

Growing Pains: Success Strategies for Rural Entrepreneurs to Grow beyond Their Limited Local Markets

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Abstract

Purpose - Business owners in rural areas must navigate limited local markets and deal with the outward migration of their regional populations, which further shrinks the pool of potential customers. This research serves to assist rural businesses with insights into the behaviors of successful rural entrepreneurs in scaling their businesses beyond the capacities of their local markets.

Method - This qualitative study used purposeful sampling and interviews with fifteen small business owners. These business founders were chosen for starting and growing their businesses to successful ventures in a very short period. No one earns more than 10% of their revenue from their local markets. All are privately-owned small businesses that generate revenues of over \$1 million annually and were able to accomplish it within three years of starting operations.

Findings - The results discovered four themes common among the majority of the companies. These were: targeted social media use, multiple touchpoints with customers, product differentiation, and earned media practices.

Limitations - The limitations are that only fifteen business owners were interviewed. Although common themes emerged from this small sample, research involving a much larger sample is a logical next step. The development of an instrument to quantitatively analyze the marketing actions and results of small business owners is also warranted to test the generalizability of the findings.

Implications - The findings should assist rural small business owners in understanding the particular methods available for them to increase sales and improve their business outcomes, regardless of their physical locations.

Originality - This study contributes to rural entrepreneurship research and provides to small business owners practical solutions currently utilized by companies in rural settings.

Keywords: rural entrepreneurship, strategy, small business, e-commerce, applied research

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Introduction

“Buy Local” is a phrase often used today to support rural entrepreneurship. The emphasis is to bolster independently-owned businesses and keep the money in the community (Seimens, 2010). Studies show supporting entrepreneurship serves to strengthen the economic base of the community and contribute to economic development, even in rural areas (Mojica, Gebremedhim, & Schaeffer, 2010). But, what happens when a town does not have the market size necessary for an independent, locally owned business to thrive? They must either close, relocate, or develop strategies to attract customers from other areas. The focus of this study is those owners whose businesses cannot possibly sustain themselves within their home locations, but devised methods to cultivate customers across the nation and grow their businesses, despite the constraints of the local markets.

Literature Review

Rural

Rural entrepreneurship has not been extensively studied (Pato & Teixeira, 2016). Since Wortman (1990) raised the issue, there is still not a consensus in defining rural entrepreneurship. Pato & Teixeira, (2018) conducted a study of the rural entrepreneurship literature and found broad debate concerning what constitutes ‘rural’ and that the majority of rural entrepreneurship studies are conducted by researchers in the UK and Spain. Among US government entities, there are fifteen definitions for rural. The nuances in these variations determine eligibility for a myriad of government programs (Johnston, 2017; USDA, 2019).

The Census Bureau defines what is urban and therefore, the default definition for rural is what is not urban (Census Bureau, 2019). Specifically, a population of 50,000 or more is labeled an urbanized area, and 2,500 to less than 50,000 people is labeled an urban cluster. Anything under 2,500 is considered rural. Commonly, it is thought rural is distanced from a large city, and communities with only a few thousand people are colloquially referred to as small towns and are considered rural (Hunt, Bryant, & Taylor, 2016). In rural entrepreneurship research, the conditions of the environment define whether or not an area is rural. These include depopulation, less economic activity, and lower levels of human, cultural, and financial capital (Korsgaard, Muller, & Hanne, 2015). For this study, adherence to this definition seems most appropriate.

Markets

Adequate market size is critical for a business to start, sustain, and grow. This is true regardless of the location of the firm, whether it is established in an urbanized area, urban cluster, or rural area. To determine the potential market size for a particular product or service, it is recommended factors such as population, GDP per capita, urbanization, and income distribution are assessed (Alon, 2006). Not only are these elements important to establish the necessary customer base, but additional considerations such as the existence of local markets, entrepreneur networks, suppliers, early customers, and multinational corporations are critical elements of the market domain when deciding where to locate a business (Isenberg, 2010; Spigel, 2017).

Often, rural areas are characterized as sparsely populated, having lower income and education levels, lacking the numbers of people and companies to establish large entrepreneurial networks, a sufficient group of early adopters, or multinational corporations to act as suppliers, customers, or strategic alliances for new ventures. Because of these factors, it is not uncommon for areas fitting this description to be less attractive for companies to locate or expand (Reid, 1987; Shields, 2005). Another issue facing small-town businesses is by the very nature of their locations, they have fewer customers who shop less often and spend less per visit (Kim & Stoel, 2010). This is compounded today by the ease of customers to make their purchases from national retailers and other firms online (Frazier, Stoel, Niehm, & Eckerson, 2013).

