

MARKETING PRACTICES AND CHALLENGES IN DEVELOPING ECONOMIES: A CASE STUDY OF FIJI'S SEAFOOD INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines some of the key marketing practices and challenges in developing economies. Fiji's seafood industry is also discussed, which no study has actually investigated. This paper fills this significant research gap by discussing the alarming challenges faced by seafood dwellers and delivers several theoretical and managerial implications for the target audience. Academic literature, observation and industry experience were the key sources of information. The findings reveal that the role of marketing has increased in developing economies due to the effects of globalisation and trade liberalisation. Fiji lacks the institutional, logistical and technological systems to support its vital seafood industry. Reasons are provided for the challenges as well as their implications.

Keywords: Fiji, marketing, developing economies, seafood industry, institutions, markets.

INTRODUCTION

With sluggish growth in the developed markets of the world, companies are turning to developing markets for business expansion (An & Puttitanun 2010; Chudnovsky, Lopex & Pupato 2006). There are a number of reasons why such markets are desirable and attractive. First, there is good potential for improved sales and revenue. Strong brands which are globally recognized could lead to increased market share rapidly with rapid customer advertising and spread of products across neighboring countries. Second, recession, low fertility and change in demographics in the developed world have also led to a shift. There is a growing interest in the role of marketing in developing economies due to trade liberalization, reforms and increased interdependence of markets around the world (Okoroafo & Torkornoo 1995; Jones 2010). The role of marketing, its essential elements and tools have proven very important as the survival and sustainability of contemporary businesses and institutions depend on it. Satisfying modern day customers at a profit is challenging and complex but it remains an essential cog of any marketing initiative in the twenty-first century. The performance of business activities designed to plan, price, promote and direct the flow of goods and services has remained a key feature in all marketing efforts. Developing economies typically share common characteristics such as low consumer incomes (compared to Western countries), high inflation rates, indirect taxation and import duties, inadequate

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distribution and logistics infrastructure, exposure of consumers to Western lifestyles, smaller competitors and markets traditionally remain sellers markets (Batra 1997; Dao 2013).

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the key marketing practices and challenges in developing economies and make some useful suggestions for the target audience. The case of Fiji's seafood industry is also conferred. While there has been research in the past in the field of marketing in developing countries, very limited erratic work has been done on Fiji's marketing environment and its seafood industry. Essentially, according to knowledge, no academic literature has ever been published which investigates the challenges and implications pertaining to this industry. Hence, this case is intriguing and a valuable contributor to fill a significant research gap. Both academic and practitioner publication sources has been used. Observation and the author's industry experience were also popular primary sources of collecting information. This vastly helped to gather insights into the subject under investigation due to the severe lack of reliable material pertaining to the seafood industry in Fiji. This paper is structured as follows. The first part consists of the introduction. The second is followed by a discussion of the marketing practices in developing countries followed by an overview of Fiji's marketing environment. The fourth part consists of a case study on Fiji's seafood industry with its challenges. Managerial implications are followed by the limitations and future directions with the conclusion in the respective order.

MARKETING PRACTICES IN DEVELOPING ECONOMIES

Marketing activities are used quite extensively in developing economies to market products and services and effectively engage sellers and buyers (Elaydi & Harrison 2013; Moser & Butler 2010); therefore marketing activities in developing economies is on the rise and its concepts and principles are largely applicable to developing economies. (Chudnovsky et.al., 2006). Globalisation and trade liberalisation have made a significant impact in developing countries despite the dilemma concerning its influence and the readiness of such economies. Several factors affect the marketing activities and practices in developing economies. These mainly include factors related to political and legal environments and socio-cultural factors. There are also issues that strongly relate to poor infrastructure, high inflation rates coupled with weak dollar value, political instability, trade barriers, lack of aid, sanctions, obsolete communication systems and political risks and uncertainties. Fiji's current climate with a military backed interim government is a classic example in the above context. Since the last military coup in 2006, Fiji has been suspended from several regional forums and trade agreements and the travel sanctions in place have seriously hampered growth and prosperity. For example in Fiji, all major business activities are concentrated in the capital city Suva which doesn't have a fully equipped international airport.

