

**APPLYING THE MARKETING CONCEPT AS A STRATEGIC
BUSINESS TOOL TO THE SMALL TO MEDIUM ENTERPRISES IN
THE RETAIL SECTOR OF BULAWAYO**

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to examine the difficulties SMEs encounter in the adoption of the marketing concept as a business strategic tool. The study deliberately targeted the SMEs because it is believed that the SMEs are the engines driving the economy of Zimbabwe. The study was based on the notion that business people have not always believed that the best way to make sales and profits is to satisfy customers. The researchers distributed 100 questionnaires (70 were completed) to SMEs in Bulawayo and the sample was selected using simple random sampling. The study used a qualitative and quantitative questionnaire to collect data. Microsoft Excel was used to analyse the quantitative data collected while content analysis was used to analyse qualitative data. The study found that most SMEs managers accepted the marketing concept as their strategic tool. It also established that the current unstable macro-economic situation in Zimbabwe was working against the success of the marketing concept. It further identified lack of understanding and appreciation of the concept by other departmental staff members, corporate culture and resistance to change as other forces hindering the marketing concept. Limited financial resources dedicated to marketing training and market surveys were also seen as a major barrier to the marketing concept. The study recommended that SMEs organise seminars, workshops and in-service courses

involving all their organisations' employees to re-orient all employees towards customer orientation. Attitude change towards marketing orientation as an integral component of organisational culture as well as an investment in appropriate technology was also recommended.

Keywords: competition, customer, entrepreneur, marketing, marketing concept, needs, wants.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Today's marketplace is highly competitive; customers expect need-satisfying products with more features and new updates of existing products on a regular basis. Also, the rise of new technologies greatly affects the way of doing business and give rise to new market possibilities. Companies need to have the ability to constantly change and update the way they operate their business. This makes it crucial to be market-driven when carrying out a product launch since market knowledge distinguishes the winners from the losers. A market-driven approach is needed to gain the market knowledge required for getting the product to market. Market knowledge is extremely important, especially for micro and small enterprises as we see it since this helps in identifying other actors already on the market that constitutes a threat to their existence. Market knowledge also helps small enterprises to develop a competitive advantage through increased customer knowledge and demand and thereby taking a strong position in the market.

Research illustrates that SMEs in pursuit of customer winning organizational goals do not adopt the marketing concept to the same extent as larger firms and that marketing practice in SMEs is situation-specific, and variable, regarding the levels of sophistication and effectiveness. SME marketing is based on inherent SME characteristics, such as size, resource constraints, the muted influence of the founding entrepreneur, strong sales focus, strong awareness of some aspects of formal marketing, and personal contact networks.

According to Etzel, Stanton and Walker (2007), the foundations of marketing in America were laid in colonial times when early settlers traded among themselves and also with the Indians. Since then, marketing has evolved through four stages. The period from the Industrial Revolution saw the permanent replacement of the simple trade era by the production era. The production concept was superseded by the product concept. The sales era followed on the heels of the product era and extended from the 1930s to the 1950s. The sales concept continued to play a major role in marketing even in the Western World until the 1950s. It was in the fifties that a new and exciting orientation emerged to challenge all concepts, which had preceded it, which is the marketing concept. Changing social and economic conditions in the Technically Advanced World were fundamental in the marketing concept's evolution.

The basic idea of the marketing concept is to give customers what they want. This compels companies to decide who their target customers are and then find out their needs and wants to result in the creation of goods and services that meet customer expectations. The marketing concept as presented by academics and marketing practitioners seems to be logical that you would think most companies would quickly adopt it. But this has not been the case with SMEs and other large companies in Bulawayo and other parts of the country. Observers and

critics argue that many companies big and small are still production or sales orientated. They believe those who attempt to adopt it regularly slip back to production or sales orientation. Papadopoulos et al (1988: 21) in the following assertion; “the marketing concept as common-sensical as it seems, was not practised by businesses until the middle of the 20th century and is still not practised by many companies today”, further reinforces this observation.

The current researchers in their careers as marketers have met several customers (both individual and organisational) who have suggested explicitly and implicitly that companies are failing to meet their needs and expectations. They argue that companies first produce products and then try to convince them to buy those goods and services. In the majority of cases, those products fall far short of meeting their expectations. The marketing concept may seem like an obvious and sensible approach to many businesses. However, many SMEs have not always believed that the best way to make sales and profits is to satisfy customers better than competitors. The problem is that they run their businesses on trial and error strategies and hence fail to compete with established companies. A number of SMEs in the retail sector were forced to close shop during the recession period 2000-2008 as small firms could not absorb market changes in the same way as large ones could. It is a truism that large companies have the required resources which enable them to implement marketing concept programmes with minimum challenges but SMEs could also run marketing concept activities at world-class levels. Competition for the same customers with large companies is now high as witnessed by an increase in the number of players in the retail sector which calls for proper strategic marketing planning so that the SMEs will survive the competition. Maynard (1993) supported by Chen and Hambrick (1995) acknowledge the need for SMEs to focus on competitors and the competitive environment as much as large businesses do. On the other hand, Prescott and Miree (1998) recognize that all companies big and small are faced with limited resources, limited access to capital, and few slack human and physical resources. These constraints ultimately affect the size of the marketing department budget and demand focus on any marketing initiative for SMEs. Organized properly adoption of the marketing concept by SMEs can level the playing field between SMEs and large businesses therefore small companies must take advantage of the marketing concept to grow. This study sought to address the following central question. “What are the difficulties SMEs in Bulawayo encounter in their attempt to adopt the marketing concept?” The research was carried out with the full knowledge that adopting the marketing concept is a voluntary process as it is not a product of any legislation, and consequently, there are no legal penalties for those SMEs who do not apply any one of its elements.

The aim of this paper is to examine the difficulties encountered by SMEs in the retail sector in Bulawayo in the adoption of the marketing concept, as a strategic business management tool. The SMEs were targeted because it is generally believed that this sector is the engine that drives the economy of any given country. This study is divided into four main parts. Drawing from literature, the first section unpacks the marketing concept and theoretical framework. The second part focuses on the overview of the study methodology. The third section presents the results and discussion while the fourth part presents the recommendations.

