

**MARKETING PROMOTIONAL STRATEGIES FOR IRELAND'S SOUTH WEST
BUTCHERS – AN EMPIRICAL STUDY**

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Abstract

The marketing orientation and strategies of small-and-medium sized enterprises is well documented. O' Dwyer & Carson (2009;56) present a conceptual model for innovative marketing in SMEs based on "incessant supplemental adjustments to current activities and practices, which enables SMEs in niche markets to differentiate their product or service from the standardised offerings of larger firms".

Henchion & O' Reilly (2007; 193) conclude that the internet can complement other marketing channels used by Irish speciality food producers and "its role in managing information and relationships maybe more important than online sales".

It is against this backdrop, that a new area of empirical research funded by 9 Local Action Groups delivering the Rural Development Programme (LEADER), across 4 counties in the South West (Cork, Limerick, Kerry, Clare) has emerged within the specialty food producers market. This primary research based on in-depth interviews with 24 rural abattoir butchers investigates suitable marketing channels for increasing brand awareness of local artisan meat supplied by butchers who own their own abattoir and source their meat supply from within a 50 mile radius. This research paper examines the suitability of such marketing strategies in the context of helping rural abattoir butchers develop new growth markets in the tourism and hospitality sectors:

The main research findings are:

- Rural abattoir butchers' have many unique selling points (USPs) for developing a compelling artisan meat message targeted at the hospitality sector
- A set of suitable promotional strategies for marketing this artisan meat message directly to restaurateurs and hoteliers is presented in the form of a 'Marketing Toolkit'
- These butchers can work with food service owners, managers and key stakeholders to develop a food tourism promotional campaign for local artisan meat in the south west region

Introduction

In recent years the Irish food retail sector has become increasingly competitive due to a number of key factors, a flood of new market entrants in the form of large scale supermarket multiples; Aldi & Lidl, increased dominance of the traditional supermarket multiple chain stores; Tesco & Dunnes Stores and increased growth and diversity in convenience chain stores shared across the total symbols groups (Supervalu, Centra, Mace, Spar, Vivo & Costcutter). The meat category has become a headline advertising product and one of the chief battlegrounds for mass discounting between these retailers. Collectively they have eroded the market share of the Irish rural abattoir sector. At The Department of Agriculture & food level there is concern for smaller abattoirs and meat processing facilities who struggle independently to maintain a viable and sustainable business base. The Irish Local Development Network (national representative body for Local Action Groups) report that the number of abattoirs in the country has decreased from about 1,000 dating back to the late 1980s, to about 450 ten years ago and is now approaching 200.

Surviving rural abattoir butchers have experienced a tighter squeeze on profit margins compared to larger supermarket chains who reap the benefits of economies of scale through mass production, bulk purchasing and centralised distribution. Moreover, the bigger supermarket chains have significant resources at their disposal for developing and implementing large scale marketing promotional activities.

Recognition of the lack of brand awareness for rural abattoir butchers was the catalyst in developing a research and business support project aimed specifically at this sector. This project was funded by the Local Action Groups (LEADER) of counties Limerick, Cork, Kerry and Clare through the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013. The Local Action Groups are charged with fostering the development of rural areas through the implementation of innovative, locally-based, bottom-up development strategies. Food and tourism are two major themes within the programme.

Launched in August 2009 this rural abattoir support programme is based on investigating suitable marketing strategies for increasing brand awareness of local artisan meat supplied by rural abattoir butchers in the south west (SW) of Ireland.

The objective of this paper is to examine the suitability of such marketing strategies in the context of helping rural abattoir butchers develop new growth markets in the tourism and hospitality sectors: - With this in mind the following research questions have been formulated;

1. What are the USPs (Unique Selling Points) for creating a compelling value proposition for high quality artisan meat supplied directly from the local butcher to the hospitality sector?
2. What are the most effective & suitable promotional strategies for marketing this artisan meat message directly to restaurateurs and hoteliers taking into account the dual requirements of sole trader butcher marketing to include low cost and ease of implementation?
3. What are the implications of these two areas of empirical research on food tourism in terms of increasing visitors to the region?

