

The Role of Marketing Skills in the Growth of SMMEs in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe

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Abstract:

This study investigated the role of marketing skills in the growth of Small, Medium, and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs) in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe. It focused on four key components: certified marketing personnel, knowledgeable marketing personnel, the success of marketing campaigns, and customer engagement. The research examined whether these marketing skills contribute to the growth and success of SMMEs in the region. Two sets of samples were engaged namely 233 SME operators/employees for a structured questionnaire survey with analysis focused on correlations between marketing skills and business growth outcomes. The findings indicate a positive relationship between marketing skills and business growth, with many participants recognising the impact of marketing activities on development. However, challenges regarding the certification and expertise of marketing personnel were identified. The manuscript offers valuable insights into the way marketing skills drive SMME growth and provides actionable recommendations for improving marketing competencies. It underscores the importance of certified, knowledgeable personnel, successful campaigns, and effective customer engagement, advocating for investment in certified marketing professionals and continuous training. Additionally, the study emphasises the role of marketing in fostering business growth and recommends enhancing marketing strategies, customer relationships, and policy support to ensure the sustained success of SMMEs.

Keywords:

Marketing Personnel, Customer Engagement, Marketing Impact, Marketing Skills, Marketing Campaigns, SMME Growth.

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Introduction

Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs) are widely recognised as key drivers of economic development, employment creation and poverty alleviation across the globe. In Zimbabwe, SMMEs play a pivotal role in contributing to the national economy by providing jobs and fostering local economic activity, particularly in regions such as Masvingo Province. According to Matura and Mapira (2018), SMMEs in Masvingo contribute substantially to employment and regional economic stability, serving as critical players in local supply chains and service provision (Jongwe et al., 2024). However, despite their significance, many SMMEs in Zimbabwe face challenges that hinder their long-term sustainability and growth. These challenges include limited access to finance, inadequate business management skills, poor infrastructure and most importantly, ineffective marketing strategies.

Marketing is a fundamental aspect of business success, influencing customer acquisition, brand positioning and revenue generation. Effective marketing skills enable businesses to expand their customer base, increase sales and establish a competitive presence in the market (Agu et al., 2024). Khan et al. (2024) also emphasise the importance of strategic marketing in enhancing business performance, particularly for SMMEs that operate in highly competitive and resource-constrained environments. However, within the Zimbabwean context, research on the marketing competencies of SMMEs remains limited. Many enterprises struggle with weak promotional strategies, lack of market research and insufficient investment in skilled marketing personnel. This creates a significant gap in understanding how marketing skills can be leveraged to enhance SMME growth in Masvingo Province.

While various studies have examined general challenges facing SMMEs in Zimbabwe, few have focused specifically on the role of marketing skills in their growth and sustainability. The absence of targeted research on this aspect leaves a critical gap in knowledge regarding the most effective marketing practices for SMMEs in Masvingo Province. Addressing this gap is essential to developing practical solutions and policy recommendations that can enhance the competitiveness of small enterprises.

The aim of the current study was to investigate the role of marketing skills in the growth of SMMEs in Masvingo Province. The study focused on four key marketing competencies: certified marketing personnel, knowledgeable marketing personnel, successful marketing campaigns and customer engagement. By examining these competencies, the research sought to identify the extent to which marketing skills influence business expansion, customer retention and overall profitability in the SMME sector. Furthermore, the study targeted insights into the marketing challenges faced by SMMEs to recommend strategies for improving their marketing effectiveness for sustainable growth. Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader discourse on small business development by providing empirical evidence on the impact of marketing skills on SMME success in Zimbabwe.

Literature Review

The survival and growth of SMMEs remain critical to the global economy. This section explores the body of knowledge on key aspects of marketing and its role in enhancing SMME performance, focusing on the importance of marketing strategies and skills.

The Importance of Marketing for SMME Growth

Marketing is essential for the survival and growth of SMMEs. According to Samir (2020), effective marketing helps small businesses identify customer needs, differentiate products, and expand their market reach. However, Abrokwah-Larbi (2024) highlights that many SMMEs face challenges in applying effective marketing practices due to limited resources and insufficient marketing knowledge. This is further supported by recent research from Emon et al. (2024), which underscores that inadequate marketing strategies significantly contribute to the high failure rates among SMMEs, particularly in developing economies.

