An Investigation into the Management of Branding in Irish Artisan Food Businesses

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An Investigation into the Management of Branding in Irish Artisan Food Businesses

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Marie Dorgan
Abstract

A consumer’s lifestyle is busier now then in the past and is moving towards products that reduce preparation and cooking times (Bia, 2015). The demand for value added convenience products has created opportunity for the Artisan food sector. This has lead to the expansion of food Small Medium Enterprises (SME’s) in Ireland. There were 235 specialty food producers in Ireland in 2018, a 2.7% increase on the previous year. SME’s are growing in popularity among consumers but there is very little research been completed into Irish SME’s. A 2016 study by Kennedy and Wright identified that the area is scant in terms of literature. Hill, 2001, published a paper suggested that large corporation brand management system cannot be implemented by a SME or Entrepreneur. The objective of this study is to examine a number of Irish food SME’s and determine what is the cause to their success.

Semi Structure interviews were completed with a number of West Cork food businesses. Each of these businesses was at different stages in development. They were questioned on their thoughts on the internal and external factors of brand management within their business. The semi structure nature of the interviews allowed for discussion on topics that were not previously planned.

The expanding businesses involved in this study were somewhat financially restricted; owner operated and in many cases prioritized products and production over branding. They showed signs of a lack of awareness and understanding with regards to the importance of brand management. Businesses did not maximize their use of various marketing methods available to each business or did they take full advantage of the local food tourism trade. Food SME’s relied on farmers markets in order to start the business. Food businesses seemed to lack a formal route that they could take in order to launch their business idea. Many of the results from this study correlate with the previously published literature but it does identify areas in which Irish food SME’s needed to improve on.

Daniel Hickey
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Attestation of Own Work

This statement is to certify that this submission is solely the work of Daniel Hickey and does not breach any law of copyright, with information taken from external sources referenced and cited as appropriate. This project is submitted in fulfilment of the Masters of Business.

Signed: Daniel Hickey

Date: September 2019
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1 Introduction to Research Project

1.1 Introduction and Background to the study

Small medium enterprises (SME’s) have been one of the leading factors in contributing to the survival of many regions of rural Ireland during the last economic downturn. In 2018 a Bord Bia publication identified 235 specialist food producers that were currently in operation in the Republic of Ireland. They expect this number to grow by 2.7% and suggest that the artisan Irish food sector is growing at a particularly fast rate with a total market worth of €764 million in 2018 (Bond, 2018). This correlates with a number of other publications that identify consumer demand moving towards local, fresh, and traceable food products (Department of Agriculture, 2015) (Department of Agriculture, 2010). Some recent social and behavioural trends are indicating that consumers are spending less time each day cooking meals. They are moving towards value added products that reduce preparation and cooking times, as many consumers now lead busy lifestyles (Bia, 2015). Interestingly, another Bord Bia report identifies that consumers are becoming more adventurous with meals and are starting to include more international cuisines. In fact, many of these meal ideas are coming from recommendations found on social media (Consulting, 2018).

Consumers now have unlimited access to the internet 24 hours of the day. This has opened up a readily available market for Irish SME’s to take advantage of. This activity is relatively cheap in comparison to previous more traditional marketing methods (BordBia, 2012). Businesses can now control the online conservations regard their business in real time with instant results. However Irish SME’s are slow to take advantage of modern techniques and still rely on traditional methods (Business-Insights, 2011). Only 60% of SME’s in Ireland had a website in 2012 (BordBia, 2012) and it is unknown how many of these had an e-commerce function on their website.
It is widely publicised that one of the main reasons for the failure of an SME is the owner. His or her poor management skills and lack of knowledge in many areas in the business often leads to a business failing due to management mistakes (Duncan, 1993). However some literature identifies the owner of an SME as one of the main factors for success. His or her perseverance, personality and motivation are a crucial requirement for success (Ropega, 2011).

A number of studies have identified the lack of awareness of the importance of branding within businesses. A lot of research has been carried out on large business brand management and strategy, but very little has been completed on SME’s (Kennedy & Wright, 2016) (Ahonen, 2008). It has also been suggested that marketing in larger companies differs from SME marketing. SME marketing also differs from entrepreneurial marketing (Hill, 2001). The basis of this study is supported from a 2016 study into Irish SME’s. This study identified that there was very little research done into branding strategies used in Irish SME’s. There was minimal data or information available on the different SME’s in Ireland and further research was required in this area (Kennedy & Wright, 2016).

The main objective of this study is to identify any internal or external factors that may be unique to the Irish SME sector. Try to determine, do Irish SME’s need to improve any of their brand management skills or methods. The marketing methods used by Irish SME’s were investigated in order to identify any uncommon or interesting approaches.

1.2 Gap in the Literature

Brand management research in SME’s appears to be a recent occurrence with most of the literature available relating too much larger and more global entities (Vidic & Vadnjal, 2011; Ahonen, 2008). Before 2005 there seems to have been very little interest in the area, with very few case studies or theories published. Since then there has been an increase in the amount of research into the area but a
2016 publication by (Kennedy & Wright, 2016) identified that research in brand management in Irish SME’s was quite limited. More often than not, brand management is overlooked in SME’s (Merrilees, 2007) (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010) but the business still appears to succeed regardless.

The author investigated the area of Irish SME’s, in particular Irish food artisan producers. The intention was to investigate and identify any internal or external factors that are contributing to their success. Try to get an understanding of how the Irish food producer manages their brand. This should add to the current gap in the literature.

1.3 Research Objectives

The title of this study is,

‘An Investigation into the Management of Branding in Irish Artisan Food Businesses’

The research aims to use the following research questions as guidance for the study:

1. To review the marketing strategies used to manage a brand in Irish SME’s

2. To review the marketing techniques used by owner-operated Irish SME’s

1.4 Limitations of the Research

This study was carried out on a sample in West Cork on different food companies. However, this is good representation of different rural areas across Ireland that has a strong food business population.
1.5 Structure of the Thesis

Chapter two reviews the current literature that is available in a hope to try identifying any areas that might be lacking material or a gap in any areas. Chapter three describes the research strategy chosen to achieve the research objective. It examines the literature and justifies the use of the different research methods used by the researcher.

Chapter four contains the findings from the different research methods used in this study. Chapter five discusses these findings and compares them with the available literature in order to determine if there are any significant results. Chapter six reiterates any findings in the study, contains closing arguments and identifies any possible future research in the area. Finally the appendix and bibliography contains material, which was not included in the main body of the project and a list of cited references.

1.6 Conclusion

This chapter introduced the reader to the background information behind this research. It describes the objectives and questions set by the researcher, and also identifying the structure that is followed. The chapter concluded with a description to the limitations of the study and finally the structure of the subsequent chapters of the study.
2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will give the reader an insight into the relevant literature available in the area of management in SME's. It is important to investigate and research any previous publications in order to identify the trends and norms in different aspects of the study. This literature review will begin with studying the literature that is available for new product development and the trends towards value added products in Ireland. The different brand management and strategy methods recommended for SME's is then investigated. Unique selling points were explored, as they are a key factor for the success of an SME. Exploration into the literature on Irish SME's, the reason they fail and the difficulty's they face is the next section of this chapter. Finally the researcher explored the literature available on the benefits of farmers markets and their role as food business incubators.

2.2 Small Medium Enterprise (SME)

Enterprise Ireland describe a small enterprise as:

‘An enterprise that has fewer than 50 employees and has either an annual turnover and / or an annual Balance Sheet total not exceeding €10m’ (EU, 2003)

Enterprise Ireland describe a medium sized business as:

‘An enterprise that has between 50 employees and 249 employees and has either an annual turnover not exceeding €50m or and annual Balance Sheet not exceeding €43m’ (EU, 2003)
2.3 Importance of Value Added Products in SME’s

2.3.1 Definition of Value Added

Simply put, Chait (2017) states that ‘value-added’ is:

“... any product or action that helps you raise the value of your products or business or something you can add to a product that enables you to increase your profit margin”.

Coltrain et al (2000) uses a broad definition of value added:

‘to economically add value to a product by changing its current place, time, and form characteristics more preferred in the market place’

Coltrain gives an example of an agricultural product such as wheat, processing this into flour, which is now desired by new customers, such as bakers (Coltrain et al., 2000).

Koopman et al (2014) takes the description a step further and describes each step in a products supply chain being potential to add value to the product:

‘Within a supply chain, each producer purchases inputs and then adds value, which is included in the cost of the next stage of production. At each stage, the value added equals the value paid to the factors of production’.

The above descriptions give a broad yet simple understanding of the different definitions available in the literature.
2.3.2 Food harvest 2020 and Food Wise 2025

2.3.2.1 Food Harvest 2020

By 2050 the world’s population is set to increase by almost 50 percent, from the current 7 billion people up to 9 billion people. Much of this growth will originate in the fast growing Asian economies. This will result in the middle classes of these countries to increase in size. Resulting in the increased demand on animal products in there diets due to an increase in discretionary income. (Eolas, 2014)

This predicted growth opens up an avenue of opportunity for the food and agriculture sector to fill. Therefore in 2010, the Irish Government released a report called ‘Food Harvest 2020’. This was a report outlining the non-legally binding aims of the agriculture and food industry over a ten-year span. It looks at every sector in the Irish food industry, assesses it and gives a recommendation on the expected growth. It identifies what the government should do to achieve these recommendations or goals. (Department of Agriculture, 2010)

The targets set out in this report for ‘value added’ are to increase the added value agri business sector by 40% on 2008 data. This is an increase of 3 billion euro compared to 2008. The report considers the Irish value-added sector to range from infant formula and functional ingredients, alcoholic beverages and prepared customer foods. It recognizes that value added products are less likely to be impacted by fluctuations in the commodity prices and that processing raw materials for this sector supports employment creation in the rural economy.

The report pinpoints a number of key areas for the government to aim at to help meet the growth goals of this sector. These include the need to focus on enhancing productivity, developing internal skills, market research, innovation and new product development. An emphasis on the development of brands will be vital for the success of the Irish food and drinks brand.
The report identifies meat products and artisan foods as key to developing a sustainable agri-food economy. Demand for Irish artisan specialty food products is increasing and a strong entrepreneurial spirit in rural Ireland has helped to meet this demand. Most of these small businesses are in many cases farming based. The report describes this sector as the seeds that will grow to become Ireland’s next generations leading brands. The artisan industry works hand in hand with the tourism sector. Offering potential tourism activates to businesses, while the tourism sector offers an opportunity to enhance the Irish brand using food production. The report recommends the following to build on the success of the artisan sector:

- Strong encouragement and help of entrepreneurship from the early stages
- Promotion of locally sourced foods and local markets
- Promote Irish food traditions at a EU level to encourage tourism.
2.3.2.2 Food Wise 2025

Launched in 2015, Food Wise 2025 is a report released by the government as a follow up and expansion of the Food Harvest 2020 plan. It is a growth vision for the Irish agricultural economy leading up to 2025. (Agriland, 2016) This report is only a statement of intent and not a legally binding document. The report identifies that the Irish food industry continues to grow and is benefiting from the fact that:

“Net foreign earnings generated from agri-food exports are greater than non agri-food sectors’ (Agriland, 2016)

The report itself is ambitious and has increased its targets for the value added sector substantially. It expects to

‘Increase the value added in the agri-food, fisheries and wood products sector by 70% to in excess of €13 billion’ (Department of Agriculture, 2015)

When compared with the previous report, Food Wise 2025 details the valued added opportunity of each sector. Food harvest 2020 saw value added as an opportunity for the Irish agri sector. However, Food Wise appears to suggest that value added products are the way forward for the success of the industry. It identifies areas for sustainable growth in every sector in terms of value added growth.

The report identifies the artisan food industry as having a significant impact on local economies as businesses are typically owner managed and closely linked to local farms. Customer demand for niche food and drink products has led to an increase in the number of food companies. Customer interest in locally sourced food, local food networks and short supply chains has helped benefit local artisan food producers. This has led to the evolution of food markets and
festivals now taking place all over Ireland. The report describes these markets and festivals as natural incubation units for start up food and drink businesses.

The report has a number of recommendations to help achieve the goals set out:

- Creation of food markets similar to the English market in Cork and the Harvest Festival in Waterford
- Expansion of Dublin food chain initiative to other cities
- Support program for direct to customer producers
- Increasing opportunities for the customer to meet the producer

### 2.4 Social and Behavioral Trends

Ireland’s annual inflation rate was at 0.7 percent in January 2019, which has slowed slightly; following increases over the last 5 years after a big fall in October 2009 of -6.56 percent. A major recovery has occurred and Ireland’s GDP continues to grow. (Economics, 2019)

The food industry in Ireland has changed drastically over the last ten years. According to statistics supplied by Trading Economics, the cost of food in Ireland has decreased by 1.5% in January 2019. Cost of food has been steadily dropping since mid 2013. Averaging decreases of between 0.5% and 2.5% over the last 6 years. Cost of food saw a huge decrease of over 8% in 2010 but saw a recovery over the following 3 years. (Inflation, 2019)

A report by Bord Bia in 2015, titled ‘Busy Lives’, looked into the consumer lifestyle changes and identified that lives of consumers are getting busier. They have increased their interaction with technology in nearly every aspect of their lives. Consumers now want technology to make their lives easier, including new innovative technology in every aspect of their life can result in an increase in the layers of complexity in a consumer’s daily life. The report recommends that food and drink brands must now aim to be in the right place at the right time, be
available to the consumer exactly when and where they want them. For example food outlets are now expected to be open 24 hours a day. Deliveries of items are now expected near instantly and new innovative delivery methods are now expected from suppliers. (Bia, 2015)

Another 2018 Bord Bia report; ‘Taking the consumer lifestyle trends into 2018 and beyond’ identifies that:

‘62% of 18-22 year-olds say they cook international cuisines at home from social media, compared to 46% of Millennials (23-38), and just 23% of Gen X consumers (39-52)’ (Consulting, 2018)

These percentages show the demands of the Irish consumer are changing and that people are willing to experiment more with food.

A 2011 report by Bord Bia titled ‘What Ireland Ate Last Night’ identifies that 1 in 6 people eat classic Irish meals for dinner of the night the report was carried out. Half of all dinners were cooked from scratch using fresh ingredients while on average 41 minutes per night is spent preparing dinner. In this report, it stated that 18 percent of consumers included in the survey eat out during the week while 24 percent have a take away at home. This report was made in an Ireland that was recovering from an economic downturn. (BordBia, 2011)

A more recent survey carried out by Supervalu in 2016, identifies that 71 percent of Irish adults under the age of 34 have a take away at least once a week. 50 percent of those surveyed reporting eating at fast food restaurants at least once a week. This number falls to 42 percent and 20 percent respectively when the same question was asked to those over the age of 45. The most staggering result of the study is that 37 percent of those under 34 report that they don’t cooking from scratch out of laziness, with 31 percent citing lack of inspiration and 16 percent who don’t know how. (Mcgrath, 2016) Another Bord Bia report; ‘Anticipating Tomorrow 2007’ predicts that that spent cooking at home will decrease by 10 percent by 2020.
The material available clearly shows that current young generation is moving towards convenient based foods, as their lives are now hectic and busy. This should see an increased demand for value added convenience food. The cost of food is continuing to drop but inflation is growing. Producers will have to move towards the value added sector in order to stay innovative and profitable.