2.0 DEFINITION OF MARKETING THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The American Marketing Association (cited by Kotler and Keller, 2014: 27) defines marketing “as the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promoting and distribution of ideas, goods and services to create exchanges that satisfy individuals, organisations and society”. The definition implies that marketing is one of the most powerful tools employed by organisations in their never-ending quest for survival and growth. Furthermore, the definition points out the objective of marketing as to satisfy customer needs. In the same vein, the American Marketing Association (cited in Kotler and Keller, 2014: 27) recognizes that “marketing is a social and managerial process by which individuals and groups obtain what they need and want through creating and exchanging products and value with others”. Kotler and Keller (2016) provide further insights to the definitions provided by the above authorities in the following statement “marketing is the performance of activities that seek to accomplish an organisation’s objectives by anticipating customer or client needs and directing a flow of need satisfying goods and services from producer to customer or client”. The important phrase in this definition is ‘performance of activities’ which is equivalent to the phrase ‘executing the conception’ in the definition given by Dalrymple and Parson (2000). The phrases centre on the satisfaction of needs and wants.

The implication of all the above three definitions is to reveal the objective of marketing as to satisfy customer needs. Therefore the challenge to the organisation is to find out a set of customers and identify their needs so that appropriate goods and services are developed. In short, marketing rests on the following core concept: to identify customer needs and wants and then work towards satisfying those identified needs and wants. It would be a serious omission if the mention is not made that marketing should begin with potential customer needs not with the production process. The views of the above authors also reveal marketing as having a lead role and responsible for identifying clearly the priority needs and concerns of customers. It, therefore, follows that it should be marketing rather than production that should determine what goods and services are to be developed. The impact of these views on marketing implies that after all, the purpose of a business or non-profit organisation is to satisfy customer or client needs and not to supply goods and services that are convenient to produce.

The UK based-Chartered Institute of Marketing (2016) provides a good summary of all previously quoted definitions of marketing. It asserts that “marketing is the management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirements efficiently and profitable”. This summary clearly produces five fundamental dimensions of marketing.

Identifying: Finding out exactly what your customer needs or wants are even if they may not be immediately conscious of such needs until or unless approached.

Anticipating: This implies working out in advance which of the identified needs will or might arise, and when they will arise and then being prepared to meet them.

Satisfying: Providing those products or services, which satisfy the needs or wants that have been identified.

Needs and wants: If products or services are designed to meet or satisfy known wants, then the process of persuading potential customers to buy them will be much easier and cost less.

Profitability: The above activities will need to be carried out profitable by the private enterprise. For non-profit the focus will be on efficiency.

3.0 MARKETING CONCEPT UNPACKED

As already mentioned above the marketing concept is a further stage in the development of marketing, which results in closely related definitions. Kotler and Keller (2015) assert that the marketing concept means that an organisation aims all its efforts at satisfying its customers at a profit. What can be derived in this definition is that the major role of the marketing concept is to give the customers what they want and this reinforces the contention that the concept is directly derived from marketing. It further implies that companies are compelled to decide who their target customers are and then find out their needs and wants, resulting in them designing goods and services that satisfy customer expectations better than competing firms.

On the other hand, Doyle (1998) describes the marketing concept as the primacy of being customer-led. He recognises that the marketing concept provides that an organisation is most likely to achieve its objectives when it organises itself to meet the current and potential needs of customers more effectively than the competition. Kotler and Keller's (2015) observations do not only agree with those of Doyle (1998) but go further to indicate that the organisation does not only have to satisfy customer needs but also potential ones. Again this customer satisfaction does not only have to be achieved but should be done more effectively than competitors. What is clear from the customer orientation as presented by the above-cited authorities is that it works back from the appraisal of what the customer wants to how production and resources can be organized to meet those wants which are in complete contrast with the traditional way of producing (Production orientation). Doyle (1998) finally summarises the marketing concept into three elements:

- i. Business goals;
- ii. Meeting customer needs;
- iii. Organisation and competitiveness.

In addition, Kotler (2014: 7) states that "the marketing concept holds that the key to achieving organisational goals consists of determining the needs and wants of target markets and delivering the desired satisfaction more effectively and efficiently than competitors". The implication of this approach is that market-oriented firms acquire an understanding of their customers and competitors and then determine which needs fit best the organisation's capabilities and profit objectives and then develop their responses to the market in a highly coordinated fashion and with long term perspectives. Kotler and Keller (2014) reinforce the assertions of Kotler (2007) on the orientation by recognising the marketing concept as demanding the business to aim all its efforts at satisfying customers at a profit. The implication of this demand is that top management must believe and support the implementation of the concept.

Darlymple and Parsons (2000) is of the same views as raised by the earlier cited authorities and present the marketing concept as a business philosophy that insists that the key to achieving organisational objectives is to determine the needs of target markets and deliver more efficiently than competitors do. This view also recognises the fact that in the process of

satisfying the customers the enterprise should do better than the competition. It further recognises that the company does not have a monopoly on the choice of target markets. Other firms would choose to satisfy the needs of the same group of customers. Therefore the challenge revealed by the authorities is to meet those needs better than your rivals in the target segments. The implication of this then is that organisations that fully embrace the doctrine of the marketing concept automatically become the customer's choice as they meet their needs better than the competition.

Additionally, the outstanding doctrine of the marketing concept is the idea of focusing a whole organisation on attending to customer needs. This further reinforces assertions by the apostles of this concept that the key point of this philosophy is responsible satisfaction of the customers, which is the economic justification of the existence of any business firm. The implication of the doctrine of the marketing concept is that the role of the company, which embraces this orientation, becomes that of "change-maker", "innovator", "doer" in continuous search for new uses of old products, new markets and new segments. This further reinforces the view that the firm's future hinges on an integrated programme designed to meet customers' needs.