Literature Review

The marketing orientation and strategies of small-and-medium sized enterprises (SME's) is well represented and documented in the literature, for a review see (Gilmore, Carson & Grant, 2001; Simpson & Taylor, 2002; Krake, 2005; Padmore Taylor & Hughes, 2006; Opuku, Bendixen & Pitt, 2007; Eps Govers & Go, 2008 and Walsh & Lipinski, 2009). By contrast, what is missing in the literature is a lack of research focusing on the promotional initiatives and marketing best practices of rural abattoir butchers. It is therefore both prudent and necessary within the context of this paper to summarise the most reputed SME marketing promotional initiatives presented in the literature and to provide a critical lens under which their potential effectiveness, suitability and ease of adoption can be deployed by rural abattoir butchers in their efforts to target hotels and restaurants across the hospitality sector.

A recent article by O' Dwyer, Gilmore & Carson (2009;56) examining innovative marketing in SMEs, reiterates previous authors in the literature who state that the primary components of innovative marketing are 'uniqueness' 'newness' and 'unconventionality'. Taken together, these variables are the basis from which SMEs can formulate a unique proposition. This study also presents a conceptual model for innovative marketing in SMEs based on "incessant supplemental adjustments to current activities and practices, which enables SMEs in niche markets to differentiate their product or service from the standardised offerings of larger

firms”. These ‘activities’ and ‘practices’ extend across all elements of the supply chain process and provide rural abattoir butchers with opportunities to create a unique value proposition in the areas of sourcing, killing, producing, preparing, marketing, distributing and selling fully traceable local quality artisan meat to hoteliers and restaurateurs. So what innovative SME marketing promotional strategies can rural abattoir butchers implement to target these market segments within the hospitality sector?

Numerous authors in recent years have examined to varying degrees the importance of two fundamental marketing phenomena: effective Customer Relationship Management, (CRM) and the use of Internet Based Technologies, (IBTs) in helping to create a cohesive marketing strategy. (Godin, 2008; Holzner, 2008; Claxton & Woo 2008; Meerman Scott, 2009). The perceived value of e-marketing hinges on a proposition that combines; lower costs with opportunities to increase sales, improve customer relationship management, enhance corporate image and increase business efficiency. Canavan, Henchion & O’ Reilly (2007; 193) in their study on Irish speciality food producers conclude that the Internet can complement other marketing channels used by Irish speciality food producers and endorse its function as a key part of eCRM “its role in managing information and relationships maybe more important than online sales”. They conclude that “leveraging the Internet as a ‘marketing channel’ as distinct from mainly a ‘distribution channel’ is evident in the specialty food market and this is likely to be of increasing importance to speciality food producers”. Rural abattoir butchers are one such segment of Irish speciality food producers. These food entrepreneurs have an opportunity to leverage the Internet by developing an interactive website with an extensive ecommerce engine. This would involve an initial set up cost, but once created, would combine the effectiveness of a direct low cost marketing channel with all the convenience and flexibility of online bulk purchasing and procurement. It would be very beneficial for chefs and purchasing managers from hotels and restaurants to order their artisan meat supply directly from these butchers on line.

The next generation of internet marketing to explode in recent years is that of social media or Web 2.0. Epps Govers & Go (2008: 12) investigate the use of Social Media as an interactive social marketing tool. The trio suggest that the Internet is now in its third age of development “based on a more affective or feeling-based paradigm, where the merely functional or reasoned approaches of earlier ages will be surpassed by an enjoyable and compelling

experience that encompasses social interaction and a sense of belonging and escapism". The Social Media Marketing (SMM) tools open to SMEs are extensive and include Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Blogging, Wiki, MySpace, Squidoo, etc. These tools provide an effective low cost online medium to reach an extensive target market by way of an interactive two way exchange. In a recent Social Media Marketing Report - *How Marketers Are Using Social Media to Grow Their Businesses* (2009,) 81% indicated generating exposure for the business as the number-one advantage of SMM followed by increasing traffic and building new business partnerships. Facebook registration in Ireland is already on the rise with a phenomenal 1.39 million Irish users registered in April 2010 (Facebook Ad System, 2010). What better way for the rural abattoir butchers to explore building new partnerships and relationships with hotels and restaurants than by leveraging the use of Social Media Marketing? Taking all of these facts into consideration surely this paves the way for examining how legendary, local artisan abattoir butchers can use some of the best practice promotional techniques highlighted across the SME Marketing literature to develop a set of marketing promotional strategies with which to target new markets within the hospitality sector?