Skills

The use of e-commerce has greatly increased as the use of mobile devices has done the same (Consoli, 2017). Small businesses have not adopted e-commerce or had success with it at the same rate as large companies. Business owners of higher ages or lower levels of education, especially in less developed areas are less likely to adopt e-commerce (Awa, Baridam, & Nwibere, 2015). It is well established nonmetropolitan areas (i.e. rural) have smaller populations and therefore, fewer highly educated, highly skilled individuals available for the workforce and therefore frequently lack the knowledge to use the internet for business (Stoel, Jeong, & Ernst, 2010). And, the phenomenon of "brain drain" contributes to these types of workers leaving the rural areas to seek opportunities elsewhere (Stephens, Partridge & Faggian, 2013).

E-Commerce

E-commerce is buying, selling, or transmitting data of goods and services over an electronic network (Islam & Eva, 2018) and is showing significant year-over-year growth (Sperdea, Enescu, & Enescu, 2011). Online sales in the US for 2018 were \$517.36 billion, up 15% from 2017 (Ali, 2019). By 2021, it will be the largest retail channel in the world

with sales of \$4.4 trillion (Grant, 2018; Prininsky, 2018). E-commerce is seen as a rapid growth strategy for small- and medium-sized businesses (Solaymani, Sohaili, & Yazdinejad, 2012). E-commerce may help small businesses reduce market entry costs, lower distribution channel costs, and interact with a greater number of customers (Ezzi, 2016). It has been touted as a key strategy for success for small, independent retailers in rural communities (Stoel *et al.*, 2010). However, research has shown many factors are involved to influence the efficacy of an e-commerce initiative, central of these is the attention given to the consumers' experience (Ouyang, Zeng, Geng, & Yang, 2017). The goal is to develop repeat customers by maximizing customer satisfaction and trust (Eid, 2011).

Strategy

Nadim and Lussier (2010) prescribe engaging in local community relations as a successful strategy for small businesses to achieve long-term success. Not to suggest this is incorrect, but what if it is not enough? Often, certain types of businesses cannot thrive in smaller communities because not enough customers reside in the area. Sometimes businesses are never opened in rural or small communities because of insufficient population density constituting a lack of critical mass of local consumers, suppliers, and strategic alliances (Snow & Prater, 2017).

However, with today's technology and the rise of globalization, it is possible to access customers and suppliers from anywhere (Lal & Singh, 2017). Using social media as a strategy to increase awareness for the business and promote traffic to storefronts and websites is very common today among small businesses (Taneja & Toombs, 2014). Unfortunately, the majority of small businesses are ineffective in utilizing this technology (Bakeman & Hanson, 2012; Taneja & Toombs, 2014).

Research Questions

Since the goal of this study is to discover the methods used by rural businesses to achieve sales significantly greater than what their local communities can generate, the main research questions are:

How do rural entrepreneurs grow their businesses beyond the capacity of their local markets?

What specific practices do they employ to scale their businesses to the national or global level?

Methodology

This is a qualitative research study using purposeful sampling. The strengths of qualitative research derive primarily from its inductive approach, its focus on specific situations or people, and its emphasis on words rather than numbers (Maxwell, 2013). By interviewing the small business owners, a rich description of methods, techniques, experiences, and perspectives for developing and executing their strategies can be obtained (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Purposeful sampling is based on selecting samples that can provide an in-depth study of particular research questions (Patton, 2001).

Fifteen business founders were chosen for starting and growing their businesses to successful ventures in a very short time. Interviews were conducted with the business owners. The duration of the interviews was between 30 and 45 minutes. These founders have scaled their respective companies far beyond the available markets in their home regions. None earn more than 10% of their revenue from their local markets. All are privately-owned small businesses that generate revenues of over \$1 million annually and were able to do this within three years of starting operations. The businesses are located in the mid-western United States and the southeastern United States. These businesses employ between three and twenty people and are located in towns with populations between 7,000 and 45,000. All businesses are in niche markets, which further reduces the potential number of local sales. A summary of the major characteristics of the study participants is in table 1. The average growth rate was calculated for the first three years to establish sustained revenues of over \$1 million.

Table 1: Summary of Major Characteristics of Study Firms

Characteristic	n=15
Average Annual Sales	\$2 million
Average Local Sales Percentage of Total	8%
Average Growth Rate	105%
Average Years in Operation	8
Average Number of Employees	9
Average Population of Store Location	19,000
Industries Represented	Computer hardware (1) Sports equipment (3) Electronic retail (2) Misc retail (5) Food products (2) Health & beauty products (1) Farm tools (1)

Content analysis was used and data was collected via a semi-structured interview process to examine if any common themes across the sample companies were present (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Flexibility to stray from the list of questions as needed was expected. The interviews were audio-recorded. Notes were taken from the interviews.

Four themes emerged from the content analysis (see table 2): targeted social media use, multiple touchpoints with customers, product differentiation, and earned media practices. These are explained in detail in the Results section.

