

SME Marketing Mix Standardization in the B2B Market

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This paper examines SMEs price and product policy interdependencies in relation to a standardized marketing management approach. The methodology is based on four site cases with consulting companies and internal marketing departments of German SMEs, realized through 14 semi-structured in-depth interviews. This study shows that a structured marketing mix is the basis for marketing-mix-management success. This paper links the perspectives of behavioural interdependencies and SME stakeholders' strategic flexibility on the identification of mix-policies. This study suggests how to identify mix policies and their interdependencies and how to manage a structured marketing mix successfully.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of marketing-mix-management, where methods and procedures are developed for executing the marketing mix, has been a topic for researchers and practitioners for many decades (Grönroos, 1994). The aims of marketing-mix-management are to plan, organize, and control the marketing mix, to meet stakeholders' requirements, to increase revenue generation, and to improve resource allocation. The lack of an in-depth account of the manner in which a marketing mix is realised, however, has a complicated effect on the implementation of this style of management. German small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the business-to-business (B2B) industry have received little attention from researchers in this context (Kleinaltenkamp & Saab, 2009; O'Dwyer, Gilmore, & Carson, 2009), notwithstanding the fact that 89.6% of German industry consists of SMEs (IFM, 2013). Although the literature on these firms' marketing practices is well-developed (Spence & Essoussi, 2010), only a few specific studies relating to marketing-mix-management have yet been published (Spence and Essoussi, 2010; Mitchell and Hutchinson, 2012). On the other hand, a considerable amount of research has been done on marketing mix management models in the context of the coordination and arrangement of international policies (Richter, 2012).

The potential for the arrangement of an integrated marketing mix that includes firms' interdependencies is enormous and associated with high stakeholder satisfaction, making it a crucial aspect of success in the German market (Kleinaltenkamp & Saab, 2009). The behaviour of small companies follows patterns that differ from those of larger companies with regard to a structured marketing-mix-management approach (Gabrielli & Balboni, 2010). Thus, because SMEs in the German B2B industry are subjected to increased competition in the so-called D-A-CH region (which includes Germany, Austria, and Switzerland), these companies are compelled to seek opportunities that cater increasingly to stakeholders' needs to bolster stakeholder loyalty and to improve their service (O'Dwyer et al., 2009). An integrated marketing-mix with clearly-defined interdependencies represents the ultimate

response in the effort to manage these various aspects of marketing management (Kleinaltenkamp & Saab, 2009).

German B2B enterprises are challenged by rising competition in the globalised and fast-changing market, by increasing price competition, quality standards, and customer expectations, as well as by changing market demands. Only those organisations can survive that are able to establish an acceptable price while maintaining high standards of quality and increasing their customer orientation, which is made possible through a structured marketing-mix-management approach (Vignali, Vignali, & Ryding, 2012). Small and medium-sized B2B enterprises represent Germany's 'industrial elite', employing 46,000 specialists and ranking first among high-technology machinery producers worldwide (CAEF, 2013). To conduct a comprehensive and applicable marketing-mix is a mandatory component of the overall marketing strategy for German B2B enterprises (Bruhn, 2003). According to the scarce literature on SMEs' marketing-mix-management and the inherent need for an all-embracing marketing mix, the following research gap is formulated:

RG: To explore the extent to which limited resources and high competition in the German B2B industry of SMEs impact the adoption of a structured marketing-mix-management approach with integrated interdependency management.

For the analysis of this research gap, a comparative overview of the main concepts of marketing-mix-management and an analysis of market behaviour of perceived high competition are presented. Afterwards, the methodology is explained and the interviews are analysed. Finally, the implications of the study findings for marketing managers and researchers are discussed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Benefit of a Valuable Marketing Mix