The revelations of the above approaches on the market orientation lead to the development of the following operational views which suggest four ultimate organisational objectives that epitomize the marketing concept: Customer orientation in all aspects of the organisation and operations, the scientific pursuit of profitable volumes, the integration of effort towards common goals – profit and social responsibility in decision making and profit delivery. In reaffirmation of the above view, Kotler and Armstrong (2012) identify four main pillars upon which the marketing concept rests namely, a market focus, customer orientation, coordinated marketing and profitability. Kotler and Keller (2015) while agreeing with Kotler and Armstrong (2012) to a certain extent, reduced those pillars to three basic ideas which form the major component of the marketing concept i.e. customer satisfaction, the total company effort and profit not just sales as an objective. Kotler and Keller (2014) agree with Darlymple and Parsons (2000) and identify three dimensions of the marketing concept: a customer orientation, an integrated company effort and goal-directed behaviour. Boone and Kurtz (1992) observe that the marketing concept is a contemporary philosophy for dynamic organisational growth.

Ideally, a total marketing approach should be found at every level of the firm. Operationally, this implies that market orientation refers to an organisational perspective that encourages (1) systematic gathering of market intelligence (2) dissemination of the intelligence across all organisational units and (3) a coordinated, organisation-wide responsive to intelligence. Essentially this means a marketing orientation is a realisation that a firm's marketing effort is the business of all departments and functions. A closer examination of marketing orientation will reveal that it is equivalent to a well-known business philosophy of total quality management (TQM). The total quality management approach emphasises that all departments and employees must commit to and share responsibility for quality that impacts on customer satisfaction. Having examined different approaches to the market orientation by authorities the following operational definition is developed. The marketing concept is an attempt to achieve the firm's goals by satisfying customers at a profitable volume, in an integrated efficient framework and a socially responsible manner. Three aspects stand out in this

operational definition and can be extracted as follows: customer orientation, an integrated company effort and goal-directed behaviour.

3.1 Customer orientation

It has been shown that the principal idea of marketing orientation is to provide customers with what they want. This compels organisations to decide who their target customers are and find out their needs and want. The net results are the creation of goods and services that will meet the customers' expectations.

3.2 An integrated company effort

A second cardinal idea of the marketing concept suggests that marketing activities should be closely coordinated with each other and with other departments of the organisation. Under the marketing orientation sales, finance, production and personnel all work together to satisfy customer needs. Bovee and Thill (1992: 14) further reinforce this view by stating that "the marketing concept is the idea of maximising long term profitability while integrating marketing with other parts of the enterprise". What is conspicuous in this instance is that the marketing concept should be applied as a useful mechanism in assisting to unify the independent functional areas to increase customer satisfaction and improve profits.

3.3 Goal-directed behaviour

All the behaviour should be directed at achieving the goals of the organisation. The implication is that the marketing plans and corporate goals must be closely coordinated. Boone and Kurtz (1992) provide the following observation, which summarises the above discussions. "The marketing concept introduces the marketer at the beginning rather than at the end of the production cycle and integrates marketing into each phase of the business". Basically, this implies that the marketing concept takes an outside-in perspective. It starts with a well-defined market, focuses on customer needs, and integrates all activities that will affect customers and produce profits by satisfying customers.

3.4 The Evolution of the Marketing Concept

According to Etzel et al (2007), the foundations of marketing in America were laid in colonial times when early settlers traded among themselves and also with the Indians. Additionally, they recognise that since then marketing in the US has evolved through three distinct stages of development. Bovee and Thill (1992), who argue that marketing emerged as a discreet discipline in the early 1900s but did not immediately affect most companies' further support this view. Further Bovee and Thill (1992) agree with Etzel et al (2007) on the three distinct stages which companies went through in becoming market-oriented. These stages are identified as the production era, sales era and marketing era. Using the approaches of Eztel et al (2007) and Bovee and Thill (1992) it can be shown that the development of marketing could be traced back to the period when societies first moved away from the subsistence economy towards some specialisation of production. This period is historically referred to as a simple trade era.

Boone and Thill (1992) while agreeing with Etzel et al (2007) and Kotler (2007) on the distinct stages which preceded the marketing concept further suggests a fourth stage which he terms product concept. The approach of Kotler (2007) is the same approach taken by Doyle and Phil (2006) regarding the four stages of the development of the marketing concept. Other scholars who have attempted to trace the evolution of the marketing concept in the recent past and also agree on distinct stages include Papadopoulos et al (2001), Boone and Kutz (2002) and Kotler and Keller (2014). Additionally, these authorities recognize Kotler's (2007) fourth stage of product concept as an insignificant variation of the production orientation. What is conspicuous from the above is that those who believe in the three-stage approach to the evolution of the marketing concept view the product concept as a mere inconsequential variation of the production concept. They believe it does not significantly differ from the basic premise of the production orientation. The approach of this study agrees with the view held by Kotler (2007) and Doyle and Phil (2006) and would identify the marketing concept as having evolved through four distinct stages.

3.5 Early Incidences of the Adoption of the Marketing Concept

Most authors have identified changing social and economic conditions in the technically advanced world as having been instrumental in the evolution of the marketing concept (Boone and Kurtz 1992; Boove and Thill 2002; Doyle and Phil 2007; Kotler and Armstrong (2012); Kotler and Keller 2014). Kotler (2007) actual recognises that in the business sector the marketing concept entered the consciousness of different companies at different times. General Electric, General Motors, Procter and Gamble and Coca-Cola were among the leaders in the U.S.A. Kotler (2007); Kotler and Armstrong (2012); Boone and Kurtz (2002); Bovee and Thill (2002) and Kotler and Keller (2014) all agree that the marketing concept spread most rapidly in consumer packaged goods companies first, then consumer durables and industrial equipment in that order. Producers of commodities such as steel, chemicals and paper adopted the concept later in the seventies. The orientation also began to excite the interest of insurance and stock brokerage in the 1970s. The later businesses in the USA to gain interest in the marketing concept are professionals, service providers, such as lawyers, accountants, physicians and architects. This could be attributed to changes in legislation regarding promotion and advertising for these groups. In the Western, World marketing has also not escaped the attention of the non-profit sector.

