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## A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE MARKETING OF AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS. EXPERIENCES FROM THE NKOMAZI REGION OF MPUMALANGA, SOUTH AFRICA

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Marketing of small farmer produce has been fraught with many difficulties and disappointments despite concerted efforts of government, non-government and private sector organisations and development corporations. There are many and varied reasons for this, one of which is the lack of appreciation of the culture, customs and traditions of the small farmer. This paper draws on experiences from a rural area in Mpumalanga Province to describe the influence of tradition on the production and marketing of small farmer produce, problem areas, and possible solutions by evaluating critical criteria in the light of traditional values. These criteria include training, information systems, market structures and product research and development. The need for a closer relationship between small farmer and advisor is identified as a key to the sustainable use of resources for the long-term human and economic stability of rural communities and the country.

### **'N KULTURELE PERSPEKTIEF OP DIE BEMARKING VAN LANDBOUPRODUKTE : ONDERVINDINGE IN DIE NKOMAZISTREEK VAN MPUMALANGA, SUID-AFRIKA**

Die bemarking van kleinboere se produkte het baie probleme en teleurstellings opgelewer ten spyte van doelgerigte pogings van regerings-, nie-regerings- en privaatsktororganisasies en ontwikkelingskorporasies. Daar is baie en uiteenlopende redes hiervoor, een hiervan is 'n gebrek van waardering vir die kultuur, gewoontes en tradisies van die kleinboer. Hierdie artikel gebruik as uitgangspunt ondervindinge in 'n landelike gebied in Mpumalanga Provinsie om die invloed van tradisie op die produksie en bemarking van kleinboere se produkte, probleemgebiede, en moontlike oplossings deur kritieke maatstawwe te beoordeel in die lig van tradisionele waardes. Hierdie maatstawwe sluit opleiding, markstrukture en produknavorsing en -ontwikkeling in. Die nodigheid vir 'n nouer verwantskap tussen kleinboer en adviseur word geïdentifiseer as 'n sleutel tot die volhoubare gebruik van bronne vir die langtermyn menslike en ekonomiese stabiliteit van landelike gemeenskappe en die land.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Marketing can be defined as a combination of dynamic management tasks and decisions directed at determining and satisfying the needs of markets offering products and services to consumers in such a manner that the objectives of the enterprise, consumer and society are realised (Marx & Van der Walt, 1989; Beckman & Davidson, 1962). Emphasis is placed on what the consumer wants, i.e. "the consumer is king". However, it is doubtful that the small farmer<sup>1</sup> sees marketing in this perspective and although emphasis on consumer needs is recognised, the small farmer also wants to have a voice in the process.

The influence that the small farmer brings to the marketing process is often linked to customary lifestyle. Unfortunately, although attempts have been initiated to develop traditional crops (Navorsingsinstituut vir Groente en Sierplante (1995)), there remains little information on customary lifestyles and, more importantly, the impact custom of small farmers has on the marketing process. Furthermore, recognition of the advantages of cultivating traditional crops (Alleman, 1995) currently excludes the interests of small farmers in a developmental context.

The paucity of this information, coupled with the fact that the majority of academic programs related to marketing are geared to "western" marketing *per se*, causes those in authority, viz. government, development corporations, non-government development organisations and community based organisations, to be either ignorant about, or unwilling to appreciate, the impact black culture has on small farmers. Consequently

certain difficulties in the marketing of small farmers' produce remain problematic.

This article is aimed at highlighting a neglected market niche and the influence and impact black culture has on the marketing of agricultural products. It should be noted that information contained in this paper has not yet been tested empirically. This paper, however, forwards hypotheses and arguments that are based on practical encounters and experiences with small farmers in the marketing of agricultural produce, primarily in the Nkomazi Region of Mpumalanga, South Africa. It is hoped that this will contribute to a better comprehension of the actions and reactions of small farmers in marketing. This may aid in stimulating a co-ordinated and joint approach towards the marketing of produce.

Most of the problems encountered revolve around local consumers. This suggests that should these problems be addressed, local consumption will be stimulated. Increased local consumption will act as a multiplier to increase opportunities to expand production, thereby benefitting the small farmer. An additional benefit to the small farmer will be lower transport costs since the market will be closer. Assuming similar patterns in most rural areas of South Africa, a stimulation of the local, provincial and national economy can be expected.