2.4.1 Artisan Food Industry in Ireland

The Oxford dictionary defines artisan as: (Oxford, 2019)

'A worker in a skilled trade, especially one that involves making things by hand'

The ‘School of Artisan Food’ describes an artisan food producer as: (Schoolofartisanfood, 2019)

‘Artisan is a term used to describe food produced by non-industrialised methods, often handed down through generations but now in danger of being lost. Tastes and processes, such as fermentation, are allowed to develop slowly and naturally, rather then curtailed for mass-production’

The Food Safety Authority of Ireland have included the term Artisan in their guidance note number 29; ‘The Use of Food Marketing Terms’. A business using the term artisan must meet the following criteria; (FSAI, 2019)

1. ‘The food is made in limited quantities by skilled craftspeople
2. The processing method is not fully mechanized and follows a traditional method
3. The food is made in a micro-enterprise at a single location
4. The characteristic ingredients used in the food are grown or locally produced where seasonally available or practical.'
Bord Bia released an article in late 2018, investigating the growth in the artisan specialty food and drinks sector in Ireland. It predicted that the artisan food sector would grow by 2.7 percent in the all Ireland market. That is a total market worth of €764 million (Bond, 2018). Republic of Ireland seems to be advancing faster then their northern counter part but this is anticipated to the uncertainty of Brexit.

At the time of the publication of the article, there were 235 specialist food producers in Ireland. Consumer demand for specialty food has increased and 78 percent of Irish consumers surveyed agreed that there should be more artisan food products available in supermarkets. The report states that the number one quality that consumer's look for in a product is freshness, followed by provenance. There has been a strong increase in the demand for buying local to support the local economy. (Bond, 2018)

### 2.5 Food Tourism

Food tourism can be defined as an activity of tourists visiting food producers, restaurants, food festivals and any other events of activity that involves specialty foods and their ingredients (Hall & Mitchell, 2001). It is the participation of tourists in food related activities (Shenoy, 2005). Modern tourists now seek delicious food, eating special meals and experiencing cultural traditions that are food based (Tsai & Wang, 2017). It is important to note that in comparison to other tourist activities, food can be consumed outside the limitation of seasons (Kivela & Crotts, 2006). Local food can enhance a visiting tourist perceived understanding of a particular destination. Tourists that enjoy the local foods would consider this as a means of gaining different experiences, rather then the mere satisfaction of physiological needs (Sims, 2009).

A 2014 study reveals that there are three types of food tourists. The first is called an experiencer; these are committed and perceive foods as an essential part of their trip. Their trip is based entirely around food and is well researched in
advance. The second is an enjoyer; these have a more casual outlook towards food but still view it as being an important part of their trip. Finally there is a survivor; any food on their trip just serves as something to fill a physiological need (Bjork & Räisänen, 2014).

2.6 Brand Management Within SME’s

2.7 Unique Selling Points

Definition:

_The factor or consideration presented by a seller as the reason that one product or service is different from and better than that of the competition_ (EntrepreneurEurope, 2019)

Above is simple yet effective broad definition of what a unique selling point is. The current food industry is expanding substantially. It is getting increasingly difficult for a business to differentiate themselves to customers. Jay Gronlund published a book in 2013 called ‘Basics of Branding: A practical Guide for Managers’. Gronlund explained that customers no longer want to be spammed with information about a product or service. A typical current method of advertising is to concentrate on features and benefits of using a product; Gronlund calls this “clutter”. A customer needs to feel the connection to the business or brand. This is where an artisan producer has an advantage over the bigger industries.

2.8 Small Medium Enterprise (SME)

A typical description of a characteristic of an SME:

_Is the often all-controlling and all-deciding role of the owner of the company_ (Krake, 2005)
Masters of Business

The European Commission released a report in 2006 stating that in order to support the expansion of SME’s than; ‘Competencies in management are a key determent to the companies growth potential and a crucial determinant of the equation leading to growth, business success or business failure’ (Commission, 2006). This can be compared to the view made by Ropega in a journal article stating that the entrepreneur is the most crucial reason for the failure of a small business. He describes that the motivation, skills and abilities of the owner has a key influence on the overall management of the business. (Ropega, 2011). According to statistics from Dun and Bradstreet, 88.7 % of all businesses failures are due to management mistakes (Duncan, 1993). Bradley and Moore discuss that one of the most prevalent causes of failure in small business is inadequate management skills or poor knowledge of the business (Moore & Bradley, 2000). Smallbone and Wyer have examined how the educational level of the entrepreneur can have an impact on the management resources of a firm and the desire of motivation of the owner to grow the business (Birdthistle et al., 2010).

Freiling and Laudien investigated the impact that a SME founder or owner can have on a businesses success. Founders or owners can have a higher regard for their own abilities. They often over estimates their own skills and competences, which can pave the way for failure (Freiling & Laudien, 2013). Another author suggests that it is incredibly rare for the founder to possess all the necessary skills. Instead they are usually predisposed towards technical, product or service knowledge (Hynes & Richardsson, 2007). Research also reveals that marketing skills, such as market research, strategic analysis, product positioning, pricing and promotional strategies ‘are crucial for a successful entrepreneur and a growing small firm’ (Ibrahim & Soufani, 2002).

The 2006 European Commission report recommends that entrepreneurs and heads of SME’s need to adhere to the idea that they should always be proactively seeking additional information and in particular management and marketing knowledge. Marketing management should include connecting with customers, shaping the market offerings, delivering and communicating value.
2.9 Branding in SME’s

A 2008 study was carried out by M. Ahonen called ‘Branding – Does it even exist among SME’s?’. Ahonen was surprised to discover how rarely branding is studied in SME’s. He stated that the studies were almost non-existent before 2005 (Ahonen, 2008). This study was written in a university in Finland but there is a more recent Irish paper published in 2016. This paper states that research into branding in Irish SME’s are scant. The paper also explains that there is an impressive amount of academic literature related to both large corporate and product line branding but very little for SME’s (Kennedy & Wright, 2016). This point is important as J. Hill in a 2001 research paper suggests that marketing of large companies differs from SME marketing, and SME marketing differs from entrepreneurial marketing (Hill, 2001).

In its most basic form, a brand is defined by ‘Entrepreneur Europe’ as:

‘The marketing practice of creating a name, symbol or design that identifies and differentiates a product from other products.’

(EntrepreneurEurope, 2019)

The ‘Business Dictionary’ describes brand as the use of a;

‘unique design, sign, symbol, words, or combination of these, employed in creating an image that identifies a product and differentiates it from its competitors.’ (Businessdictionary, 2019)

A brand image is something that is built up over time;

‘This image becomes associated with a level of credibility, quality, and satisfaction in the consumer’s mind. Thus brands help harried consumers in crowded and complex marketplace, by standing for certain benefits and value.’ (Businessdictionary, 2019)
Adamson (2006), suggests that the creation of brand images is done using signals that generate associations between the customer and the brand (Adamson, 2006). Previously, branding would have relied on visual identity to generate these signals but in modern branding, the emphasis has expanded to include a focus on ‘those brand identity characteristics that create its unique story’ (Ruzzier et al., 2013). Keller (2008) describes the ability of a strong brand to be able to simplify a customer’s decision making and reduce the risk as invaluable (Keller, 2008). The function of a brand is its ability to influence a consumers buying behavior (Ries & Ries, 2002). In an ideal situation, the brand will be able to tell the customer exactly what the business does and why (Dunn & Davis, 2002). For that reason, brands are ‘increasingly viewed as offering a crucial point of differentiation’ (Beverland et al., 2007).

More often then not, branding is treated as pertinent to larger businesses and is generally overlooked as being important for SME’s (Merrilees, 2007; Bresciani & Eppler, 2010). A number of other authors challenge this approach and suggest that corporate branding, as a philosophy is just as important for an SME as it is for a larger business. They also propose that SME’s actually need brand power as much, if not more, than the larger companies (Inskip, 2004; Lamons, 2007; Ahonen, 2008; Bresciani & Eppler, 2010). However, a 2005 paper by Krake suggests that brand management within SME’s receives very little focus and ‘is not given the priority it needs for a strong brand image to be constructed’ (Krake, 2005)

Wong and Merrilees released an interesting journal article in 2005. They argued that if a business focuses on selling its products or services then the customer would naturally create an opinion of the products or services. This naturally becomes the brand. The company created this naturally created brand with little or no say, therefore the company also has very little control of it (Wong & Merrilees, 2005). A brand strategy is required during the creation of a business to avoid this from happening. But good branding and communication strategies are not required to start a business, so more often then not the priority is put on
the financial and production issues. This results in branding being neglected (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010).

2.10 Strategic Brand Management Process

A brand strategy involves putting together a plan that will be used to create a brand. This will send the right brand signals to the customers that best underpins your brand idea (Adamson, 2006). A brand strategy needs to include a brand identity that describes the brands differentiated position, ideally designed in such a way that it will resonate with customers (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2009). Aaker and Joachimsthaler also suggest that a brand strategy should include the creation of an organizational structure and decision process. Most importantly there must be someone in charge to prevent ad hoc decisions (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2009).

Ruzzier et al, suggests a process model that incorporates 5 different key steps for the development of brand identity in SME’s (Ruzzier et al., 2013; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2009):

![Figure 1 Process Model for Brand Identity Development](image)
2.10.1 Strategic Analysis

Aaker released a book in 2006 and suggested that the most important factor in building a successful brand is to understand how to develop a brand identity. This involves developing knowledge of what the brand stands for and to learn how to express the identity signals (Aaker, 1996). Aaker published another book in 2014 and continues the point. He advises that the development process starts with context and strategy. This would require an analysis of customer segments, environmental forces, competitors, market trends, the current brand strengths and weaknesses and the business strategy (Aaker, 2014). Other publications agree with the previous points but also identify the requirement for customer, competitor, and self-analysis (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2009). While others describe the need for industry sector analysis (Ruzzier et al., 2013).

2.10.2 Brand Identity Elements

‘Corporate branding is not just about a nice logo or compelling advertising, above all, it is concerned with giving an organization a clear and publicly stated sense of what it stands for’ (Inskip, 2004)

Aaker (1996) explains that ‘A brand identity provides direction, purpose and meaning and is central to a brand’s strategic vision’ (Aaker, 1996). It is important that not just the visual elements of the brand are examined but also the invisible elements of the brand. These elements include; ‘vision, values, personality, benefits, culture and attributes’. SME’s will have to combine these elements in order to ‘create a story that will draw attention to the unique position of the brand’ (Ruzzier et al., 2013). To expand on this, from business launch, it is suggested that some attention is given to corporate identity, values and culture is worthwhile (Merrilees, 2007).
2.10.3 Visual Identity Elements

Elements such as name, slogan, symbol and web domain are examples of visual identity elements. These make the brand visible and should be designed in such a way to reflect the key identity characteristics (Ruzzier et al., 2013). Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2009), describe these symbols as ‘a strong symbol can provide cohesion and structure to an identity, making it much easier to gain recognition and recollection’ (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2009). The selection of a brand name can be considered both an art and a science (Keller, 2008). Keller (2008) suggests that a name must be chosen using the six general criteria of memorability, likeability, adaptability, transferability meaningfulness and protect-ability in mind (Keller, 2008). Finally a brand name should ‘not be left to chance or the personal preference of individuals in the SME’ (Ruzzier et al., 2013)

2.10.4 Internal and External Brand Implementation & Ongoing Branding Programs

There are many different pieces of research that suggest that the owner manager is the most important and influential member for management of a SME brand. The owner generally will influence the branding within a small business and drive marketing activities depending on their competence, experience, business style, knowledge and personal networks (Gilmore et al., 1999; Merrilees, 2007; Mitchell et al., 2012).

For a brand to become powerful, it is suggested that these brands are built from within the company. Therefore, in order to create a strong brand, employees of the company need to have an understanding of the brand vision and feel a sense of responsibility towards its importance (Aaker, 2014). Following on from this, there have been a number of research publications on the importance of employees in developing a strong consistent brand image. This will also lead to reducing the perceived gap between the desired brand identity and the
perceived image that the company is hoping to achieve (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Hatch & Schultz, 2001; Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2006). Harris and de Chernatony (2001) describe how important it is for managers to communicate the values of the brands core to its employees. It is vital for staff to understand how to interact and communicate with other employees, consumers and other stakeholders (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). It is advisable that the owner should include the entire company when it comes to selling and communicating a new brand implementation process (Krake, 2005).

Keller (2008) identifies the importance of the brand element choice with significance put on how brand building, channel, and communication strategies must be put into place in order to achieve a strong and unique brand association (Keller, 2008). In terms of external implementation of a brand, it should include a variety of marketing mix tools, designed in such a way that the message is communicated to the target audience. This method with quite different in an SME in comparison to a larger company due to the limitation the SME will have for financial resources (Ruzzier et al., 2013).

2.10.5 Ongoing Evaluation and Maintenance

‘If we are a good firm, selling a good product and giving a good service, then the brand may well be good – but we cannot be sure of this’ (Wong & Merrilees, 2005)

In order to measure the effect of a branding effort, a guideline to measure its effects must be put in place by managers. This is a continuous process that involves examining brand reputation among stakeholders and finding a way to ensure that the brand identity is being communicated successfully and consistently. If there are any issues, then these must be identified and a predetermined corrective action process must be completed (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001).
2.11 Importance of Social Media Marketing

Most Irish Consumers now have daily if not hourly access to the internet and social media. Many Irish SME’s use the internet already in some form of a marketing tool. This presents a readily available market for Irish SME’s to take advantage of. It is an activity that is relatively cheap in comparison to previous marketing methods (ads in newspapers, radio or TV) (BordBia, 2012). The horsemeat scandal increased the customers demand on clear traceability of products, quality and integrity of food production. It is now vital for businesses and organizations to portray these messages across to their target market effectively if they hope to achieve a successful brand. The internet allows businesses a real time platform to manage their digital conversations and images around different topics that are aimed at their target markets. It also allows them to stem any negative publicity or conversation (Ahain-Group, 2013). Social media must be used to highlight the integrity of food produce and food producers have ample opportunity to portray this with online marketing. However only 60% of Irish SME’s have a website. Irish SME’s are not exploiting online marketing to their advantage. (BordBia, 2012).

Online social networks have increased in popularity over the last number of years with many customers getting meal ideas from the recommendations from the many different platforms (Vassallo et al., 2018). Many Irish businesses now include some form of social media into their marketing strategy, with the use of Facebook and twitter, most frequently used to interact with Irish consumers (Mintel, 2013). Good Food Ireland also identifies the importance of digital marketing engagement;

“The revolution in digital marketing is also a significant opportunity, especially for the relatively more agile, well-networked industry players such as Ireland. Innovative dynamic content, much of it user generated, seeded and targeted towards specific interest groups with clever promotional follow-up is the key to unlocking this viral opportunity. We are already seeing real success on
this digital approach at a national “destination brand” level’ (Grant-Thornton, 2014)

2.11.1 Challenges Facing Irish SME’s

Food and drink businesses could be considered a natural fit with social media. But because of the conservative nature of the Irish SME’s, uptake to the advantages of technology, telecoms and financial services has been a slow process and food businesses are starting to lag behind (Business-Insights, 2011).