Research Methodology

It is against this backdrop, that a new area of empirical research funded by 9 Local Action Groups delivering the Rural Development Programme (LEADER), across 4 counties in the South West (Cork, Kerry, Limerick, Clare) has emerged within the specialty food producers market. The objective of this primary research was to examine the marketing orientation of rural abattoir butchers in the south west of Ireland by;

1. Identifying their unique selling points (USPs) and understand how they can create a compelling value proposition through a differentiated artisan meat product
2. Understanding to what extent they have engaged in marketing/promotional activities to date
3. Examining how they can adopt and implement innovative SME marketing promotional practices to communicate their message to customers

The primary research was exploratory in nature based on conducting individual in-depth interviews with 24 rural abattoir butchers across counties Cork, Kerry, Limerick and Clare. The research guidelines stipulated that these butchers must own an abattoir and source their

meat supply from within a 50 mile radius. All of these butchers have a retail presence. The primary research was carried out between August 2009 and March 2010 and each interview was conducted on site at the butcher's location. As an exploratory study based on a geographical focus in the south west of Ireland, this research is not intended to be wholly representative of the wider population of rural abattoir butchers in Ireland. However, it is important to highlight that the cross section of rural abattoir butchers that participated in this study have a similar business model and profile consistent with the wider rural abattoir butcher market in Ireland.

The limitations of the study are inherent in its exploratory approach in that in-depth interviews are recognised to include some degree of subjectivity. However, every effort was made in collating and presenting the findings of this research to include only information based on factual data as provided by the individual rural abattoir butchers themselves and not on any subjective interpretation thereof.

Each in depth research interview focused on four areas;

1. Construct a rural abattoir butcher profile which included the scale of their involvement in the food service sector
2. Identify the factors inherent in creating a unique value proposition
3. Understand the range of marketing tactics used by these rural abattoir butchers to date
4. Assess their attitudes and thoughts on the best mix of marketing promotional tactics for the future.

The interview questions were designed and collated by an independent research consultancy company with specialist expertise in food marketing and research. Following each interview a suitable business profile documenting all the information was created for each participant. Each interview lasted approximately 1.5 -2 hours.

Research Findings

Background & Profile

All of the rural abattoir butchers are family owned businesses. Half of these are *at least* third generation. A summary is given in the table below. This is testimony to the strong sense of family pride and the immense butchering knowledge and expertise indicative of this region.

Table 1: Family Business & Generational Profile

No. of Rural Abattoir Butchers	Generational Expertise & Ownership
2	Fifth Generation
1	Fourth Generation
9	Third Generation
7	Second Generation
5	First Generation

Food Service Sector - Scale of involvement

A summary of the findings are presented in the table below based on segmenting the scale of their sales activity to the food service sector into three sections

- Small scale (Selling to 3 or less)
- Medium Scale (Selling to between 4-10)
- Large scale (Selling to Greater than 10)

A significant finding from this study is the fact that the existing market opportunities within the food service sector are predominantly due to the efforts of the food service entities themselves rather than as a result of any type of marketing promotional campaign instigated by the butchers.

Table 2: SW Rural Abattoir Butchers & Food Service

No. of Rural Abattoir Butchers	Food Service Involvement
9	Not selling to Food Service
5	Small
3	Medium
7	Large

Creating a Unique Proposition

Table 3 presents a number of USPs for creating a distinctive value proposition for quality artisan meat.

Table 3: Summary of Main USPs for SW Rural Abattoir Butchers

● Successive generations of family owned business
● Highly skilled in traditional butchering methods and best practices
● Family owned farms and rearing of own livestock in a large percentage of cases
● Local sourcing of meat supply direct from farmers within a 50 mile radius
● Full traceability of product based on ownership and management of the entire supply chain process including sourcing of cattle, slaughtering, hanging, chilling, boning, cutting, trimming, presentation and final sale to the consumer
● Only source high end breeds including Aberdeen Angus, Hereford, Charolais, Red and Black Limousines and Continentals
● Owner managed abattoir
● Low food miles as all product is either locally sourced or reared on family farms adjacent to abattoir
● Extended hanging time for extra tenderness- minimum 14-21 days for beef, 7-10 for lamb
● Embrace environmental farming best practices
● Passionate about animal welfare including provision of a healthy livestock diet, food supplements and rearing in a natural stress free environment
● Extensive range of value added products - unique handmade artisan sausages puddings, burgers, cured and salted bacon products, matured and spiced delicatessen style beef and lamb products parma ham, pancetta
● Wide range of award winning products based on traditional family recipes passed down through successive generations
● Variety of highly specialised natural artisan techniques including curing, smoking, spicing, seasoning, salting, and extended maturation of product

This extensive list of USPs, differentiates these specialty food producers product offering from the supermarket multiples whose world is dominated by mass production and distribution, bulk purchasing, and a rush for volume sales. By comparison these rural abattoir butchers control the entire supply chain process ensuring they embrace the principal of full traceability – based on a ‘Farm to Fork’ artisan philosophy.