### 2. BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE NKOMAZI REGION AND MARKETING OPPORTUNITIES

The Nkomazi Region is located in the extreme south-east of Mpumalanga, north of Swaziland, south of the Kruger National Park, east of the Great Escarpment and

west of Mozambique. It is a rural region that supports a large number of small farmers producing a wide range of agricultural products. Problems in the region are not necessarily a lack of markets and/or transport to take the produce to the market. The predominant problem is the attitude of small farmers towards the marketing options available to them.

The following options are available to the farmers within a 130 km radius:

- (i) Fresh produce markets  
Nelspruit Fresh Produce Market  
City Council - Nelspruit
- (ii) Fresh produce pre-packers  
Lowveld Sugar  
Neofresh  
Prodcure
- (iii) Fresh produce processors  
Barvale Dehydration Plant  
Patoma  
Schoolboy - Kabokweni  
Lomati Foods, Buffelspruit
- (iv) One day fresh produce markets  
eMangweni, Matsulu,  
Kanyamazane, Mgobodi, Naas Kabokweni and  
Schoemansdal
- (v) Export market  
Swaziland
- (vi) Hawker trade  
Countrywide

The following forms of transport are available:

- (i) A number of trucks belonging to the regional development corporation which, at a fee, could be made available to small farmers.
- (ii) Some of the processors are willing to collect produce from the small farmers' fields.
- (iii) Pre-packers assist the small farmers in transport as they take responsibility for transport from the point of receipt of goods to the final consumer.
- (iv) Local contractors.
- (v) Hawkers who travel with their trucks between the Nkomazi Region and the National Fresh Produce markets.

### 3. BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

Circumstances governing the behaviour of small farmers and local consumers need to be described before the assessment of marketing problems. These can be regarded as basic assumptions upon which this paper is based.

- (i) Most often families of small farmers live under conditions of survival (Deiniger & Binswanger, 1992; Low, 1984), particularly because the majority of breadwinners are women. Furthermore, even when the breadwinner is a male, his income is often marginal and insufficient to provide for all the needs of the family. As a result, credit granted to them or by themselves to others, is generally seen as a threat.
- (ii) Where a scientific approach contradicts custom, as a form of risk aversion, the customary approach is normally given preference by the small farmer.
- (iii) Information conveyed by word of mouth spreads more quickly and easily than other forms of communication and occurs at no cost.
- (iv) It is common practice for people, particularly women, to move in groups rather than as single individuals, for example, women gathering fuel wood from the veld or harvesting traditional vegetables from fallow agricultural fields. The group is viewed as a form of protection and a forum to discuss womanhood without interruptions from men or children.
- (v) Companionship is more acceptable than competition. Emphasis is placed on doing things in a similar manner rather than to outshine others. The extreme of this is the fear of being be-witched if one is seen by others to be doing things differently. The latter point is gradually diminishing but it remains instinct to be comparable to others.
- (vi) While traditional nutrition is ignored by western civilization, it is still practised by rural subsistence communities. In addition to nutrition, natural resources have a number of uses, for example, shelter and fuel (Agricultural Research Council, 1995), medicine (Cunningham, 1988) and craft work (Heinsohn, 1991). There are an estimated 350 000 subsistence homesteads in Mpumalanga for whom traditional crops are likely to be an important source of nutrition.
- (vii) The Mpumalanga Department of Agriculture has emphasised its commitment to assist the resource poor (Nel, 1995). This is the group addressed in this paper.
- (viii) South Africa is a multicultural and multilingual society which needs to be made aware of cultural differences and associated impacts on daily life. The acceptance of cultural differences creates a favourable environment for a multitude of activities (Launer, 1995). This is the core of the subject matter in this paper.

### 4. MARKETING PROBLEMS

For the sake of logic, problems are discussed hereunder according to the well known principles of marketing

mix, viz. product, price, promotion and physical distribution (Marx & Van der Walt, 1989).

