

## Blurring Lines – The Case for a Marketing Mind Set within the Third Sector

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### Abstract

Third sector organisations need to identify and grasp opportunities related to fund-raising, commercial trading activities, the acquisition of volunteers (including voluntary employees), collaboration with for-profit businesses, and so on, in order to compete with others in the marketplace (Cooney, 2011; Gainer & Padanyi, 2005; Macedo & Pinho, 2006). This study is a work in progress with the focus group being completed at the end of May.

This aim of the research is to evaluate the importance of marketing activity within Northern Ireland's third sector organisations (Charity, Community and Voluntary and Social Enterprise). The research population includes 75 third sector leaders who have completed and 50 are completing the Advanced Diploma in Sustainable Investment for the Third Sector (AdvDipSITS). AdvDipSITS is a part-time Level 5 qualification developed by Ulster University Business School in partnership with Atlantic Philanthropy and Charity Bank. Leaders on this programme demonstrate their commitment to helping their organisations rise to new challenges.

This study investigates the:

- Marketing mind-set of third sector leaders
- Role and marketing needs of third sector organisations
- Perceptions of marketing in the third sector
- Strengths and weakness of existing marketing activities, and the
- Impact of AdvDipSITS Marketing module on marketing practice and mind-sets.

This research utilises a mixed-model methodology with an online survey and focus group. This allows for quantitative and qualitative data to be collected and analysed using both methods for analysis. Triangulation of results will be achieved by the mixed-method research, the literature review and from the research participants.

Key findings show that there is a lack of depth with understanding marketing and it is viewed as an operational in nature, with the focus on communication. The participants state that marketing is important and can support the sustainability of third sector organisations yet this is not reflective within the organisations themselves. There is a huge disconnect from what individuals recommend and transpires. Marketing lacks resources, strategic importance, board support, planning, measuring and is not being utilised to support sustainability.

**Keywords:** Marketing, Social Enterprise, Third Sector, Leadership, Business Development, Stakeholder engagement.

**JEL classification:** M31.

### 1 Introduction

Ulster University Business School's Business Institute uses innovative research-informed teaching to support knowledge transfer to enhance sector growth. Growing the marketing capabilities of third sector organisations resonates strongly with the Business Institute remit. This research explores the marketing mind-set of senior leaders in third sector organisations. Leader participation in formal learning opportunities demonstrates commitment to developing their organisation. Likewise dissemination of newly-acquired marketing skills acts as a support to staff enhancing the organisation's capability to engage with the new and emerging realities.

The research is designed to investigate the:

- Marketing mind-set of leaders
- Role and marketing needs of third sector organisations
- Marketing perceptions held
- Strengths and weaknesses of existing marketing activities, and the
- Impact of the AdvDipSITS marketing module on marketing practice and mind-set.

The third sector in Northern Ireland has changed significantly over the last number of years. Drivers for change have included the challenging funding environment, the introduction of charity

regulation in Northern Ireland and the emphasis on more collaborative working.

It is widely recognized (Bruce, 2013; Lee and Kotler, 2011; Kotler and Zaltman, 1971; Lindsay and Murphy, 1996) that Kotler and Levy's (1969) conceptual paper on 'Broadening the Concept of Marketing' is the first academic work that questions if marketing could apply to non-profit organisations. The article challenged the beliefs of other academics that marketing was primarily a discipline of profit making organisations. In particular the authors identified the concept that "all organisations are formed to service the interest of particular groups". Critically no organisation can avoid 'marketing' if it is to remain customer orientated.

Kotler and Murray (1975) argue that marketing should be a function for non-profits and that many are doing it anyway albeit not in a strategic or integrated way. They raise the ethics of marketing as a barrier to non-profits taking up marketing practices. 'Traditional' marketing perception meant non-profits did not want to be seen to be associated with it.

In a time of austerity, where funding continues to decrease, there is an important debate on the role of marketing and how it can contribute to sustainable growth within the sector. This is particularly important for organisations at different stages in their development. It is important to recognise that not all third sector organisations have the capacity or expertise to embrace the role of marketing, possibly due to the size and nature of the organisation.