The benefit of a valuable marketing-mix-management lies in the fact that it helps meet the requirements of different types of stakeholders, boosts sales and generates higher profits (Pepels, 2013). A highly structured marketing mix refers to a mix with a high impact on stakeholder loyalty (Brooks & Simkin, 2012), particularly when marketing activities are clearly communicated to the stakeholders. A well-suited marketing-mix-management programme is quickly accepted and permits stakeholders to personally identify with the marketing-mix programme. This leads to stakeholder loyalty and satisfaction and sometimes to their active engagement (Vrontis, Thrassou, & Lamprianou, 2009). The basis for this relationship is the thorough analysis of the sub-instruments the stakeholder needs, building interdependency relationships between those sub-instruments and arranging them within the mix (Pepels, 2013). This basis allows marketers to gain synergies from a standardised product portfolio and to convey this marketing concept to stakeholders who are open to its significance and attitudes (Kimery & Rinehart, 1998). Interferences within the marketing-mix possibly lead stakeholders to respond negatively to marketing activity (Green, 2008). Consequently, a re-conceptualised marketing-mix-management concept involves the identification of sub-instruments, effective management of interdependencies and the development of a valuable marketing-mix-management model.

Marketing-Mix-Management

Recent studies on marketing-mix-management focus on relevant processes and factors in SMEs' and LOs' management of marketing-mix and interdependencies. Depending on the industry and the target of the marketing plan, marketers will take approaches to each of the 4 Ps in terms of planning, organising and controlling them (AMA, 2014). Recent studies on marketing-mix-management add that the marketing mix is a set of various tools that can be controlled in combination with interdependency management (Chenhall, 2007; Desmond, 2004; Skitmore, 2009). Given these facts, these processes are analysed and compared.

Marketing Mix Planning

Marketing managers need to account for interdependencies among the 4 Ps and marketing mix planning, particularly when determining the appropriate level of budget and its allocation to marketing strategies and the practical implementation of marketing-mix targets (Naik, Raman, & Winer, 2005). Marketing mix planning is, in particular, the synchronisation of all operational sub-instruments to achieve a perfect combination to meet corporate and marketing objectives (Brooks & Simkin, 2012).

Within SMEs, the marketing mix managers are the functional persons who plan the marketing-mix and allocate resources and products on the market (Cespedes, 2012). Banterle, Cavaliere, Carraresi, and Stranieri (2013) further note that the marketing-mix plan has to be aligned according to the overall business strategy. Within the marketing mix, only objectives which can be definitively realised and objectively measured should be planned (Banterle et al., 2013).

Marketing Mix Organisation

Marketing mix organisation can be linked back to marketing mix planning, as it focuses not only on target derivation, strategy definition and practical implementation of derived targets, but is also based on the practical implementation of marketing mix targets (Robins, 1991). Robins (1991) stresses that the marketing team should give individual and detailed attention to each element of the marketing mix, the evaluation has to be continuous and the marketing mix organisation should be more rigorous. The crucial step in deriving targets is to plan alternative actions that are achieved through a thorough marketing mix plan (Helbig, 2009). Gatignon and Hanssens (1987) note that LOs tend to measure the effectiveness of mix variables with time series or cross-sectional data. In the case of SMEs, marketing mix effectiveness is measured by focusing only on a small subset of marketing mix variables and not on the entire mix (Herche, 1994). Furthermore, in SMEs, the organisation of the entire marketing mix is handled in a less formalised manner than in LOs (Dickinson & Ramaseshan, 2004). Wilthorn, Larsson, and Henriksson (2013, p. 4) state that in practice there exist differences in large organisations compared to smaller ones with regard to the organisation of the marketing mix, “where it is argued that small-sized enterprises typically are family owned or entrepreneurial organisations with a more collegial and less formalised internal system”. Gatignon and Hanssens (1987) add that, in SMEs, the key elements regarding the organisation of the marketing mix widely differ from those used in large operations.