According to Srinivasa and Sutzb (2008), goods and services that are sold in developing countries are of questionable quality since the governments implement legislations which enable trade regardless of suitability and are also subject to a price ceiling. Similarly, there are limited funds to carry out effective promotional and research activities as most of the information disseminated to the public are controlled by authorities (Kandil 2011; Sadri & Williamson 1989). Attention is given more to the production of standardised products and services made through mass production since basic needs are given priority. Thus, manufacturing and production is seen as more important than engaging in twenty-first century marketing activities. Marketing is seen as a quasi-parasitic activity which will not

benefit the overall economic growth and development of a developing economy (Appiah-Adu 1998). Developing economies are very much characterised by the conditions of scarcity and this cultivates the increased demands on manufacturing and production (El-Khasawneh 2012).

Developing economies are also characterised by a small percentage of an exclusive class of people mostly comprising of foreigners, expatriates and the rich locals. This opulent class of people usually demand imported products and services while the rest are forced to rely on domestically made goods which are essentially inadequate and of questionable quality. This majority also resort to purchase cheap imports from other developing countries. The elite class are loyal to the brands sold in their home countries and thus they do not rely on domestic marketing efforts to buy them. Sleuwaegen & Goedhuys (2002) mention that because domestically made products are generally simple and aimed to satisfy basic needs, contemporary marketing activities in developing economies do not have a part to play at any key stage. Furthermore, many developing economies have a 'dual economy' characteristic which means that there are only a few urban living areas which have a reasonable demand for sophisticated products and services (OECD 2009). This modern class also have higher incomes levels making income distribution skewed towards the rest of the population. These characteristics pose a significant challenge to marketers to implement marketing strategies across the country or at least to many segments.

MARKETING IN FIJI'S CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

The marketing environment in Fiji has changed significantly over the past decade from a non-competitive and monopolised epoch to a free market economy. During the production era, consumers didn't have many choices or alternatives and had to settle with whatever was produced. This was the case of most developing economies where the marketing principles were existent in theory but hardly put into practise (El-Khasawneh 2012; Narteh 2012). However, from the last decade, focus has shifted to customers and a more open and free market system has emerged. Competition has increased and the emphasis has generally been on marketing activities that satisfy customer needs and wants at a profit. This has become a key strategy since Fijian customers have reasonably modernized and their needs and requirements have transformed and increased overtime. Thus, it has become the responsibility of the marketer to offer good quality products and services, value for money and competitive prices. Competitive pricing will always remain an important element in any marketing strategy in Fiji since most customers are middle to lower class income earners and the preference of cost over quality in many situations play a big part in their purchasing decisions. Narsey (2008) has demonstrated in his study that Fiji's economic environment has changed over the last decade with an increase in marketing activities and a revolution of customer needs and wants.

Quality, creation and modification of new products and services suitable to the Fijian market will be fundamental to gain competitive advantage. Modification and the creation of new products and services are important to maintain long-term sustainability, performance and demand (Mamaghani 2010). Competitive pricing will play a key role as Fijian consumers are very sensitive to the cost of purchase. To support these strategies, costs need to be streamlined. Therefore various organizations are undertaking restructuring activities to bring in more efficiency and competitiveness. Many Fijian based businesses have also increased

elementary promotional activities to aggressively target customers to sell their products. To enable their cause, many have also resorted to cheap and non-credible suppliers whose products may not be permissible to developed countries for reasons related to quality and safety.

Price has always remained a fundamental component in Fiji's economy given the abridged income levels of most customers. George and Prabhu (2003) mention that average consumer incomes are relatively low in developing economies which leads to greater price sensitivity. For example, in Fiji, the current national minimum wage rate is two dollars per hour (Fiji Times, 30 January 2014). As Fiji is an import dependant country, the devaluation of the dollar after the 2006 military coup has had significant impact in the pricing of goods and services and marketing activities. Retailers have resorted to cheaper suppliers and lower quality of products and services to offset this depreciation. Due to challenges related to macroeconomic issues, quality of products and services and the standard of living has also been hindered. A classic example of one of many serious macroeconomic problems in Fiji was recently reported in the daily newspaper that there was a shocking 83,000 people unemployed in Fiji (The Fiji Times, 30 May 2014). Contemporary marketing efforts and promotional activities are also compromised due to expensive imports and pressures to maintain an affordable price.