In order for businesses to get the most out of social media, they need to incorporate it into their existing traditional marketing strategy. But it is not proven yet on how best to achieve this method of using both (Ahain-Group, 2013). Brand management has completely changed, brands can no longer be completely controlled and conversations can start online completely outside the control of the business. Brand managers must now be ready to react to their brand being talking about by customers (Campbell et al., 2011).

2.11.2 Models of practice

A 2015 study into Irish SME’s use of social media resulted in a model or process that could be followed in order to have a successful interaction with social media within the marketing approach of a SME food business. The study took the findings of the study and combined it with the current literature to provide a practical working structure. The recommended areas to concentrate on are; Business Strategy, Marketing Planning, Customer engagement and analysis, and review. (Murphy & Wright, 2015)
The study recommended that Irish food businesses must move beyond ‘brochure-ware’ websites and develop an e-commerce capability. All social media must try and revert its target audience back to a website or relevant business owned app. The authors also identified the increased levels of customer service due to social media giving better engagement with the customer. Finally the food business must put a budget aside to spend on social media. Social media should only be a part of a bigger branding strategy. Traditional marketing routes should also be utilized (Murphy & Wright, 2015).

### 2.12 Food business Incubators – Farmers Markets

The food supply is becoming more controlled by a small group of global companies. Through scale and size these massive retailers have the power to price out any smaller independent stores (Fernandex-Armesto, 2001). But in recent years the market has taken quite a turn. The consumer is now looking for value in their food and they want it to be traceable to preferably a local producer. This has led to the increase demand for local farmers markets.
Farmers and producers have also started to feel their profit margins squeeze as larger retailers grow in power. This has led to an increased interest in selling directly to consumers and cutting out the middleman, leaving more profit for the farmer. These markets are allowing the customer to meet the producer and source fresh food at a reasonable price. Farmers market can be considered an event and are described as open-air shopping where customers can seek out specialist products (Cameron, 2005b). (Adams, 2002) describes the current regeneration of food markets as 'the real food revolution' due to the resurgence of farmers markets in many parts of the world. Farmers markets are suggested to be seen as a key identifier of a trend towards less industrialized agriculture (Hinrichs et al., 2004).

Business incubators are often used as a useful mechanism whereby start up businesses can survive and grow in a supportive environment. Local authorities or universities with an aim of stimulating employment normally set up these incubators. However, less attention has been given to the creation of incubators for food products. There is a growing suggestion that farmers markets are fulfilling this role (Cameron, 2007).

Typically businesses follow a staged lifecycle; takeoff, slowdown, maturity, and decline or renewal (Burns & Dewhurst, 1989). One of the main roles of farmers markets suggested by (Corum et al., 2001; Hinrichs et al., 2004) is that it incubates small agricultural and rural businesses. One quarter of vendors reported selling their produce at farmers markets had increased their sales in other outlets. A study completed in Australia on famers markets identified three categories of vendors; the first considers the market as strategically important for the business, the second uses the farmers market to showcase their produce to the local community and finally the third category of business has outgrown the farmers market but still recognized the importance of the its function as a business incubator (Coster & Kennon, 2005).

Another study suggested that vendors benefit from farmers markets in different ways depending on the size of their business. Established businesses use the
markets to expand or advertise their already developed business. Smaller vendors use the markets function as a training ground for the growing business in terms of developing marketing and product ideas. Farmers markets appear to be one of few options for small-scale entrepreneurs to maintain or enhance their business and at a relatively low cost (Feenstra et al., 2003). It is important to also add that not all vendors are interested in being entrepreneurial and growing their business. Some use the market as a social event where making a profit and developing the business is sidelined to enjoy the market and the atmosphere it brings (Hinrichs et al., 2004).

Finally a study carried out on the slow food movement in a West Cork town called Clonakilty, found that it was Ireland’s first and only ‘slow city’. The town embraced the slow food movement as local restaurants and retailers sourced their products locally and supported local suppliers. The study also mentions the unique environmental and cultural setting based around food in the town (Broadway, 2015).

In conclusion, literature available on famers markets and the benefits is very limited. It is not a well-researched topic area with a few limited research project based on Irish markets.

### 2.13 Conclusion of Literature Review

The review of the literature has resulted in some mixed results. It has shown that there is lack of research into the marketing methods used by Irish SME’s. It has been difficult to find any major pieces of research completed on Irish SME’s, particularly those based in the food industry.

The research has shown that consumer demand is moving towards a diet based on high quality, fresher and locally produced food. They are also moving towards a more international diet, which creates new opportunity for SME’s to take advantage of. It is suggested that brand management in SME’s are not prioritized
during the early stages of business development. Typically SME's have no management structure in place and the owners tend to lack the skills required to effectively operate a business.

The consumer demand for food tourism activities are increasing year on year. This has resulted in new opportunities for businesses in certain areas of the country. Food businesses can create food tours or other similar activities for visiting tourists to take part in. Farmers markets offer a location for fledgling businesses to test their business ideas, train their skills and build their new brand. It is seen as a necessity in the food business sector as many business incubators are not specifically designed for food businesses. SME’s have been proven to be slow in uptake on modern practices; this is no different for their uptake of online marketing methods. These online methods are considered the cheapest form of marketing and offer direct access to a businesses target market.

There is a lot of material available on the different marketing methods available to businesses but there appears to be limited amount available about its use in Irish SME’s. It has also been suggested that large-scale marketing methods may not be effective or realistic for a financially restricted SME. This literature review is the basis of this research project in branding in Irish SME's.
3 Methodology chapter

Introduction

This chapter will give the reader an insight into the reasons and the logic behind this study’s objectives and research questions. The author has researched the different methods of completing a research project and identified the reasons for using the chosen methods. Finally the chapter gives the reader some background information on the businesses and companies involved in the study.

3.1 Research Definition

Research can be described as approaches taken by people to systematically and critically examine various aspects of a particular area or topic with an aim to increase the researchers knowledge of said area (Kumar, 2005; Barrachina et al., 2004; Burns, 1994). Kumar describes systematic as, “The procedures adopted to undertake an investigation that follow a certain logical sequence” (Kumar, 2005). “Critical scrutiny of the procedures used and the methods employed is crucial to a research enquiry. The process of investigation must be fool proof and free from any drawbacks” (Kumar, 2005). Research allows the researcher to increase their knowledge of a certain area and suggests that the researcher has a clear understanding of this topic (Kumar, 2005). The main purpose of any research is to continue on previously completed research, and answer questions that the answers have yet to be discovered (Kothari & Gaurav, 2014). Therefore, research questions and objectives are required in order to create a true systematic approach (Saunders et al., 2003).

3.2 Research Objectives

Research objectives and questions must be set down in order to narrow the gap that the researcher is investigating. It is the first and most important part of any research project (Saunders et al., 2003; Kumar, 2005).
“Research objectives are set to gather the specific bits of knowledge that need to be gathered, in order to close the information gaps” (Burns & Bush, 2008)

The researcher of this study has completed a Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Agriculture from Cork Institute of Technology in 2014. He has since worked in food industry and in 2016 he was accepted for a Masters in Research. Branding is important in any business. How do start-ups and SME’s operate and manage their branding strategy? The researcher commenced an in-depth review of the existing literature in this area.

3.3 Literature Review

Once research objectives have been examined and questions have been created. The researcher can then begin to go through the existing literature in order to acquaint yourself with the available body of knowledge in your area of interest (Kumar, 2005). It can be viewed as a means to an end and assist researchers in formulating more questions about a topic (Yin, 2003). The literature reviewed in this project included; books, online databases, academic journals and the internet. The researcher identified key areas of the Irish Food industry that lacked previous research. The researcher identified a gap in the literature with regards to the methods and strategies used of branding and brand management in SME’s. The literature on business development may be quite generic and designed for large-scale businesses.

3.4 Gap in the Literature

Brand management research in SME’s appears to be a recent occurrence with most of the literature available relating too much larger and more global entities (Vidic & Vadjal, 2011; Ahonen, 2008). Before 2005 there seems to have been very little interest in the area with very few case studies or theories published. Since
then there has been an increase in the amount of research into the area but a 2016 publication by (Kennedy & Wright, 2016) identified that research in brand management in Irish SME’s was quite limited. More often then not brand management is overlooked in SME’s (Merrilees, 2007) (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010) but the business still appear to succeed regardless.

With this in mind the author investigated the area of Irish SME’s, in particular Irish food artisan producers. The intention was to investigate and identify any internal or external factors that are contributing to their success. To try developing an understanding of how the Irish Food producer manages their brand. This should add to the current gap in the literature that appears to be present in the area of SME’s in Ireland.

3.5 Research Question

The title of this study is”

‘An Investigation into the Management of Branding in Irish Artisan Food Businesses’

The research aims to achieve this objective by answering the following research questions:

To review the marketing strategies used to manage a brand in Irish SME’s

The artisan food sector in Ireland is currently experiencing a huge expansion. These food businesses are helping to contribute to the economic growth of rural Ireland due to job growth in these businesses, and the increased incorporation of food tourism into many rural Irish businesses. Branding is a vital for growth in any business. According to the limited research that is available on branding in SME’s in Ireland, business owners are not prioritising branding. This is normally due to financial restrictions that are usually in place in an SME and the lack of
experience or skill of the owner. It is suggested that an owner-manager of a business very rarely has all the skills needed to run a business (Ropega, 2011) (Duncan, 1993). But how does an owner-manager in an SME accomplish the correct balance needed in order to achieve a successful brand while being financially efficient. Corporate branding strategy and management cannot be implemented effectively into SME's and start-ups. This is the basis of the research question that will be investigated, to get a better understanding of what is going on in small businesses in rural Ireland. This research project will also include the external factors that can impact on a start up businesses success.

To review the marketing techniques used by owner-operated Irish SME's

Marketing is often considered an expensive investment in business. It is often deemed too expensive to even consider in many SME's. In many scenarios, a businesses brand is allowed to grow organically and uncontrolled. This is not always the most sensible decision. Prioritising and controlling a businesses brand is vital. Being in control of a brand from the very beginning makes it much easier to get key identify signals across to the target audience. But what are the options available to SME's that are prioritising financial investment in other operating and running sectors of the business. Social media is now a SME's greatest tool when it comes to cheap marketing. But what other tools are Irish SME's using in order to develop their brand? The research in this project will investigate what methods SME's are using to develop their brand?

3.6 Qualitative and Quantitative Research Methods

Qualitative and quantitative research, are two different types of research methods (Myers, 1997). Quantitative research options have been predetermined and large number of respondents are involved. Respondents are the people involved in the study. Therefore, due to large number of participants, the measurements must be objective, quantitative and statistically valid. (Anderson, 2005; Myers, 1997) “It’s all about numbers, objective hard data” (Anderson,
Examples of quantitative methods would be surveys, questionnaires, and secondary data such as business accounts.

‘Qualitative research methods involves collecting, analysing and interpreting data by observing what people do. Taking into consideration the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols and descriptions of things’ (Anderson, 2005).

An example of these would be an interview, case studies, or participant observation (Morgan, 1988).

At times the researcher may need to integrate both types in order to achieve the desired results. Miles and Huberman describe a number of different ways both types can be combined to be beneficial for the researcher, seen in Figure 3: Illustrative Designs Linking Qualitative and Quantitative Data

Figure 3: Illustrative Designs Linking Qualitative and Quantitative Data (Miles & Huberman, 1994)
3.6.1 Strengths and Limitations

3.6.1.1 Qualitative Research

Strengths

The researcher of this method will gain an insider's view of the field, offering them an increased knowledge in that particular area. This may also allow the researcher to identify issues that may often be missed, such as subtlety and complexities. Qualitative methods can also play an important role by suggesting possible relationships, causes, effects and dynamic processes. Finally this method can also be beneficial for practitioner due to the descriptive and narrative style of the data. (Carr, 1994)

Limitations

There are a number of major limitations with regards to qualitative research. This method generally requires a large amount of time and costs. This inevitably reduces the sample size. The procedures and results are also very difficult to replicate due to the central role of the researcher in idea generation. The researcher must analysis each case individually and can at times lead interviews and participant observations in a biased form. Therefore, it is very difficult to validate any data found and its reliability is a major criticism. Qualitative research data analysis can be also be difficult and often requires expert knowledge of the area to try and interpret it correctly. (Carr, 1994)

3.6.1.2 Quantitative Research

Strengths

Quantitative data can be interpreted with statistical analysis, and since statistics are based on principles of mathematics, the quantitative approach is viewed as scientifically objective (Carr, 1994; Denscombe, 2010). Due to ever improving
sophisticated software, large amounts of complicated data can now be calculated quickly, saving both time and money (Antonius, 2003). Finally, quantitative data is based on measured values and can be checked by others because numerical data is less open to ambiguities of interpretation. Hypotheses can also be tested because of the use of statistical analysis (Antonius, 2003).

**Limitations**

Quantitative experiments do not take place in a normal setting and they do not allow participants to explain their choices. The meaning of the questions may also be misunderstood. (Carr, 1994). Poor knowledge of the application of statistical analysis may negatively impact analysis and subsequent interpretation (Black, 1999). Large sample sizes are required in order to get accurate analysis due to the low quality of acquired data (Denscombe, 2010).

### 3.7 Research Strategy

According to Saunders et al., a research strategy is

“A general plan of how you will go about answering the research question(s) you have set” (Saunders et al., 2003).

Ingirige et al. (2011) references a quote from the work of Yin (2003), which suggested that a research strategy has three conditions that selection, must be based on:

‘the type of research questions, the extent of control an investigator has over actual behavioural events, and the degree of focus on contemporary or historical events’ (Ingirige et al., 2011)
3.7.1 Interviews

It was decided that the use of semi structured interviews were to be used in order to achieve the material required to answer the research questions.

Interviews are a commonly used method of qualitative research and are considered the most effective method (McCracken, 1988). Monette et al. describes interviews, ‘an interview involves an interviewer reading questions to respondents and recording their answers’ (Monette et al., 2014). While according to Burns, ‘An interview is a verbal interchange, often face to face, though the telephone may be used, in which an interviewer tries to elicit information, beliefs or opinions from another person’ (Burns, 1997). There are three different types of interviews available to the researcher; structured, semi-structured and unstructured.

Structured interviews have a predetermined set of questions in a standardised manor. Each question in each interview is asked identically and typically an interview schedule is used. An interview schedule is a written list of questions, each question can be open ended or closed, and to be used by the interviewer in a person-to-person interview (Kumar, 2005). The main limitation of structured interviews is that they stick too closely to the interview guide and don’t tend to probe for relevant information. There are a number of advantages to structured interviews. It provides uniform information, which allows for comparable data. Structured interviews also requires fewer skills than unstructured interviews (Kumar, 2005)

Semi-structured interviews are less restricted in terms of what questions can be asked. The interviewer has a list of themes and questions to be covered but neither the exact wording nor order of questions is predetermined before the interview (Saunders et al., 2003). This gives the interviewer the freedom to ask questions that they may not have anticipated before and allow them to probe any possible unexpected opinions or views of the interviewee.
Unstructured interviews offer almost complete freedom to the interviewee in terms of content and structure. Questions and issues may be formulated during the interview, as there is no predetermined structure to follow (Kumar, 2005). Unstructured interviews are appropriate when the interviewer does not know a lot about the research topic and an in-depth interview is needed to obtain a clear idea about the area being explored (Saunders et al., 2003; Kumar, 2005). The main advantage of unstructured interviews is that they are more suited for studying complex situations, questions can be explained and information can be supplemental while interviews have a wider application (Kumar, 2005). The main limitation of unstructured interviews is that interviews can be time consuming and expensive. The quality of the data will depend massively on the skills of the interviewer and data may vary from when using a number of interviewers. The interviewer may introduce his or her, own bias into the interview (Kumar, 2005). However, despite these limitations, these types of interviews allow the researcher to collect a unique, rich and detailed set of data (Saunders et al., 2003).