3.6 Marketing concept as portrayed in literature

Records from the literature indicate that the marketing concept is glorified. The advantages are clearly articulated but organisations still seem reluctant to adopt the concept. Most authors recognize this but no attempt is made to explain the reasons for this reluctance. Kotler (2007) asks the following question "Besides SAS, how many companies have implemented the marketing concept?" And he provides the following well-researched answer: "Too few". Only a handful of companies really stand out as master practitioners of the marketing concept: Procter and Gamble, IMB, Avon, McDonald's, General foods, Marlott Hotels, Delta Airlines, General Electrical, Caterpillar and John Deere.

In addition, Kotler (2007) argues elegantly that most companies have not arrived at full marketing maturity. He observes that most think they have marketing because they have a marketing manager and other marketing departments' executives. He also recognises that

most enterprises do not embrace marketing orientation until driven to it by circumstances. These circumstances include sales decline, slow growth, changing buying patterns, increasing competition and increasing market expenditure.

Kotler and Keller (2014: 40) acknowledge the reluctance of companies to adopt the marketing concept despite its clear advantages. They acknowledge the fact that companies find it easy to slip back to production orientation. This acknowledgement is clearly contained in their comment: "The marketing concept may seem so obvious, but is very easy to slip back to production orientation".

In addition, Kotler and Keller (2014: 39) admit that while the advantages of being customer-led are obvious, firms are not embracing it. In the following statement they summarise this observation: "the marketing concept seems so logical that you will think firms would quickly adopt it. But this isn't the case. Many firms are still production-oriented". Additionally, they assert that the majority of organisations are production-oriented or regularly slip back that way.

Guiltnan, Gordon and Maden (1997) agree with Kotler (2007), on the reluctance of firms in adopting the marketing concept. Kotler and Keller (2014) assert that even in market-oriented organisations, it is not a simple matter to implement the marketing concept. What is critical about these observations is that indeed there are problems or difficulties, which are encountered by organisations in attempting to adapt to marketing concepts without stating these problems.

3.7 Suggested ways or methods of implementing the marketing concept to ensure success

The solutions to unidentified problems of implementing the marketing concept as suggested by Guiltnan et al (1997) include planning approach, situation analysis and setting objectives before developing strategies and programmes. Pride and Ferrell (2006) also recognize there are difficulties in the implementation of the marketing concept but also like others who wrote before and after them fail to identify these problems. The following observation is extracted from Pride and Ferrell (2006) "a philosophy may look good on paper. It may sound reasonable and even noble. But that does not mean it can be put into practice easily. The marketing concept is such a case in point." Without explicitly identifying these problems, Pride and Ferrell (2006) proceed to suggest some general conditions for the implementation of the concept. They even advise organisations to be cognizant of several problems (which they do not even suggest). Pride and Ferrell (2006) suggest the following conditions for the adoption of the marketing concept:

- a) They argue that because the concept affects all types of business activities top management must adopt it.
- b) High-level company executives must incorporate the marketing concept into their personal philosophies of business management so completely that it is the basis for all the goals and decisions they set for the firm.
- c) Top executives must convince other members of the organization to accept changes in policies and operations that flow from their acceptance of the marketing concept.

- d) Implementation of the marketing concept always requires an efficient information system and sometimes restructuring of the organisation.

3.8 Problems associated with the adoption of the marketing concept

Among all the authorities consulted by the researchers only Kotler and Armstrong (2012) has attempted to identify difficulties companies face in becoming customer-led. Kotler and Armstrong (2012) assert that: “in the course of converting to a market-oriented company, a company faces three hurdles- organized resistance, slow learning and fast forgetting”. The inadequacy of Kotler and Armstrong’s (2012) approach is that only three problems are identified. The researchers, therefore, believe these are inadequate to discourage companies from adopting the marketing concept.

3.9 Organised resistance

According to Kotler and Armstrong (2012) some departments, chief among them operations and finance do not like to see marketing build up because it threatens their power. This becomes more pronounced especially if judged against the traditional way of business operations (production orientation). Traditionally the production department makes decisions on what to produce, in what quality, quantities, sizes and shapes. All production decisions are the domain of this department. The role of marketing is relegated to that of selling what has been produced. The marketing department does not have any input on what to produce, its inputs are funds generated through sales. On the other hand, the Finance department is traditionally the most powerful department influencing events from strategy formulation to funds allocation to other departments. Under production and sales orientations, finance holds unchallenged power, as financial resources allocation is at its sole discretion. The adoption of the marketing concept implies that the marketing department has to play a new and major role even at the strategy formulation level. The new role of the marketing department makes the rest feel threatened. The result is organized resistance and at times a complete rejection of the concept. Kotler and Armstrong (2012) elegantly and persuasively argue that resistance is more pronounced in industries where marketing is being proposed or introduced for the first time. At times the resistance is so fierce that the finance department attempts to block the funding of activities related to the adoption of the marketing concept. Other departments also resist because of the new role they desperately find themselves made to play. Under the marketing concept, all departments should focus their efforts on the provision of customer satisfaction. This they normally consider an extra burden, which outside their departmental functions.

3.10 Slow learning

Kotler (2007) admits that in spite of initial strong resistance, some companies do manage to build up the marketing function in their organisation. This success Kotler credits to top management support, for the adoption of the concept. What is very clear from the above is that the top executives will have given enthusiastic support to the function by creating new positions, hiring outside marketing talent and key managers (especially departmental heads) attending seminars to gain a deeper understating of marketing. Also, the marketing budget would be substantially increased, marketing planning and control systems introduced. Kotler (2007) argues that even with these steps taken, learning as to what marketing really is, comes

slowly. Views supported by Kotler and Keller (2014), whereby rightly observe that it is very easy to slip back into production orientation. What then is very clear from this view is that at times even where all the necessary steps have been taken, the adoption of the marketing concept will take a bit of time to be implemented due to the time taken to appreciate it by others in the organisation.

3.11 Fast forgetting

Kotler and Armstrong (2012) recognise that even after effective marketing is installed in an organisation and matures through the stages, management must fight a strong tendency to forget basic marketing principles. The lesson drawn from the above view is that management tends to forget that the marketing concept is a continual process. The result is to slip back to either sales or production orientation.