The impact of marketing for the growth of SMMEs cannot be overstated, as it is indispensable for business sustainability and expansion. SMMEs contribute immensely to a nation's GDP and employ a significant portion of the global workforce (Jagun, 2022). However, Bertanzetti et al. (2024) argue that many SMMEs struggle with poor brand positioning and weak customer engagement due to a lack of structured marketing strategies. Similarly, Mar and Armaly (2024) contend that effective marketing facilitates customer acquisition and enhances brand visibility and engagement, which are necessary for competing in increasingly crowded markets. This assertion is supported by Aburaya et al. (2022), who assert that SMMEs with well-developed marketing strategies achieve higher customer retention and increased market penetration.

Moreover, a well-defined marketing strategy enables SMMEs to articulate their unique value propositions and connect meaningfully with their target audiences (Joensuu-Salo et al., 2022). Recent empirical research by Moschogianni (2024) emphasises the role of storytelling and digital branding in reinforcing customer loyalty and trust, which are critical for long-term sustainability. Furthermore, Taherdoost (2023) asserts that leveraging digital marketing tools such as social media and email marketing can significantly amplify outreach efforts. This allows SMMEs to engage directly with consumers and foster loyalty through personalised communication, a sentiment echoed by AlKoliby et al. (2024), who stress that digital marketing effectiveness is a strong predictor of SMME success in competitive markets.

Moschogianni (2024) indicates that business enterprises with robust marketing capabilities experience higher growth rates. This underscores the need for SMMEs to invest in developing these competencies to navigate resource constraints effectively (AlKoliby et al., 2024). Likewise, Khan et al. (2024) suggest

that a data-driven approach to marketing, including customer analytics and personalised advertising, significantly enhances market reach and business resilience. Thus, integrating strategic marketing into the core business model is both an operational necessity and a fundamental aspect of achieving long-term viability and success in the competitive landscape.

Marketing Skills and SMME Performance

Marketing skills, including strategic thinking, market analysis and digital marketing, are essential to the growth and success of SMMEs (Kollmann & Kuckertz, 2019). These skills enable SMMEs to identify market opportunities, understand consumer behaviour and adapt their strategies to meet customer demands effectively. According to Krowinska et al. (2023), SMMEs with strong marketing competencies are more likely to achieve sustained growth and competitive advantage, particularly in volatile economic conditions.

Furthermore, having certified and knowledgeable marketing personnel in an SMME is thought to considerably improve the efficiency and impact of marketing efforts (Kollmann & Kuckertz, 2019). This could lead to higher performance outcomes. In addition to skilled personnel, the ability to design and implement effective marketing campaigns, alongside maintaining consistent customer engagement, plays a pivotal role in driving business performance. Kotler et al. (2019) explain that strong customer relationships, facilitated through targeted digital marketing strategies, contribute to brand loyalty and repeat business.

Recent studies by Adigwe et al. (2024) indicate that the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) driven marketing strategies significantly enhances SMME performance by providing data-driven insights into consumer behaviour and preferences. Moreover, Taherdoost (2023) stresses the importance of digital literacy among SMME owners and marketing personnel, arguing that a lack of digital marketing expertise can hinder business scalability. Similarly, Bvochora (2023) found that training programmes aimed at enhancing digital marketing skills lead to a substantial increase in online engagement and sales performance among SMMEs.

Ultimately, SMMEs that leverage these marketing capabilities are better positioned to compete and thrive in today's fast-paced business environment. The dynamic nature of consumer preferences and technological advancements necessitate continuous up-skilling in marketing strategies to maintain relevance and achieve business growth (Aburaya & Yassin, 2022). Therefore, investing in marketing skills and embracing technological innovations remain crucial for SMMEs to sustain competitive advantage and long-term success.

Methods and Data

This study employed a quantitative research design, utilising a structured questionnaire to gather data from SMME owners, managers, and marketing personnel in Masvingo Province. The survey was designed to assess the marketing skills of these teams and examine the relationship between these skills and business growth. Utilising a descriptive survey design, data were collected from 233 SME owners and employees via self-administered questionnaires, with analysis focused on correlations between financial skills and business growth outcomes (Creswell, 2014). This approach was chosen to enhance the generalisability of the results while minimising sampling bias (Taherdoost, 2016). Data collection was carried out using both face-to-face interviews and self-administered questionnaires, providing a comprehensive understanding of the participants' responses. The collected data were then analysed using descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages, which allowed for the summarisation of the data and the drawing of meaningful conclusions regarding the marketing capabilities of SMME teams and their impact on business growth (Field, 2013). The use of these statistical methods justified the quantitative approach by ensuring an objective, data-driven interpretation of the findings.

Results

This section presents the findings of the study, focusing on the role of marketing skills and their impact on the growth of SMMEs. It provides an analysis of key marketing skill components, their measures, and the perceived influence of these skills on business performance.