Table 2: Thematic Categories Identified in Content Analysis (n=15)

Category	Frequency of Emphasis
Targeted Social Media Use	n = 14
Multiple Touchpoints with Customers	n = 13
Product Differentiation	n = 10
Earned Media Practices	n = 9

This paper aims to contribute to rural entrepreneurship research by providing practical, factual examples of rural entrepreneurs and their methods of acquiring customers beyond the capacity of their local markets and flourishing despite the constraints of their respective brick and mortar locations.

Results & Discussion

This section provides answers from the entrepreneurs during the interviews and an analysis of the major themes discovered in the study. *What percentage of your customers is from outside the local market?* All businesses reported 90% to 100% of customers are from outside their local markets. *What percentage of your revenue is from outside the local market?* All businesses reported 90% to 100% of revenues are from outside their local markets. *What is the size of the local market?* The size of the local markets ranges from \$300,000 to \$2 million. *What is the size of the national market?* The size of national markets ranges from \$100 million to \$50 billion. *Do you sell your products nationally and/or globally?* All fifteen companies sell at least on a national scale. One sells on a global scale. Four of the firms do not sell globally because they are restricted due to regulations governing their industries or it is a complex process that they feel not worthy of the trouble. The company selling globally has approximately 50% of global sales. The other businesses are not yet at a stage to consider global sales and may not aspire to do so. Customers for each of these businesses were across all fifty states. The company selling globally has customers in Australia, Europe, and the Middle East. *How long did it take for you to grow your company nationally/globally?* All the companies were able to expand to national sales (14 out of 15) and the fifteenth to global sales in less than two years. *What marketing methods do you use to reach distant customers?* An overview of marketing methods for the companies is in table 3.

Table 3: Marketing Methods of Sample Companies

Products	Scale	Local Sales	Local Pop.	Website	SEO	Facebook	Online Store	eBay Store	YouTube	Reddit	Instagram	Twitter
Retail	National	10%	7,000	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Inactive
Retail	National	10%	20,000	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Retail	National	10%	20,000	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No
Retail	National	10%	20,000	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Retail	National	10%	20,000	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Retail	National	10%	45,000	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Retail	National	5%	45,000	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No
Retail	National	5%	45,000	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Retail	National	10%	45,000	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Retail	National	10%	45,000	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Retail	National	5%	45,000	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Retail	National	5%	45,000	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes
Retail	National	5%	7,000	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Retail	National	10%	7,000	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes
Retail	Global	1%	20,000	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No

Targeted Media Marketing

One of the major themes in the marketing practices for each of the companies studied was to effectively focus the marketing efforts where the customers are both physically and virtually. This means not wasting time and money with an overly broad approach, but knowing their customers very well and communicating directly with the target group, whether by physical proximity, such as a tradeshow, or virtually, such YouTube videos (Bhayani & Vachhani, 2014). Each company only spends between 1% and 5% percentage of revenue for their marketing budgets, as this owner conveyed:

Marketing is a very small percentage of our business, less than one percent. We have a lot of organic traffic and repeat customers. They come to our website looking for product A, then they buy product B and C because they are on sale.

Another owner's company produces retail products and sells them at wholesale to retailers who then sell the products in their physical stores or online through their own websites or other sites, such as Amazon. So, this owner raises awareness for his products by generating demand from the retailers and by marketing to the end-users. 100% percent of his sales are from outside his local area.

He sells sports equipment and one method he has found effective is geographically targeted marketing. For example, if there is an event where hundreds or thousands of

target customers are in attendance, his local communications provider can structure a mobile marketing campaign that will send ads to the cell phones of all the potential customers in a specific geographical area.

Multiple Touchpoints

Repeated touchpoints with customers are part of building those relationships and keeping the customers engaged (Vivek, Beatty, & Morgan, 2012). One business owner expressed how repeated contact with customers is important, "We have 155,000 subscribers now to our newsletter. We have a lot of touches with the customer, whether it be a newsletter, whether it be Facebook marketing or Instagram."

This is part of building lasting relationships with customers and is extremely important for long-term success. It is reported acquiring new a customer may cost five to twenty-five times as much as retaining an existing customer (Gallo, 2015; Rasul, 2017). One business owner stated:

We focus on maintaining customer relationships and look at the long-term value of the customer. We also have abandoned-cart recovery, so if somebody adds something to their cart and leaves, forgets to checkout or whatever, we email them saying you haven't checked out.

Product Differentiation

For generating demand with the retailers, three companies attend the trade shows for their industry. Small firms typically participate less in trade shows, but they can be important in establishing networks and scaling to national and international levels (Measson & Campbell-Hunt, 2015). The majority of retailers attend these looking for new products and to establish relationships with wholesalers. During the tradeshow, sales are made and leads are generated. Afterward, salespeople for the company follow up on the leads. The retailers who sell this company's products do their own advertising. However, this company also markets to retail consumers.