In order to compete in the marketplace third sector organisations need to identify and grasp opportunities-related marketing, fund-raising, commercial trading activities, the acquisition of volunteers (including voluntary employees), collaboration with for-profit businesses, and so on, (Cooney, 2011; Gainer & Padanyi, 2005; Macedo & Pinho, 2006).

## 2 The profile of the third sector in Northern Ireland

The third sector generally comprises organisation offering a range of services and activities which stand outside, but not apart from, the traditional groupings of public and private sectors. Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC) was commissioned by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and the Department for Social Development (DSD) to examine the size, structure and contribution of the 'third sector' to the economy in Northern Ireland. PWC defined the '*third sector*' as:

*"A range of institutions which occupy the space between the state and the private sector. These include small community and voluntary groups, registered charities both large and small, foundations, trusts and the growing number of social enterprises and cooperatives"* (Hopkins, 2010, p.9)

The Office for the Third Sector, established in 2006, defines third sector organisations as:

*"Non-governmental organisations that are value driven and which principally invest their surpluses to further social, environmental and cultural objectives"*  
[http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/third\\_sector.aspx](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/third_sector.aspx)

There is no agreed definition of the third sector according to NICVA (2012). However, there are certain criteria that can be applied to all third sector organisations. These criteria are: formality, independence, non-profit distribution, self-governance, voluntarism, and private benefit versus public benefit. In terms of commercial viability, third sector organisations tend to be more reliant upon government/non-commercial funding. The third sector in Northern Ireland is diverse and rooted in the community with the delivery of services driven by social benefit. The type and scale of organisations differ significantly, ranging from small grant funded community groups and groups of volunteers to sophisticated large scale social enterprises and charities operating and trading as successful not-for-profit businesses.

The sector plays an important role in Northern Ireland in economic, social and environmental terms, providing direct employment and assistance in economic development to many local communities. It connects with and works in all parts of the community, particularly in those areas that cannot be easily reached by the public and private sector. It also provides the opportunity for local people to make a difference in their communities by volunteering.

Research by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department for Social

Development (2013) reported that in 2012 there were 3,821 third sector organisations in Northern Ireland (see Table 1), 473 were social enterprises and 3,348 were community or voluntary organisations.

Third sector	
No of organisations	3,821
Number employed	29,784
Turnover (£ million)	1,217.7
Number of volunteers	46,674

**Table 1 – Estimated size of the third sector in Northern Ireland**

Source: PWC Survey, PWC Calculations, NICVA (2012)

Third sector organisations employed just fewer than 30,000 people, excluding volunteers, equivalent to around 4% of the economically active in Northern Ireland. For the same period the public sector employed around 210,000 people and 510,930 were engaged by the private sector (NICVA, 2015). The three main goals for third sector organisations were identified as enhancing communities, helping people into employment and improving the environment. DETI's Employment Survey (2015) further identifies community development as the largest single purpose of third sector organisations (22%) with education and training the next largest 'other'/secondary purpose, followed by community development and advice/advocacy and information services (NICVA, 2015).

### **3 Marketing and the Third Sector**

Marketing is arguably a core function of third sector organisations. Every organisation has a purpose they are trying to achieve which needs to attract sufficient resources to convert into products, services and ideas and to then distribute the outputs (Kotler and Murray, 1975). More recently, in response to an increasingly competitive environment, non-profit organisations have adopted more business-like techniques (Goerke, 2003).

Kotler and Levy's (1969) paper was the first academic piece to explore the fit between marketing and non-profit organisations. Non-profit organisations are involved in marketing, subconsciously or otherwise (Kotler and Murray, 1975). The question is about the thought and focus that goes into it and how strategic non-profit organisations are about marketing. Kotler and Murray (1975) argue that non-profit organisations should be interested in formal marketing principles to assist them to become more effective in achieving their strategy and objectives. Marketing enables charities to attract resources, customers, funders and stimulate employees. Marketing also has the intent to engage stakeholders and improve their satisfaction. Therefore, if marketing is not embraced the charity may not understand stakeholders' needs.