Current Marketing Promotional Activities

A summary of the marketing activities in use by these rural abattoir butchers is given in table 4 below:

Table 4- Summary of Marketing Activity by SW Rural Abattoir Butchers

Logo & branding design concept	20 out of the 24 participants do not have a logo or branding concept for their business
Ability to manage a CRM system	None of the participants currently have any kind of CRM system
Direct Mail	Only 4 out of the 24 have ever engaged in direct mail activity
Point of Sale (POS) & In store promotions	All 24 participants concentrated their promotional efforts on in-store activities; handmade window posters and Point Of Sale (POS) signage
SMS Texting	One
emarketing	Only 2 have engaged in any type of emarketing activity
Web Marketing	Only 2 of the 24 participants have a website
Social Media Marketing	None of the 24 participants are currently using Social Media Marketing
Public Relations Activity	Only a very small amount of participants engage in PR activity

These findings show that the extent of marketing activity engaged in by these 24 rural abattoir butchers is *extremely limited* with hand written window posters and POS promotional offers being the only evidence of promotional activity common to all participants.

Albeit, in the case of two of the abattoir butchers who are using a website to promote their business one of whom actually sells their product on line, there was a complete *absence of any type of proactive e-marketing activity*. This lack of e-marketing effort was offset by an eagerness and willingness on the part of the abattoir owners to create a branding concept for their business through the assistance of an independent marketing company whose expertise and services were funded as part of the overall research project.

Best Promotional Mix for Rural Abattoir Butchers

The final part of the in-depth interviews served to capture the rural abattoir butchers' attitudes and thoughts on the best mix of marketing promotional tactics to implement going forward. All of the participants unanimously agreed that marketing was pivotal to maintaining a competitive position but they were unsure of what promotional initiatives they should pursue based on having limited financial resources and time poor constraints.

A variety of promotional options and marketing tactics were explained to each rural abattoir butcher and presented as a 'Marketing Toolkit'. This toolkit serves as a quick reference guide loaded with specific marketing promotional examples best suited for this sector taking into consideration the dual requirement of low cost and ease of implementation. Suggestions included:

Direct Marketing – SMS Texting, email marketing and direct mail

Social Media Marketing – Facebook Pages and Twitter

Web Marketing – Creation of a website based on ability to secure funding

Box Scheme – Creation of a USP through door to door product delivery

In store Promotions – Creative bundled offers such as €X amount off when you buy Y quantity

Public Relations – Press & media coverage based on the creation of newsworthy storylines

Sponsorship and Networking – Sponsorship of local events, school fund raisers, jerseys for the local GAA Club, school concerts etc

Customer Loyalty Schemes- Developing rewards programmes for loyal customers

Discussion and Sectoral Implications

One of the objectives of this paper was to identify the USPs for south west rural abattoir butchers to create a unique value proposition for marketing high quality artisan meat to the food service sector. This research has highlighted a series of USPs, based on the product offering and how it is produced which empowers these speciality food producers to create and deliver a compelling food service marketing message. As was highlighted earlier, existing innovative SME marketing is based on 'newness', 'unconventionality' and 'uniqueness' across a range of activities. These south west rural abattoir butchers are highly skilled and perform a wide range of these activities themselves (sourcing/rearing, killing, boning cutting, trimming, presentation etc) which arms them with two powerful points of differentiation over their multiple counterparts

1. They have complete control over the *entire supply chain process* which empowers them to create a powerful marketing message based on genuine full traceability to the food service sector.
2. They can completely customise and '*create a unique product offering*' for the food service sector based on orders for specific cuts and portion sizes, use of specialised

artisan processes; smoking, curing, spicing and extended maturation cycles based on longer hanging times which produce a much more tender tasting meat product.

These USPs are in direct contrast to the mass produced, standardised product offerings of the larger processed meat plants, many of whom are central suppliers for food service owners.

Interestingly enough the research shows that 9 of the rural abattoir butchers are not selling to the food service sector at all, a missed opportunity in terms of increasing sales. Of the 15 rural abattoir butchers that are selling to the food service market, most of these market opportunities are occurring based on sales and marketing efforts driven by the food service managers and not by the butcher owners. There is a strong business case emerging from this research which suggests that rural abattoir butchers can increase sales in the food service sector based on implementing a focused marketing campaign for quality artisan meat which embraces all of these USPs. This will empower them to 'fight back' at the multiples who enjoy a much stronger brand identity in the marketplace.