In this study the researcher used semi-structured interviews. Using this type of interview, allowed the interviewer to probe and ask additional questions that were not planned. It also allows the interviewee time to elaborate on their responses. An interview guide was created and used to guide the interview process.

For this research, five West Cork food business owners were interviewed. Each business was at different stages of growth and expansion with each participant having different levels of industry experience. Open-ended questions were used throughout the research, which allowed the interviewees to expand and explore interesting topics in greater detail.
Table 1: List of Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product Range</th>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Position of Interviewee</th>
<th>Employee numbers</th>
<th>Years Established</th>
<th>Respondent number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cheeses and range of pork Products</td>
<td>Retail/Foodservice</td>
<td>Owner</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoked Fish and Pates</td>
<td>Retail/Foodservice</td>
<td>Owner</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fresh and cooked duck and chicken</td>
<td>Retail/Foodservice</td>
<td>Owner</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooked pies</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>Owner</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gluten free bread</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>Owner</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.8 Conclusion

The main objectives and aims of this study are outlined in this chapter. A potential gap in the literature regarding SME’s brand management has been identified. Research questions based on this gap have been created. This chapter has gone into detail on the research methods that are going to be used in this study. The reasoning behind these decisions is supported with published literature. An interview structure was decided on and a brief background on each of the businesses involved has been included in this chapter. The next chapter will give a detailed report of the results from the semi-structured interviews carried out on food businesses based in West Cork.
4 Results

4.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the reader to the main body of results that the researcher has carried out. The primary research conducted involved the completion of semi-structure interviews with different food businesses based in West Cork. Questions were based on areas of the literature that appeared to be lacking in content. The semi-structured nature of the interviews encouraged exploration of unplanned topics to be investigated and explored.

Main topics of conversation in interviews:

2. Brand Management
3. Brand Strategy
4. Marketing Methods
5. West Cork Food Culture and Food Tourism

4.2 Product Innovation

4.2.1 New Product Development

4.2.1.1 New Product Development Strategies and Aims

Each respondent was questioned on their thoughts and strategies on new product development (NPD) within their businesses. All the respondents considered NPD an important part of their business. They considered the business area as vital for the continued existence and progression of the business.

A dedicated new product development management team did not exist in any of the businesses interviewed. Although, each business had some form of method or system to ensure that new products were created when required. Respondent
2 and 3 both had virtually no system or plan in place when it came to NPD. New product development appeared to occur in these businesses when a reduction in waste was required.

Respondents 4 and 5 have very little waste in terms of production, they have a different approach to respondents 2 and 3. Both have an on going process in place that will help to create new products that the market might be interested in. They do not have a dedicated NPD team and the owner generally completes the whole process. Respondents 1 and 4 sell directly to the consumer through farmers markets. They find this is a huge benefit when it comes to NPD as they can get direct feedback for new products from the customers. Respondent 1 adds that some of their best product ideas have come from a conversation held with a random customer at a farmers market. Respondent 5 does not participate in farmers markets but believes that they can acquire similar information from shop managers that they meet each day during deliveries.

The methods used by respondent 1 are similar but different to each of the other respondents. Respondent 1 does not have a team in place to create new products but a considerable amount of time each week is given to product development and innovation. The owner identifies this as key to both new product success and the development of their brand. Respondent 1 has an interesting process for developing these products. The majority of the products created by respondent 1 never reach a shop shelf or a consumers dinner plate. The owner or a local chef designs many of the products once off. These once off products are then advertised on social media or at farmers markets. Respondent 1 suggests that many of these products would be unsustainable financially to sell commercially. Consumers like and share these products on their social media, which results in a growth of the brand recognition. Many of the products are unsustainable but every so often a product will work out in terms of both popularity and profitability. This approach is completely different to any of the other respondents interviewed.
4.2.1.2 Export Market

Respondents 1, 2 and 3, identified potential for their products to be marketed in Europe. Respondents 1 and 3 saw the possibility of achieving success in the global market. Respondent 1 already had products for sale in many parts of Europe, but also in parts of Canada and the USA. Respondent 2 and 3 are both targeting customers in Europe while respondent 3 is probing the idea of getting product to the Asian market. Respondents 1, 2 and 3, see the benefit of penetrating a market that is much bigger than the Irish market. They agreed that it’s a good idea to try and penetrate the hundreds of millions of people that live on mainland Europe and beyond.

Respondents 4 and 5 do not sell any product outside of Europe. Respondent 4 can see the potential in getting their product into a bigger market but it will be some time before they are capable of achieving this. Respondent 5 has very little interest in branching into foreign markets and at the moment is only interested in conquering the Irish market first. Respondent 5 is dealing with a very short shelf life product and their customers expect the product to be fresh at all times.

Respondent 3 has been the only business interviewed that has created products based on the demand of a foreign market. Respondent 3 stated that this was a request from a new customer and only required packing the products in a more standard European design, with a change of language. Respondent 3 identified that the standards, everyday practices and requirements are different in other countries, so products may have to change to suit.

4.2.2 Value Added Products

All of the respondents interviewed considered some if not all of their products as value added products. Respondents 1 and 3 considered themselves to have started with non-value added products. After 2008, during the recession, respondent 3’s outlook on product development had to change. Respondent 3
used to just produce fresh meat for the retail and foodservice market. Margins on this were tight so they moved towards concentrating on value added based products. They are now cooking and smoking products for the ready to eat market. Respondent 1 went through a similar evolution but this happened during the previous recession and has since diversified. They now have a wide range of products and don’t rely on one core product range.

Respondents 4 and 5 are young businesses and both consider their product range as entirely value added products. Respondent 4 identified a range of different product variations they hope to eventually launch. They consider the variations of potential products as having endless possibilities. Both respondents consider value added products as the way forward.

Food Harvest 2020 was published by the Dept. of Agriculture in 2010. It identified the value added food sector as having the potential to grow in the Irish market. In the departments follow up publication in 2015, called Food Wise 2025. It identified the value added food sector as Ireland’s way forward and that the value added sector has grown substantially since the previous publication.

4.2.3 Social and Behavioral trends

Consumers are spending less time cooking, and spending more time eating out. This is more common in younger generations. Older generations still appear to do a lot of cooking from scratch. Research also identified that more people are now turning towards international cuisines as opposed to the Irish “meat and two veg approach” (Bia, 2015). As international cuisines become more common, it will start to have an impact on the types of products that businesses will have to create in order to meet the demand of the changing market.

All of the respondents agreed on the same point that customers are now looking for convenience based food. Respondent 3 identified that since 2008, their sales have changed from all fresh sales and no cooked product sales, to nearly 50
percent cooked sales and 50 percent fresh sales. Respondent 3 admits that they stumbled onto this market by accident as they had a lot of waste off cuts and needed to find a market for them. Respondent 1 adds that in the last 5 years, the demand for cooked sausage has increased massively. Respondent 1 suggests that people are becoming more adventurous with international foods.

Both respondent 4 and 5, state that they believe that customers don’t have time to cook or don’t know how to cook any more. Respondent 2 identified that he had to reduce the size of his products in order to entice purchasing, as the larger weight product was too expensive. Respondent 1 agrees and adds that when they are creating a product for the Irish retail market, they try to design it around keeping the price below 4 euro. In their experience, anything above this price will start to become difficult to convince an Irish consumer to take the risk and put it in their basket.

### 4.3 Brand Management

Management of a brand is now vital for the success of a business. Many smaller businesses allow the brand to grow uncontrolled. With consumers now having unlimited access to the internet, a business has no reason to not take advantage of the relatively straightforward and low cost activity such as social media. These interview questions will concentrate on finding out what West Cork food producers do and don’t do, and what do they find successful.

#### 4.3.1 Brand

Only one of the five businesses interviewed in this study understood the benefits a strong brand can have on a business. Many of the businesses prioritized production and their products instead of branding and marketing. Respondent 1 understood the advantages of having strong brand image and spoke clearly about how they have actively worked on spreading their business through different marketing methods.
All of the other respondents were under the impression that a high quality product will convince the consumer to pay the higher prices for their product. But having a strong brand plays a vital role in convincing the consumer to trust your product. Respondent 3 adds that they have only recently started to understand the benefits of having a recognized brand. But this has only occurred as the business has started to compete on a national level.

All of the business had a strong brand identity, but after interviewing it was obviously that many of them had acquired a powerful brand without much input from the businesses. It is possible for a brand to grow uncontrolled and become successful. But it makes it very difficult to change and adjust it once an image becomes ingrained in a consumers mind. It was difficult to determine whether to not the respondents fully understood that their business was a brand and any action they took could have an impact on that brand.

### 4.3.2 Skills and Experience

Respondents were asked on their own training, skills and experiences in business. All the respondents had some form of higher level of education. Respondents 1 and 2 inherited their business originally from their parents and in part, had learned a lot of their skills from them. Respondent 3 had grown up in an entrepreneurial household. Respondent 4 and 5 had a high standard of education but in a completely different field.

In terms of experience, each respondent had varying levels of experience in every area of business operations. Respondent 5 seemed to have been involved in a number of different businesses and states that he has learned something new from each new venture.

Each respondent was questioned on his or her skill levels in each aspect of the business. Respondent 2 stated that small business owners need to learn how to do everything and when mistakes are made, they must learn from them.
Respondent 3 identified that at the beginning the owner has to be in control of everything, normally due to financial restrictions. As the business grows then different staff can take over different aspects of the business, taking the workload from the owner. Respondent 3 adds that at the beginning she attended a lot of courses and training days to get on top of the food safety requirements. A lot of these training days included common practices for business operations.

A number of different literature sources (Duncan 1993; Moore & Bradley, 2000; Freiling & Laudien, 2013) cite management mistakes and inadequate management skills or poor knowledge of business for failure. The respondents admitted that they are not experts in every area and they had to learn as they go along in order to succeed. A lot of these lessons come from mistakes made in the business as opposed to training or research.

4.3.3 Management Team

In 2005 M. Ahonen, questioned the existence of branding in SME’s and also asked why there was so little research done in to the area (Ahonen, 2008). A 2016 paper by Kennedy and Wright agreed with M. Ahonen and stated that research completed on Irish SME’s are scant but there is an impressive amount of academic research completed on large commercial branding (Kennedy & Wright, 2016). J. Hill, 2001, believes that branding in large corporations is completely different from that of SME’s (Hill, 2001).

Respondent 1 had a structured management team but they also had the largest number of staff. The other respondents had an unstructured system in place but their staff numbers were much lower. Respondent 1 seemed to enjoy the NPD and spent a number of hours each week working on this area.

Respondent 2, 3 and 4 did not have a brand management plan or structure in place. Promotional activities were not planned and in some cases could go weeks without any interaction with social media. The owner was normally the
individual that contributed to social media posts and other activities. Respondent 2, 3 and 4 stated that they didn’t have time to work on creating material to publish, and they could not afford to pay a staff member to work on creating material. Respondent 3 also included that they would struggle to find someone that they trust to control the material being published. Respondent 5 did not have a brand management structure in place.

4.3.4 Training and Education of Staff

A 2006 European commission report recommended the importance of a business being able to connect with customers and shape its image in the eyes of the customer. The customer is constantly evolving so on going training and research is required to keep up with ever-changing trends. None of the respondents had any staff that has a higher educational background in marketing or do they train their current staff in modern marketing and brand management practices. (Commission, 2006)

4.4 Branding Strategy Processes

This section looks into the different strategies or processes that each respondent uses to manage their brand. Although some respondents put very little time into managing their brand, there is still a brand name, logo and packaging that must be created and determined.

4.4.1 Where on Businesses Priority List is Branding

Each respondent had put a different rank of importance on branding in his or her business. Respondent 1 seemed to rank branding the highest. An investment of both time and money was put into branding each week with an understanding that there will be a return on investment. However, respondent 1 is the most established business of those interviewed. Respondent 2 has a different outlook on branding in comparison to respondent 1. The owner prioritizes product
quality. They have had a very much-unchanged logo and brand for the last 20 years.

Up until recently respondent 3 has not invested much time or money on their branding and have allowed it to grow organically and uncontrolled. The owner stated that they concentrate mainly on getting production and the product right. Over the last 6 months both money and time have been spent on developing a new logo, packaging and website. Their attitude towards branding has changed and the owner puts this down to the need for the business to be competitive at a national level.

At the time of the interview, respondent 4 was still a relatively young business. They were trying to develop a business direction and strategy. Respondent 5 had a good sense of direction in terms of where the business was going and understood the value of promotion. Respondent 5 previously won the investment of 2 dragons on the TV show Dragons Den. They experienced a large boost in sales after the show. Both respondents 4 and 5 relied heavily on the retail market, which is different from the other three respondents who also deal with the foodservice market.

Merrilles, 2007; Bresciani & Eppler, 2010; Inskip, 2004; and Lamons, 2007; Ahonen, 2008, identified that branding is generally overlooked during the start up and development of a business. Branding needs to be prioritized and that brand power is much more important then that of larger businesses. They also suggest that the business must decide on an image when the business is starting in order to shape the consumers understanding of what the business values are. Only respondent 1 seemed to have an understanding of the importance of controlling that image. Respondent 2 and 3 could be compared in terms of size but respondent 3 is further ahead in their understanding on the importance of brand. Finally respondents 4 and 5 can be compared but neither have enough time or even the finance to concentrate on working on their brand.
4.4.2 Strategy and Planning Processes

There were a couple of different strategic branding processes identified in the literature. The process model that was described by Ruzzier et al, 2013, seemed to be the most popular model recommended for SME’s. Ruzzier’s process was used as the bases of the interview.

4.4.2.1 Strategic Analysis

Aaker, 2006, identified the importance of doing research into different areas of the business before branding plans can begin. For example, competitors and customers should be researched to determine if there is a gap in the market. All of the respondents started by identifying a gap in the market for their particular product and began by selling directly to consumers in local farmers market.

Respondent 3 began with selling different farm produce in the farmers market and eventually noticed that their duck products were one of their biggest sellers. This led them doing some research into the poultry market and they discovered that there was very little choice in terms of duck on the Irish market. Each of the other respondents had very similar beginnings. In terms of developing a branding strategy, respondent 3 admitted that at the beginning, their brand was seen just as a logo and nice packaging. They thought the consumer needed to see a good-looking product on the shelf in order to get noticed. Logo and packaging design were prioritized in the business. There was very little consideration put into the brand values or identity.