This may in turn lead to a poor reputation in the marketplace (Kotler and Murray, 1975). For non-profits to flourish they must be agile and adapt to evolving social needs. They need to be in tune with their markets and stakeholders so they can allocate resources to areas of high social need. This demands market analysis, planning and control (Kotler and Murray, 1975).

Third sector organisations need to be heavily involved in raising awareness of the work they do to not only attract funding but also to raise public recognition of social issues. Awareness raising is greatly enhanced by professional calibre marketing communication and advertising (Bennett and Savani, 2004). Ideally organisations should perceive marketing with strategic importance and employ talented marketing specialists (Bond, 1996; Cervi, 1996; Bennett and Gabriel, 1998).

Marketing does not always fit comfortably with not-for-profits "motivated primarily by values rather than by wealth creation or the phenomenon of power" (Lewis et al., 1997, p.279). Their focus is on helping stakeholders and some leading UK charities even have an "anti-marketing bias" (Burnett, 1986; Clutterbuck and Dearlove, 1996; and Bennett, 1998). This may stem from some diverse stakeholders believing emphatically that charities should devote all income to purely philanthropic activities as opposed to marketing. Competent marketing may not be viewed as relevant by individuals involved in a charity because they align with the values of the organisation or believe in what the organisation stands for (Cantano et al., 2001). Cantano et al (2001) posit that for volunteers, particularly those in leadership roles, who may be involved psychologically are more concerned about the philanthropic operations, not the

success of the marketing or how the external world views the organisation (Bennett and Savani, 2004).

For some organisations and senior level executives marketing may be seen as a detractor to the aims of the organisation and as a cost centre that drains resources that could be utilised to do further good work in the pursuit of their philanthropic objectives (Bennett and Savani, 2004). Another objection would be the assumption that one charitable organisation receiving funds is a false economy because it means that a successful campaign by one leads to another losing that charitable support (Bennett and Savani, 2004). High profile promotions may lead donors to believe that their money may be spent on further expensive marketing campaigns. O'Sullivan (1993) found that 40% of a sample of 1,312 people felt that charities "wasted money" on advertising. It is important to note that the UK press have attacked charities for having large fundraising to total expenditure ratios (Omisakin, 1997; Paton, 2002).

Conflict between marketing and other functions may also arise as charities are increasingly focusing on sustainability. For some the marketing function is viewed as a "cash cow" which finances the rest of the organisation but is not given the resources it requires (Barclay, 1991). Marketing requires resources including money, information and properly paid specialist personnel. At times this function is requesting these resources from unsympathetic senior executives who do not value the role of marketing or prioritise it (Bennett and Savani, 2004; Srivastava et al., 1998; Hudson, 1985).

There are numerous researchers (Kotler and Levy, 1969; Kotler and Zaltman, 1971 and Shapiro, 1974) who have supported the application of marketing to the third sector with a more systematic approach (Andreasen and Kotler, 2003; Dolnicar and Lazarevski, 2009). Marketing continues to be misunderstood by non-profits and social enterprises as a transactional process of promotion or selling, rather than one of building longer-term business-to-business and business-to-customer relationships that would contribute to their long-term sustainability (Powell and Osborne, 2015). Consequently, managers need to be encouraged to engage with the relevant body of services marketing practice to build on their unconscious understanding of the need to maintain relationships as the essential for sustainability (Powell and Osborne, 2015). Is it that leaders do not put emphasis and value on marketing or is it that they do not have the skill set or the mind-set to see the value of marketing and its pivotal role to the work of the organisation? Moreover, beyond the clash of social and economic conceptions, Powell and Osborne (2015) found that often many social enterprise leaders had limited actual experience of the application of private sector business skills and this limited their effectiveness. This may also be the case within leadership of non-profits. According to Akchin (2001), whilst some leaders feel marketing is essential there are still non-profits that are not taking a comprehensive approach to marketing. Benson (1975) on resource-dependency theory and Williamson (1985) on transaction cost analysis, identify new levels of complexity to relationships that are perhaps beyond the scope and competences of traditional transactional models of marketing and which, it is argued here, is highly relevant to the practice of marketing in the third Sector. As evidenced in the literature review the relationship between marketing and third sector has changed due to the competitive nature of funding and the macro environment. Third sector organisations must realise the role and importance of marketing and utilise it as a platform for engaging with stakeholders and achieving competitive advantage.