Marketing Mix Control

The marketing mix which SMEs and LOs introduce must be subject to control. Clearly quantifiable and measurable objectives are the main factor for marketing managers to focus on when controlling the marketing mix. This requires control over budget expenditure, performance of each mix variable and the monitoring of interdependencies (Lidstone, 1987). LOs of the German B2B industry develop internal fluid sets of guidelines for action that require constant innovation in the light of changing circumstances (Holloway, 2004). To maximise the effort of marketing mix control, different control systems are used by large enterprises: they use performance control, create strategic control, carry out financial control or develop quality control mechanisms (Holloway, 2004). In practice, it is often difficult to discern how control of the marketing mix is achieved, as there also exist differences between sales-driven and relationship-driven marketers (Merrilees, Rundle-Thiele, & Lye, 2011). Comparing LOs and SMEs of the German B2B industry, the former tend to be relationship-driven and listen more to the needs of stakeholders, and may adapt the marketing mix accordingly (Merrilees et al., 2011). The latter are much more sales-driven and make adjustments to marketing reasons to boost sales and increase profit margins (Swoboda & Olejnik, 2013). Needless to say, a sales-driven SME of the German B2B industry is able to use their niche market power to set differential price margins across different markets. Merrilees et al. (2011) find that relationship-driven firms may not necessarily make greater adaptations to their marketing mix to meet stakeholders’ requirements, but will exercise more control over it.

Interdependency Management

It is suggested that interdependency management can be viewed as a strategic process for preparing, implementing and optimising mix-variables and their interdependencies and embedding this within a marketing-mix-management approach within the overall organisational structure (Patanakul & Milosevic, 2008). According to Naik et al. (2005), marketing-mix-management can only be successful if interdependencies between mix variables are used in a synergic manner. A few papers study interdependency management in SMEs, and their results show that it is an integrative part of marketing-mix-management (Codita, 2010). Jagpal, Sudit, and Vinod (1982, p. 401) state that identifying and defining marketing-mix interdependencies “allows more effective control of marketing instruments”. This explicitly enhances productiveness “of a given marketing instrument to depend on the time path of the entire marketing mix”. Looking forward and reasoning backward increases an SME’s own optimal decisions in response to the best decisions made by all other competitors (Naik et al., 2005). In conclusion, SMEs do not seem to have been attracted by the advantages of interdependency management in the past, but have changed their opinion due to increased competition and fast-changing stakeholder requirements. A summary of this discussion can be found in table 1. The literature review and the contradictions found there lead to the following research questions:

How is marketing-mix-management standardisation realised by SMEs in the German B2B industry?

What are the key drivers in the interdependency management of SMEs in the German B2B industry?

What processes do SMEs follow in interdependency management, and how are these processes different from those of LOs?

TABLE 1
COMPARISON OF MARKETING MIX MANAGEMENT IN SMEs AND LOs

	SMEs	LOs
Marketing mix planning	Limited and reductive concept with functional purpose.	Fully integrated concept within the marketing-mix-management approach. This concept is aligned with the overall business strategy.
Marketing mix organisation	Intuitive organisation of marketing-mix-management objectives based on stakeholder requirements and developed by the entrepreneur. Product portfolio sometimes exceeds the capabilities of the SME.	Fully developed objectives that are easy to measure. Objectives are clearly communicated to all involved parties. Objectives are deduced from wealthy product portfolio. The aim is to maximise market coverage in a highly competitive market.
Marketing mix control	A limited number of strategies are used by an accountable person. Objectives of marketing control are maximising profit and minimising market overlaps. Different levels of control strategies have been identified. These are sales-driven.	A variety of processes are used on both a regional and international level. The aim is to measure clearly quantifiable objectives. Fluid set of guidelines in performance control, strategic control, financial control and measurement of stakeholder expectations. Marketing mix control is part of the overall business strategy and is relationship-driven.
Interdependency management	Increasing interest since 2011 regarding the identification and definition of behavioural interdependencies. Do not possess the necessary knowledge for carrying out interdependency management. A range of processes are imitated from LOs.	Aware of interdependency management and in many cases have company standards on how to identify and define interdependencies, mainly between price and product. Emphasis is on optimal resource allocation, low cost tactics and strategic foresight.

