

The Retail Context: A Case Study of 4 UK Based Knowledge Transfer Partnerships

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Abstract

This case study will analyse the role of knowledge transfer in the development of revised retail marketing and management strategies in four retail Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) that have each entered into two year Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs.) Interviews were conducted with senior managers of three completed projects and a content analysis was undertaken of review meeting minutes from all four projects. The findings clearly indicate that an innovative partnership approach is preferable to utilising elements of the traditional consultancy model when developing new retail initiatives. Furthermore, the embedding of core retail merchandising systems and marketing practices are highlighted as critical when ensuring sustainable growth and a return on partnership investment costs. Although not generalisable to other industry sectors, this case study provides timely insight in to some of the key issues faced by food and charity orientated retail SMEs as they engage with knowledge transfer processes. This paper is particularly relevant given the continued development of retail as an academic discipline in its own right and the recent (2013) ESRC Retail Sector Initiative which recognises "The UK retail sector is an important part of the economy and has a profound impact on the whole of our society." [1]

1. Acknowledgements

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2. Introduction

Knowledge Transfer Partnerships are a successful UK based programme aimed at enhancing business performance through strategic alliances and knowledge sharing with Higher Education (HE), Further Education (FE) or research organisation providers. The TSB in 2012 described them as...

"Europe's leading programme helping businesses to improve their competitiveness by enabling companies to work with higher education or research

and technology organisations to obtain knowledge, technology or skills which they consider to be of strategic competitive importance.” [2]

Until recently these were not available to retail, hospitality and tourism companies due to strict funding criteria, having traditionally being embedded in the engineering and scientific sectors. The demonstrated, ongoing success of KTPs and their contribution to the UK economy has resulted in a greater range of service sectors becoming eligible to qualify for funding from early 2007; including those with a retail business component.

Every KTP involves three partners, namely: a third sector organisation or business usually but not exclusively an SME, a team of academics from a specified discipline within a university or equivalent educational provider and a recent graduate (known as the Associate) usually qualified in an academic field aligned to the activities of the business partner. In June 2011 the ESRC [3] re-confirmed its two priority areas originally communicated in January 2010 for KTP funding as the Financial Services and Retail Sectors [4]. This paper presents an indicative overview of the challenges and benefits that KTPs and knowledge transfer can produce for retail a range of retail SMEs. The School of Sport and Service Management at the University of Brighton has an established range of courses in Travel, Tourism, Events, Hospitality and Retail and like most post-1992 institutions, has worked closely with a number of regional SMEs as part of its Economic and Social Engagement (EaSE) Policy in the process of supporting regional economic development. This portfolio of work includes KTP networking events that then developed into formal dialogues with the four KTP partners featured in this case study. The companies are:

The Seafood Restaurant (Padstow) Ltd., KTP Partnership no. 6354. This award winning hospitality business based in the South West of England had incorporated an expanding retail and mail order element into their offer. Recognising that there were inconsistencies in their portfolio and its profit performance, this project aimed to conduct a strategic review of all retail marketing, merchandising and management activities to more consistently align with other areas of the food, hospitality and media activities. See: <http://www.rickstein.com>

Pordum Foods Ltd. KTP Partnership, no. 7428. Trading as Bon Appétit, the company diversified from selling gourmet quality, bulk frozen ready meals delivered through a network of field sales staff to develop a separate frozen food/microwave vending offer as a catering solution for the workplace to complement existing hospitality provision. This project aimed to refine the existing offer and enhance levels of innovation to develop a more widely appealing vended food retail offer. See: <http://www.hotfoodvending.com/>

Spring Barn Farm, Kingston, KTP Partnership no. 7927. This visitor attraction incorporates a petting zoo, campsite and children’s play areas on the South Downs as part of a working, family run farm just outside the historical town of Lewes. Recognising local consumer demand for regional produce, their home-produced beef and lamb and alternative (non-multiple) retail offer, the business aimed to build and open a complementary farm shop. This KTP project was centred on the

initial start-up retail business and aligning it to the existing food and event offer. See: <http://www.springbarnfarm.com>