3.12 Benefits of adopting the marketing concept

Adoption of the marketing concept is not a product of any legislation, and there are no legal penalties for those organizations that do not apply any one of its elements. Rather the marketing concept suggests that those organisations that do apply and implement it are more likely to be successful than those that do not. Bovee and Thill (1992) recognise that one of the benefits of adopting the marketing concept is that the business is able to attract and keep customers. Gultinan et al (1997) assert that the marketing concept enables companies to acquire an understanding of the customers and competitors, determine which customer needs fit with its capabilities and profit goals and develop their response for the marketplace in a highly coordinated fashion and with long term perspective. The implication of this view is that without giving effective attention to customers' needs, marketing and other business functions will lack the direction needed for success. Doyle and Phil (2006) argue persuasively and elegantly that businesses that are good at satisfying customers' needs have the best opportunities to grow and prosper. The implication of this view is that a company that adopts the marketing concept become internationally competitive. Morden (1994) further reinforces this view by his observation that the dominance of the world market share enjoyed by Japanese car manufacturers shows the benefits of the marketing concept. Doyle and Phil (2006) provide the following observation that the adoption of the marketing concept results in the creation of satisfied customers. Operationally it is clear that a satisfied customer is the only true asset of a business. In practice some of the benefits of the marketing concept can be summarised as follows:

- i. Creation of loyal customers who tend to spend more on the organisation's products and services. Loyal customers are the best advertising agents for any business and are more likely to introduce new customers to the company through word of mouth recommendations.
- ii. Satisfied customers are often willing to pay premium prices to the supplier they know and trust.

3.13 Criticisms of the marketing concept

Kotler (2007), Kotler and Armstrong (1996), Doyle (1998), Etzel et al (2007), Kotler and Armstrong (2012), and Kotler and Keller (2014) all acknowledge existence of criticisms of

the marketing concept. Kotler and Armstrong (2012) argue that in recent years, some people have questioned whether the marketing concept was an appropriate organisational philosophy in an age of environmental deterioration, resources shortages, explosive population growth, world hunger and poverty and neglected social services. Additional critics have questioned whether companies that do an excellent job of sensing, serving and satisfying individual consumer wants are necessarily acting in the best long-run interests of consumers and society. This view leads to an observation that there is a real danger that a firm may totally satisfy its customers (in line with the marketing concept) while at the same time adversely affecting society. What is then clear is that, even though the marketing concept stresses consumer orientation, it does not follow that every fleeting whim of every customer must be met. In agreeing with Kotler's (2007) view on the limitations of the marketing concept Etzel et al (2007) assert that there have been calls to make the marketing concept more socially responsible. As its critics charge that although some may conflict with a firm's responsibility. Kotler and Armstrong (1996) have also noted the criticisms levelled against the marketing concept and admit some of these concerns are justified. They point out that those social critics of the orientation claim that certain marketing practices hurt individual consumers, society as a whole and other businesses. What is clearly revealed above is that while the benefits of the orientation are clear, it does have limitations and has been subjected to criticism. Be as it may, some of the criticisms can be addressed by implementing the concept in a socially responsible manner, what Kotler (2007) refers to as a societal marketing concept. Despite its limitations and criticisms, the marketing concept remains the most obvious and logical business philosophy which can assure the long-term survival and success of companies. Evidence also showed that some companies especially in the technically developed world have been successful after the adoption of the concept. The review also identified the gaps, which this study will attempt to fill. The major gap identified was the failure to establish the difficulties companies encounter in converting to market-oriented firms by earlier academics in the field. This study moved to explore what difficulties SMEs in Bulawayo have encountered in converting to the marketing orientation.

4.0 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Adopting a descriptive survey approach to generate answers to the primary objective, the study used a sample of one hundred (100) entrepreneurs from a population of five hundred and fifty one SMEs according to the SEDCO directory. This sample was selected using simple random sampling. Simple random sampling was preferred for this study because the method ensured that each element in the population had an equal chance of being included in the sample. The study used a descriptive survey as the most suitable method of collecting data. The hallmarks of the descriptive survey design are in its strength as a tool for investigating the status of the phenomena, and its in-built mechanism for reliability and validity. Data was collected through the use of a qualitative and quantitative questionnaire. Microsoft Excel was used to analyse the quantitative data collected while content analysis was used to analyse qualitative data. The approach was deliberately adopted to ensure that the research is able to benefit from the strengths of the qualitative and quantitative approaches while minimizing the weaknesses of both approaches.

4.1 Data Presentation and Analysis

The questionnaire instrument used had both open-ended and close-ended questions. The open-ended part was presented and analyzed through the use of descriptive statistics. The use of descriptive statistics enabled the researchers to reduce a body of data into tables so that facts would be easily interpreted. Constant comparative analysis was used in the analysis of data to establish emerging themes. The open-ended part was analyzed using content analysis. This involved organizing the data and breaking it into manageable units in the process of searching for common patterns. This process made it easy to discover important ideas and what to report. Out of a total of 100 questionnaires administered 70 were completed and returned. The response rate was therefore 70%.

5.0 RESULTS OF THE STUDY

5.1 Level of understanding of the marketing concept among marketing managers

The study sought to establish the participants' understanding of the marketing orientation. Table 1 below shows the distribution of managers on what they understood about the marketing concept.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by their understanding of the marketing concept

N=70

| MANAGERS UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONCEPT | NUMBER | PERCENTAGE | RANK |
|--|-----------|------------|------|
| A business philosophy which considers satisfaction of customers as the most important function of the organisation | 38 | 54 | 1 |
| Identification of customers' needs and wants and satisfy them profitable | 12 | 17 | 2 |
| Is the management of 4Ps' | 10 | 14 | 3 |
| Putting customers' needs and wants first | 6 | 9 | 4 |
| Selling and buying of goods | 4 | 6 | 5 |
| Total | 70 | 100 | |

In response to the understanding of the marketing concept, 54% of the respondents said the marketing concept is a business philosophy that considers the satisfaction of customers as the most important activity in an organization. Demanding that this be achieved with all departments focusing their efforts at the meeting and exceeding the expectations of customers profitably. Only six percent of managers identified the marketing concept as selling and buying goods. Overall, it would appear most managers in the survey (eighty percent) had the required theoretical knowledge of the marketing concept, with only twenty percent displaying a poor understanding of the concept. The theoretical understanding of the concept was considered extremely necessary expertise if the application of the concept is to be successful. The study concluded that it is not a lack of understanding of the marketing concept, which is discouraging companies from adopting the marketing concept. The findings are collaborated by the research conducted by Rice (2014). Rice's (2014) research findings show 84% of managers are aware of and appreciate the marketing concept.