Business training seminars are offered by a lot of local councils and retailers in order to develop smaller businesses. Respondent 4 said they had attended a number of these to get some basic understanding of how to run a business. These courses often helped a business to understand its strengths and weaknesses in terms of business activities. Respondent 4 believed this was the beginning of the brand development for him.
None of the respondents seem to have had a definite branding strategy in place but they were preforming market research in order to determine what types of products their customers were looking for. Customers seem to connect to the personalities and the lifestyles of the brand that the artisan producer was naturally portraying.

4.4.2.2 Brand Identity Elements

Aaker (1996) describes that a business must understand certain elements of what its brand communicates to customers. Some of these elements include; vision, values, personality, benefits, culture and attributes. According to Inskip (2004), corporate branding is more then just a nice logo and compelling advertising. The customer must get an understanding of that the brand stands for.

All of the respondents interviewed have managed to connect with their customers. This image that they have created has grown over time and has led to their success. Respondent 3 identified the importance to them of having a good rapport with customers, especially retail managers and chefs, these people understand who you are and what you are. They deal directly with the consumers and can sell your product and brand for you. Respondent 2 agreed and adds that every new customer wants to know how the business began and its story. Respondent 2 believes that people like local success stories and businesses that have come from humble beginnings. Respondent 1 made the point that even though the products are all available in local shops, customers still love calling to the farmyard and buying the produce straight from the owner.

Respondent 3 identifies the importance of being involved in the local community. During the last recession a lot of their business structure had to change. The business had to change from concentrating on local markets to selling nationally, a lot more products were sold to Dublin after 2008. The owner contributes the
success of Dublin sales to Dublin tourists visiting the coastal villages of West Cork pre-recession and discovering respondent 3’s brand. This gave them an advantage in the foodservice industry in Dublin. Respondent 3 does not do local farmers markets any more but has begun having a venders stand at national markets and shows. This has been quite successful for them, as they tend to have a bigger footfall.

Respondent 3 stated that as their product sales started to drop the further away from their own area that they got. Sales in these areas were not as good as the areas that would have known their brand. Respondent 1 added that they over came this by preforming tastings in each shop in the areas. This gave the potential new customers a chance to meet the producers.

The original point of this section was to understand if each of the businesses involved had put a strategic brand vision in place and followed it. From speaking with each of them it is my understanding that they may not have an exact strategic plan in place but they seem to have naturally connected with the market. Respondent 1 is communicating their moral standards and values to the customer. They each have created a story, and sell this story consistently to all their customers.

### 4.4.2.3 Visual Identity Elements

Ruzzier et al (2013) identifies the visual aspects of a brand as an element that should be designed in such a way that it reflects the businesses key characteristics. While Keller (2008) describes creating a brand name as a process that can be considered both an art and a science.

All of the respondents interviewed have a location included in their name. Respondent 1 stated that it is a common trend to include a location in the title to give the name a local impression. Respondent 2, 3, 4 and 5 agreed but respondent 3 identify the issues they have with getting the customer to now
pronounce their name correctly. Respondent 3 also had to make a slight change to their brand name recently due to the diversification of the product range to other types of poultry. The process used for creating the logo and symbols for each producer is quite similar. Respondent 4 and 5 have recently created new logos and symbols. Respondent 4 used a local designer to put a few ideas together. These ideas were then trialed with trusted customers and friends until they decided their favorite. Respondent 3 believes that logos and symbols need to be updated every 3-5 years due to the changing market demands. Respondent 3 had a folder with five previously used logos, each logo was similar and the core idea was the same but you could see the modernization and improvements with each new design.

Respondent 2 describes packaging design as a continuous project in their businesses. This is due to the ongoing release of new own brand products or launching a retailer-branded product. Respondent 3 describes the process of packaging design as long and tedious. Generally completed with a design company and can take months to get right. Often quite expensive and thousands of boxes have to be bought in order to meet minimum orders. Respondent 1 suggested that a team of two staff members should be established to get the bulk of the designing done. To many people involved can make it near impossible to get a final design agreed. Respondent 1 points out that the packaging imagery needs to be designed around the businesses story. For example, respondent 3 has designed their packaging around the coastal view from the their farm. Respondent 2 concentrates their packaging design on the village where the business is based. The village is a popular fishing village and blue is the colour of the local football club. Both of these points are incorporated into the packaging design.

4.4.2.4 Internal and External Implementation

There are many different models and processes recommended in the current literature for implementing a branding strategy within a business. Respondent 1
appears to have the best methods for implementing their brand both internally and externally. They appear to follow the recommendations of Aaker (2014) of including all their staff in creating a brand. Respondent 1 seems to concentrate on selling a welcoming laid-back family farm approach to their customers. This image or identity that they have built up internally seems to then extend outward. Customers and myself included can get a sense of what the business stands for from meeting any of the staff or family. Respondent 1 is living the lifestyle that they portray to the customer and it translates across as welcoming and trust worthy.

Respondent 3 is in a similar position but not quite at the point that respondent 1 is. Respondent 3 makes the point that up until very recently product quality, logo and packaging had always been the priority of the business. But as the business developed and started to compete nationally, then a better branding plan has been required. The emphasis has now started to move towards selling the story and the values. The business will never be able to compete price wise with their larger competitor so the customer needs to be convinced to purchase their product. A complete remodeling of their website, packaging and logos has begun the process of getting their story across to the customer. Respondent 3 explains that they hope to maximize their social media and introduce e-commerce. She also admits that this has not been possible up until recently due to the financial restraints that have been on the business since the start of the recession in 2008. Respondent 3 also makes a point that 90 percent of their staff are family members and that anyone dealing with the business in any shape or form is more then likely dealing with a family member of the owner. This is a huge advantage over other businesses that need to rely on employees to exhibit a sense of responsibility towards the brand.

Respondent 2 believes in the having the product quality right and the packaging looking its best. Respondent 2 is using a different method to respondents 1 and 3. Respondents 4 and 5 are quite different from the other businesses interviewed. They both are quite young companies and don’t have the foundations in terms of brand recognition that the other businesses interviewed
had. Respondent 4, during the interview described the ingredients that went into each of his pies and where they came from. This made up the bulk of his USPs and a lot of his marketing information. Respondent 4 does not have a strong family based story backing the business and unlike the others there was no family involvement. Respondent 4 hadn’t yet determined the strategy or direction that the business was going to follow. This business had quite a lot of staff members and the owner did not have a guide for the employees to follow in terms of communicating a brand image. Respondent 4 is a vendor at most of the farmers markets in Cork County each week. This is a huge benefit for any business, as the owner would get to connect with potential new customers each week. They also completed food tastings in different retailers each week. This is to try increasing brand awareness and convince consumers to try their products.

Respondent 5 is also a young business but has had a different approach to respondent 4. Respondent 5 started in farmers markets and then entered an academy route of a major retailer in Ireland. Academies are courses that retailers run in order to get businesses, which are a new supplier to the retailer, up to the required standards. Respondent 5 appeared on RTE’s Dragons Den and successfully got dragons to invest. This was hugely successful for respondent 5 as sales increased dramatically once the show was aired the. Respondent 5 also had a brand identity that relied on the respondent's home farm. At the time of the interview the owner had planned on building on this image of a diversified farm and continue to grow with the added boost of the brand recognition from the Dragons Den show. In terms of internal implementation, he had very few staff and they were all in production. Most customer interactions were done through the owner, which allowed control of the image that was being portrayed to the customer.

4.4.2.5 Evaluation

Wong & Merrilees (2005) have identified that a business cannot be sure of how successful their brand reputation is, even if they are doing every thing correctly.
Harris & de Chernatony (2001) described the need for managers to put in place a process that involves examining brand reputation among stakeholders, and determining a way to ensure that the brand identity is being communicated successfully. Each of the respondents was asked questions regarding the success of their branding strategy and how they determine its success.

In each of the respondent's circumstances there was no set process or list of procedures for confirming that their brand identity is being communicated effectively. Respondent 3 stated that they determine it is time for a packaging or logo update when managers of retailing outlets would comment on how their packaging is starting to look dated. Respondent 1 had an interesting method of judging the success of marketing activity. They rely on social media for the bulk of their communicating with the customer. If a post on social media gets a larger then average interaction then something in that image or video is connecting with the customers. This must be identified and repeated in order to keep the interactions up and increase their following.

None of the respondents have a process for fully evaluating the success of there brand reputation. Respondents 2 and 5 stated that they neither had the time or money to complete research into this topic. It appears that each of the respondents have their own way of ensuring that their packaging is kept modern and up to date. However, they do not investigate whether or not their image is being communicated correctly.

### 4.5 Types of Marketing Techniques

Below is a list of the types of techniques that were named in the interviews and which respondent uses them.
Table 2: List of Marketing Techniques

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Respondent 1</th>
<th>Respondent 2</th>
<th>Respondent 3</th>
<th>Respondent 4</th>
<th>Respondent 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Farmers Market</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signage</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online presence</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influencer</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restaurant Menus</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public presentations</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SME’s are typically seen as financially restricted and are slow to invest in any large scale marketing activities. Each respondent was questioned on the various marketing techniques that they take advantage of in their businesses.

4.5.1 Farmers Markets

All of the respondents had started originally in farmers markets. However, as each business has grown only 2 out the 5 interviewed still sell at farmers markets. Respondent 3 identified that they eventually started to make a loss at the farmers markets. They decided to stop selling at markets and concentrate on their retail activity. Respondent 2 added that time restrictions was a big factor that led to the decision to stop visiting the markets.

Respondent 1 actively visits four different markets each week. This occurs all year round and is done by a number of different staff members. They had for a time stopped going to markets because of similar reasons to respondent 2 and 3. When they were contemplating opening a farm shop, they saw the markets as a more viable option and began travelling to them again. Respondent 1 recognizes
that there are no profits to be made from markets and at times it is a loss-making venture. The markets are a great way to get the brand image directly out to customers. He believes that customers love to meet the person creating the food and this creates a customers connection to the brand. The markets are also a great source of market research. It is direct access to the businesses target market. Customers love trying new products and giving feedback. The owner gets great feedback from customers in this situation and customers feel as if they are part of process when they are involved.

Respondent 4 also visits the markets each week. They have done so since day one and similar to respondent 1, various staff members work the stand. It is a great opportunity to sell the product to potential new customers. These potential new customers may not have thought about trying respondent 1’s products before. The markets are also a great way of selling any product that has a short shelf life left. When questioned on the cons of the market, he did agree that it is difficult to make a profit at the markets.

Respondent 3 made the point that they have started taking on larger market events such as the Ploughing Championships and the Web Summit. However, instead of trying to sell fresh product for the customer to take home, they have instead started to make ready meals made from the businesses produce. This has been incredibly successful for them and the business has started to invest more time and money into this venture. Respondent 3 believes that it is a great marketing opportunity. Instead of only dealing with 20 or 30 customers at local farmers markets, they now deal with hundreds of customers at the larger events. The increase in brand recognition is substantial due to the increase in footfall.

It appears that brand recognition is boosted by actively attending farmers markets. With some clever innovation, the market can work in an effective way in terms of brand development. It appears that using the farmers markets to get the brand off the ground is a definite requirement but whether or not it is beneficial to continue needs further examining.
4.5.2 Signage

The use of signs and posters to promote a business is probably one of the first courses of action any business will undertake. There are different variations of signage a business can use to promote and inform their target audience. In this study, respondent 2, 3 and 4 have their business information sign written on their delivery vans. They both consider it to be beneficial as their vans are delivering 3-4 days a week. Respondents 1 and 5 do not have any sign writing on their delivery vehicles. Respondent 1 explained that it was something that was to be done but didn't have the time. They agreed with respondents 2, 3 and 4’s point as to the benefits of using it.

4.5.3 Online Presence

4.5.3.1 Website

A 2012 publication by Bord Bia identified that only 60% of Irish SME’s had a website. Four out of the five businesses interviewed had a website of some description. Of the four that had a website only one could be considered to be kept up to date and relevant. However, none of these websites were mobile friendly. Respondent 3 explained the price of creating a website is an expensive and long process. There are grants available for SME’s to create a website but this will only cover a fraction of the total cost.

At the time of the interview, respondent 3 was undertaking a website redesign. In terms of website content, respondent 3 stated that the website needs to include all the information about the business, for example; location, recipes, the story and people involved. Media outlets also rely on the website for information for articles and blogs, pictures and videos. Respondents 1,4 and 5 placed the website quite low on their priority list. They saw the advantage of if but believed that most of the information can be put up on social media. Interestingly respondent 1 has created a Wikipedia page that contains all the history and basic
information on their business. Respondent 2 agrees with respondent 3 in terms of the importance of a website but identifies an online store as the most important aspect.

A study carried out in the UK by Michael Quayle suggested that UK SME’s do not prioritize E-commerce and they do not effectively include it in their business strategy. It so identified that businesses in the UK put leadership and waste management as greater opportunity of increasing profits (Quayle, 2002). E-commerce is vital in modern times due to the increased uptake in modern technologies. Customers now look to the internet for ordering their everyday items (Murphy & Wright, 2015). Only 1 out of the 5 respondents interviewed had an active e-commerce function on their website. Respondent 2 considered their e-commerce a viable part of their business with a considerable amount of product being ordered through this function each week. They considered their product to be small in size, which make it easier to transport. Respondent 1 and 3 add that e-commerce does not making financial sense for them but understood the benefit of having the option available on a website. Respondents 4 and 5 do not plan on including e-commerce on their websites due to the fragile nature of their products.

### 4.5.3.2 Social media

Ahain-group (2013) identified that since the horsemeat scandal the demand for food traceability from customers has increased. Social media allows the producer to convey real time information across to the customer. Mintel (2013) identifies social media as the easiest way for a producer to connect and communicate with its customers. Vassallo et al (2018) suggested that many customers now get their meal ideas from recommendations on social media.

All of the respondents have social media accounts. Four out of the five respondents state that they post weekly updates. However, they admit that they do not consistently do this and some times they may go weeks with out posting
any new material. Respondent 1 uses their social media in a different way, each of the owners have their own social media page and they do most of their promoting and posting through these pages. The normal food and business information posts are put up on the businesses social media platforms. Everything the owners post is linked back to their business social media pages. Respondent 1 suggests that the customer is looking to connect to a personality. It is difficult for customers to connect or relate to a business, which is why they promote themselves on their social media.

Respondent 1 believes that social media is the cheapest and the easiest way to connect with existing and new customers. Respondent 3 and 5 made the same point, but don't take advantage of the opportunity. Some studies have identified the damage a poor social media campaign can do to a business. It is suggested that this is a direct result of many SME's lacking the resources, knowledge and time to carry out an effective social media campaign(De Vries et al., 2018). Respondent 2 has an e-commerce function on their website. They do not direct customers back to this through their social media. None of the other respondents actively tried to persuade customers to visit their website.

4.5.4 Influencers

Influencers are members of the public that have a considerably large following on social media. Once they get to a certain number of followers then they can start charging businesses to advertise to their followers. Anyone in public life could also be considered an influencer. Three out of the five respondents included it in the list of marketing methods that they use. Respondent 3 stated that some of the smaller and more regional influencers are happy to trial your products for free as they are looking for material use on their daily posts. Respondent 1 tended to use more celebrity based influencers and took advantage of network of chefs and athletes that the business had built up. Respondent 5 appeared on an episode of RTEs Dragons Den, which resulted in the huge boost in sales for their business. Having one of the dragons involved in
a business could be considered the use of an influencer. The other respondents made no mention using influencer as a method of marketing their brand.