Bolos, et al (2016) found that 90% of consumers state their buying decisions are influenced by online reviews. This coincided with the companies in this study whose products are reviewed on platforms such as Reddit and YouTube. This is reinforced by the statements of one of the interviewees who said:

We often sell a product and limit our own marketing; we let it snowball organically and don't even try to make it go viral. Often, the products sell themselves. We see once it gets posted to the forums, Facebook groups, and stuff like that, and customers

are saying these guys got a great deal, and yeah I got mine in two days. So, we sold 6,000 units of one product in three weeks and didn't even push it.

Another important aspect of growing a business is to understand marketing is not the only function integral to success. Structuring a company to take advantage of opportunities and to accommodate increased demand from more effective marketing is also needed (Lee, Kozlenkova, & Palmatier, 2015). One owner expressed these feelings with his statements:

I don't want to compete solely on price for a commoditized product, down to the nickel. So, strategic buying, supply chain management, being first to market, or even last to market. I would rather buy it deep and own the market, then have the best pricing. I still make my money and do not have to race to the bottom because I control the market. By having the best price on the internet, the product will market itself. Because my business model has always been that, it has always given me a competitive advantage. By having good free cash flow, having solid finances, and being able to take measured risks. We have a holistic business model with good pricing, with good service, with fast fulfillment, and good delivery times. So, that builds on itself. We are not a marketing company. We are more of a distribution company.

Earned Media Practices

First, it is prudent to define the term marketing. The latest definition provided by the American Marketing Association is "Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large" (Brunswick, 2014, p. 111). There are two main categories to achieve this. One is through paid demand creation activities and the other is through earned demand creation activities (Blank & Dorf, 2012, p. 133).

One owner has a brick and mortar retail location in a town of 7,000. His aspirations were to grow his business nationally. He took the action of earned demand creation activities. Before he launched his online store, he began creating YouTube videos reviewing products sold in his physical store. He grew to become known as an expert in his industry with millions of views of his videos and hundreds of thousands of subscribers to his YouTube channel. He also solicited feedback from viewers as to what products they would prefer to purchase when he launched his online store. This was an extremely successful strategy for this company. To date, this owner has 594,000 subscribers to his channel and his videos have been viewed a total of over 84 million times. His choice for the website provider is Shopify because it is very effective for a retail operation to display extensive inventory and checkout with a shopping cart. His site also

has a feature that shows every time a purchase is made and the city in which the purchaser lives. This constant pop-up display confirms how popular this business is and that the customers are literally from every part of the United States. One additional side effect of becoming an industry expert through online media is his physical store is routinely visited by customers from across the country who want to meet the owner.

Another owner who also sells retail products through a physical location, but generates 95% of his revenues from online sales has been successful using Reddit. Reddit is an online platform categorized by topics of interest that are arranged as communities for people to communicate. Every day, millions of people post, comment, and vote on the site. Current numbers from Reddit claim it is the fifth most visited site in the US, averages 330 million monthly users, has 130,000 active communities, and 21 billion screen views per month. This owner found communities that applied to the products he sells and would post and comment in those communities. This is another form of earned demand creation. This owner also started his own Reddit page where he lists items on sale.

Conclusion

This study interviewed small business owners to discover and provide real-world examples of practical solutions rural entrepreneurs use to grow their businesses to the national or global level and succeed regardless of the market size or conditions in their home localities. Methods the interviewed companies use to increase sales are supported by established research and can be duplicated by other firms who desire to increase sales. Insights gained from the study include the importance of knowing your customers well to capitalize on the most appropriate marketing channels. By doing this proficiently, the marketing budget for these companies is less than five percent of sales. Frequent contact with customers is integral to establish relationships and to retain customers for the long term. Today, most consumers rely upon online reviews before making their purchases. Lastly, the organization of the company and the other functions, such as cash-flow management, product distribution, and customer service after the sale are crucial to retain customers, increase repeat sales, and spur company growth.

Limitations and Future Research

This is a qualitative study that used purposeful sampling in order to seek in-depth answers to the research questions. The limitations are that only fifteen business owners were interviewed. Although common themes emerged from this small sample, research involving a much larger sample is a logical next step. The development of an instrument to quantitatively analyze the marketing actions and results of small business owners is also warranted, if any generalizability of these findings is to be tested. Other future research can focus more closely on each of the specific marketing tactics and study these

across industries to determine if certain variables may impact their effectiveness. With technology, the task of online marketing is not a slow-changing endeavor. Research such as this may need updating as current online platforms lose popularity and others are created, gain users, and take their place.

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