St Wilfrid's Hospice, Eastbourne, Partnership no. 8985. This Hospice provides palliative care in the community for Eastbourne and the surrounding towns. The organisation generates funds to support these activities from a range of activities including a lottery, events and bricks-and-mortar retail activities in an increasingly crowded market. The aim of this project is to devise and implement a new retail strategy incorporating innovative retail models for the charity sector informed by mainstream retail and e-commerce best practices while providing a clearer understanding of the changing charity shopper. See <http://www.stwhospice.org>

3. Methodology

For the purpose of this paper an initial overview of all relevant meeting minutes' was undertaken. These summaries were then used to formulate broad research questions centred on the KTP process (see Appendix 1.) and, more specifically, the organisational considerations given towards the development of the respective new (or revised) retail offers. Utilising these questions, one-to-one interviews were subsequently conducted with senior managers from the three completed partnerships, with the regular meeting minutes exclusively reviewed for the fourth. Where completed, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and coded in line with good research practice, Silverman [5] with a content analysis being conducted on the available documents relating to the fourth company. This followed an inductive, qualitative case study approach is known to be a successful strategy to investigate SME retail and branding issues (Budnarowska and Marciniak [6], Horan et al. [7], Hutchinson and Quinn,[8]). Indeed, Choueke et al. [9] comment on the usefulness of one to one interviews when investigating SME cultures – something critical to understanding the strategic importance of KTPs to the four businesses under investigation. A range of common themes was highlighted as a result of the analysis undertaken. The following discussion summarises the range of reflections and approaches to knowledge transfer from retailing SME perspectives, highlighting the benefits of the KTP programme.

4. Discussion

4.1 Drivers for the engaging with KTP process

Prior to their involvement with KTPs most of the companies had experience of using external consultants or agencies to assist in strategic developments, as discussed by Bennett and Smith [10] in their analysis of management consultant selection and control. However, it was apparent that custom and practice tended to be polarised into two areas, namely low cost-low intensity advice from Government funded regional sources such as Business Link and higher cost-higher intensity consultancy from a range of professions. This is consistent with their observations that: *"fee level and overall cost and duration of assignments appear to be the critical factors influencing how a client selects a consultant for a particular assignment"* [ibid, p.456]. It was also perceived by the interviewees that traditional

consultants have to be more actively engaged with by companies to ensure both value and delivery. Previous studies have also highlighted issues in developing SME management skills partly due to interventions wrongly assessing SME needs, Gray and Lawless [11]. All four businesses acknowledged limitations to company budgets for consultancy activities arguing that they needed more value and tangible outputs from bought-in services. This had led to the businesses searching for a more sustained, medium intensity, medium cost solution of longer duration. Their experience of regional educational providers through traditional graduate placement programmes and business engagement activities e.g. the University of Brighton's Profitnet[®] scheme had highlighted alternative opportunities to utilise Service Sector disciplinary expertise from academic practitioners aligned to their core businesses areas. As a result the organisations involved approached retail academics to review possible options for collaborative working. This building of existing relationships is consistent with previous Business-to-Business (B2B) research conducted by the author, Ells et al. [12].

4.2 The appeal of retail

For all organisations there was clear desire to explore the range of possibilities that retail markets presented but often these were effectively unavailable due to lack of insight or restricted by existing capabilities. From an economic perspective it was recognised that retail products can clearly add value to rural and semi-rural businesses, Fiore et al. [13] and that hospitality entrepreneurs are increasingly successful at selling a wider range of retail products.