METHODOLOGY

For this study, a qualitative design of multiple case studies was selected to illuminate the set of decisions to be made by SMEs in the German B2B industry to apply a structured marketing-mix-management approach and to find out which key drivers in interdependency management are necessary to apply such an approach successfully. This applies particularly to processes which have to be understood rather than measured. Several studies have used this approach for measuring successful marketing-mix-management within SMEs (Frank, Sommer, & Haug, 2007).

For this study, 14 cases of SMEs within the German B2B industry were selected (Frank et al., 2007). Marketing-mix-management in the German B2B industry is important because of its influence on cost

saving due to standardisation, better resource allocation and higher satisfaction of stakeholder expectations. According to present estimations, in the German B2B industry, particularly in SMEs, no more than 60 specialists are employed in Germany (CAEF, 2013). The 14 cases selected for this study thus provide a representative sample. The sample size of 14 was determined by the number of interviews required to achieve relative theoretical saturation (Bryant, 2014). The criteria for the selection were: SMEs with fewer than 250 employees, enterprises which produce B2B machineries in Germany, and enterprises which employ marketing managers who are accountable for marketing mix decisions to be made. Only SMEs of the B2B industry were selected. All firms were contacted via the Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Federal Association of the German B2B industry. Only SMEs with an internal marketing department were selected where marketing-mix decisions are made by marketing managers working in these departments. This research is considered as exploratory, because “not much is known about the situation at hand or no information is available on how similar problems or research issues have been solved in the past” (Sekaran, 2006, p. 95). The qualitative nature of this research yielded semi-structured in-depth interviews with the three different interviewee types to obtain insights. This cross-sectoral, single-respondent and multi-size approach has been used for similar studies in German B2B companies by Hofstede, Fritz, Canavari, and Oosterkamp (2010), who observed the marketing processes of German SMEs. The questions of the semi-structured in-depth interviews, which are open-ended, are summarised in the case study protocol. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. The questions which the participants were asked ranged from realisation of marketing-mix-management, main drivers in interdependency management, main objectives of marketing-mix-management and realisation of control to the impact of limited resources/high competition on such an approach. The characteristics of the interview subject population and company are summarised in table 2.

TABLE 2
CHARACTERISTISC OF THE INTERVIEW SUBJECT POPULATION

Number of participants	14
Job level	2 chief executive officers 4 senior marketing managers 2 chief marketers 4 consultants 2 principal marketing-mix-management experts
Job role	3 company administration (overall business administration) 6 planning and organisation of marketing mix 2 control of marketing-mix-management activities 1 assisting in marketing-mix-management activities
Status	4 external consulting companies 5 staff 5 chief executive officers
Experience in marketing-mix-management	4 with 10 or more years 8 with 8 or more years 2 with 5 or more years

INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

Origins of Marketing-Mix-Management, Its Planning and Organisation

Of the interviewees, four provided profound knowledge about marketing-mix-management, particularly about planning and organising the marketing mix. With regard to using a standardised approach for identifying and defining sub-instruments, eight interviewees believed that such an approach impacts the successful application of a structured marketing mix. The other interviewees believed that such an approach was not necessary, or mentioned that particular knowledge in identifying and defining sub-instruments is not available. These interviewees developed their marketing-mix based on a macro- and micro- environmental analysis, not focusing on particular sub-instruments or their interdependencies. Of the interviewees, two mentioned that identifying sub-instruments is cost- and time-consuming. The core variables of product policies are product features, attributes and service. With regard to price variables, pricing and abatement are used most. Development of pricing strategies has been realised over many years and is thus time- and cost-intensive. The impediment of grey imports and parallel imports has been mentioned as a core benefit of a standardised pricing strategy. Of the interviewees, two mentioned that in standardising the price mix internal issues such as goals and objectives of the company, research and production have to be taken into account. In planning a structured marketing mix, the activities have been focused on analysing, particularly competition-, macro-, micro-, and organisational factors. All interviewees used common analysis tools for examining the current situation. SWOT analysis, BCG-analysis, PLC, Porter's five forces were mentioned most often. Few interviewees used marketing-mix-management approaches, particularly brand aid-models, mix-mapping methods and stratics models to plan and organise mix variables. Interestingly, four interviewees mentioned that they plan to use a structured marketing-mix-management approach in the future.