The majority of respondents (83%) reported that the marketing department existed in their organizations. Only 17% said the department did not exist and this agrees with Kotler (2007) who admitted that in spite of initial strong resistance, some companies do manage to build up

the marketing function in their organisations. It would appear that most SMEs have taken the first step towards the application of the marketing concept. Forty-five percent of the participants reported that the marketing department had been in existence for more than 10 years in their companies, while 28% indicated that the department had been in existence for between 3 to 7 years and 17% said it had been in existence for 0-3 years. The responses suggest varied experiences in the application of the marketing concept by SMEs in the retail sector especially if one considers the establishment of the marketing department as an important founding step in the acceptance of the marketing concept.

Further, the participants were asked to identify at least three roles of their marketing departments. The contention was that the combination of the three factors forms the basis of the application of the marketing concept. Table 2 displays the respondents' views on the role of the marketing department in their respective companies.

Table 2: Identified roles of the marketing department

| Marketing department | Frequency | Rank |
|---|-------------|------|
| Development of marketing and brand strategies preparing marketing plans and coordinating all sales and marketing activities and ensuring they contribute to corporate objectives. | 26 (37, 1%) | 1 |
| Carrying out marketing research, doing competitive analysis, research and development, new products development and development and developing packaging for new brands and organizing new products launches. | 20 (28, 6%) | 2 |
| Carrying out promotion activities and public relations. | 14 (20%) | 3 |
| Environment analysis, identification and exploiting opportunities, maintenance of current market shares, customer service and creating new markets. | 10 (14, 3%) | 4 |
| Total | 70 | |

Thirty-seven percent (37, 1%) of the respondents reported that the role of the marketing department was preparing marketing plans, designing marketing and brand strategies, making sure these contribute to the corporate objectives. The results show that generally the role of the marketing department in an organization is understood. It also concluded that in the majority of retail SMEs the marketing department is properly constituted and the respective heads clearly understand its functions. Stewart (2009) noted that managers are varied in terms of their understanding of the roles of personnel in the department.

The study found out that generally, the marketing managers have a good theoretical and practical understanding of the marketing concept as they were able to freely define and identify the strategic roles of marketing managers and the importance of marketing concept in an organisation. This high level of awareness could have been backed by the fact that most of the managers were mature, had sound academic and professional qualifications. The study also observed that as a result of this high level of awareness of the marketing concept these managers were indeed competent participants of this research as well as gave well-informed views and their experiences on the difficulties associated with practice and application of marketing concept in SMEs retail sector as a central business philosophy. Effectively the study showed that generally, SMEs are at different levels of the adoption of the marketing concept. However, their major weakness was lack of experience with the majority having been in management or leadership of the marketing department for less than three years.

5.2 Attitudes of SMEs towards the implementation of the marketing concept.

Having examined the theoretical knowledge of the marketing concept it was important to test its practice. It was against this background that the ability to apply this theoretical knowledge practically was examined. Tables 3 and 4 show the distribution of participants by their degree of agreement or disagreement with the given practical statements.

Table 3: Our business cannot exist without our customers;

N=70

| Responses | Number | Percentage |
|----------------|-----------|------------|
| Strongly agree | 64 | 91 |
| Agree | 6 | 9 |
| Total | 70 | 100 |

All respondents reported that they either strongly agreed (91%) or simply agreed (9%) with the contention that their business would not exist without the customers. The results suggest that all marketing managers viewed the customers as the cornerstone of the continued existence of their companies. What is important with these results is that marketing managers understood the meaning and practical implications of the customer orientation to their companies. This is a sign that most SMEs have at least accepted the marketing concept in principle. Kotler (2007) argues that all managers fully understand the importance of customers to the survival of their business.

Table 4: All our departments contribute to satisfying the customer

N=70

| Responses | Number | Percentage |
|----------------|-----------|------------|
| Strongly agree | 54 | 77 |
| Agree | 16 | 23 |
| Total | 70 | 100 |

All the participants either strongly agreed (77%) or simply agreed (23%) that all departments in their organisations contribute towards satisfying the customer. The responses revealed that indeed SMEs have put into practice systems that provide the right environment for the implementation of the marketing concept. The departmental cooperation is fundamental especially if viewed against the need for total company effort for the application of the concept to succeed. Furthermore, the results seem to reinforce earlier made observations that the majority of retail SMEs appear to have accepted the concept in principle. It is also noted that the majority (63 % strongly agree and 26% agree) of managers realise and completely accept the importance of customers in the long-term profitability of the firm. When further asked whether if left alone their customers would still continue to buy their products, 60% of the managers strongly disagreed or simply disagreed with the view. The rest either agreed or were not committed. Those who agreed with the statement seem to be still at production or sales orientation. When asked to comment on spending money for market research the majority of participants believed that expenditure on market research is worthwhile. The results seem to suggest that managers in the retail sector are in favour of research which is a basic tool of the application of the marketing concept.

It would appear that most retail SMEs have adopted a positive attitude towards customers. This was reflected in the majority's response to the question on having strong personalized relationships with their customers as well as aiming to delight their customers. Eighty-five percent agreed that they have strong relationships with their customers while 89% agreed that they want to delight their customers.

One of the challenges presented by the marketing concept is to continually meet the ever-changing needs of customers. It is therefore paramount for companies to constantly review products and services on offer to be able to meet the ever-changing needs, tastes and preferences of consumers. To ascertain the practical application of this important procedure the participants were asked to state the extent to which they agree or disagree with the following statement: We constantly review our products and services. Table 5 shows the responses given by the respondents.

