
The future of small firms in the hospitality industry

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Abstract

This paper provides a wide-ranging review of what is currently understood about the management and development of small firms in the hospitality industry, with particular reference to entrepreneurship. Its premiss is that small firms in this industry should be seen as an analytical category that is distinct from other – larger – enterprises. Assertions made by those who see small hospitality firms as merely miniaturised versions of larger organisations are, therefore, rejected as ill-conceived. The paper is also critical of the quality – and thus value – of widely cited statistics, which are often used as evidence of the inexorable decline of small firms. The paper concludes by tentatively suggesting that far from suffering such misfortune, many small firms are likely to experience prosperity in the years ahead. Furthermore, a minority of firms which can be classed as entrepreneurial represent dynamic engines which have the potential to drive the hospitality industry into a healthy future.

Introduction

There is no agreement in the literature about how “small firms” in the hospitality industry should be defined. Some commentators adopt quantitative criteria – notably numbers of employees – whereas others prefer qualitative approaches. Although the justifications for, and implications of, these diverging perspectives are important, since they have been discussed in detail elsewhere (Thomas, 1998a), it is unnecessary to repeat the arguments here. Of over-riding significance is the observation that whatever definition is adopted, the most commonly found hospitality enterprise is small.

Yet, until recently, those engaged in hospitality management research had all but ignored small enterprises or, arguably, misunderstood their dynamics by treating them as scaled down versions of larger firms. There is a growing consensus, however, that the size of firm and its sectoral context are likely to be important influences on the phenomenon being studied (Thomas, 1998a). As a consequence, more rigorous research is emerging relating to the management of such organisations and how they engage with the economy.

Following an assessment of the sometimes conflicting evidence regarding the structure and related trends in the industry, this paper offers a critical review of what is currently understood about small hospitality firms. In addition, it concentrates particularly on the notion of entrepreneurship as evidenced in small firms.

The structure of the industry

The case is frequently made – from as early as Pickering *et al.* (1971) to, more latterly, Litteljohn (1993) and Mogendorff (1996) – that key sectors of the hospitality industry are becoming more concentrated. Moreover, it is suggested by some, notably Slattery (1994),

that structural shifts in the UK economy have precipitated this development, at least as far as the hotel sector is concerned. In essence the argument is that smaller firms are being squeezed out of the market.

To some extent, the evidence – represented by the growth of multiples, especially in the fast-food and accommodation sectors over recent decades – is incontrovertible. However, the extent to which multiples have taken market share and will continue to grow at the expense of smaller operators is more questionable. As several commentators have pointed out (for example Morrison, 1998), many of the most widely cited statistics on the structure of the industry are partial in their coverage. Indeed, some go further, arguing that it is only since the creation of the DTI's *Statistical Bulletin* series some two years ago that it has become possible to gauge the structure of the industry with any degree of confidence (Thomas, 1998a). Thus, assertions about the demise of the small business sector must be treated with extreme caution. This is particularly the case since some of the theoretical constructs that inform explanations and predictions of future structural change have also been sensibly challenged on the grounds of their crudeness (Hughes, 1993).

Peacock (1993) provides an alternative outlook in terms of the dynamics of the small business sector. He argues that standardisation – inherent in chain operations – stifles innovation. As a consequence, dynamic small firms might continue to thrive, even in prime locations. Given the low barriers to entry, and the highly segmented nature of demand (Morrison, 1996), such an argument is not implausible. Certainly, recent survey evidence (Thomas *et al.*, 1997) – which included a broad range of small tourism and hospitality firms – found that the majority of almost all the 1,400 firms sampled had experienced stability or growth in revenues, profits and employment during the 12 months prior to questioning and were optimistic about the

future. In addition, comparison between the second and third *DTI Statistical Bulletin* (DTI, 1996, 1997) suggests that in the case of hotels and restaurants, the proportion of employment and turnover accounted for by small firms has remained relatively constant. Clearly this is an issue which will require careful monitoring.

The management of small hospitality firms

It is important to recognise that a distinct and significant range of management issues confronts small hospitality firms. Specifically, the following section considers: the role of marketing; quality management; the value and application of information technology; the relationship of business planning and small firm success; strategic management and growth; and entrepreneurship. Of necessity, the discussion of each issue is circumscribed by available space; readers are referred to Thomas (1998b) for a more comprehensive assessment. What follows draws heavily on the reviews contained in the text.