4.5.5 Restaurant Menus

Respondent 1 stated that appearing on restaurant menus is an essential part of the success of a small food business. Respondent 3 considers the foodservice sector as where the majority of their sales are. They attempt to get their product on the menu of the best restaurants in the country. Their hope is that it will have knock on effect; other ambitious chefs will want to have the same ingredients on their menu. Respondent 1 adds that customers will eat in these restaurants and want to try remake that dish at home. Respondents 4 and 5 have very little sales in the foodservice sector and rely nearly completely on retail sales. Respondent 2 does sell a considerable amount to the foodservice sector but failed to mention the overall benefit of in the same way mentioned by respondent 1 and 3.

4.5.6 Public Presentations

As the businesses have grown, both respondents 1 and 3 have started to carry out public presentations on their business at different events. Typically business related events would request the presence of the respondents to take part in a presentation in front of members of the public or other business owners. Respondent 1 finds these events beneficial, they are an opportunity to sell to a much larger group of people. There is also an opportunity to get some feedback from customers or other business owners. Respondent 3 agrees on the benefits and also identifies the opportunities at these events to expand your network and build up relationships with other business owners.
4.6 West Cork’s Food Culture

West Cork is commonly seen as a hub for food and was named Ireland’s top foodie destination in 2017 by the restaurant association of Ireland. The area has thrived in recent years, beginning with an increase in the number of food businesses setting up in the area. As the economy recovers, the area has also seen an increase in the number of restaurants. Businesses have experienced an increase in food tourism to the area and have begun to take advantage of this by creating business activities that include visiting tourists. Many of the towns and villages in the area are now hosting food related festivals.

Respondent 1 is the most established business interviewed, they were founded over 45 years ago and have seen the culture of West Cork develop and grow. Respondent 1 suggests that it all began with an influx of people to West Cork from all over the world. West Cork is truly one of the most scenic and beautiful parts of the world; it is quiet and very rural but welcoming at the same time. A lot people from other countries were looking for an area like this to settle down, retire or escape to. These people were looking for the cuisines that they were used to at home but couldn’t find it locally. So they began to recreate it themselves and wanted to share their creations with the locals. These people began selling all of their foreign cuisines in the local farmers markets. The markets began to grow in size but respondent 1 stated that many of these mini-businesses were not profitable but the people were doing it for the love of sharing their creations with the locality. More importantly these entrepreneurs could be described as “characters” or unique personalities that are charismatic and enjoyable to be around. Respondent 1 describes the fad of entrepreneurship that then spread around West Cork in the late 80’s and early 90’s like a virus. Everyone wanted to try and create something and bring it to the market in order to be involved. Some of the mini-businesses that started trading at these markets then realized that there might be a viable business opportunity available to them if they grew their business idea.
The second major contribution to the success of these local businesses is the local retailers, butchers and fishmongers that wanted to be part of the expansion and excitement of the farmers markets. They began to take on a lot of local produce in order to entice customers more to visit their store. The same can be said for local restaurants and cafes, they wanted the farmers markets products on their menus and also support the local trade of food. Respondent 1 suggests that this is how the food culture began and got engrained into the local mindset. This became especially evident during the recent recession, as the local population supported the local food businesses as it was seen as area for employment. This is the basis of how West Cork’s food culture got its roots.

The trends have really begun to evolve lately with the increases in food businesses taking advantage of the food tourism opportunities. Respondent 3 mentions the benefit of an Irish tourist travelling to the farm, meeting the owner and understanding their processes. This tourist will travel home and help to spread the brand, but also now recognize the product on the shelf of their local retailer. Respondent 1 makes the same point and compares this to their activities in the farmers markets, he states that customers want to meet and develop a relationship with the person that is creating the food for them. Respondent 2 makes the point that “West Cork “ has become a type of logo that businesses want to associate with. However, none of the businesses involved in this study were doing any major food tourism activities.

Respondent 4 admit that having local businesses nearby that are willing to help and offer advice when needed is a huge advantage when the business was starting. Respondent 5 adds that the area is very rural and a lot of the businesses will share deliveries or team up for bulk orders in order to reduce costs. Respondent 3 adds that a lot of suppliers have minimum order quantities. There are a number of businesses in the area and they may be using the same ingredients or chemicals and are willing sell it them. Respondent 1 believes that SME’s need to help each other in order to survive in rural Ireland.
Respondent 1 suggests that West Cork is a food business incubation hub. When a business is set up. The local population will support them, the local media will promote them and the local businesses will advice and help them. Teamwork, sharing and helping each other has been the main objective of farmers markets. This continues to help develop and grow the food culture in West Cork. Respondent 2 has a lot of praise for Failte Ireland for developing the Wild Atlantic Way and promoting it to the world.

It appears that a number of factors have come together to develop the West Cork food culture. The influx of foreign cuisines into the area seems to be the beginning of the process and from there the locals got behind the various local food businesses. The increased investment into promoting West Cork has resulted in tourism increasing in the area. This is another venture for food businesses to explore. The increased interest in food festivals is another venture for food businesses to explore but also helping the local economy the same time. Businesses in the area do appear to be benefiting from the food culture that now exists in West Cork

\[4.7 \text{ Conclusion}\]

This chapter contains all the major information gathered from the semi-structured interviews carried out with a number of West Cork Irish food SME’s. The beginning of the chapter gives a detailed account on how each SME managed their new product development and the value they put on the importance of value added products. Respondents were asked if they identified any product trends that consumers are looking for which may not yet be obvious to the whole market. The respondent’s opinion on their opportunity in the export markets was also examined.

The businesses were then questioned on their methods of managing and controlling their brand. The questions were based around the processes recommended in the previously researched literature. This section included
brand strategy, brand identity, skills and expertise, management team structure, training and the different strategies they use to design and control their brand. However in many of the businesses included in this study they did not manage or control their brand. The different marketing methods that the businesses used were then investigated. Many of the respondents did not use them correctly or to their full potential. An example of this is the respondent's poor use of social media and their poor online presence in general. Finally external brand factors were investigated, this included the West Cork food culture that food businesses in the area seem to benefit from. The reliance on farmers markets to start and grow the business was also examined. The next chapter will break down these results and compare them to the literature that is available in the different areas.
5 Discussion / Findings

5.1 Introduction

It was identified in the literature that there was very little research completed into Irish SME’s and to be specific, brand management in Irish SME’s. With this in mind, an objective was set for this study in order to determine how Irish Food SME’s are managing their brand in rural Ireland. Is there anything they are doing, that could be done by others to improve their chances of success?

5.2 NPD and Value Added Product

Over the last decade there has been a substantial increase in demand for convenience foods. This has opened up a new market for SME’s to penetrate. The artisan food sector is now renowned for their specialty products, and the demand has increase for new product development of value added products. The new product development process (NPD) has been well documented and well researched with many different process and versions for businesses to follow. Publications such as (Kotler & Armstrong, 2014) and (Stone & Desmond, 2007) go into great detail of every step of the NPD process.

None of the SME’s in this study had a dedicated new product development management team in place. Two of the respondents had virtually no system in place, other than when there was a need for reducing a waste byproduct of production. Two more respondents were at the early stage of business development so they were in the middle of creating new products to fill their product portfolio. However, in comparison to the other respondents these businesses have no waste byproduct to deal with. Only one of the respondents interviewed, respondent 1, understood the benefit that creating and publicizing new products can have on a businesses brand. This respondent was constantly creating new products, then advertising them at farmers markets and on social media. This is a bid to draw in the interest of new customers and make existing customers create some discourse in relation to the brand. Many of these new
products are value added versions of old products. The feedback received from trialing new products at markets allowed respondent 1 to develop an understanding of the trends that their target market is beginning to take interest in. Due to the consistent nature of this process in the business, it also allows them to identify trends and enter new markets before the trend has fully begun. This is all done with the intention of expanding the business but also increase the awareness of their brand among the public.

5.3 Social and Behavioral Trends

SME’s deal directly with customers much more then the larger businesses would. It was the researchers intentions to investigate have the SME’s interviewed discovered any early signs of food trends growing in demand by the consumer.

All of the respondents agreed that over the last ten years that customers are now looking for quick and convenience foods. This correlates with many of the trend publications made in recent times (Consulting, 2018; Mcgrath, 2016; BordBia, 2011; Bia, 2015). One of the respondents suggested that there has been a large movement in demand towards more international cuisines. This again correlates with some of the statistics mentioned in previous publications (Consulting, 2018). A number of interviewees identified the need for increasing the price of their products due to the rising costs of producing the food. This again correlates with what another publication has identified, that the price of food is increasing due to the increasing rates of inflation (Inflation, 2019). However, in order to combat this point, the food producers had to reduce the size of their products in order to stay competitive in terms of on shelf pricing with the larger competitors.

Much of what the respondents expressed in terms of trends, was already stated in previous publications. However, it was interesting to identify that with the increasing costs of production, that they were aware that the consumer is very much conscious of price. Even if they are to some extent, entitled to charge a higher price on their product due to their niche nature.
5.4 Brand Management

The basis of this study was to determine what Irish SME’s are currently doing to control and manage their brand. The literature available is quite unsuitable and only compatible with larger and more established businesses. M. Ahonen identified that there is very little research available on brand management in SME’s (Ahonen, 2008). Kennedy and Wright agreed with this and added that virtually no research was completed on Irish SME’s (Kennedy & Wright, 2016). It was the researchers intention to study a number of businesses and determine if there is anything that these businesses are doing that is new and different from the current literature.

5.4.1 Brand Understanding

A number of studies have suggested that branding in SME’s is generally overlooked and not treated as important (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010) (Merrilees, 2007). The data from this study appears to agree with the literature, as many of the businesses involved did not fully understand that their business was a brand. The bulk of those interviewed concentrate on products and production and did not put an emphasis or interest into the benefits of building a strong brand. The majority of those interviewed did not fully understand the purpose of a brand in the business, which was surprising, as the businesses brands appear to be quite successful. Therefore many of these businesses have allowed their brand to grow organically and with very little control.

One of the more established businesses in the study has branding at the top of the priority list. They spend both time and money on this area in the business and believe in the benefits it has to offer. In my opinion, this is what has led to their national success as a brand. Many of the other businesses, did not invest in actively growing their brand. The respondents put this down to a lack of time and money but in my opinion it is both lack of knowledge and understanding of
the importance of marketing that leads them to ignore the necessity for brand development.

The lack of knowledge and expertise of the owner-operator, in the many areas is quite well documented. With many publications identifying the owner as one of the major reasons for a business failing (Krake, 2005) (Ropega, 2011) (Duncan, 1993). The business owners in this study all had some type of higher level of education, but not in any business related studies. All of the owners also operate and manage almost every angle of the business. Many admitted that they were poorly equipped to manage certain areas of the business but had no choice but to learn in order to succeed. One respondent mentioned that they attend a lot of locally run business training and seminars, which they found quite beneficial. It is well documented that business can fail due to the poor skills of an owner, but the owners in this study had no choice but to try and learn these new skills. The poor understanding of marketing and branding in SME’s could be put down to the owner of the business not being aware of its importance. The businesses interviewed did not have any staff that had a higher educational background in marketing or did they train any of their staff in modern marketing and brand techniques.

It would be fair to suggest that business-training activities would be beneficial for both the owners and employees of the business. Self-learning may be an option when the business is just starting, but as the business grows and the owners time is becoming valuable then perhaps the creation of a management team would be a necessity. The owner would then be able to delegate jobs to other skilled staff members. Skilled staff members may need to be trained in their respective areas or hired with experience in the area. In order for staff members to remain skilled then ongoing and continuous training would be required. Creation of a management team would require an investment, which might not be possible in the early stages of a business. However, a business owner should attend business-training in order to advance his or her own knowledge.
5.4.2 Branding strategy process

None of the SME’s included in this study had any formal method of branding strategy in place for their business. The beginnings of the business rely on the lessons learned from trading their products at the local farmers markets. The farmers markets are how all of the respondents in this study began. Many food businesses would not exist if farmers markets were not available for start up food businesses to trial their products on. The Irish food industry appears to trust in the informal nationwide activities of farmers markets in order to get new businesses off the ground. Many SME’s do not have any brand strategy in place before they begin, with the majority of their decisions being made with no long-term plan in place. According to the literature this could be a recipe for disaster, as the brand identity needs to be set from the very beginning (Adamson, 2006).

The literature is clear; a business must undergo an investigation into the market and decide what brand identity path the consumer would be attracted to (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2009). This study has proven that this does not happen in many rural Irish SME’s. Although informally the owner, with the help of the farmers markets, will develop an understanding of what their target market is interested in. This is possible through feedback, advice from customers and other vendors in the market. Furthermore a number of established respondents admitted that up until recently they had concentrated on ensuring the product was aesthetically pleasing and believed that this would be the primary reason to draw in new customers to purchase their products. This again shows signs of a lack of knowledge in the area of marketing and the benefits of branding management for an SME.

Irish SME’s are relying heavily on the stepping-stone that is the farmers markets. These markets are great for giving rural members of the public a chance to start their own business. The only issue that so far appears to occur is that these business owners may be entering into a market without the full knowledge required to maximize the chances of a businesses success.
5.4.3 Brand and Visual Identity

The research completed in this area suggests that a business must portray a sense of what it stands for (Inskip, 2004). It can be described as the invisible brand of the business but it includes the vision, values, personality, benefits, culture and attributes of the business. These elements must be combined in order to great a culture that is consistently portrayed by the business (Merrilees, 2007). To an extent, each of the businesses interviewed had some sort of a brand identity.

The most successful respondent in terms of brand management had a good method for ensuring a consistent and interesting business identity. The owner was treating the brand and business as one entity. The owner was living the life that the brand was portraying i.e. laid-back, easy going and relaxed. He opened up his life and let the consumers in. This was done using social media and farmers markets, but he used his own personality in order to sell the brand. This is quite common in the some areas of social media at the moment; some YouTube, Snapchat and Instagram users are gaining rather large followers by Vlogging their day-to-day activities and thoughts on these social media outlets. These people are commonly known as “influencers”. People are drawn to these influencers and make a connection with their personalities that they portray. A business is no different, as it needs to portray an image that customers can connect to.

Most businesses, especially SME’s, will have a personality that they portray. Only some do it better then others. Respondent 1 has taken advantage of social media and been successful with it. The other respondents in this study manage their social media very poorly. Social media is where most customers now get their food ideas and it is a relatively cheap marketing activity available to businesses. A businesses website could be considered a shop front while their social media page could be compared to the sales assistant. The business need to interact on social media in order to connect with customers successfully, but it appears that Irish SME’s are not taking full advantage of this method.
SME’s appear to be selling themselves well in other areas; they build a rapport with chefs and retailing managers. These associates deal directly with the customer and can sell the brand for the SME. Furthermore food awards appear to be quite beneficial for artisan producers. A number of respondents identified the success they had in certain areas of the country after winning certain reputable national food awards. The awards seem to break down the trust barrier that some customers might have when tempted to try a product.