#### 4.1 Product

The quality requirements of the market are not normally well understood by the Nkomazi small farmers. Survival generally forces people to seek products of quality. This is more evident in the retail market. One often wonders why people prefer expensive clothing, furniture or motor cars. The point is not that they have plenty of money at their disposal, but that they want to buy something that will last.

In contrast, agricultural fresh produce is not generally seen in the same manner. Quality is not the first priority. This position is held by affordability. The product has to be bought regularly and high quality coupled with a higher price will drain the financial resources of the less well-off consumer. However, this must not be viewed as a dumping market. For example, a consumer may not seek out prime grade meat but equally will not purchase obviously inferior quality cuts.

The small farmers' way of crop quality enhancement is different to that of larger commercial farmers. Firstly, the small farmer does not have the same access to cool storage and transport as the commercial farmer.

Therefore, the small farmer resents efforts to persuade him to harvest the crop at one specific time. Rather, the small farmer prefers to let the crop remain on the land as this prolongs the lifespan of the produce. The land therefore acts to achieve results which are, in some ways, similar to those of cool storage.

Secondly, while the product is on the land, the small farmer has better control over the transaction between him and the buyer. The risk of perishability is lower and, this places the small farmer in a much better bargaining situation. The opposite is true on the market. The produce will spoil if it is not sold quickly and this results in buyers having more control over the terms of the transaction. Also, when selling from the field, goods are sold for cash. This avoids the "debt trap" and enables the small farmer to meet survival needs more quickly.

Small farmers argue that it is better for them to sell their crops in the land than selling it through national markets. National markets have fluctuating prices and high grading requirements. The background of the small farmer leads to less knowledge concerning grading which, therefore, will sometimes not be of the required standard. As a result, crops often fetch poor prices and, in certain cases, the final amount payable to the small farmer is lower than direct costs, viz. packaging, transport, storage and commission. Therefore, the small farmer believes that selling from the land is better because whatever remains can be used as compost. This avoids the frustration of negative accounts.

The timing of seasons for certain products is not well known or recognised by small farmers. There is sometimes a difference in the time certain products are to be successfully planted for better yields and the time custom determines these products should be planted. For example, jugo beans normally have the highest yields if planted before the end of December. However, in terms of custom, this crop cannot be planted before

after the last rains in January. There is a belief that the remaining rains will be hampered after planting the crop. Therefore, small farmers simply are not keen to plant earlier. Those who do plant early, take a risk of traditional law suites and the destruction of their crop by angry neighbours.

Crop combinations recommended to small farmers do not necessarily fit in properly with their expectations. Generally, emphasis is placed on western crops, for example, cabbages and tomatoes, with little or even no attention to traditional crops. As a result, small farmers tend to split their production, firstly, to cover what development staff recommend and, secondly, to cater for traditional needs. This presents problems in that either crops are mixed in the same fields, or that planting of western crops is delayed by the harvesting of traditional crops. Examples include mixed cropping of maize with groundnuts or jugo beans occupying land which should be prepared for tomatoes.

It must be emphasised that regardless of whether it is dry land or under irrigation, traditional crops tend to occupy more land than western crops. At the end of the season, harvest statistics are calculated only for western crops. The comparatively small area planted to western crops causes serious underestimation of small farmers' productivity and creates the impression that the small farmers have been wasting land and water. If traditional crops also are taken into account the reverse could possibly be proven to be true.

Little research, if any, is specifically focused on products processed in the traditional manner. This can be illustrated by an example. Maize millers specialise in sifted maize meal. However, the black consumer has a preference for whole maize meal. Although the black consumer will continue to buy sifted maize meal, he/she also shall continue to prepare or purchase stone-ground whole maize meal. Whether this market opportunity is addressed or not remains an open question.

Moreover, little attention is given to the determination of the market potential of traditional crops, for example, processed groundnut products such as "timbavi/xigugu" (traditional chocolate made from maize and groundnuts) or "sitoja/xirhidza (traditional groundnut soup).

This apparent myopic attachment to western culture restricts the size of the market. Black consumers are in the majority in South Africa. Therefore, successful efforts to promote traditional products certainly will improve and benefit the agricultural sector.