Marketing

The role of marketing in small firm management has latterly received growing attention. Friel (1998) in his discussion of the topic begins by reinforcing the differences between small and large enterprises, but with specific reference to marketing. This is instructive for it establishes the inappropriateness of assuming that marketing techniques developed in the context of large enterprises may be replicated to good effect in small firms.

To some extent, Friel's work challenges some common perceptions relating to marketing activities in small hospitality firms. Although he is cautious – as a result of the limited research on which he is able to draw – he suggests that the majority of small businesses in these industries undertake some kind of research into customer needs and formulate a marketing plan, even if only on a short-term basis. Moreover, a variety of promotional methods are used and there is some evidence of market-orientated pricing even though the “cost-plus” approach remains most dominant. His impression, therefore, is that there is greater dynamism in terms of marketing among small hospitality firms than is generally considered to be the case.

Quality management

In recent years there has been an explosion of interest in quality management. The debates

surrounding the most appropriate means of ensuring and enhancing the quality of products or services has recently been examined in the context of small hospitality firms by Church and Lincoln (1998). They begin by arguing that if small firms addressed the issue of quality management, they might expect to gain advantages over their competitors that should result in a more secure financial future.

A central tenet of Church and Lincoln's work is the rejection of retrospective methods of quality control. They argue that such approaches, with their emphasis on comparing outputs with a given standard, are both expensive and highly intrusive in the context of services. As a result, they promote preventative systems of quality control. Their proposition is that if the various stages of the process of production and/or service delivery are controlled, little, if any, testing of the final product or service is required. Against this background, they examine the potential of two methods: Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points (HACCP) and Failure Modes and Effects Analysis (FMEA). Both are seen as potentially valuable, but two limitations are recognised by the authors. First, there has so far been little systematic evaluation of these systems in small hospitality firms. Consequently, their strengths and weaknesses in such environments remain to be tested. The second is that the approaches are partial; they do not necessarily produce the holistic approach to quality management that many commentators now advocate.

In order to overcome the second of these limitations, Church and Lincoln (1998) review a range of alternatives: Investors in People (IiP), benchmarking, BS EN ISO 9000, total quality management (TQM) and quality costing. They see potential merit in both IiP and quality costing. Notwithstanding possible marketing advantages, they display more ambivalence towards the remainder; unless small firms have already established preventative quality control mechanisms, benchmarking, BS EN ISO 9000 and TQM, they argue, are not likely to be as effective as their proponents would claim.

Information technology

Mutch (1998) has examined the potential value of information technology (IT) for small hospitality firms. He argues that smaller enterprises can gain significant benefits from IT. However, there needs to be a clear distinction between the information requirements of organisations and their technology needs. In too many cases, the technology used

is inappropriate and reorganisation of manual systems in the light of an enhanced awareness of information needs may well prove to be more productive.

Nevertheless, in some cases, IT may play a significant role in supporting business development. In addition to a review of the relevant literature, Mutch (1998) uses the findings of his own research in the tourism industry to illustrate his case. It is clear from his analysis that the growth of one case study company examined – Country Holidays – can be partially attributed to its careful management of information needs and the appropriate use of technology. However, while the case study may illustrate potential benefits, such effective use of IT currently remains relatively isolated among small tourism and hospitality firms.

Business planning

As Margerison (1998) points out, business planning is one of the most widely advocated aspects of small firm management. In providing an outline of the planning process, he emphasises both financial considerations – such as cash flow and profit forecasting – and the non-financial, such as matters relating to employment, product or service development and marketing. In order to illustrate the principles of this process, he provides an example of how it has been operationalised by a small restaurant firm. The descriptive case study is useful as it draws attention to the informal as well as the formal process of planning that is sometimes neglected.

Arguably, the key element of Margerison's contribution, however, is its critical evaluation of any connections between business planning and small firm success. The potentially ambiguous notion of "success" is used merely to enable the author to be inclusive in his review of available research. In practice, most of the studies referred to relate to the search for an articulation between business planning and small firm growth. Perhaps the two most important aspects of the review are its demonstration of the complexity of establishing causality between business planning and growth and its revelation that relatively little robust research has been undertaken in this area. The latter is disappointing, given the importance currently attached to the topic by banks and a wide range of private and public sector advisory agencies. The somewhat inevitable conclusion of his work is that although business planning appears to play a role in the "success" of small businesses, it is not possible at this stage to be

confident of its importance *vis-à-vis* other variables.