5.4.4 Internal and External Implementation

This study’s investigation into the internal and external methods of brand management found that the respondents appeared to be undertaking activities that followed the literature very closely. The literature suggests that the owner-manager of a SME is the most important and influential member of the management of a brand (Gilmore et al., 1999) (Merrilees, 2007). The businesses need to build an internal story and then exert image outwards to the customer by using a different variety of marketing mix tools (Ruzzier et al., 2013). This is what is also recommended by (Aaker, 2014) but some publications also highlight the importance of including staff members in developing a consistent brand image (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001).

Most of the businesses involved did not have a management structure. Each had a different way of achieving the same outcome. Respondent 1 is the most established business and had a system in place whereby his staff understood the brand image that they are trying to achieve and help to apply this to the customer. One the other hand, respondent 3’s staff members were made up mainly of family members. This allowed them complete control of every interaction with their customers.

Respondent 5 had a small number of staff and all of the customer interactions were through the owner. This gives the owner complete control over the brand
image being portrayed and does offer some consistency. Respondent 4 did seem to struggle with achieving a consistent brand image. The business was young but relied on a large number of staff members; these staff members spent a lot of time dealing directly with customers. The owner had no brand identity structure in place, making it difficult for his staff to consistently portray the same businesses personality and values to the customer.

The finding from this section is that it is entirely possible for an SME to control their brand image and its implementation in the business. It appears to even be possible with a limited brand management structure in place; many of the SME’s in this study are selling the image of the life they are already living. Each of the businesses involved in this study have a unique and different way of approaching brand implementation but it does correlate with many of the published literature. There is an advantage to those from an agricultural background as a ready-made story and image is normally already there. Any business that is starting from scratch appears to find it difficult to settle on a story or image to sell to the customer.

5.5 Types of Marketing Used

There has been limited research completed into SME’s in Ireland, even less done into the marketing techniques used by SME’s. This area was investigated for this study with the intention of creating an understanding of what methods are available, successful and viable for Irish food SME’s. It is well known that SME’s major restriction is their access to finance for investment into different aspects of their business. Finance needs to be prioritized in the business and branding and marketing is often over looked.

5.5.1 Farmers Markets

The market for food has changed in recent times. The consumer demand has shifted from cheap food to a more sustainable product that stands for value and
sourced locally (Fernandez-Armesto, 2001). This has lead to an increase in the demand for farmers markets in rural towns and villages. Research into the benefits of Irish farmers markets is limited.

Rural farmers and food producers have been hit recently with reducing profits. This is due to the rising costs of producing food and the decreased price that the retail and foodservice sector are willing to pay for fresh produce. Rural food producers are now moving back towards selling their stock at farmers markets in order to try meet the growing consumer demand for fresh produce (Cameron, 2005b). Farmers markets cut out the middleman, which allow venders to make a larger profit then they normally would. A stall in a farmers market generally requires very little input in order to set up and operate. It is a great way for a new business to connect with their customers and build up a local network of other businesses.

All of the SME’s involved in this study began their business in a farmers market. It gave them the chance to experiment with products and build on their skills as a business operator. The market also allowed them to develop an understanding of what their customers were expecting from their products as direct feedback is a main advantage of a farmers market. As the business began to grow and develop, running a stall at a farmers market became uneconomical. It becomes difficult to make a profit once the business gets a certain stage. Time is also a valuable asset to a small business owner. The market was seen as an inefficient use of the owner’s time in many cases. All of the respondents agreed that farmers markets are a loss making activity but two out of the five businesses involved still took part in local farmers markets. These two businesses saw a benefit in the market for two reasons. The first was it is a good opportunity to meet new customers, sell the businesses story and build on the brand. One respondent saw this as a vital part of their business strategy and hoped to continue doing it for the foreseeable future. The second reason is it is a great opportunity for businesses to carry out market research on new products and ideas. Direct feedback can be hugely beneficial for a business, but also the consumer will feel as if they are involved in the business.
Business incubators have been set up and used for many years. Local authorities and universities operate them in order to stimulate growth and investment in the region. However, less attention is given to the creation of incubators for food businesses. There is a growing suggestion that farmers markets are fulfilling this role as a food business incubator (Cameron, 2007). This study correlates with this research as all of the businesses involved in the study began in a farmers market. The farmers market is great opportunity for fledgling businesses to trial their products and test the market for demand. The market will allow the business to build their network. It will also prepare them for the next stage in growth of dealing with retailers and restaurants.

The business incubator model currently present at farmers markets has an informal structure and also receives little to no funding or grant aid. The farmers markets currently appear to be self-funding. The established venders are making a loss at the markets, so it is vital that some large entity start to invest funding into farmers markets in a hope to make it a formal structured incubator, which food businesses could avail of. Keeping established businesses in the market is vital to their success as many customers visit the market as return customers. These customers will enviably interact in some form with the new venders that have started in the market.

To conclude this study has shown that farmers markets are vital to the continued success of the Irish rural food industry. The markets not only give new businesses a chance to start their business, but also allow established businesses to develop their brand. The markets are a loss making activity for many venders. There should be some form of grant aid or government funding in order to develop farmers markets into a structured and formal business incubator.
5.5.2 Signage

Signs and posters are one of the first pieces of marketing that any business will normally carry out. It is a relatively cheap investment with a good return on interaction and views of the material. All of the respondents in this study have at least one delivery vehicle. But only 60% of them have sign writing on their vehicles. Van sign writing is seen as free advertising by many of the respondents involved and those that don’t have sign writing put it down to lack of time as a factor for not using it. Earlier in this chapter I identified that SME’s do not prioritize branding and often overlook it when it comes to financial investment. The non-use of van sign writing by many of the respondents supports this argument even further.

5.5.3 Online Presence

5.5.3.1 Website

Consumer’s access to the internet has increased dramatically over the last ten years with the increased use of smart phones in the Irish market. Most consumers now have unlimited access to the internet in their pocket. However, Bord Bia published a report in 2012 identifying that only 60% of Irish SME’s had a website (BordBia, 2012). In the UK, many SME’s do not effectively include e-commerce as part of their business strategy. Consumers now look to the internet for ordering their everyday items (Murphy & Wright, 2015).

Four out of the five businesses included in this study had a website. Only one of these had an e-commerce function, while only one respondent kept their website relatively up to date. This same respondent believed that their e-commerce was a functioning and viable part of their business strategy. However, all of the other respondents did not regard e-commerce as a viable activity for their business. They suggested that it would be not be a profitable venture and due to the chilled, fragile and short shelf life nature of many of their products.
This study suggests that Irish SME’s are not keeping their websites up to date. The businesses did not see the benefits of having a reputable online presence in the form of a website. Some of the respondents suggested out that social media is all they need, and websites are becoming obsolete. E-commerce is becoming an important part of operating a business. SME’s should be actively trying to discover innovative ways in which they can take advantage of their website.

This chapter further supports my original argument of Irish SME’s not prioritizing branding. This section is an example of the modern SME not understanding modern marketing techniques. If SME’s were up skilling and expanding their knowledge then the businesses involved in this study would be taking advantage of the power that a website has to offer a business.

5.5.3.2 Social Media

Social media use has made a huge leap in recent years with more and more consumers getting meal ideas from recommendations they find on the many different social media platforms (Vassallo et al., 2018). Many Irish businesses now include social media as part of their marketing campaign. (Mintel, 2013). This increased use of social media has opened up a new opportunity for businesses to connect with their customers in a relatively cheap manner. Innovative and dynamic content can be targeted towards specific interest groups, which can lead to real success in growing a recognized brand (Grant-Thornton, 2014). However, it is not clear if SME’s are taking advantage of this modern marketing method. SME’s are typically understood to be financially restricted. Social media opens up an avenue for SME’s to grow their brand recognition in an inexpensive manner.

The majority of the businesses involved in this study were not maximizing their use of social media. Some participants were going as long as a month between posts on some social media platforms. Others were posting on average of about once a week, but there was still no marketing strategy involved. Many of the
posts were lacking the personality and innovation that is required to increase engagements in posts. One participant ran an active social media page with regular and interesting posts. They concentrated on selling the personality of the owners and business, which appeared to be successful. However, they did not have any e-commerce in place that they could direct their social media followers to. Another participant had an e-commerce system in place but did not post relevant or frequent information on their social media to direct customers to it.

Participants only concentrated on one or two forms of social media, concentrating on Facebook and Twitter in particular. There are so many other platforms that need to be utilized in order to get the most out of their social media presence i.e. Instagram and Snapchat. Lack of time was identified by every respondent as the main issue for not investing more time in the social media campaigns. However, I believe this also is caused by a lack of knowledge and skills in marketing, the reluctance to delegate key positions as the business grows, and refusing to place branding at the top of the priority list in a business. Social media is key to any businesses success. SME’s unique selling point is the personality and values that the business has that is generally lost in larger businesses. It is now very difficult to portray these values to customers without an effective social media presence. This study has shown that most SME’s do not take full advantage of social media to grow their brand. This is quite alarming and may be a result of the informal business development route that food businesses have to take through farmers markets. If a formal route was offered and the benefits were taught to business owners then social media may increase in priority in SME’s

5.5.4 Influencers

Social media influencers were mentioned as avenues of marketing by a number of respondents in this study. There is an increasing amount of information available to show the advantages and disadvantages of a social media influencer. Influencers of some sort have been used in advertising for decades and this latest
craze is no different. However previously, celebrities would have been used to publicize a brand, now these homemade micro celebrities are drawing a huge following and controlling a lot of power in relation to public opinion on a brand or product (Booth & Natic, 2011). This study did not investigate this area as a benefit for SME’s, as a cheap method of brand development. Respondents claimed that most influencers they dealt with were willing to publicize their product for free. However, without a good social media and website, investment in influencers may be worthless. This may be an interesting avenue for a future research project but the researcher did not investigate this subject further.

5.5.5 Restaurant Menus

Respondents in this study used restaurants as a method of growing their brand. Many of the respondents mentioned that they would concentrate on getting their products onto some of the best restaurants in the country. These restaurants are frequently and widely reviewed resulting in some increase brand recognition. Other ambitious restaurants will as a result be interested in stocking some of the respondent’s products. Customers may then want to try recreating these dishes at home. Foodservice appears to be an important part of the success of rural Irish food SME’s. Identifying that Irish food businesses are using this method of marketing is an interesting finding. 60% of the respondents in this study used this method in some form.

5.6 Food Culture in West Cork

There is a strong food culture in the West Cork area. It in fact it is known as a ‘Foodie Destination’, the area has won Irelands premier foodie destination in 2017 by the Restaurant Association of Ireland.

I have mentioned previously that there is an informal and unstructured food business incubation hub present in farmers markets in rural Ireland. This business incubator in West Cork has expanded passed the farmers market and is
instilled in the local culture. Start-up businesses in the West Cork area have a unique advantage over other areas in the country. West Cork has a lot of successful food businesses and these businesses have a strong network between each other. They offer guidance and advice for new business. Businesses also share bulk buying to reduce price and to meet minimum orders. To an extent, there is an informal and unofficial food forum or knowledge transfer group in place. The local businesses could benefit from creating an official knowledge transfer group. All different sizes of businesses would benefit from such a group. Farming knowledge transfer groups are growing in popularity and it are fast becoming the standard for farmers to keep up to date with modern techniques. A similar system could be put in place for food businesses in rural Ireland and a structured group could see further benefits for its members.

The increased advertising of the Wild Atlantic Way at a global scale and the increased demand for food tourism activities has created opportunities for businesses in the West Cork. Unlike many other summer activities, food tourism in many cases is not susceptible to the elements. The natural views and landscapes that many of the West Cork food businesses operate in, again offer an opportunity for these businesses to build their brand. That being said, none of the businesses involved in this study offered tours or activities for tourists to take part in. This is a lost opportunity for businesses to build their brand and create revenue.

To conclude, businesses do appear to benefit from the West Cork food culture as many of the local businesses aim to help each other in development. However, there needs to be a formal knowledge transfer group put in place in order to fully benefit from the advantages that a knowledge transfer group can offer. With food tourism becoming an increasing demand for travelling tourists, food businesses needs to start offering activities for tourists to take part in. The West Cork food name will bring tourists to the area but businesses need to have tours and other activities in place for them to take part in.
5.7 Conclusion

This chapter takes the information from chapter 4, analyses it and compares it with the literature in order to determine is there any new information. Some of the results found correlated with previously published literature. The results showed that many of the SME’s in this study did not have a structured new product development process in place, nor did they place much value on creating new products in order to grow their brand. Many of the trends identified by the respondents were already mentioned in the literature examined in chapter 2. The businesses did not effectively manage their brand or did they have any from of strategy in place that was effective. Some respondents had consistent identities and values in place that they portrayed to the customer but there was no exact strategy or plan in place to follow. The literature in this area was scant and previous publications have recommended future research in this area. The results showed that SME’s did not prioritize branding in the business but it seemed that they were unaware of this occurrence.

Marketing methods used by the respondents was also investigated in order to determine if they were doing anything differently from the norm. Many of the methods the respondents were using were not being used effectively. An example of this is the respondent’s poor uptake in the use of social media. Social media is seen as a cheap opportunity for SME’s to take advantage of but the businesses in this study were not getting the full potential of their social media platforms.

The importance of farmers markets was investigated. Its role in business incubation was identified as vital for start up food businesses in rural Ireland. However, farmers markets are informal and unstructured in design. They lack in certain areas of training and guidance for its members as they grow. The food culture that is present in West Cork has helped many food businesses in the area to succeed. All of the businesses in this this study are part of an unofficial and unstructured food knowledge transfer group in West Cork. All the businesses regularly connect with each other when they have problems or need guidance. It
was discovered that this area could be expanded more and a more formal structure could be put in place. One similar to the successful farming knowledge transfers groups.

The demand for food tourism has grown in recent years and West Cork businesses have the unique opportunity of being able to take advantage of visiting tourists to the area. However, this study showed that the businesses were not taking part in any food tourism activities. Providing tours for tourists can help to generate revenue and build on brand recognition but many Irish SME’s appear to not be taking advantage of this.

The main finding from this chapter is that most Irish food SME’s do not prioritize branding, do not manage their brand or do they have a strategy in place in order to develop their brand. The results suggest that SME’s lack the skills and knowledge needed to successfully manage a business brand. There appears to be a need to find some method in which Irish SME’s could retrain or up skill on a consistent or regular basis. This could be of huge benefit to the rural economy and the food businesses that exist in it.
6 Conclusion of the Study

6.1 Introduction

This is the final chapter in this study, which will summarize the main findings that were described in detail in previous chapters. It will also include the limitations that were present during the study and topics of interest are identified. A synopsis of the main conclusions and findings are contained in this chapter. Finally recommendations for these findings are explained.

6.2 Limitations to the Research.

The study was limited to a small area in West Cork, Ireland and to a small sample of SME’s. The findings cannot be generalised to represent all SME’s. However, this is good representation of different rural areas across Ireland that has a strong food business population.

6.3 Future Research

This study was limited to a small number of West Cork food businesses. Further research should be carried out on a much larger and national scale in order to determine if similar results would reappear. Some of the information in this study may be unique to this region and I believe this could be possible for other regions in Ireland too. Comparing results with urban or rural based food SME’s may also be an interesting avenue for further research. The literature on Irish SME’s is scant so any further detailed studies into the area would be greatly beneficial.