Table 5: We constantly review our products and services N=35

| Responses | Number | Percentage |
|----------------|--------|------------|
| Strongly agree | 12 | 17 |
| Agree | 34 | 49 |
| Uncertain | 8 | 11 |
| Disagree | 16 | 23 |
| Total | 70 | 100 |

The majority of respondents (sixty-six percent) reported either strongly agreeing or simply agreeing with the statement, followed by those who disagreed at twenty-three percent. Eleven percent chose to be neutral. Despite these varied responses the majority (66%) seem to favour the adoption of the marketing concept, especially in the identification of needs. At the same time, it would appear to suggest the influence of either production or sales orientation in the minority of SMEs.

Evidence from the study revealed most SMEs managers accepted the marketing concept as their strategic tool. It was also concluded that these managers strongly believed that adoption of the marketing concept assisted their companies to gain higher levels of market share which in turn leads to increased business performance.

A close association between top management support and the success of the marketing concept was established. In this instance, the failure of the implementation of the marketing concept could not, therefore, be attributed to a lack of support by top management.

The result from the study also revealed that top management, organisational vision, mission and objectives were supportive to the application of the marketing concept in retail companies. The failure to meet customer needs could not be attributed to these but possible to other factors. Overall the study in this area concluded that a positive attitude towards the marketing concept leads to increased sales and profitability. It also improves the relationships with customers and loyalty. Bovee and Thill (1992: 14) reinforce this view by stating that "the marketing concept is the idea of maximising long term profitability while integrating marketing with other parts of the enterprise".

6.0 FACTORS AFFECTING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MARKETING CONCEPT

6.1 Micro-environmental variables

There were issues of micro-environmental nature which were believed to be possible factors discouraging retail companies from adopting the marketing concept despite its obvious benefits. The study, therefore, attempted to isolate these factors. The participants were asked to indicate whether those factors hindered or supported the implementation of the marketing concept in their companies. The following are respondents' comments on these factors:

6.2 Top management support

Eight-two percent reported that top management was supportive of the application of the marketing concept, while 9% felt that top management was unsupportive to efforts to implement the marketing concept. A further 9% professed neutrality. It would appear that in most retail companies top management was supportive of the efforts to implement the marketing concept. In these circumstances, it could be fairly concluded that it is not a lack of top management support which is discouraging retail companies to adopt the marketing concept. There could be other factors.

6.3 Availability of funds

Sixty-six percent of participants reported that the availability of funds was not a problem to the implementation of the marketing concept, while 25% said that the availability of funds was indeed a problem. It would appear that only in a minority of companies the availability of funds is a problem and therefore a factor hindering the application of marketing concept. However, in most companies, the availability of funds is not a factor discouraging the acceptance of the concept.

6.4 Provision of information for decision making

In total, 80% indicated that the provision of information for marketing decision making was either supportive or very supportive of the implementation of the marketing concept. Ten percent reported being neutral, while a further ten percent claimed it was a problem. Results seem to suggest that provision of information for marketing decision making is not a problem to the adoption of the marketing concept, in the majority of companies. However, it was only in a minority of cases where it is a problem.

6.5 Organisational structure

Sixty-six percent of the participants said the structure of their organisations was either supportive or very supportive to the application of the marketing concept. Seventeen percent of the respondents claimed neutrality, while a further eight percent claimed that the structure of their companies was a hindrance to the application of the marketing concept. Hence in most companies, organisational structures are not a factor hindering the implementation of the marketing concepts.

6.6 Other department attitudes

Fifty-seven percent of the managers reported that the attitudes of other departments were either very supportive or simply supportive to the adoption of the marketing concept. Twenty-three percent could not elect aside while 20% said the attitude of other departments were problematic to the implementation of the marketing concept. The results indicate that the other departments' attitudes contribute to some extent to the failure of the application of the marketing concept.

6.7 Organisational vision and mission

Seventy-four percent of respondents indicated that the organizational vision and mission were supportive of the implementation of the marketing concept in their companies. Nine percent of the participants failed to elect aside, while 17% reported that the vision and mission of their organizations were a problem. Results suggest that only in a minority of companies the vision and mission of the organisation is an impediment to the implementation of the marketing concept.

6.7 Organisational objectives and strategies

Seventy-one percent of the marketing managers said that organizational objectives and strategies were supportive of the implementation of the marketing concept. Eight percent failed to choose a side while 15% reported objectives and strategies being a problem to the adoption of the marketing concept. It would appear that it is only in a minority of companies where objectives and strategies create problems to the application of the marketing concept.

6.8 Organizational culture

Forty-nine percent of respondents reported that organizational culture was either very supportive or simply supportive. Forty percent claimed that organizational culture was problematic to the adoption of the marketing concept while 11% reported being neutral. The results suggest that corporate culture is a problem to the implementation of the marketing concept.

6.9 Attitude to change

The majority of participants (54%) reported that their attitude to change was either unsupportive or very unsupportive. Thirty-five percent indicated that attitude to change was not a problem at all while only 11% did not elect aside. It would appear that most managers in the study believed that attitudes to change were discouraging the adoption of the marketing concept in their companies. Kotler (2007) observed that "even after effective marketing is installed in an organisation and matures through the stages, management must fight a strong tendency to forget basic marketing principles". The lesson drawn from the above view is that management tends to forget that the marketing concept is a continual process. The result is slipped back to either sales or production orientation.

Overall sixty-three percent of the managers reported that the above factors were not a problem to the application of the marketing concept while seventeen percent were of the

opinion that the above factors were creating problems in the application of the marketing concept. A total of thirteen percent of managers could not choose aside. These results suggest acceptance of the marketing concept in the majority of companies.

6.10 Macro-environmental variables

It was further contended that the macro-environmental factors might be discouraging companies to adopt the marketing concept. It was against this background that the study sought to establish their impact on the adoption of marketing orientation. Table 6 below shows responses given by marketing managers on the impact of the macro-environmental factors believed to be critical.