Measures of Marketing Skill Components

The role of marketing skills towards the growth of SMMEs was evaluated using components “key marketing personnel are certified”, “marketing personnel are knowledgeable”, “marketers conduct successful marketing campaigns”, and “marketing departments engage customers effectively and regularly”. The responses are summarised on Figure 1 below.

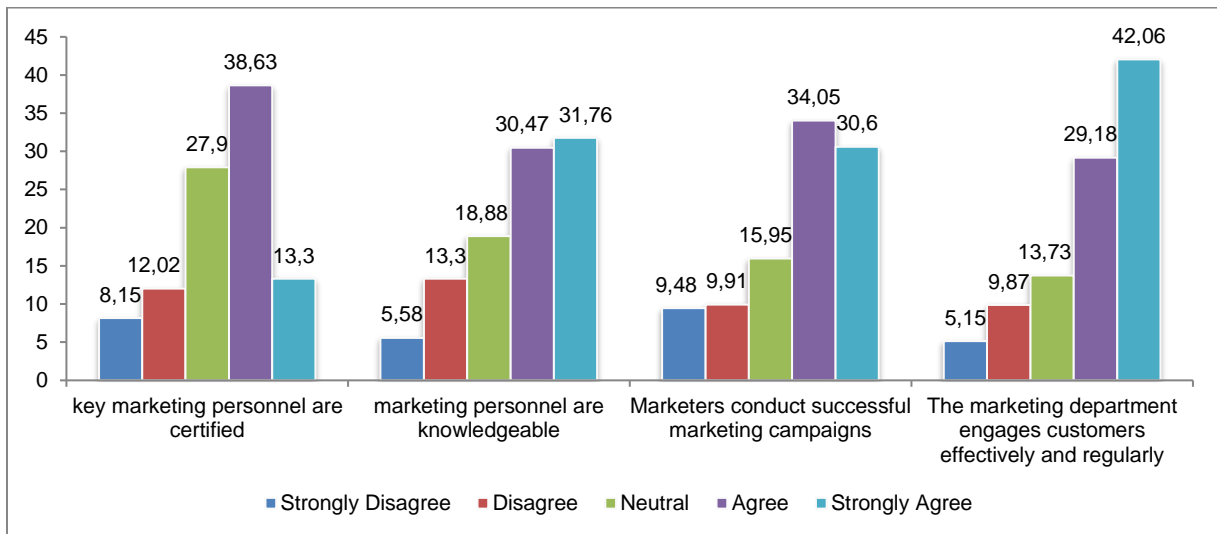


Figure 1: Measures of marketing skill components

As shown in Figure 1, 51.9% of respondents (13.3% agree + 38.6% strongly agree) believed that marketing personnel in SMMEs in Masvingo City are certified. However, 20.2% (12.0% disagree + 8.2% strongly disagree) disagreed, while 27.9% were unsure. This suggests that while a significant number of marketing personnel may be certified, there remains a gap in the certification levels of some marketing departments.

The analysis in Figure 1 indicates that 62.2% of respondents (31.7% agree + 30.5% strongly agree) agreed that marketing personnel in SMMEs are knowledgeable. On the contrary, 18.9% (13.3% disagree + 5.6% strongly disagree) disagreed, and 16.0% were unsure. This indicates that while most marketing personnel are seen as knowledgeable, there is still a notable portion of respondents who do not share this view.

As shown in Figure 1, 64.7% of respondents (30.6% agree + 34.1% strongly agree) believed that marketing departments of SMMEs conduct successful marketing campaigns. However, 19.4% (9.9% disagree + 9.5% strongly disagree) felt that the campaigns were not successful, with 16.0% unsure. These findings suggest that marketing campaigns are generally viewed positively, though challenges in effectiveness remain.

According to Figure 1, 71.3% of participants (42.1% agree + 29.2% strongly agree) agreed that marketing departments of SMMEs in Masvingo engage customers effectively and regularly. However, 15.1% (9.9% disagree + 5.2% strongly disagree) disagreed, and 13.7% were unsure. This indicates that customer engagement is seen as a strong area for many marketing departments, although there is room for improvement.

Impact of Marketing Skills on SMME Growth

The section determines whether the respondents believed that marketing skills impact positively on the growth of SMMEs. The visual display below (Figure 2) provides a summary of the impact of marketing skills on the growth of SMMEs as experienced by the respondents.