#### **4 Methodology**

The organisations and leaders selected for this study will be current and past participants of the part-time Level 5 Advanced Diploma in Sustainable Investment for the Third Sector (AdDipSITS) developed by Ulster University Business School in partnership with Atlantic Philanthropy and Charity Bank. Approximately 75 third sector leaders have completed the programme, with 50 currently studying.

This research utilises a mixed-model methodology. This allows for quantitative and qualitative data to be collected and analysed using both methods for analysis. Triangulation of results will be achieved by the mixed-method research, the literature review and from the research participants.

This approach is appropriate for several reasons. First the focus of this research is the exploration of the marketing mind-set of senior executives in the third sector and their demonstration of an explicit marketing orientation. Qualitative research is particularly adept at exploring real life settings and allows the researchers to discover differing perceptions of marketing. The approach adopted here is a grounded



theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) which allows the study to build theory inductively, starting from the ground upwards, rather than test hypothesised relationships.

## 5 Method

The research offers a first exploration of the marketing mind-set of third sector organisations and how marketing might contribute to their sustainability within a Northern Ireland context.

125 participants from cohorts of the Advanced Diploma in Sustainable Investment for the Third Sector were invited to participate in the research. They also have the potential mind-set and the ambition to learn new marketing skills to engage with the new realities that are emerging in the sector. This focus allowed the researchers to explore the congruity, or otherwise, between the marketing activity of these organisations and their explicit organisational purpose.

This approach also ensured a robust body of exploratory evidence allowing similarities and differences between the organisations to be highlighted. This dimension was critically important. While the third sector market is relatively mature, the role of marketing practices in their sustainability, is much less well established.

An online questionnaire consisting of 29 questions was sent to 125 senior third sector leaders. The aim of the questionnaire was to explore the marketing mind-set of the leaders, the role and marketing needs of third sector organisations, marketing perceptions/misconceptions held, and the strengths and weaknesses of existing marketing activities and to identify potential gaps.

Significantly respondents were mainly male and over the age of 44. With female respondents representing 40% of the sample. 67% were from the Charity sector with 13% from the social enterprise sector with 3% from community and 9% from voluntary. Organisations represented were evenly distributed across micro, small and medium sized organisations with only 9% from large organisations, which is reflective of Northern Ireland.

Focus groups will be conducted in May/June 2016 with 25 senior leaders from the Third sector who are students on the Advanced Diploma in Sustainable Investment for Third Sector but who have not completed the marketing module. The aim of the focus groups will be to explore in more depth their perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes towards the marketing mind-set in their organisation.

## 6 Research Findings

The response rate for the survey was encouraging at 32.5% (66 respondents) above the national average (10-15%) for external surveys (The Survey Unit, University of Nottingham). The majority of respondents ranged from those with minimal to extensive knowledge of marketing. Very few (5%) possessed extensive understanding with 36% (55 respondents) at the beginning of their survey, stating they had a good level of understanding of marketing.

The responses showed that 77% stated the person responsible for marketing is also involved in the organisation's strategy: 34% to some level and 43% to a great extent. 14% of the sample said that there was no one in the organisation responsible for marketing while more than half do not have a board member with significant marketing experience. 88% of the respondents stated that their staff were involved at some level in marketing the organisation. This reflects that third sector organisations view marketing as a communication activity rather than strategic to enhance competitive advantage (Powell and Osborne, 2015; Akchin, 2001).

87% of respondents stated that in their opinion marketing was extremely important (45%) or very important (42%). Again an interesting difference of opinion was identified and data shows that their organisation did not share this view. Only 13% reported that their organisation viewed marketing as extremely important. This is compounded by the fact that only 10 respondents (18%) stated that their organisation had a marketing-specific senior role, for example, Head or Director of Marketing. Data suggests that Communications Director (25%) and Fund Raising Manager (28%) were the most popular titles in third sector organisations given to individuals with marketing responsibilities.