Henderson [14] notes that within tourist operations, retail represents an alternative income stream and that food solutions provide a retail product orientated offer that is an acceptable alternative to in-house catering. Inter-sector transitions from retail to hospitality have also been more widely witnessed as national supermarket chains develop hot food counters, coffee shops and restaurants (Bourlakis and Weightman [15], Slattery, [16]. It was also mentioned by the interviewees that cultural proximity between food business disciplines was also an important factor to consider including common consumer demands, knowledge of food supplier networks, the Retail and Hospitality Servicescapes, Speilmen et al. [17], and most notably common elements of aesthetic labour, Wadhurst and Nixon [18]. From a charity retailing perspective, retailing has always been an important selling channel for donated goods but competition has intensified over recent years as a result of online auction websites and as a sector, Charity Retailing has at times suffered from reputation issues associated with poor retail merchandising practises. From a consumer perspective there was also evidence to suggest that customers' changing expectations now demanded different consumption experiences from SME retailing, these being more attentive to their needs, less corporate, at times more experiential and, in turn offering more informed choices about products and the services offered. The four businesses questioned also recognised that the potential benefits of existing customer footfall were not always fully capitalised upon.

4.3 Recognising limitations to custom and practice

Despite retail aspirations and prior experimentation with different retail formats the interviewees often recognised that there was much work to be done at the commencement to the KTP projects in defining their respective retail offers. One commented that they were “*enthusiastic retail amateurs*” (11) another noting that the offer “*needed to be more mainstreamed*” (13) with a third commenting that “*we need a well-run store to sustain and support future business growth*” (12). The main concern for all businesses was that they had trialed different product mixes in a limited way but these organic business practices had not delivered sustained growth and more importantly not accurately reflected company visions for their businesses. At times they were struggling to translate some of their entrepreneurial ideas into meaningful retail merchandising practices that were appropriately recognised by their customers – a drawback of informal approaches to retail management [11]. There was also evidence to suggest that other areas of the businesses were sometimes subsidising poor retail performance. This is not uncommon when multiple offers are present under one umbrella organisation or location but more importantly it was clear that in a number of situations this had resulted in limited incremental development of the retail offer, see Reynolds et al.[19]. Concerns over retail performance and company image therefore acted as a catalyst for seeking more formal external advice from trusted sources notably with known educational providers as part of a broader information search process.

It was also recognised that retail expertise could not be developed without a combination of *both* higher-level skills *and* recruiting individuals to work on retail projects. From the outset it was known that substantial retail projects were costly and involved an element of risk but the limitations of internal capability was clearly inhibiting business growth with a more detailed, progressive retail strategy being required. It should also be noted that the vocational nature of retail programmes of study, HE institutional credibility and local reputation were significant factors that steered companies towards The KTP programme model.

4.4 Own label and branding

Without exception all companies were passionate about their own label development as an extension of their existing business offer and, on discussion, clearly articulated the importance of developing a range of products aligned to their personal values, original business aims or charitable activities, particularly if there was any significant heritage associated with the established offer. A number of times it was emphasised that the term “*brand*” sometimes provided an uncomfortable fit within organisations as it might be perceived as being too mainstream, corporate or even unethical. It was also important to consider the symbolic and functional meaning of branding to the owner manager, Mitchell et al. [20]. With these perspectives in mind the academic project team were cautious and at times had to effectively translate branding and marketing theory via discussions of ‘own label’ as an intermediary term which proved acceptable. Nevertheless, the strategic importance of brands had to be highlighted on an ongoing basis as part of

a strategy to differentiate and reduce risk, something recognised by Spence and Essoussi [21]

Without exception the companies were passionate about selling retail products that were important to them in terms of perceived quality and provenance but issues arose when a subjective (and often random) assortment of individual products were amalgamated within a defined retail business unit. This reactive accumulation of lines and lack of category management strategy often produced a collection of erratic merchandising classes and displays that resulted in a confusing consumer offer which was difficult to navigate and understand when compared to mainstream conventions. From observation of consumer behaviour in the KTP retail environments, problems subsequently became evident when consumers were attempting to assess the pre-purchase offer. Furthermore, inconsistency in product labeling was an issue with a succession of packaging designs and labels on display at any one time. This had potential to damage any branded perceptions therefore making any associated values and brand pillars less clear. From a project management perspective, it was recognised early on by the academic team that three common area of focus were required in all of the projects:

1. The clear defining of all merchandising classes and aligned products to assist in the category management process. This would facilitate easier customer choices and contribute to better staff productivity.
2. The consistent presentation of all branded products specifically in terms of labelling and packaging to consolidate the company offer and produce the desired, consistent company image.
3. The establishment of a programme of periodic strategic range reviews including the management of new lines/ deletions to actively manage all retail processes.