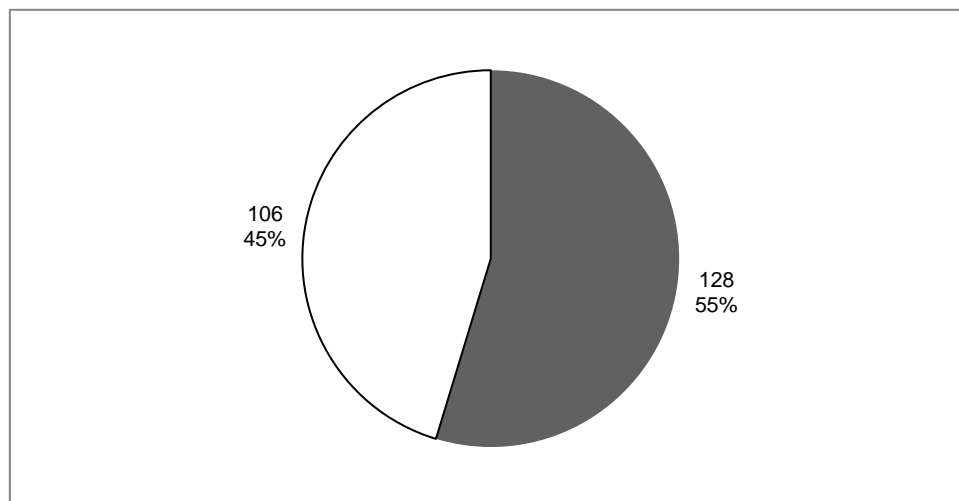


Figure 2: Visual display for the impact of marketing skills on SMME growth

The study also assessed the perceived impact of marketing skills on the growth of SMMEs. As shown in Table 1, most respondents (128 out of 234) believed that marketing skills played a role in the growth of SMMEs, while 106 respondents believed marketing did not contribute to business growth. Figure 2 further supports the positive role of marketing skills, as more respondents affirmed their belief in marketing's influence on business development.

Discussion

This section outlines the role of marketing skills in the growth of SMMEs. The growth of SMMEs is influenced by numerous factors, and marketing skills is among the leading determinants (Solomon et al., 2024). Marketing has been shown to play a fundamental role in enhancing the visibility, competitiveness, and sustainability of SMMEs. According to Jongwe et al. (2025), marketing contributes directly to their growth trajectories. This discussion explores how marketing skills, particularly through certified personnel, knowledge, successful campaigns, and effective customer engagement, contribute to the growth of SMMEs, supported by recent literature and empirical evidence.

Certified Marketing Personnel

The importance of certified marketing personnel in the success of an SMME cannot be overstated. Certification, often a marker of competence and professionalism, ensures that marketing employees

possess the requisite skills and knowledge to perform their tasks effectively. According to the study conducted in Masvingo City, approximately 51.9% of respondents believed that SMMEs employed certified marketing personnel (Figure 1). This perception aligns with previous findings by Kirkwood and Walton (2020) that SMMEs with certified marketing teams are more likely to develop and implement strategic marketing plans that align with business goals. Certified personnel bring a higher level of expertise and a structured approach to marketing that can significantly enhance the growth prospects of an enterprise (Lau, 2019).

However, the fact that a significant portion of the respondents (20.2%) disagreed or were unsure about the certification of marketing staff suggests that many SMMEs may still be underperforming in terms of investing in skilled personnel. This discrepancy could be attributed to a lack of resources or a misunderstanding of the value of certification in marketing.

Knowledgeable Marketing Personnel

The knowledge and expertise of marketing personnel are crucial factors that influence the success of marketing strategies and campaigns. In the Masvingo study, over 62.2% of participants agreed that marketing personnel in SMMEs were knowledgeable (Figure 1). This finding is consistent with the literature, which underscores the importance of knowledge in navigating the complex marketing landscape, especially for small businesses (Pauwels, Leeflang, & Srinivasan, 2021). Knowledgeable marketers are better equipped to make informed decisions regarding target markets, product positioning, and the most effective marketing channels.

The higher percentage of positive responses regarding the knowledge of marketing personnel suggests that there is a general recognition among SMMEs that having informed marketing teams is essential for growth. Knowledgeable marketers are more likely to employ data-driven insights, engage in competitive analysis, and create personalised marketing strategies that resonate with customers, thereby fostering long-term business growth (Choi & Lee, 2017).

Conducting Successful Marketing Campaigns

The ability to implement successful marketing campaigns is a direct outcome of effective marketing skills. Over 64.7% of the respondents agreed that marketing departments within SMMEs conduct successful marketing campaigns (Figure 1). Successful campaigns contribute significantly to brand awareness, customer loyalty, and revenue generation. Marketing campaigns that are strategically crafted and well-executed can elevate an SMME from a local player to a regional or even national competitor (Kotler et al., 2022).