Strategic planning and growth

Such a perspective is supported by Webster (1998) when she considers the role that strategic management plays in the growth of small tourism and hospitality firms. Her focus of attention is, therefore, on the minority of businesses that have aspirations to grow and those which have actually grown since their inception.

Webster takes Storey's (1994) position as her starting point. Thus, she argues that small firms appear to grow when three influences on growth overlap: a particular blend of ownership characteristics discussed in more detail below, the features of the firm itself, e.g. age, size, location, and the strategic decisions taken by the firm. To that extent, she argues that although strategic decisions are important for growth, they are unlikely to be effective if they are taken in a context where other factors that are necessary for growth are absent.

In summary, it has been argued that:

- small firm marketing is distinctive and often more dynamic than many commentators acknowledge;
- the incorporation of quality management, which is sensitive to the operational and financial characteristics of small firms, may be a means of achieving competitive advantage and a more secure financial future;
- astute information technology application can enhance small business performance provided operators accurately identify organisational requirements;
- there is an inconclusive link between business planning and growth; and
- business growth occurs when there is an appropriate blend of ownership and firm characteristics, and strategic decisions made.

Entrepreneurship and small firms

From the foregoing, it is clear that if the small hospitality firm sector in general is to retain an element of stability and flourish into the next century, a wide range of management challenges require to be addressed. For some, the application of entrepreneurial principles may represent one way forward. This section considers the role and impact of "entrepreneurship" which has its origins in small firm creation within the context of the hospitality industry. For a

more extensive treatise of this subject area refer to Morrison *et al.* (1998).

Timmons (1994) defines entrepreneurship as creating and building something of value from practically nothing. It is the process of creating or seizing an opportunity, and pursuing it regardless of the resources currently personally controlled. Traditionally, entrepreneurship has been associated with the solo entrepreneur, but more recently the value of entrepreneurial teams has been recognised. These persons are intensely, directly, creatively and actively involved in the entrepreneurial process creating firms that McCrimmon (1995) describes as glorified by independence, creativity, improvisation and rebellious opportunism. These entrepreneurs face challenges of uncertainty, calculated risk-taking, and risk minimisation. Typically they retain almost total control and remain at the centre of the decision-making web (Goffee and Scase, 1995). The following section summarises and illustrates within the context of the hospitality industry the key elements that are generally associated with entrepreneurship (Kirzner, 1980; Timmons, 1994; Carson *et al.*, 1995; Goffee and Scase, 1995; Deakins, 1996).

Key elements of entrepreneurship

- *Change initiation*: capability of identifying an opportunity for creation or innovation, and ability to turn it into a reality.

Illustration: Holiday Inn

Kemmons Wilson founded what is now called Holiday Inn Worldwide in 1952. In 1951 he and his family of five children decided to visit Washington on holiday. Everywhere they went they found that while a room cost \$6 to \$8 each child was to be charged \$2 extra. This annoyed Wilson and he vowed to develop a chain of hotels where children could stay free as long as they slept in the same room as their parents. Wilson's hotels would also feature free parking, air-conditioning, free in-room TV and swimming pool. By the late 1970s Wilson and his associates ran a hotel chain of more than 400,000 rooms. Wilson changed the rules of the "hotel game", innovating in the development of a radically new concept.

- *Commitment to employees*: application of appropriate management practices and reward systems designed to exact employee loyalty, retention and efficiency.

Illustration: Browns Restaurants

Over a period of 24 years, Jeremy Mogford created Browns Restaurants, a chain of seven. In 1998 he sold it to Bass for £35

million. As an employer, Mogford was widely regarded as being one of the industry's best and most enlightened. This is particularly well reflected in an exceptionally low turnover of staff, and the 15 or more years with the company that many of them had served. Mogford attributed this remarkable stability to his policy of promoting from within, and to his management practices and conditions of service. The company trains staff and encourages them to be involved with the business through monthly meetings, where policy and performance figures are discussed and ideas welcomed. As an incentive, staff receive bonuses based on turnover and monthly results. After a year's service, they are eligible for accident insurance and after two years' employment they also get private health-care cover, plus a private pension plan to which both parties contribute. Senior managers are also given permanent health insurance. "It is incredible just how many of the people who leave return to us within just two or three years. It's simply because they've compared us with other employers and realise how much we have to offer", said Mogford. Mogford provides an illustration of industry good practices that benefit employees and employer alike.

