

Ever since I started I have looked after the Facebook stuff. A colleague does the online retail side, so I just get people interested and clicking the link to the [online] shop. [Employee 2]

More specifically, if the younger family member comes in they bring in new resource and knowledge [social media] into the business. [Expert 4]

I was shown how the online competitions worked and then was just left to sort it out...the other stuff like messages they are not really bothered about. [Employee 6]

Overall the interviewees reported an eclectic mix of approaches, and a clear lack of structure and job/task design. The initial time assigned to setting up marketing initiatives was not matched by the necessary resources for structured and successful management. Small wins are viewed as a positive, but there is limited oversight and no evidence of any high-level planning.

Having explored the reality of small business engagement and the utilization of social media marketing, we next explored the capacity of HEIs to facilitate the adoption of social media marketing by small businesses. Surprisingly, the focus of the experts was on how HEIs could adopt the role of advocates by engaging directly with small business owners to first, explain the value of social media and second, to help with resource planning and ongoing management issues.

They [small business owners] *need things such as vision to add value to the company and technical competency had emerged.* [Expert 5]

It comes down to a lack of education, they [SME owners] *thought there were costs associated with starting up a social media presence.* [Expert 3]

Setting up their own [web]pages...thinking that they just had to set up a page, whereas its much more than that. [Expert 6].

Way of knowing how people [customers] *go through your pages online, tracking their movements, if or how they make a sale.* [Expert 1]

Reveal customer attitudes and behavior, and bring in money...new business...new partnerships and customers. [Expert 4]

More local groups...more research needs to be done, results need to be available for SMEs to see what is happening. [Expert 3]

A lot of people have no marketing expertise. It depends on your background; more mentoring needs to be provided, more classes...there is no harm with that. [Expert 2]

As a business school we need to reach beyond our ivory tower...to show that social media is not just a 'nice to have,' not an add-on, but an important tool. [Expert 4]

For the owners there were a diverse mix of expectations and needs:

Training to keep me up-to-date…there are always new tools and sites that we could be using. [Owner 6]

Projects with a real outcome would be great…although I am not sure how we keep it going afterwards. [Owner 5]

Train someone on the job…I can't do it all but one of the office staff could be given time to work on it each week. [Owner 4]

I would love a student to come in to completely redesign everything…there must be loads we things that we don't do or know about. [Owner 2]

I need to start learning. If I could do a project with classmates and a good teacher then I would be able to get myself properly organized. [Owner 2]

For the employees (many of whom are graduates of HEIs) there were very specific needs, mainly around the requirement for an external advocate who could support the scaling up of social media-based marketing:

I need more training on how to improve our SEO in order that we will attract people to our website. Then I can link back to Facebook and Instagram to really start getting our online customer base up. [Employee 1]

I am trying to get my boss to try one big online campaign, so if I did a course then I would have someone to help me work on a project.. then maybe I could work on marketing full-time. [Employee 4]

We don't do anything at the moment…our content is so bad I think it puts people off. If I had a proper reason to design and package our products [cars] *then we could do much more business.* [Employee 6]

It is so frustrating try to get [anyone] to listen to my ideas. Other shops are doing it so all we need to do is to keep up. I would love to work on it full-time. [Employee 4]

In the final part of the interviews we asked the participants about the value of experiential learning with an emphasis of what could be delivered through work-based learning initiatives.

If I had a placement in my postgrad then I could have used my (academic) supervisor to help me with some of the work they asked me to do at the start. [Employee 5]

A proper well designed project that they [employees] *are assessed on but that I can see something tangible. Then I would consider spending more money and getting that member of staff to work on it as needs be.* [Employer 2]

There is so much we can do. If we had online classes then we could work live on the social media platforms and get real momentum. [Expert 6]

These three quotes capture the willingness of the participants to engage in some form of work-based learning. We propose it is HEIs who are best positioned to facilitate this process.

