

Title Page

Poetry in Motion: Creative networking in micro retail

This developmental paper explores the role of networks in the micro retail sector by providing qualitative evidence from a longitudinal study of a female owned retail publishing business. The preliminary analysis finds that the owner has drawn upon her own social capital to develop networks which have been crucial to the survival of the retail business. These networks are informal, wide reaching and closely linked to the social bonds the owner has made with other individuals who share similar values to that of the business.

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Introduction

In the UK the number of self-employed women is growing at a faster pace than male owned businesses (Prowess, 2014). Certain sectors have attracted women in large numbers, particularly retail (BRC, 2012) with women often operating micro retail businesses, such as pop-up stores and those based online. For micro businesses, networks are seen as key for market development, as sources of supply and indeed a catalyst for new venture creation. Anderson et al (2010) argue that networks are essential to the entrepreneurial process. SMEs and micro enterprises in particular, are constrained by their size and thus their endogenous resources need to draw upon exogenous capabilities. Women are never just women and the social capital that is drawn upon to create an eco-system of support or network is predicated on a plethora of factors such as class (Anderson and Miller, 2003) and educational attainment (Ibarra, 1993). Whilst the literature suggests that networks are an important element of entrepreneurial endeavour, there is limited research which explores the role of networks in the retail sector and the extent to which female retail owners make use of such networks to support their micro retail business.

This paper, therefore, explores through a longitudinal case study methodology how a female owned retail micro business has built and exploited networks to grow the business and how these networks have evolved over the life cycle of the business. The research thus addresses Anderson et al's (2010) call for research that delves into the development of network ties and how they are configured over time. The study also contributes to knowledge relating to SME retail networks since the majority of current (albeit limited) literature explores the role of networks from the perspective of large retailers (Wood and Reynolds, 2013; SeEVERS et al, 2010).

Literature

As defined by Drakopoulou Dodd and Patra (2002, p.117) a network is "the sum total of relationships in which an entrepreneur participates and which provide an important resource for his, or her, activities." Greve and Salaff (2003) identified that networks varied depending on the life stage of the SME and that there are differences in their use dependent on gender. As Greve and Salaff (2003, p.17) advocate "[I]f networks make a difference in starting a firm, we need to learn more about the network composition of female and male entrepreneurs." This study, therefore, focuses on the network a micro retail business uses over the life cycle of their business and identifies the perceived value of these mechanisms according to the business owner (s) of the case study.

Focusing on the retail sector more specifically, existing research, albeit limited, suggests that retail networks can take a number of forms but nevertheless the importance of studying the networks and relationships between suppliers, buyers and sellers is key as "...social networks that span organizational boundaries are associated with achievement of performance goals" (SeEVERS et al, 2010:318). Other forms of relationships concern *intra*-organisational social networks, such as mentoring, which it is argued are equally as important in enhancing retail performance (Woods and Reynolds, 2013). Work by Wegner and Padula (2010) has considered more formal collaborative networks in the form of retail cooperatives and found that these can also enhance the performance and strategic decision making of its members. In the case of SME retailers in particular, recent research has highlighted the evolving nature of networks by suggesting that retail owners are making more use of online, rather than offline, social networks, such as Facebook, to engage customers and market their business more

widely (Bent et al, 2013). It would seem therefore that the "...industry does influence the networking behaviour of business owners." (Sharafizad, 2011:158)

Whilst the benefits of retail networks are reported in the literature, Drakopoulou Dodd and Patra (2002:130) concludes that "... the excessive amount of time spent on network maintenance and development must surely carry considerable opportunity cost.". Indeed the value of networking has been keenly debated in the literature with views ranging from low usage (Audet et al's, 2007), lack of support from networks (Constantinidis, Cornet and Asandei, 2006) to Loscocco and Bird (2012:p.191) who discuss the possible compulsion of women "to nurture connections with other people." For female business owners in particular, it is argued that the nature of how women network is determined by their wider caring responsibilities. As Davidsson and Honig (2003) report, women tend to rely on support from family and friends more than formal business networks, such as industry associations because of the time pressures related to balancing work with home commitments. McGregor and Tweed (2002:p.430) also found, that "the networked female businesses were smaller and home based suggesting that informal support, rather than institutionalized linkages was sought of women who participated."

Methodology

This paper provides an exploratory, ethnographic case study of the experiences of a small female owned independent retail publisher based in the East Midlands. The business fits into the EU definition of a micro business. Since 2008 the business has been publishing and selling poetry pamphlets aimed in the words of its founder "equally at people familiar with poetry and those that are not". The pamphlets are sold with the strapline "Instead of a card...." and include short poems centred on one theme such as weddings, drinking tea, pets, hobbies and Christmas. In 2014, approximately 58,000 pamphlets were sold directly to the public from the website but also through other outlets such as galleries and gift shops (Sargent, 2014).