A particular issue in this survey was whether third sector organisations adopted marketing as a holistic discipline across their entire organisation or whether they were more selective in its application.

49% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the notion of a holistic approach with 28% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing.

Respondents demonstrated a varied understanding of the role of marketing and its potential in the organisation. (21%) ranked communication as being the most important role for marketing. This suggests the notion that a large proportion of the leaders surveyed, viewed marketing as a communication activity only. Similarly, all but three respondents, did not recognise the benefit of focussing their marketing efforts to achieve competitive advantage.

Interestingly, the survey highlighted that 63% of the respondents did not see any tension between their social objectives and the business means (marketing) through which to achieve them. A significant difference of opinion was identified here (Table 2).

Yes	9%	6 respondents
No	63%	41 respondents
Somewhat	25%	16 respondents

**Table 2: Q4. Do you feel there is tension between marketing and the social aims of your organisation?**

34% of the respondents, however, had the opposite view stating that there was a tension and that the social aims should always take precedence. Their comments included the following statements:

*“not wanting to appear too “business-like”*

*“the notion that a charitable purpose social enterprise would promote itself or its services to someone appears vulgar”*

*“we don’t always see our members and beneficiaries as customers”*

The data collected shows that for the majority of respondents (73%), decision making about the level of marketing expenditure is set at board level. 65% of respondents have little or no marketing budget even though the majority of those sampled view marketing as very important or extremely important. 84% (55 respondents) agreed that marketing can contribute significantly or greatly to the sustainability of the third sector which is not reflected in the setting of the level of organisation marketing budget or view of marketing importance. At an individual level marketing is given significance but at an organisational level it is not deemed strategically important. However there is potential for increased budgets in the future according to participants with 43% reporting a possible increase in marketing expenditure. Further evidence of the lack of strategic importance of marketing is that 60% of those sampled do not have a marketing plan, 90% reported little or no measurement of marketing activities and 84% agreed that there was insufficient resources for marketing.

## **7 Conclusions and recommendations**

This research been based on exploratory research and has explored the marketing mind-set of senior leaders operating in the third sector of Northern Ireland and its contribution to the sustainability of their organisations.

As such, results have to be treated as indicative, rather than definitive. However, the findings are significant and require further research to validate them, as the implications are important. Three major conclusions are important and discussed below along with recommendations:

1. There is a significant lack of understanding and knowledge with genuine marketing theory and practice indicating that there is little or no strategic importance and resource given to marketing practice within the organisations of senior leaders who participated in the research. It suggests that this lack of understanding and engagement with marketing as a holistic approach is widespread and threatens the long-term sustainability of third sector organisations in Northern Ireland.

2. There is also a serious lack of resource for marketing. Whilst the majority of the sample surveyed highlighted the importance this was not found to consistent at an organisational level. Most organisations have little or no marketing budget and there was no strategic planning of marketing. There was also lack of any type of planning and there was limited measuring of the marketing. Again this may support the lack of importance if it is not being planned for or measured therefore making it more of a transactional function. Marketing should be strategic, planned and measured in order to value it, leverage it and to view it as a tool for sustainability.

3. There is a misconception of the actual nature of marketing for third sector organisations. As suggested by the wider third sector marketing literature (Akchin, 2001; Kotler and Murray, 1975; Powell and Osborne, 2015) discussed earlier, marketing continues to be perceived to be associated with the communication or promotion of services, products or programmes rather than a strategic process to achieve competitive advantage and therefore sustainability. This research would support the notion that if marketing and its role was clearly understood by senior leaders and applied in its correct manner within the third sector it would have the potential to make significant contribution to their sustainability. It could build upon the “unconscious marketing” practised by some of the organisations in this research and increase its contribution to organisational performance. At present, marketing as a strategic and holistic process is not fully understood or applied by a significant proportion of the research sample, and this is undermining the sustainability of third sector organisations operating within the Northern Ireland context.

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