These actions help to preserve the reputation of the organisations as well their respective brands, Abimola and Kocak, [22]. Own label development was seen in all four businesses as a means of demonstrating integrity of products and sometimes viewed as both an extension of the family name/ personality and a way of conveying the transparency and honesty in the offer. *"It says about us, who we are and what we do"* (12) but was also about *"more professionalism and styling"* (13.)

4.5 Project Management

Over the course of all four KTPs it has been demonstrated that key to the success of the projects was the successful recruitment of a suitably qualified graduate Associate. Most companies stressed that qualifications were secondary to achieving an appropriate fit with the organisational culture, governance methods, mix of existing employee personalities and social capital, Wright and Kellermans, [23]. It was also critical that candidates demonstrated a good work ethic as contact with academic supervisors was at times limited to on average half a day per week. The ability to work unsupervised, immediately and at a supervisory level was also essential to project success along with an ability to take ideas forward and make

tactical retail decisions. To meet these selection criteria a one-day recruitment centre format was devised with key company stakeholders. This involved a competency based interview, presentation and group exercise linked to the developed retail job specification. Once appointed, the Associates were given job titles that were most meaningful to the project e.g. Retail Project Manager, Marketing Manager or Retail Manager. This was seen as critical in communicating a broad job specification to existing staff and integrating the role of the Associate and academic team within the business as soon as practical. Prior to the KTPs there was typically limited experience of in-house retail project management but the roles were clearly welcomed, as highlighted by one interviewee who stated that *“not only do you benefit from the advice and knowledge of the academic partners, you have the physical day to day presence of the Associate in the business to make things happen”* (11). For all four projects the initial bid had highlighted detailed (up to n=85 activities) project plans to be completed within the 2 years and there was an expectation that the Associates would be responsible for driving this agenda forward. It should also be noted that the initial project plans provided a key strategic tool by which to monitor ongoing progress. All interviewees highlighted that Associates tended to perform above the level of typical graduate recruits with the academic supervisors estimating that their project management experience gained, interpretation of the project brief, and exposure to the commercial environment was equivalent to 5 years spent in a national retailer’s graduate scheme. In part, this was attributed to the high level of responsibility assigned to the Associate, combined with the relative lack of organisational bureaucracy that acted as an enabler to facilitate change when compared to larger retail organisations. Other benefits of Associates highlighted was their ability to identify problems, consolidate work from a number of different business areas and conduct detailed analysis.

4.6 Innovation and the retail transition

One of the key issues with all four projects was to get the organisations differentiate elements of their offer to create greater levels of customer awareness. This was highlighted by the academic team as one of the key challenges of the projects and required not only retail disciplines to be defined and communicated but also the development of new routines for store and field staff. As part of the knowledge transfer process, a number of ‘consumer-orientated’ workshops were conducted to emphasise potential business culture issues. Without exception all four businesses wanted to innovate their offer but much of the time changes were made to products and merchandising without fully thinking through some of the more strategic imperatives such as consistency and customer reaction. As one interviewee commented *“Prior to the project there were no rigorous systems in place, we didn’t know enough...absolutely”* (13), something that resulted in missed sales opportunities. There were also limitations to the quality of sales and profit data captured, which, at times, made the making of informed business decisions difficult – often leading to decisions based on instinct rather than analytics. This was reflected in observed merchandising trends and limitations to the management of retail spaces, functionality of packaging and presentation of products. This necessitated a clearly formulated retail New Product Development (NPD)

processes to allow appropriate consumer testing and therefore minimising financial risks. In two companies this process extended to the trialing of new store merchandising concepts enabling a transformation of the retail offer by developing more innovative and engaging retail spaces.