Marketing Mix Control

SMEs in the German B2B industry have developed several strategies to undertake marketing mix control to measure the performance outcome of mix variables, budget expenditure and stakeholder satisfaction. The interviewees mentioned that clearly quantifiable and measurable marketing mix objectives are the main factor in successfully controlling a marketing mix. This proposition is clearly underlined by the current literature, which states that mix variables have to be quantified to be successfully measured (Lidstone, 1987). In practice, SMEs use a wide range of decisions outlining the marketing mix strategies to be adopted and the tactics to be employed to achieve the plan's objectives. Of the interviewees, seven mentioned that they used marketing cost analysis and management by objectives as marketing control tools. All respondents further noted that competitor analysis and stakeholder analysis are requirements for controlling marketing-mix targets. SMEs in the German B2B industry base their marketing mix control on long-term figures of market share, revenue, profit and return on investment. The issue on controlling is communicated via a clear and rigorously defined process to all involved parties. Of the interviewees, four emphasised marketing mix mapping and market segmentation approaches as valuable long-term control tools. Relationship-driven companies control their activities more successfully, as they have greater access to information about stakeholders' wants, marketplaces and competitors. These findings are confirmed by Merrilees et al. (2011), who state that relationship-driven firms exercise their marketing mix control to meet stakeholder needs and have more control over this process than sales-driven companies. The interviewees further noted that long-term control is the basis for exceeding stakeholder expectations. It seems that relationship-driven companies possess much larger information bases for carrying out control issues than sales-driven companies. The interviews show not only that clear controlling guidelines and the commitment of all involved parties are essential, but also that it is necessary to integrate the controlling task within the marketing-mix-management process and overall business strategy. By doing so, a structured marketing-mix-management process is ensured.

Interdependency Management

The interviewees suggested that a relational model is used to support the strategic process for preparing, implementing and optimising mix variables, and for embedding this process within a structured marketing-mix-management approach. The participants mentioned that such a relational model is a

radical innovation and enables the marketer to add value to the marketing mix and to increase the chance of successful application. Of the interviewees, seven mentioned that such a framework leads to repeat purchase and enhances stakeholder satisfaction. This argument is supported by the fact that identification of interdependencies helps the marketer to optimise mix variables. This in turn enables the definition of such variables according to stakeholder requirements. The interviewees stated that such a framework is dictated by German B2B trends, because these SMEs launch up to two new product lines a year. They also mentioned that the companies have to offer training to enable such innovations. For the successful application of a marketing-mix-management framework, mix variables have to be used in a synergic manner, as this allows for the effective application of marketing instruments, reduces time and saves money. German SMEs standardise their products to a high degree, which also ensures production efficiency. By managing interdependencies in a synergic way, productiveness is increased and unnecessary waste of resources is reduced. Of the interviewees, six stated that they know many marketers do not possess the necessary knowledge for managing interdependencies; two said they know marketers who have never heard of this issue.

DISCUSSION

In comparison to Los, where marketing-mix-management is created via measurable objectives by the controlling department to answer the needs of stakeholders, increase business performance and enhance resource allocation, marketing-mix-management in German B2B SMEs is based on the overall business strategy of the general management. The marketing mix creation should concentrate on much more focused contexts such as product launch, attributes and features, as realised by German B2B SMEs. Consistent with the literature on marketing-mix-management in LOs, the general management of SMEs has to concentrate on a manageable product portfolio with no more than four product lines (Kauf & Kniess, 2014). Over the years, marketers in SMEs have gained knowledge about how to measure the effectiveness of mix variables (Hofstede et al., 2010). Research shows that German B2B SMEs use less formalised internal systems than LOs to plan, organise, and control a structured marketing mix and to identify price and product policy interdependencies. This leads to the first proposition:

P1 In German B2B SMEs, less formalised marketing-mix-management approaches are used because of missing knowledge.