The second objective of this research paper was to propose a set of low cost effective promotional strategies that rural abattoir butchers could use to target the food service sector. Although this research reveals that their current marketing promotional tactics are extremely limited, they also have a strong desire to learn how marketing can benefit their business. Any promotional activity proposed must be based on the philosophy of low cost and ease of implementation. This is where the worlds of email marketing, web marketing and social media marketing present the ideal promotional mix for galvanising an effective low cost marketing campaign among rural abattoir butchers targeted at the food service sector. As was highlighted earlier, there is tremendous opportunity to leverage IBTs in marketing to the food service sector. Supplying real genuine, fully traceable, locally sourced artisan meat online would be an ideal marketing initiative to target local chefs and restaurateurs who would welcome the flexibility and convenience of online ordering. One of the main challenges in the use of e-marketing activities by SMEs compared to larger firms (including digital technologies like text messaging), is lack of time, expertise and financial resources (Gilmore Gallagher & Henry, 2007). Despite these limitations there is an opportunity for rural abattoir butchers to gain the expertise required in the form of technical training, grant funding and effective time management practices to surmount the barriers to e-marketing. Getting this

expertise will empower them to target the hospitality sector through effective on line promotional initiatives.

The south west rural abattoir butchers are already at an advantage to embrace basic IBTs (email, customer database, and website) as a core part of their marketing promotional strategy to hoteliers and restaurateurs through the public funding they have already received by way of this research project. Already training is underway through a series of one to one mentoring and master class workshops delivered by an independent marketing company which is the first stepping stone in educating these SW abattoir butchers on the importance of e-marketing for their business. There is a real opportunity now for each of these rural abattoir butchers to channel this expertise into implementing an effective e-marketing strategy targeted at the food service sector.

A recent development in the area of on line marketing is the upsurge in Social Media Marketing across SMEs in Ireland. In a recent survey of Irish SMEs by the O2 Ideas Room, 15% of Irish SMEs have their business on Facebook, rising to 20% for technology related companies and one in ten SME businesses also have a Twitter account. The benefits of Social Media Marketing were highlighted earlier to include the ability to generate exposure, increase traffic and build new business partnerships. Rural abattoir butchers have a real opportunity now to leverage SMM as an essential part of their low cost marketing promotional strategy in targeting chefs, general managers/procurement managers, restaurateurs and hoteliers. These butchers can combine the other low cost marketing promotional approaches to develop a cohesive integrated marketing effort directed at the food service sector. These innovative SME marketing approaches (documented in the marketing toolkit) include SMS texting, direct mail campaigns, public relations, direct selling through box schemes and implementing effective customer loyalty programmes.

The third objective of this research paper was to assess how rural abattoir butchers can work together with the food service sector in an attempt to create a niche food tourism opportunity. In fact, integrating all of these efforts into a cohesive strategy as proposed in the marketing toolkit, supports the notion that rural abattoir butchers can *lead a marketing campaign* in conjunction with restaurateurs and hoteliers across the south west region to engage in cross sell opportunities and joint collaborative marketing efforts using a combination of offline and

online approaches. One of the current initiatives underway from this empirical research is the creation of a regional brand amongst these 24 rural abattoir butchers, based on achieving excellence across their entire supply chain process. This branding strategy could serve as the stepping stone for positioning the south west of Ireland as a niche food tourism destination based upon a unique value proposition of marketing local quality artisan meat. These rural abattoir butchers are masters in their field and could work with industry stakeholders like Failte Ireland and the Irish Tourism Industry Confederation to jointly develop a food tourism campaign using web marketing, e-marketing and social media marketing that would increase tourist numbers to the region.

Conclusion

This paper has presented an insight into the marketing promotional strategies open to a cross section of rural abattoir butchers in the south west of Ireland in order to target the food service sector. Based on empirical research, this paper has examined the various aspects of their unique value proposition in terms of creating a compelling message which focuses on marketing high quality local artisan meat to the hospitality sector. Moreover, it has presented a set of promotional strategies that these rural abattoir butchers can easily develop to promote their message cost effectively. Finally this paper has constructively opened the debate for how these butchers can work with food service owners, managers and key stakeholders to develop a food tourism promotional campaign for local artisan meat that will increase tourists to the south west region.

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