- *Creative resourcing*: ingeniously marshalling resources, of both a financial and managerial nature, from a complex set of sources in order to mobilise and realise the opportunity.

Illustration: Highland Mysteryworld

Laurence Young is the entrepreneur behind the development of the Highland Mysteryworld visitor centre on the banks of Loch Leven in Scotland, which first opened in 1996. The Young family, under the company name of Glencoe Adventure, owns it. The investment of £1.2 million in the project came from the Young family's personal resources of £100,000, a bank loan of £600,000, and £180,000 from a local development company, Lochaber. A further £350,000 was secured because of delays in planning permission. While the permission was being processed the European Union designated the Highlands and Islands as being worthy of receiving Objective One funding, some of which Young managed to secure for Highland Mysteryworld. Young ingeniously marshalled the resources necessary for him to realise his dream, using but a fraction of the family's money.

- *Entrepreneurial learning*: motivation to acquire the necessary knowledge and expertise through relevant exploration and reflection, in order to excel.

Illustration: Pied à Terre

Pied à Terre is the 35-seat London restaurant of Richard Neat. It opened in 1991 and achieved two stars in the 1996 Michelin Guide. When Neat describes his background in catering his accomplishments seem incredible. He started out as a washer-up at a nearby Little Chef “because it paid more money than a paper round”. But, at 15 he decided he was seriously interested in the industry and gained experience in the kitchens of Pennyhill Park, Bagshot. In 1984 Neat joined London’s Savoy Hotel, moving to the South Lodge country house hotel in West Sussex in 1985. While there, he set his sights even higher. He sent seven letters to various gastronomic havens in France and one letter to Raymond Blanc, who was the only chef to respond. He spent two years at Le Manoir, leaving in 1989 to work with Robuchon at Jamin for a couple of years. He then returned to England and worked under Marco Pierre White at Harvey’s Wandsworth for 12 months before opening Pied à Terre. Neat’s knowledge and expertise was not gained through any formal education system. The acquisition illustrates a dedication and tenacity of a person determined to achieve his entrepreneurial goals.

- *Innovation and creativity*: renewal of products or services by adding value through application of expertise and imagination.

Illustration: Planet Hollywood

Planet Hollywood is a themed restaurant concept that was the brainchild of entrepreneur Robert Earl and movie producer Keith Barish in 1991. They own the majority of the company, but investors include movie stars Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, Bruce Willis, Demi Moore, All Stars and Pelican chains. The outlets sell burgers against a backdrop of movie clips, loud theme tunes, and other memorabilia. In 1996, according to *The Sunday Times*’ eighth annual survey of Britain’s 500 wealthiest people, Earl was the richest man in leisure. The survey valued him at £350 million compared to £80 million in 1995. The increase is due to the success of the Planet Hollywood chain. Earl took a basic core food and beverage product and creatively added value providing the industry sector with an innovative, value-added concept.

- *Knowledge leadership*: development of sources of management information to enable first mover capability, and effective strategy formulation and implementation.

Illustration: Massarella Catering

In 1860, when the Italian Massarella family settled in South Yorkshire it set up what was

to become one of the largest ice-cream manufacturers in Europe. This was based on knowledge leadership in that few people in Europe then knew how to produce and hold the ice-cream product. In the 1950s the business was sold to J. Lyons for a handsome sum of money which was re-invested in the creation of a new company Massarella Catering Group. Today, knowledge leadership for this firm is facilitated by computer packages, which Jeremy Massarella believes is the key to the expansion plans of his family’s catering business. He is hoping to expand the company beyond its current management of about 116 restaurants and café units, located in department stores, at factory shop sites and in shopping centres. This illustration presents two businesses that started small, divided by a generation, and both using knowledge leadership as an entrepreneurial strategy.