4.7 Web based considerations

A further concern of the project team was how the retail 'bricks and mortar' or workplace business offer was translated to an online presence. Such aspects were important for a number of reasons:

1. To make the offer available to regional and global markets where appropriate. This was particularly critical when considering mail order and online ordering/ auction functions while also emphasising service elements of the business, see Horan et al. [7]
2. To filter and re-direct enquiries to an appropriate first point of contact within the organisation. One business highlighted this as essential to developing B2B relationships but it was also paramount when taking bookings for functions, facilities and restaurants.
3. To add value to the marketing, fundraising and PR activities undertaken in other areas of the businesses. Where limited budgets were available the return on any paid marketing activity needed to be optimised through cost effective channels, Opoku et al. [24]
4. To ensure consistency of branding across all areas of the business.

It was also critical to facilitate regular in-house web updates with all four case studies and to optimise the use of social media mechanisms. The KTPs facilitated this activity by supplying all partners with a digital photography capacity (from project budgets) which also reduced costs associated with buying in contract photographers and other media specialists. Furthermore, all four Associates also had to develop their copy writing skills to supported the retail offer. The ability to produce a range of materials including advertising copy, blogs, training manuals and developing point of purchase materials highlighted the importance of previous higher academic attainment.

4.8 Localised supply chains

Jämsä et al. [25] stress the importance of supplier networks to SMEs and without exception this was a critical component of the four business models under review. Companies were very conscious of the need to add value to products, where possible producing and processing ingredients and donated goods in-house and in doing so controlling both the quality of retail products and their reputations. They found that by utilising trusted companies for sourcing both goods and services that it was easier to control all elements of the supply chain and associated marketing activity. It should also be noted that when greater volumes of product were required some outsourcing was necessary. The partners used were carefully selected often with checks made regarding their corporate reputation. At times supplier relationships were also linked to custom/practice and informal yet established business practices. From a positive perspective the utilisation of

trusted suppliers and contractors enabled much more flexibility in sourcing product and interviewees commented that it was easier to initiate and terminate contracts as required and therefore maintain the integrity of the products sold. In the case of the food retailers affinity between food production and food retailing also facilitated the ongoing exchange of ideas and products between hospitality, catering and retail components of the business to enhance sales opportunities. It appears therefore that this vertical *and* lateral thinking of NPD is unique to diversifying hospitality and food service providers, particularly if the ingredients base has a number of common locally sourced components. In the case of (non-food) charity retailing disposal of unwanted goods and waste management was of equal importance to the sourcing and buying of quality stock but similar to the food retailers, trusted contractors were critical in ensuring revenues and consumer trust were optimised.

4.9 The role of the university and Associates

From an academic perspective, working on KTPs has highlighted many of the “*open innovation*” benefits available to businesses by engaging with HEIs , Johnston et al. [26] and how they support the agenda of the UK Government Department of Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) which aims to create more innovative collaboration between HEIs and industry. This is particularly timely given the recently announced ESRC (2012) Retail Navigator Project [1] and the published review of the High Street conducted by Portas [27] that recommends consideration for a range of wider support mechanisms for smaller retailers and market traders with the interpersonal dimension of knowledge transfer being identified as key, Mitton et al. [28]. All interviewees registered the importance of the working relationship with academics. Such features are common with Edwards [29] who stresses the importance of relational considerations over more positivistic ways of measuring the relative success of knowledge management in relation to SME innovation. It was also noted in that in looking for external working partners, the interpersonal skills of the academics (as well as retail industry experience) were felt to be critical in order for knowledge transfer to occur and that some degree of integration was required with day to-day operations. Indeed, as The Lambert Review of Business –University collaboration [30] has previously suggested “ *the most effective forms of knowledge transfer involve human interaction and puts forward a number of ways to bring together people from businesses and universities.*” The cohesiveness of a range of interpersonal skills between all partners and particularly those of the Associate who were described as “*bringing another dimension to the business*” (I1), and in doing so representing “*fantastic value*” (I2) by partners being “*eager and keen to make an impact.*” (I3) The employment of an Associate for two years was also seen by all four companies as being critical to their (current) stage of business development with their ability to deliver a range of detailed outputs clearly recognised as a further benefit.