Selling products of questionable standards with high mark-ups is no surprise in the Fijian markets. Some products sold in supermarkets have labels written in foreign languages and many don't adhere to local authority guidelines. The consumer council of Fiji has highlighted these issues to the government on numerous occasions. The reality is that Fijian retailers have to depend on imported products largely since most items cannot be produced domestically. There has also been pricing issues with imported products in Fiji. The consumer council of Fiji has stressed that the Fijian government provides duty-reductions to certain imported products but this has not had any impact on the prices at the retail level (Fiji Sun, 06 November, 2013). Hence, there is an urgent need for a stringent and robust system in place to monitor duty-reduction prices to ensure that its effects are filtered down to ordinary consumers.

FIJI'S SEAFOOD INDUSTRY

Seafood marketing has been a key element in the Fijian society for over a century. According to the Fiji Islands Bureau of Statistics (2013), Fiji's fish exports amounts to about 200 million Fijian dollars annually. Land and sea is a very important resource for any ordinary Fijian and their attachment to this natural reserve can be linked to ancestral and traditional ties. Seafood marketing in Fiji involves more than just selling fresh produce from the sea. It is associated with a lot of hard work with regards to fishing, anticipated risks, harvesting, preservation and finding suitable logistics and transportation to the markets. According to Ram (1993), it is the Fijian men who go out fishing for commercial purposes and women are confined to just small scale fishing for family purposes. However, this trend has changed significantly. Both genders are involved in commercial fishing but women remain underrepresented in national fishing statistics.

Rural dwellers of Fiji are heavily involved in the seafood industry (Rawlinson, Milton, Blaber, Sesewa & Sharma 1996; Veitayaki 1998; Vunisea 1996). A survey by Rawlinson et.

al., (1996) revealed that 93 percent of households in Fiji consumed at least one type of seafood once a week. The fact that Fiji is a developing country and a vast majority of people live in semi-urban and rural areas, their reliance on seafood is significant. A study done by (Vunisea 2004) revealed that 43 percent of fishermen are Fijians, while less than 1 percent is Indo-Fijians. This highlights the fact that the native population of Fiji are most involved in all aspects of fishing, while the Indo-Fijian population are mostly confined to the preparation and post harvesting stages of fishing.

Fiji's municipal markets generally have readily available seafood all around the year. Although logistics and distribution is a challenge to communities, the demand for seafood over the years has inspired sellers to overcome these problems to sell their harvest. Some roads have been upgraded with the upgrading of the markets where the produce is sold. Due to these issues, people also sell seafood on roadsides, restaurants and shops. Hotels in Fiji also demand considerable amount of seafood making them a good market for the fisherman. The traditional barter system is still present at a small scale along family and kinship lines. There is also the issue of undersized fish, crabs and selfish being readily sold in the Fijian markets. Authorities have often highlighted the need to proper catchments; however the measures to implement and monitor these laws seem nonexistent. Education and information on seafood stock depletion, risks to the industry and the fundamental need to harness a sustainable industry does not seem to be effectively undertaken. There are community meetings and gatherings to educate people but many are too busy with other chores and simply don't get the message. There is also the issue of poverty and survival, so people just continue to do whatever it takes to fulfil the important needs of life. Vunisea (2004) mentions that a large number of Fijians lack the technical knowledge of sustainable fishing.

CHALLENGES

There remain enormous challenges for Fiji's seafood industry. The institutional structures to support seafood marketing in Fiji is absent (McGoon 2012; Vunisea 2004). In the rural areas of Fiji and many fragments of the metropolitan division, transportation systems are very traditional and basic and they lack the efficiency and robustness to support the important seafood industry. Support from family and friends who own trucks, carriers and small boats are often used to cart goods through muddy feeder roads. The transportation mediums do not operate on regular basis and sellers simply depend on the availability of any type of transportation available at any one time of the day or night. As a result, safety standards are seriously compromised as trucks, carriers and even boats are usually overloaded and open. The fact that most seafood dwellers are based in the rural areas, a boat ride usually takes six to eight hours and then another four to five hours on trucks to the market (Vunisea 2004).