#### 4.2 Price

Generally price is understood in two ways. Firstly, it is accepted as a measure to determine the value to which an exchange is made, and secondly, it is regarded as an important indicator of quality.

Price variations are perplexing both to the small farmer and the local consumer and may lead to confusion or be perceived as price manipulation. The same applies to discounts. Discounts are not viewed as an opportunity for the consumer to acquire goods which would under normal circumstances be out of financial reach. On the contrary, discounts are sometimes seen as an attempt to dump useless goods on to the consumer.

Unfortunately, some traders manipulate prices for a different reason, for example, a high price to create the impression of high quality in order to attract consumers.

Also, little regard is given to price structures in the informal market. Whether this market, by virtue of its size and structure, can still be referred to as "informal" is debatable. However, this is not the issue. Some small farmers, particularly commercial farmers, have over the years established a fixed price structure which ties in with the needs of hawkers. In general, therefore, hawkers find themselves selling the same things at the same place at the same time. One would expect a competitive spirit to develop between hawkers. Instead, however, they tend to agree to sell the same things for the same price. Again, companionship appears to be more important than competition.

The producer is normally not readily adapted in this kind of trade. Should a producer, regardless of whether small or commercial, wish to trade, he/she will have to sell produce within the agreed price or face eviction. Failing this leads to violence. This is one of the major reasons why small farmers find it difficult to compete with hawkers, even in situations where hawkers are not their clients.

#### 4.3 Promotion

Promotion should always emphasize quality. Although not universally true, the best method of promotion in the Nkomazi and similar regions is by word of mouth.

For this reason, therefore, due to the low literacy level of communities in South Africa, exposed products normally sell better than concealed ones. For example, a less literate person finds it easier to speculate on the quality of potatoes in a transparent plastic bag than in a brown paper bag.

As discussed previously, the spirit of companionship also influences promotion. Sellers do not like to be seen promoting goods to the disadvantage of others. This may sound ridiculous, but can be confirmed by hawkers. An example is a dispute at a one-day market in the Nkomazi Region. A splinter group of hawkers selling groundnuts brought a different container for measurement. Other hawkers became agitated as it was viewed as a tactic to out-sell them. Eventually, the splinter group had to revert back to the original measure.

#### 4.4 Physical distribution

It can be argued that hawkers are not fully utilized. Since local communities tend to be poor, most families do not have fridges. This presents a problem to the consumer in that perishable goods cannot be stock piled. Small producers may not be able to solve this problem on their own. The problem at this stage is that small hawkers, especially those who move from door-to-door selling fresh produce, are less in contact with the small farmer, as compared to the kind of relationship existing between these same hawkers and commercial farmers. Therefore, small farmers lose market share to commercial farmers.

It is difficult to co-ordinate transport to market small farmers' produce; small farmers do not necessarily have

similar crops and collection points tend to be far away even if small farmers are from the same irrigation scheme. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that each small farmer has small quantities to market. This increases the cost of transport, often putting it beyond the reach of the small farmer.

Small farmers have a greater psychological identity with the land than with the market. Informal talks with small farmers often reveal that these people typically believe they are supposed to spend most of their time in their fields. They do not see themselves as being part of the market. Consequently, they feel that the market should come to them. In this scenario, the small farmer and not the consumer is perceived to be "king".

The myth of a guaranteed market also needs to be understood. Small farmers always talk about a guaranteed market as the best marketing option. They would like to find themselves in a position where they can deliver produce to a specific place, be paid in cash immediately, and have no responsibility thereafter. The implication of this thinking promotes lethargy on the part of the small farmer, often resulting in him/her making no effort to penetrate and compete in an open market place.

### 5. POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEMS

Suggested solutions to the problems can be grouped in six categories.

- (i) Training
- (ii) Improved information systems
- (iii) Improved co-operation between producer and advisor
- (iv) Recognition of market price structures
- (v) A mind shift towards recognising hawkers as an important distribution channel and not merely an informal market
- (vi) Research and product development

#### 5.1 Training

Three important aspects are evident in training, viz. literacy training, needs driven training for small farmers, and training to keep the small farmer relevant in the market place.