Further research into the impact of a structured food business incubator in rural Ireland would also be an interesting topic. Examining the relationship between business incubators and farmers markets as the location for these incubators could be beneficial.
Food businesses in this study seem to be using social media influencers as a marketing tool to grow their brand. Is an investment into the use of influencers even effective if the businesses website and social media are not setup to attract interest from customers sent by an influencer?

There is a need for further research into the lack of social media used by SME’s. If the reasoning for SME’s slow uptake of this modern marketing tool was discovered then maybe incentives could be put in place in order to increase the use.

In my opinion there is a need for research into the benefits of knowledge transfer groups in the food sector. These groups have proven successful in other sectors but it doesn’t seem to be widely available to food producers. Dealing with short shelf life and fresh produce requires a different approach to both logistics and stock management. Only producers in particular areas will understand the dynamics of running their food production operation. A start-up or SME could benefit hugely from regular meetings with larger producers to share their knowledge.

Further research is required into the best methods of maximizing the return from food tourism activities. There are many regions in Ireland that have a good tourist trade, an investigation into the methods used by existing food tourism activities may result in some interesting findings. The benefits that SME’s experience from winning certain food awards should be investigated.

Finally I consider that there is research required to determine what is the best method of educating and up skilling small business owners. There are many options available but uptake of education activities could be low and determining the most appealing approach to SME’s could lead to improvements.
6.4 Conclusion of the Study

This study was carried out with the aim of adding to the limited literature available on food SME’s in Ireland. The main focus was on how SME’s control and manage their brand, especially during initial stages of growth. The project was set on a number of West Cork food businesses and involved carrying out semi-structured interviews with the objective of comparing their methods to the literature that is available. It was discovered that the literature available on SME’s in Ireland was insufficient, with even less on how Irish SME’s manage their brand. Once the investigation into the literature was completed, an interview was carried out with a number of food business owners.

One of the distinct findings in this study was that the SME’s appears to lack the required knowledge or skills, in the context of marketing, that are required to build a brand and business. There have been many examples in this study to support this argument. The businesses involved do not prioritize branding in the business, as the owners find it time consuming and expensive. In many case’s SME’s let the brand grow organically. This means that they have no control of what values their brand identity is communicating to the customer. They do not take advantage of the benefit to the brand of developing and launching new products to the market. The businesses do not have a brand management structure or strategy in place for branding. However, most of the businesses are not capable of creating such a structure, due to financial restrictions.

Most of the businesses interviewed were under the impression that products will sell due to its physical packaging and not the invisible brand, hence the true understanding of the power of a brand appears to be lacking. These examples are quite obvious in all of the business interviewed. It appears that the owners do not delegate key tasks in the business, even as it grows. Many SME’s cannot afford to hire highly trained or skilled staff. They often rely on in-house training for many staff members. SME owners need to be continually training and up skilling in order keep up to date with modern techniques in today’s business.
world. This includes external training of staff members that are in control of key elements in the business.

Irish SME’s rely heavily on farmers markets in order to get a stepping-stone into the business world. I have described the farmers market in this study as a version of an informal food business incubator hub where there currently is a demand. Regular business incubators may not cater for the unique circumstances of food production in rural Ireland. Businesses rely on the farmers markets to build their brand, network, skill set and complete market research. In fact the farmers market is the backbone to many West Cork food SME’s. It offers a vital service required by many fledging businesses. The current informal structures have businesses progressing through the farmers markets and expanding their business into the retail and foodservice sector. These business owners are normally self-thought and pick up skills as the business grows. In many cases they do not seek training or keep up to date in many businesses areas. In my opinion this is one of the contributing factors, which has led to the lack of knowledge, skills and expertise in their brand management. I recommend some governing body take control to some extent of farmers markets and offer a more structured and formal approach to food business development. This would be hugely beneficial to any start up business as it is recommended that a businesses control its brand identity from the beginning.

The combination of the West Cork food markets and the success of many food businesses in the area have led to a food culture being developed. Food businesses appear to have a high rate of success due to local restaurants; retailers and consumers supporting each of the new and existing businesses. Businesses in the area seem to build a strong rapport between one another and many of the respondents identified this as one of the key reasons for their success. There has been an informal and unstructured form of a knowledge transfer group created between the food businesses in West Cork. This appears to be hugely beneficial to everyone involved i.e. bulk buying for cheaper prices, advice, networking and sharing the industry norms. Food businesses have to deal with completely different methods of logistics and stock management due to
the short shelf life nature of most of their produce. Food preservation techniques are not widely publicized. Some of these topics can only be understood from meeting with people that have experience in these areas. These groups could be formalized and structured in a way that is similar to farming knowledge transfer groups. It’s possible that formal food knowledge transfer groups could be used to further strengthen the West Cork Food brand. This would permit start-up and growing businesses the opportunity to access priceless information.

The growth of West Cork’s food culture has resulted in the area now seen as a key destination globally for food tourists. However, businesses appear to not be taking advantage of this, none of the businesses interviewed were carrying out any food tourism activities. It was surprising that none of the businesses were offering any factory or farm tours. Many regions nationally do not have access to this opportunity and the businesses interviewed should be taking advantage of this sector. It is a potential all year round venture and priceless in terms of brand development and recognition. I would suggest it is a lack of knowledge, time and finance for investment in the infrastructure required that has seen a poor uptake in food tourism by these businesses.

It was interesting to discover the businesses high regard for food awards and the impact that they can have on brand recognition. A number of respondents identified the benefits that certain awards had on opening up the barrier to entry that existed in some their target markets. This may be another area for future research, as it was not investigated in detail in this study.

None of the SME’s in this study were using their online presence to its full potential. Only one business that was interviewed had an active and up to date e-commerce function on their website (mobile friendly, regular updates and stock lists). A website is vital in these modern times and with consumer demand for online shopping increasing, there should be an e-commerce function available for every business. The website is where a customer will get all of the businesses information, history and stock lists that will not be available on their social media.
Social media is another function available online that is growing in use. Consumers have access to social media 24 hours a day and are now getting meal ideas from different platforms on social media. Social media is a cheap marketing tool for businesses to take advantage of. Most of the SME’s involved in this study did not fully maximize their use of social media. Businesses interviewed had long periods between posts and did not post on all the available platforms used by their target market. One business interviewed ran a good social media campaign and built up an online personality that has acquired a rather large following in comparison to the other businesses. However, they did not have an e-commerce function on their website for social media posts to link back to. This respondent was successfully building their brand but they were not taking full advantage of it. The other respondents did not prioritize social media and did not invest the time into the marketing method. It is vital for businesses to take advantage of this. Many of SME’s involved stated that they are too financially restricted to invest in a marketing campaign. However, they were not taking advantage of social media, which is the cheapest form of marketing available.

One of the objectives of this study was to determine were Irish SME’s using any marketing methods that were outside what was normally used. Some of the interesting methods mentioned were influencers and restaurant menus. Both were being used by nearly all of the respondents. Appearing on some of Ireland’s top restaurant menus was considered hugely beneficial and normally resulted in an increase in sales in both the retail and foodservice sector of that area.

One of the traditional methods mentioned in the study was the use of sign writing on delivery vans. This is commonly seen as one of the cheapest forms of advertising and generally is the first piece of marketing a business will undertake. However, many of the businesses interviewed did not use this form of marketing. In my opinion, this supports the argument for SME’s having a lack of knowledge and training. The businesses do not prioritize branding and jobs such as sign writing a van get put on the long finger.
The strongest finding is that Irish SME’s involved in this study appear to poorly manage their brand effectively. They were not in full control of their brand identify or were they using any of the mentioned marketing methods to the maximum potential. The businesses had a complete lack of a brand strategy and management structure in place. All of the businesses involved were artisan producers and dealing with niche products in a relatively small market. These businesses all have unique stories and work in beautiful and scenic parts of the country. Without a strategy to follow or any management of their brand then the consumer will not understand this. The story and personality that the brand communicates is the advantage that they have over the generic brands. These businesses are generally family-run and its founders normally do not have any education in marketing or brand management. It is easy to understand why these businesses are not aware of the lack of control that they exhibit over their brand. The current literature is lacking on studies of Irish SME’s, food SME’s in particular. Studies on larger businesses cannot correlate back to SME’s, as the situations are completely different. It is clear that owners or management in SME’s need to be educated on the importance of managing a brand. This may need to be done through business night courses or day seminars etc. It is an area that all of the businesses involved in this study need to improve. The other option available for businesses is to start hiring experienced or educated staff. However, this is not normally possible in SME’s due to financial restrictions.

I’ve identified that Irish SME’s rely on Farmers Markets in order to get their brand known on the local market and learn their trade. This supported by the local food culture and from other businesses gives them an advantage, which businesses in other areas may not have access to. These are external factors that benefit both SME’s and the local economy but a more structured and formal process should be put in place. Internally SME’s seem to lack the knowledge and training needed to create and maintain a marketing strategy. The implementation of a brand strategy is not prioritized in many SME’s. However, there are cheap options available to SME’s, such as social media. Many of the businesses interviewed are not using social media to its full potential. Brand
management structures are not used and delegation appears to be a major issue for owner-operators of the business.

6.5 Recommendations

This study has shown that Irish SME’s appear to need guidance and education in understanding the importance of their brand and how to implement a branding strategy. This could be done through the use of food business classes in the local towns or villages. There are many night classes and courses available in many areas of the country that Irish SME’s owners and staff member could benefit from. Convincing businesses owners that they need up-skilling and training may be difficult. Convincing start-up businesses to attend these classes could make it an easier task or perhaps making business management class compulsory to get a food production license.

Knowledge transfer groups have been proven in many other sectors to be successful. Business owners may be slow to accept the advice of teachers or lecturers but they may accept the advice of their peers or role models. This is where knowledge transfer groups could be beneficial. There are many other advantages of being part of knowledge transfer groups. For example bulk purchasing tends to get cheaper prices, site and factory tours, advice on food safety and other production tips, and increased network connections. Formal food business knowledge groups would be hugely beneficial for SME’s. Observation of how larger businesses in the group manage their brand may convince SME’s to implement a brand strategy.

Farmers markets appear to be the backbone to the success of rural Ireland. Almost every food business owner has started his or her business in a local farmers market. These farmers markets currently act as food business incubation hubs, but in an unstructured and informal manner. In my opinion farmers markets are the key to training businesses to successfully manage their business. An entity should be set up in order to create a structure in the market. The current lack of knowledge in certain food business areas could be avoided.
Training and guidance could be offered to start up businesses, in particular understanding the need to manage a brand from the very beginning. Grant aid and support is a must for an activity like this to be successful.

None of the businesses in this study were carrying out any food tourism activities i.e. tours of factory, open days, farm shop. SME’s that are in food tourism areas need to take advantage of their unique situation that allows them to benefit from visiting tourists. This is not possible in many regions in the country. Businesses must maximize these activities in some form, while there is a demand for them. The benefits from investing in food tourism would include an increased revenue and a boost to brand recognition.

6.6 Conclusion

This is this the final chapter in this study. It began with the explanation of the different limitations that were present during the course of this research. The chapter then describes the various options available for further areas of research. The next section is the main conclusions of the study that identified that there seems to be a lack of research into Irish SME's and their management of their brand. This study concluded that many Irish SME’s appear to not manage their brand; they typically don’t have a strategy or structure in place for managing it. Lack of awareness and education seems to be the biggest contributing factor to this. However, this study was only conducted on a small sample and the results cannot be generalized nationally. This chapter concludes with identifying some recommendations for some of the findings. An example is the introduction of some form of education activities specially designed for SME’s in the food production sector.
Appendix A - Interview Schedule

This will give the interviewer and interviewee a basic structure for the interviews.

Background

- How long have you been working with XX company
- What are your main roles?
- Any previous experience before joining this work force?

Product Innovation

- Who in the business is in charge of NPD?
- Do you have a time frame in which you want to launch a product?
- Who are your main competitors? Irish and UK?
- What are your USP’s? Why would I choose you over a named competitor above?
- Is NPD an on-going process in the company?
- How important is NPD in your business in terms of success and profits.
- Have you a particular strategy when it comes to NPD?
- Do you test a product in a particular area before branching it out nationwide?
- How much analysis do you do of the market and the business before launching a product? Does the actual sales match up with predicting sales and costs?
• What type of market research do you preform?

• Pricing a new product? Start high and drop? Promotional price to entice customers and then high price slowly dropping to a lower price or set and stay price.

• NPD involves costs, some times high costs, especially in product design. How long do you plan on recovering these costs and start making a profit?

• Have you ever dropped a product? If so why?

• Do you export any products?

• If so have you had to design products especially for the export market?

Value Added

• Would you consider your products to be value added?

• How have you added value to your products

• In your opinion, what are the benefits of value added products?

Consumer Trends

• Do you see any consumer trends emerging?

• How has the market changed over the last ten years?

• Do you believe there is a benefit from a business being ahead of a trend?

Brand

• Can you describe what the businesses brand is?
• What image or values is the brand trying to communicate to customer?

• Do you think you are successful at this? Do you actively control the image you are communicating? Or is it left to grow itself?

• How do you evaluate your success in terms of communicating the correct image to the customer?

• How do you consistently communicate your values to your customer?

• Do you think you think your product has a loyal following?

• Have you a strategy in place for controlling your brand?

• Do you have a long-term vision for the brand image?

**Brand Management**

• Have you a management structure in place to manage your brand?

• Do you delegate different branding jobs to other staff members?

• When it comes to financial investment, do you prioritize branding or product quality and production?

• Do customers will trust when it comes to product choice? A high-quality product or a well-known brand?

**Experience and Training**

• What training and experience had you before you stared your business?

• Did you complete any further business training after the business started?

• Do you continue to upskill?
• Do you have experienced and trained staff for certain job positions?

• Do you train staff in house?

• Are staff members being training and up skilled on a regular basis? Have any been trained in modern marketing methods?

• Do your staff members understand the values that your brand is trying to communicate?

• How do you get your employees to communicate the values that the brand stands for?

**Marketing Techniques**

• What marketing methods and techniques do you use?

• How effective do you find each of the techniques you listed?

• What is your aim of completing various mentioned marketing campaigns?

• Do you have an annual budget for spending on marketing?

• Do you intend on continuing to use traditional marketing methods or move towards more modern online techniques? Or a mixture of both?

• Do you have a website? Does it have an e-commerce function?

• Describe how you use your website and social media?

• Does social media play a big part in your marketing activities?

• What different platforms do you use?

• Describe your typical social media post?

• How important are the interactions with followers on these platforms?
• Could you be using your social media more effectively?

Farmers Markets

• How important was the farmers market when your business began? Were there any other options available to you?

• Does the local farmers market play any role for contributing to the local economy?

• Do you think attending farmers markets are beneficial for a business?

External Factors

• Are there any external factors that you think have led to your success?

• How important is the West Cork image to your brand

• Do you think there is strong food culture in West Cork?

• How have businesses benefited from this?

• How important is a network with the other food businesses in the area?

• Do you run any food tourism activities for tourists? (Tours of the farm and factory?)

• If no, why not?

• Do you see this as a viable option for businesses in the area?
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