The case study is a convenience one but as Gartner (2010:p.9) acknowledges one that can surface, richer, comprehensive findings of 'a particular entrepreneurial situation.' Moreover, the data collection through a series of longitudinal qualitative interviews, supports Gartner's (2010:p.12) view that "narrative scholarship can best address issues in entrepreneurship that are concerned with entrepreneurial intentions and actions and their interrelationships with circumstances" Whilst it is recognised that this sampling method has limitations, this was the most appropriate approach given that micro businesses are often reluctant to engage with academia and can be a population that is difficult to identify (Short et al., 2010). The relationship between the research team and the business also meant a longitudinal data exercise could be conducted. The research team have interacted with the founder and latterly the co-director approximately every 12 months, since 2009. These interactions have included a series of formal, qualitative interviews as well as observations of web and social media and informal conversations. This has enabled the researchers to map the owner's network experience at start-up and post start-up as the business became established.

The interviews used a set of questions around a priori themes drawn from the literature, to prompt the discussion. Each interview lasted between 60-90 minutes and the founder and latterly the co-director were encouraged to talk about their personal journey to business ownership (Dyer, 1994; Perren and Ram, 2004; Brush et al., 2009). Furthermore, by using this approach "...an understanding can be acquired of why and how the networking behaviour of a business owner changes over time..." (Neergaard et al., 2005, p. 350). The reporting of

the findings therefore attempted to capture the participants' 'voices' by providing rich descriptions of the development of the business over a 6 year period. Specifically, the themes explored in the interviews included the founder's career history, their reasons for moving into retail publishing, their experiences of running their business and the support mechanisms they had used whilst being self-employed. All the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. This data was then combined with the researchers' notes relating to observations and informal conversations and analysed thematically using a system of coding called Template Analysis (King, 2004). Through the development of a list of codes (the 'template'), this approach enables researchers to make sense of large amounts of rich textual data through structured, rigorous analytical methods (Waring and Wainwright, 2008). The researchers developed a coding 'template' which highlighted broad themes and then more narrow, specific themes important to the study. This was then applied to all the materials to aid the interpretation of the data and included both a priori codes and codes generated inductively. The preliminary findings to emerge from this analysis are reported next.

Preliminary findings

The initial analysis suggests that the success of the retail micro business was reliant on the external social networks the founder had instigated at the start-up phase of the business and had continued to maintain. These relationships took a number of forms, were wide-reaching and had different levels of formality but all had enhanced the performance of the business in some way. Furthermore, these networks had been developed with limited resources and the success was very often attributable to the personal relationships and bonds the owner had cultivated with a number of key individuals during her career and over the life-time of the business. The founder's previous employment as a freelance author, lecturer and poetry editor provided her with skills and contacts that were integral to the business. So, for example, at the start-up phase, the founder had used a family friend to help with packing and fulfilling orders from home. As the success of the business grew, the founder was able to secure the support of celebrities such as Sophie Dahl and the Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy who provided forewords to the pamphlets. This led to publicity and features in national newspapers and an appearance on Radio 4's Woman's Hour. After two years of running the business, the founder, as a result of attending a SME support event held at a local university, met her current co-director (a local business owner providing marketing services) who she persuaded to join the business as a result of a mutual interest in poetry. Through meeting with her local Waterstone's store manager, the founder was also able to secure nationwide distribution of the pamphlets in the UK based retail chain.

Typically, the business had not used formal network associations and had not suffered as a result. The social capital of the founder and latterly the co-director are inextricably linked to the longevity, directions and values of the networks that have been harnessed to develop and grow the business. Contemporary poets and key figures in the arts media sector were known personally by the founder and as well as helping to form the product, also helped to garner exposure for the business. The founders' values permeate throughout the business and at start-up she built upon her Mother's philosophy of "investing for wealth not profit" and for the business the wealth was increasing the accessibility of poetry. In 2010 when the founder brought a co-director into the business, the founder sought not only someone with the skills needed for the business i.e. marketing web development and order fulfilment but a partner who was fostering her own creative talents in regard to poetry. This partnership exemplified the synergistic networking that is at the heart of the business. Similarly, sustainability is another cornerstone of the business and materials used are recyclable and/or biodegradable. The nature of the product means these sustainable values of the business are part of the

product- it is a product to be kept rather than thrown away typically, like a card would be. Values are weaved into the latest sales promotion which has involved balls of wool being available with the knitting pamphlet – wool from the co-directors’ own heard of sheep. Further ‘values’ were evident in the sale of the Christmas pamphlets where a proportion of the sales were donated to the Samaritans. This paper reports only the preliminary analysis of the study. It is the authors’ aim to present a more detailed analysis and further conceptual development at the BAM conference in September.

Implications

One of the key challenges for retail micro businesses, especially if one adopts a gender lens is moving from the start-up phase to survival and growth. This case has illustrated how using social capital drawn from past careers has been key and moreover the founder has been able to seek networks that support her values. Values that have become integral to the retail model adopted and values that have enhanced the drive to success. Thus, whilst the case identifies that new product development and a foray into the retail sector is possible without retail experience it does stress the benefits of starting up a business with significant cultural and social capital. For those not able to have the advantages of class, education and professional careers significant barriers remain.

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