Discussion

Previously, authors (Adegbuyi et al., 2015; Cesaroni & Consoli, 2016; Fillis et al., 2004; McCann & Barlow, 2015) have noted that it is important for business owners to understand the impact (positive and negative) that social media marketing can potentially have on their business. Specifically, social media marketing can help small businesses to: generate increased sales; secure new customers; identify opportunities; avenues for communication; and increase market presence (Eggers et al., 2017). There is however, a false expectation that because barriers (including) cost are low (initially), that all business owners will adopt and resource social media marketing. This is not the case. However, HEIs can play a key role in providing the knowledge and skills necessary to support the small business sector. Social media marketing is identified in the interviews as a promotional and cost-effective tool, that, when used correctly, increases awareness of products or services. The evidence from our interviews in this study indicate that there is both a desire and willingness among small business owners to integrate social media marketing into their business strategy. However, operationalizing social media marketing presents a significant key challenge, as is utilizing its capacity and measuring its impact through appropriate metrics that can support evidence-based decision-making. Our findings indicate that limited time and skills shortages can negatively impact the ability of small business to utilize social media marketing. Unfortunately, some of the employers and their employees were unaware of the capacity or functions of social media marketing. Finally, the participants suggested that there are sector-specific adoption challenges, and that for many small businesses there remains a fear of receiving negative feedback from their customers.

In terms of the resources that small business require, it is interesting to note that family members were identified as key advocates and often reported as the individuals who managed the social media platforms and activities. It is not surprising that finance was raised as an issue. But of greater significance in this study is the influence of the attitudes, knowledge, and capacity of the owners. Our experts were shown to be strong advocates, but there is a role for HEIs in bridging this knowledge gap. However, this is not just through the delivery of traditional skills, but by working as advocates through consultancy and by developing student, graduate, and employee advocates through a comprehensive provision of experiential and work-based learning.

Bensimon et al. (2004) explained that in order to ensure an appropriate link between research and practice, there is a need to study problems that are of greater relevance to policymakers and practitioners. Therefore, this paper presents our answer to RQ3 in the form of the following recommendations to HEIs:

- Biannual seminars or webinars are needed to update owners and their staff on the latest technology, new platforms, and trends in marketing for small businesses.
- Innovative provision and dual-education initiatives such as the new apprenticeships and work-based learning are the format of delivery most likely to succeed.
- HEIs must work in partnership with employers to support extended placements and rotational programs as part of programs of study.
- Employers must work with HEIs to promote initiatives like company visits, industry guest speakers and learners collaborating on real life projects proposed by local organizations.

These recommendations add to the literature and present novel ways in which HEIs can better support the activities of small businesses.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to the scholarly debate on how HEIs can meet the training and educational need of small businesses. The success of partnerships between HEIs and small businesses can be linked to the relationships that form between employers, employees, and academics (Cameron et al., 2019; Ferrández-Berrueco et al., 2016; Roberts, 2018; Stephens et al., 2014). Therefore, we have provided insight from three key stakeholder groups (experts, employers, and employees) simultaneously; something not previously presented in the literature. The challenges associated with work-based learning place demands on the design and delivery of curriculum, pedagogy, and accreditation (Byrom & Aiken, 2014; Manning & Parrott, 2018). It is imperative that owner-managers are made fully aware of the benefits of using social media for the purposes of marketing. HEIs and their staff have a key role in increasing awareness, as do graduates from HEIs. There is a need to change how HEIs manage their program design process. A greater diversity of offerings in terms of content, duration, delivery modes, assessment design, and the proportion of work-based learning is needed.

We conclude by acknowledging the limitations of our study. Our sample size is small and a greater number of case study organizations would add additional perspective. Furthermore, an extended longitudinal study may provide greater insights. There is significant scope for further research. Specifically, further research is needed to explore and report on case studies that relate to the implementation of our four recommendations and the associated outcomes achieved within a small business setting.

Notes

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