This study confirms the findings by Coviello, Brodie, Danaher, and Johnston (2002) that firms plan their marketing mix based only on a small subset of marketing mix variables, not on the entire mix. Studies show that handling the whole marketing mix in a formalised manner leads to higher stakeholder satisfaction (Dickinson & Ramaseshan, 2004). LOs make full use of primary macro- and micro-economic data. This enhances the integration of price and product policy interdependencies into the marketing mix and the exploitation of synergic effects. The contribution of this article, therefore, is that marketing mix variables have to be developed in a synergic and formalised manner. The measurement of the effectiveness of price and product variables serves as a basis to enhance marketing-mix-management in SMEs. Since these firms have limited resources for marketing mix creation and interdependency management, measurable marketing mix objectives increase German B2B SMEs' chance of applying the marketing-mix successfully, hence the following research proposition regarding marketing mix control in German B2B SMEs:

P2a In German B2B SMEs, clearly quantifiable marketing mix objectives are a relevant factor of success to be used for marketing mix control.

P2b For German B2B SMEs, clearly quantifiable marketing mix objectives provide a low cost enhancement of marketing-mix-management.

It was also found that functional and systematically outlined marketing mix objectives were used in the development of a strong marketing mix to achieve planned objectives, thereby supporting a number of studies (Lidstone, 1987). Clearly outlined responsibilities, direct communication and staff responsible for taking corrective actions and management by objectives seem to prevail, enabling higher profits and

providing a solid long-term basis for enhancing marketing-mix-management success. This leads to the third set of propositions:

P3a In German B2B SMEs, functional and systematically outlined marketing mix objectives contribute to the development of a strong marketing mix.

P3b In German B2B SMEs, functional and systematically outlined marketing mix objectives provide a basis for long-term success.

As suggested by Gatignon and Hanssens (1987), a functional interdependency framework helps provide optimal resource allocation and increased efficiency in pricing strategies. In sum, functionally outlined marketing mix objectives provide segment standardisation statements. The functional interdependency framework is an integral part of the marketing-mix-management approach. To support the integration of the interdependency framework, as well as the integration of price and product policy standardisation, the introduction of prioritisation, classification, mapping and controlling of interdependencies as separate steps enhances marketing mix success and helps lower cost while raising efficiency. On this basis, two propositions are made:

P4a In German B2B SMEs, interdependency management increases marketing mix success, particularly regarding higher efficiency and lower costs.

P4b In German B2B SMEs, an integrated interdependency framework and standardised identification strategy of policies are essential in supporting marketing-mix-management.

Managerial Implications

This study demonstrates that the use of a structured marketing-mix-management approach in German B2B SMEs provides positive results. Marketing mix managers have to be aware that the way they identify and define price and product policies and their interdependencies strongly impacts both stakeholder satisfaction and resource allocation. Defined mix variables therefore have to be synergic in their behaviour. Among standardised product features, attributes and pricing strategies which have to be standardised before structuring the marketing mix enhance marketing-mix-management at low costs. Aligning marketing-mix-management strategies with overall business strategies reduces risk while creating new product lines and penetrating new markets. A clear procedure of managing price and product policy interdependencies both enhances marketing-mix success and serves as a knowledge tool for marketers. Finally, a strict focus has to be kept on a manageable product portfolio, which should include no more than four machineries. Clear communication between all involved parties might be ensured with a standardised request for information.

Limits and Future Research

This study was limited to 14 marketers specialising in the B2B industry and can, therefore, only be generalised with caution. Only one key marketer from each organisation was interviewed, which is justified by the fact that SMEs generally employ no more than one marketing mix manager.

Nevertheless, future research may improve the generalisability of the exploratory findings presented in this research within the application of a structured marketing-mix-management approach and across other markets. The findings of this study provide further topics to be investigated in the field of marketing-mix-management. By answering the following questions, further insights could be provided:

To what extent is the use of price and product policies standardised by German B2B SMEs?

Under what conditions are price and product policies identified and defined?

Which change management strategies are efficient for marketing-mix-management in German B2B SMEs?

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