Distribution channels in Fiji have never been up to standard especially in the rural areas where seafood cultivation is mostly concentrated. Fiji is decades behind infrastructure rehabilitation. Developing economies have to ensure that efficient logistical and transport systems are in place to enable trade to take place in a competent manner (Oyelaran-Oyeyinka & Lal 2006). Most rural transportation systems in Fiji are either not developed to cater for the modern day activities or obsolete. Present and past governments have also neglected rural areas as the focus has been more on the urban areas with financial constraints being a major issue (Khan & Khan 2007). At present, two major bridges in the capital city Suva has been

closed as they are in an irreparable state and about thirty major bridges around the country is in need for urgent repair (McGoon 2012).

Sellers regularly sleep overnight in the markets as they travel from far distances to bring their produce. According to Vunisea (2004) people normally come a day early and either board with relatives or sleep overnight outside the market. The key reason for this is that sellers want to secure a good selling spot. While this practice still continues, some renovations to market facilities have provided temporary relief. In addition, seafood is also smoked for preservation purposes as vendors don't have means to buy equipment for refrigeration. These issues also limit vendors to come to the market only once a week. A lot of sleep is lost and meals are also missed due to these adversities. Even the time spent fishing and collecting seafood also have health implications. According to Naikaso (2011), a report issued by the Ministry of Health revealed that many rural women in Fiji are malnourished and have iron deficiencies.

The markets' where sea produce is traded is also not up to standard. Most of the vendors are normally seen sitting in the hot sun or heavy rain to sell their produce. The shaded areas of the market are occupied by merchants who are able to afford the local council fees on a long-term basis. This is a very unfortunate sight and there are also health and safety implications attached to these open areas. Proper disposal measures are also a problem in the market areas. Crop peelings and seafood waste disposals are regularly seen lying around in huge piles covered with insects and undesirable odour. Food safety and security is a major issue in many developing countries which have wider implications on the health and wellbeing of its population (Yu & You 2013).

Financial support is a key challenge in developing nations (Chinn & Prasad 2003; Torres-Fuchslochera 2010), and Fiji's seafood industry is no different. Credit or financial support from institutions to assist people is limited. Most of the unsecured credit is taken from family members, relatives or small shops. Thus, long-term sustainable planning and development is seriously impeded. People who are involved in the fishing industry usually buy groceries on credit and arrange transportation and other related costs on deferred payment methods. Disbursements are only made when the produce is sold and this leaves them with little profit. This is seen as more of a vicious cycle where people are obliged to sell their produce to pay off their accumulated debts and are left with barely any money. This also has implications on health as people are forced to purchase inferior quality goods to feed their families. This is especially relevant in areas where there is heavy reliance on marine resources for a living.

It is evident that people who are involved in Fiji's seafood industry have to blend their traditional lifestyles with modern day marketing challenges. They have to organise many aspects of their traditional chores, catching their sea produce and then getting them to the market to sell. Proper planning, organising and coordination of activities within the villages are vital to improve marketing efforts. Rural networks would considerably assist fisherman and also lead to improved techniques of fishing, awareness and education.

The government of the day has a huge role to play in helping achieve a sustainable seafood industry. Fiji has several Marine Protected Areas (MPA's) with marine conservation programs which started in 1999. However, government reports have shown that people are still poaching into the MPA's as controlling these areas is very difficult due to the severe lack of resources (The Fiji Times, 25 October 2012). Providing comprehensive and effective

educational programs on fishing, disparaging fishing practices, overfishing and long-term implications on excessive fishing would be very useful. Programs relating to health issues, catchments, harvesting, preservation techniques and the purchase of poor quality of food items is also a priority. Transportation and logistics especially in the rural areas require urgent attention to bring in efficiency in the seafood industry. Micro- finance schemes to support and boost individual fish sellers should also be readily available to avoid unsecured loans with excessively high interest rates from unscrupulous dealers.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