- *Opportunity alertness*: continuous focus on emerging trends and opportunities to be captured and realised.

Illustration: Prêt à Manger

Prêt à Manger was started by two former property men, Julian Metcalfe and Sinclair Beecham. As office workers in the West End of London they had been dissatisfied when they could not find a quick tasty take-away lunch. Although not experienced in catering, they decided to remedy this. Prêt à Manger was the result. Its uncompromising commitment to high standards in respect of its freshly prepared food, service and surroundings has brought tremendous success. Since its opening as a single unit in 1986, the company has now expanded to around 40 outlets and a turnover of around £30 million. By any yardstick Prêt à Manger has been a tremendous success story. Metcalfe and Beecham are archetypal successful entrepreneurs who have built a multi-million pound business from their alertness to, and realisation of, an opportunity.

- *Relationship management*: maintenance of effective teams, networks, and flexible management structures.

Illustration: Life Restaurants

David Hinds, Tim Bacon and Jeremy Roberts turned a sketchy idea for a restaurant into a chain of four Mediterranean style café-bars within a year. Thus Via Vita was born. Although they knew that the idea had potential, they needed the financial backing of a large company to roll out Via Vita quickly. The trio formed Life Restaurants and approached Marston’s, the brewer and pub operator, with a deal. The deal they struck with Marston’s was to open 50 restaurants in five years and required each

party to invest £100,000 start-up capital. On the strength of this, Life Restaurants raised £2.5 million to do four restaurants by April 1998. The Marston's clout proved useful in obtaining prime city-centre sites. Through relationship management in teams, networks and marketplace, in addition to dynamic management structures, Life Restaurants is achieving its entrepreneurial goals.

- *Timing of action:* acting within a limited window in which an opportunity can be optimised.

Illustration: Macdonald Hotels

Donald Macdonald formed Macdonald Hotels in 1990, taking advantage of a downturn in many businesses during the economic recession. The company began by purchasing two hotels in Scotland and then made further acquisitions, including a number from The Rank Organisation and De Vere Hotels. It also manages timeshare resorts in Spain, under contract for Barratt Developments, and UK hotels put into receivership by the Royal Bank of Scotland. In 1996 it owned 16 hotels and operated a further 53 under contract. Macdonald Hotels had a successful stock market flotation in 1996 that netted the three founder directors a paper profit of approximately £40 million, from an initial investment of £500,000. Acting within the limited window of opportunity of the recession, the company took advantages of a seemingly adverse business environment to establish and expand.

- *Vision and strategic orientation:* Formulation of ambitions, and strategies to realise them.

Illustration: Orange Balloon

Jerry Brand is sympathetic to the small businesspersons that, like him, sit in a carpeted sitting room and start their business from scratch. Brand has already opened two Orange Balloon restaurants but intends to have around 50 by the year 2000. He aims to take it nation-wide and eventually to the stockmarket, so who knows just how big the chain may become? Brand is into brands. The basis of the Orange Balloon concept's claim to success is that along with its modern design it will be offering quality food at decent prices and high-profile chef Brian Turner has been hired to make that happen. Turner has been given the option to buy a substantial stake in the business at the end of 1998. Brand's personal vision and ambitions are fuelling the development of Orange Balloon, accompanied by the embedding of strategies designed to ensure that they will be achieved.

Clearly, each of the above illustrations have been selected on the basis that they

represent "best practice entrepreneurship", the typology of which has its origins in small firm creation. It is admitted that, to a certain degree, they present isolated incidents of a certain approach to business development and management. However, they do provide an indication of the ways in which such entrepreneurs, collectively, have the potential to add vitality to the hospitality industry through the introduction and application of innovative approaches to traditional activities.

Conclusions

This paper has reviewed what is currently understood about the effective management of small hospitality firms. From an analysis of industry-specific illustrations, it has emphasised that it is possible to identify positive outcomes of the process of entrepreneurship, which commences with the creation of a small firm. Specifically, it can be seen that new concepts and practices emerge which have the potential to revolutionise the hospitality industry sector and stimulate the competitive environment. Furthermore, many of the management challenges confronting small hospitality firms have the potential to be addressed through entrepreneurial practices.

Although more research is required, on the basis of available evidence, it seems that small firms will continue to play an important role in the development of the hospitality industry well into the next century.

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