5. Conclusion

This case study has indicated that the lessons learned from these four projects can be extended and applied to other areas of the retail sector and that the existing KTP mechanisms have the potential to address recent concerns by Johnston et al [26] focused on “*create(ing) a knowledge sharing culture and develop enterprising mindsets*” as well as “*strengthen(ing) HEI and industry capacity to engage with each other*” but most importantly by completing a succession of sector based projects to “*share good practice across inter and intra-organisational boundaries*”. At times the interviewees were brutally honest about what they had learned “*we weren’t properly set up for the retail market... retail is far too technical than to just say it would be nice to sell this product...we quickly learned that there needs to be more to your retail strategy*” (I3.) There was also recognition that a range of informed retail decisions needed to be made more quickly. “*We need to make mistakes and quickly move on... slow moving lines need to be got rid of*” (I2) Interviewees further highlighted that without their KTPs they would be too slow in reacting to consumer demand, this being especially problematic in an economic downturn. From a systems perspective firms developed an increased appreciation of the strategic significance of new line development, labeling, branding and stock management, combined with the relevant merchandising and range management disciplines. When asked to summarise how KTPs had succeeded in moving the businesses forward there was unanimous support for the KTP process as it enabled the moving on of ideas and generated an embedded understanding and enthusiasm for retail. This detailed understanding of retail business components had facilitated the development of existing (pre-project) supervisors and managers in addition to the Associates and allowed strengths and weaknesses to be more easily recognised particularly in relation to sector specific skills (see related findings in Lashley [31], Skillsmart Retail [32]). Most importantly, the experience was viewed as “*Positive... we’ve learned a lot*” (I3) and had left a legacy within the businesses with one interviewee recognising that “*we needed knowledge transfer to get things working*” (I2).

From the four companies under review it would appear that the KTP process is an effective mechanism for developing resources and capabilities by reducing dependency on existing or family members’ expertise as discussed by Wright and Kellermans [23] with one interviewee stating that SMEs should “*not assume that they know everything about retail.*” (I1) The expanded funding structure for these projects also helps to overcome some of the earlier problems associated when trying to “*penetrate the SME retail sector to facilitate an improvement in owner manager skills and business development*”, Parker et al. [33]. Furthermore, there is evidence to support the relational perspective to knowledge management and transfer, Edwards [29] with trusted academics being key facilitator of this process. As one participant suggested, “*We always get something of value when the academics visit the business*” (I3). There is also evidence that to support the benefits of mentoring within KTP projects as “*Associates aid staff development*” (I2), something previously highlighted by Kent et al. [34].

From a retail KTP perspective, all four company partners have benefitted financially from their involvement and the partner university has succeeded in engaging with the business community while at the same time enhancing third stream activities and addressing some of the sectoral criticisms summarised by Prince [35]. However, despite common benefits and a flexible approach, it should be noted that between the four companies discussed there was no uniform mechanism for realising knowledge transfer, a concern consistent with the observations of Riege [36]. Given the aforementioned UK Government focus on retail SMEs, it appears that an extension of the existing range of Knowledge Transfer Networks (KTNs) to include a wider range of Service Sectors is apposite to facilitate wider dissemination and sharing of emerging retail SME best practice. It is also critical that funding streams for retail KTPs are maintained.

6. Appendix 1. Research interview questions

1. Why did your company consider a KTP?
2. What is your previous experience of using external consultants and how effective have they been?
3. Why is the retail offer so important to the business and what are the perceived/ actual benefits?
4. Prior to the KTP what were the limitations to your company's retail management practices?
5. What do you try to achieve with your 'own label' retail products?
6. Can you describe your company philosophy regarding food suppliers/ food supplier networks?
7. How important is the Associate to the success of the project and how would you describe their contribution?
8. From retail operations perspective (merchandising, buying etc.) what has the organisation learned as a result of the project?
9. How has the KTP experience enabled the retail offer to innovate/ move forward?
10. Have you any other comments to make on KTP projects?

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