Table 6: Degree of macro-environmental variables on the ability to implement the marketing concept N=490

| Degree of support | | | | | | |
|-------------------------|-----------|----------|-----------|---------|----------|-------|
| Environmental factor | Very high | High | Uncertain | Low | Very low | Total |
| Levels of market demand | 32 | 18 | 6 | 14 | 0 | 70 |
| Changes in inflation | 28 | 24 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 70 |
| Price controls | 44 | 16 | 6 | 2 | 2 | 70 |
| Price of raw materials | 50 | 14 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 70 |
| Operate as a monopoly | 8 | 10 | 14 | 16 | 22 | 70 |
| Changes in technology | 10 | 18 | 18 | 18 | 6 | 70 |
| Shortage of cash | 46 | 10 | 6 | 4 | 4 | 70 |
| | 218(44%) | 110(22%) | 58(12%) | 62(13%) | 42(9%) | 490 |

Sixty-six percent of the managers felt that the above-identified macro-environmental variables had a very high or simply high impact on companies' ability to implement the marketing concept. Twenty-two percent of the managers reported that these macro-environmental variables had either low or very low impact on their companies' ability to apply the marketing concept. A further twelve percent claimed neutrality. The results suggest that the macro-environmental variables are heavily impacting companies' ability to implement the marketing concept. This is in agreement with Kotler (2007) who said "in recent years, some people have questioned whether the marketing concept was an appropriate organisational philosophy in an age of environmental deterioration, resources shortages, explosive population growth, world hunger and poverty and neglected social services".

Evidence from the study revealed that the macro-environmental variables (inflation, shortages of raw materials and cash problems etc.) were major forces impeding the SMEs marketing managers from implementing the marketing concept. Included in these macro-environmental factors was the current unstable macro-economic situation in Zimbabwe. The current unstable macro-environmental situation in Zimbabwe was found to be working against the success of the marketing concept. In spite of this harsh macro-economic environmental situation, there was evidence suggesting that most companies were trying to apply the concept. The study also identified fast-changing technology and globalisation as major barriers to the adoption of the marketing concept.

Also coming out clear as a problem of implementing the marketing concept was other departments. These were accused of not giving the necessary support to the application of the

marketing concept. Production, finance and accounting were named as chief culprits. These views were consistent with the views revealed by the literature review specifically Kotler and Keller (2013) on the problems caused by other departments to the adoption of the concept.

The study also identified lack of understanding and appreciation of the marketing concept by another departmental staff member, corporate culture and resistance to change as other forces hindering the adoption of the marketing concept. The failure by SMEs to institute a properly functioning marketing department and marketing structure were identified as some of the problems hindering the adoption of the marketing concept.

6.11 Availability of funds to implement the marketing concept

The study identified a lack of financial resources dedicated to marketing training and market surveys as a major barrier to the adoption of marketing concepts in some of the SMEs. The study concluded that effective application and practice of marketing concepts requires a lot of money and more personnel to do customer surveys. This is in line with Kotler's (2007) view that top executives will have given enthusiastic support to the function by creating new positions, hiring outside marketing talent and key managers (especially departmental heads) attending seminars to gain a deeper understanding of marketing. Also, the marketing budget would be substantially increased, marketing planning and control systems introduced.

6.12 Required skills to implement the marketing concept

Ninety- four percent of marketing managers who made up the sample had the required professional marketing qualifications. Only six percent held other professional qualifications, specifically, they had an economics degree. The professional marketing qualifications of the majority of respondents (94%) made them suitable participants in the study. The results further suggested varied experiences (above 10 years – 26%; 7 to 10 years – 11%; 3 to 6 years – 29% and less than 3 years – 34%) in the post of the head marketing department. Therefore the majority (34%) had been in the leadership of the marketing function for less than three years.

The study showed that most SMEs have marketing managers who possess necessary requirements for the positions of marketing managers. Most of them have gone above degree level. However, the study showed that most of the managers are still new to the market and they lack experience as most of them have less than three years in the management field.

7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 In the light of the above conclusions, the study recommends that:

7.2 Level of understanding of the marketing concept among managers

Seminars, workshops and in-service courses involving all the organizations' employees should be conducted to re-orient all departments towards customer orientation. Induction courses should also include training on the importance, implications and benefits of the marketing concept to ensure that employees accept the concept at the point of entry into the

organization. This, it is hoped, will assist in the cultivation of the concept within the practices and culture of the organisation.

7.3 The attitude of SMEs towards implementing the marketing concept

While cultural change cannot be achieved in a short time, it is recommended that top management deliberately start processes, which will lead to acceptance of cultural change and adoption of a culture that recognizes the marketing orientation as an integral component of the organizational culture. This could be done by including the tenets of the concept into the company's vision, values and in the employee handbooks.

7.4 Factors affecting the implementation of marketing concept

SMEs should come up with recognisable structures to enhance the marketing concept. The marketing managers are challenged to enforce the adoption of marketing concepts across all departments. Everyone in the organisation should work towards customer satisfaction and should be made to understand the rewards of adopting the marketing concept.

7.5 Availability of funds

To successfully implement the marketing concept it is recommended that SMEs invest in inappropriate technology and human resources training and development that will assist in carrying out the marketing concept.

7.6 Skills required for implementing the marketing concept

While it is appreciated that the study revealed that top management was very supportive of the implementation of the marketing concept, it is further recommended that they should incorporate the marketing concept into their personal philosophies of business management that form the basis for all goals and decisions they set for their companies.

8.0 CONCLUSION

This study sought to examine the difficulties SMEs encounter in the adoption of the marketing concept as a strategic tool. The study deliberately targeted the SMEs because it is believed that the SMEs are the engines driving the economy of Zimbabwe. The study used a sample of a hundred SMEs in Bulawayo who are registered with the ZIMRA and the sample was selected using simple random sampling. The study used a questionnaire to collect data and the data was analysed. From the analysed data it was found that participation by other departments and financial capacity was hindering the success of the implementation of the marketing concept. The study recommended that SMEs organize seminars, workshops and in-service courses involving all their organisations' employees to re-orient them towards customer orientation. Attitude change towards marketing orientation as an integral component of organizational culture as well as an investment in appropriate technology was also recommended.

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