This study has a number of managerial implications which are discussed below. First, a correlation exists between the gross domestic product of developing economies and the performance and level of its marketing activities. Based on this precept, the marketing activities in the developed world would be different and in many facets, thus less relevant to developing economies. The suggestion here is that the more developed a country is particularly in relation to its GDP, the higher the level and performance of its marketing activities. This implication is also applicable to a developing economy like Fiji. This paper stress that there is a significant need for Fiji to improve the quality of its products and services and raise the standard of its marketing performance and activities. This advocates that in order for this to happen, Fiji like many other developing economies has to ensure that efficient infrastructure and institutional systems are in place to support modern and effective marketing activities.

Second, the current business environment implies that developing markets so far have not attained the position of a full buyer's market. For example, Fiji has embraced the marketing practices and concepts in principle; however it still has significant challenges and problems with its execution stage. Essentially, the service offerings and delivery is still in its basic or in some cases even at premature stages. Nonetheless, customer care, satisfaction and wellbeing will most likely take a crucial role especially in future as the environment continues to be more competitive with the increasing amounts of new players. Key components of environment such as technological, socio-cultural, political, legal and competitive aspects should be thoroughly understood and prudently considered by practitioners as they have significant influences in marketing activities and practices.

Third, the need to have effective and robust policies to expedite marketing practices and strategies is essential. This suggests that governments have to generate sound policies relating to the access of investment funds, abolition of exchange restrictions, vigorous foreign exchange control systems and better infrastructure. Therefore, to encourage successful marketing practices and strategies for a profitable market, effective policies would have to be considered in areas relating to finance, infrastructure, communications, and transportation. This also implies that it is very important for authorities in developing markets ensure that their respective markets remain sustainably attractive at elevated levels to local and foreign investors. However, new players particularly those who are foreign based should expect challenges relating to resources, technological support and infrastructure.

Finally, this study insinuates that good research has to be a priority for such economies in all fundamental areas, including competition from foreign products and services. More attention is also mandatory in areas related to funding and capital investments. Developing economies

does have its problems, but it also has some promising features and qualities. With strong internal attributes of a company, it may be possible to endure the costs and risks with the help of apposite strategies and resources at its disposal.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study offers potential limitations. First, the focus of this paper has been on Fiji's seafood industry, the analysis and implications may not be generalizable to other agricultural sectors work contexts. It may be possible to pursue similar research using samples from different industries. Second, the methodology of data collection limits the possibility to attribute any causality. Information was gathered via observation and personal experiences since reliable material was severely limited or non-existent. In addition, objective data obtained directly from the dwellers and key stakeholders would have been more rich and useful rather than capturing perceptions through personal observations, understanding or even indirect sources.

Further studies could focus on other pacific island countries to enable a comparative analysis for various developing countries. This would assist in identifying problems and developing policies collaboratively. Assistance from donor countries could also be sought through joint efforts and identification of common needs. Future studies could also examine the social and economic effects of the seafood industry on the dwellers. Also, a worthy and intriguing area of investigation would be to examine what effect if any does substandard marketing practices and lack of control mechanisms have on consumers and consumer watchdog agencies in Fiji.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to discuss the marketing practices and challenges in developing economies by putting Fiji's seafood industry at centre stage. The marketing practices in developing economies are fast changing from a non competitive and monopolised age to a free market economy. However to facilitate this shift, developing economies have to ensure that efficient infrastructure and institutional systems are in place to support effective marketing activities.

The rural areas of Fiji are heavily involved in the seafood industry. Fiji lacks the institutional, logistical and technological systems to develop a twenty first century marketing framework. Numerous governments have come into power but no serious initiatives were taken to build and improve the infrastructure around the country leaving Fiji decades behind in infrastructure rehabilitation. Military coups, sanctions, despairing policies and grimy politics are fundamental causes of the problem. As a result, the marketing efforts to enhance trade in a modern market era are dampened. It has now become an absolute necessity to create an environment that recognises, protects and strengthens the marketing practices in Fiji's vital seafood industry.

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