However, 19.4% of respondents opposed the notion that SMMEs conduct successful campaigns. This indicates that while marketing may be a focal point for many businesses, its execution often remains

flawed, potentially due to budget constraints, lack of expertise, or insufficient market research. The challenges faced by SMMEs in running successful marketing campaigns have been extensively documented in the literature, with many small businesses struggling to allocate adequate resources to marketing activities (Sharma & Singh, 2020).

Effective Customer Engagement

Customer engagement is another fundamental element for driving growth in SMMEs. According to the study, 71.3% of participants believed that SMMEs in Masvingo effectively and regularly engage customers (Figure 1). This finding is corroborated by research that highlights the role of customer engagement in fostering strong customer relationships and building brand loyalty (Ranaweera & Prabhu, 2019). Marketing teams that engage with customers regularly through various channels, including social media, email marketing, and direct interactions, are better positioned to understand customer needs and preferences, which in turn allows them to tailor products and services more effectively.

The positive response regarding customer engagement points to a growing awareness among SMMEs about the need to create strong customer connections. It also indicates that businesses are increasingly adopting digital platforms to engage with their customer base, a shift that has become more prominent in the post-pandemic era (Pereira & Melo, 2021). However, the remaining 15.1% of respondents who disagreed with this statement suggest that there are still barriers, such as limited digital literacy or resource constraints, which may prevent some SMMEs from engaging effectively with their customers.

The Role of Marketing in SMME Growth

Finally, the overall role of marketing in SMME growth was evaluated. The study revealed that more respondents believed that marketing had a positive impact on SMME growth than those who disagreed (Figure 1). This aligns with the broader literature, which consistently highlights the critical role of marketing in the growth and sustainability of small businesses (Niemann & Kotze, 2021). Effective marketing not only helps in attracting and retaining customers but also in differentiating the business in a competitive market, thereby fostering long-term profitability and growth.

The belief that marketing skills contribute to growth underscores the importance of investing in marketing resources and capabilities. Small businesses that prioritise marketing are better positioned to expand their customer base, increase sales, and improve profitability (De Jong & Den Hartog, 2020).

Conclusion

The study concludes that marketing skills are crucial for the growth of SMMEs in Masvingo Province, because effective marketing teams that engage customers and use informed strategies significantly contribute to business success. However, challenges such as a lack of certification, limited knowledge,

and insufficient resources for impactful marketing campaigns hinder many SMMEs. While the recognition of the importance of marketing skills is positive, there is a pressing need for improvement, particularly in ensuring that marketing personnel are certified and continuously updating their knowledge. SMME owners should focus on professional development, enhance their marketing campaigns, and engage customers more effectively to drive business growth. Addressing these gaps can enable SMMEs to leverage marketing as a strategic tool for sustainable growth and competitive advantage.

From the analysed results of the role of marketing skills towards the growth of SMMEs, several implications for practice (IFPs) can be drawn. First is the need for SMME owners to invest in hiring certified marketing professionals or offering training and certification opportunities for their existing staff. Secondly, ensuring marketing teams possess up-to-date knowledge of trends, tools and consumer behavior is crucial for driving successful marketing campaigns. SMME owners could also focus on refining their marketing campaigns by developing better-targeted strategies, crafting clearer messaging and measuring campaign outcomes. Furthermore, SMMEs could benefit from investing in more robust and personalised customer relationship strategies, such as implementing loyalty programmes, maintaining regular communication through newsletters, and fostering interactive social media engagements. It is also recommended that SMME owners emphasise the connection between effective marketing and business growth, ensuring that marketing strategies are closely aligned with clear business objectives such as increasing sales, expanding market share or enhancing brand visibility. Also important is educating their teams and stakeholders about the strategic importance of marketing through workshops, seminars or consultations with marketing experts.

Future research should explore the specific barriers to improving marketing skills and propose practical solutions to overcome these challenges. It is essential for policymakers, business owners, and educators to prioritise the development of marketing skills within SMMEs to maximise their growth potential and ensure long-term success. Exploring the specific challenges faced by SMMEs in adopting digital marketing strategies is also desirable, particularly in resource-constrained environments. Additionally, research into the long-term impact of marketing training and certification programmes on SMME performance would provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of capacity-building initiatives.

Authors

Pamire Jongwe is a PhD student with the University of South Africa, researching the impact of entrepreneurial skills on SMME growth in Zimbabwe. He has published a few peer-reviewed articles on business management and is actively involved in community outreach programmes to educate parishioners in various localities about adapting to changing economic conditions.

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