Literacy training is important to improve the readership level and understanding of small farmers. Pure literacy training is currently conducted by a number of organisations. Although these programmes are useful, literacy training with an agricultural focus for the small farmer is probably the best solution.

Needs driven training for the small farmer as is done at present, requires some form of review in the light of the cultural mind shift this document tries to identify and promote. Training concentrates on western crops because of the emphasis placed by development corporations, departments of agriculture, universities and technikons on the production of these crops. If production of traditional crops would receive similar attention in research and training, small farmers would be more eager to produce and would reap better benefits. This would require an adjustment in emphasis on subjects and subject matter.

Allied to needs driven training for the small farmer is needs driven extension. In the Eastern Cape it was found that extension services are effective for only 10% of small farmers, less effective for 50% and totally ineffective for 40% (Bembridge, 1984). This emphasises the need to change training and extension methods, subjects and content as a matter of priority.

Much has been done in terms of training to keep the small farmer relevant in the market place. Present problems, such as grading which results in small farmers fetching lower prices for their crops, need to be taken seriously. The choice of markets to which to market and the best option in terms of transport need to be considered. This point links closely to information systems. However, from the training perspective, small farmers need to be trained on how to evaluate markets and market information which may be at their disposal as a result of information systems.

## 5.2 Information

A proper information system is one that is bidirectional, ie. it gives and receives information. While there is a system in place to give information to the small farmer by development advisors, the same system needs to be developed and matured to receive feedback. More specifically, development advisors need to pay attention to the concerns of small farmers.

## 5.3 Improved co-operation between producer and advisor

Improved joint planning and co-operation between small farmers and development advisors can be achieved by closer contact between the two groups. This should contribute to effective use of natural resources, for example, soil and water. It is envisaged that small farmers will no longer be two-pronged in their cropping strategies because their advisors' views will blend in well with their own needs. Should a small farmer decide to concentrate all resources on a traditional crop, support should be available, both in terms of experience and, where necessary, finance.

## 5.4 Recognition of market price structures

With regard to market price structures, the two price structures currently operating in the market place need to be recognised and used advantageously. In addition, small farmers need to be made aware of the benefits they can derive from using the hawker market which deals with fixed prices. Commercial farmers support it because it provides a buffer against price fluctuations on national markets. If it is a benefit to the commercial sector, why should it not be a benefit to small farmers?

## 5.5 Recognition of hawkers

In terms of broadening the distribution base, there needs to be a mind shift away from viewing hawkers as informal and insignificant as this sector is amongst the largest in the country, comprising both wholesalers and retailers. Presently hawkers can be found in almost every street in every town. They also move from door-to-door in all settlements, whether urban or rural.

The small farmer should take cognisance of the benefits that may accrue to them from this sector. Hawkers operate the whole year round and, hence, also when

some established markets, for example, canners, are closed off-season. Hawkers, therefore, are of immense benefit to small farmers who do not necessarily produce for specific markets at specific times of the year.

## 5.6 Research and product development

Research and development need to concentrate on four primary aspects, viz. promotional efforts, improved production of traditional crops, the broadening of the base of processed traditional products, and the adoption of appropriate crop production models.

Packaging, for product promotion, should be able to attract the type of market the producer is targeting. Packaging for the western consumer is well catered for, colourful and descriptive. However, the extent to which colourful packaging attracts the illiterate consumer is open to question. Therefore, instead of making packaging colourful, an attempt should be made to make the product more visible in the package, for example, by transparent packaging from which the consumer should be able to obtain all necessary information. However, there should be a trade off between consumer needs and technology, for example, potatoes will not last as long in plastic bags as in paper bags, even though the former are preferred by consumers. Research needs to be done to accommodate both consumer convenience and technological constraints.

Improved production methods need to be devised for traditional crops. While traditional crop production is not encouraged by development corporations, it makes a large contribution to rural livelihood that cannot be ignored. For example, about R 1.5 million per annum is generated at the one-day markets in Nkomazi Region from groundnuts (Agriwane, 1994). This figure excludes domestic consumption and sales through channels other than the one-day markets.

The value of traditional crops produced and traded provides impetus to the argument of a need to research improved methods in producing these crops.

Given the need to produce traditional crops, there is an equal need to broaden the processing base of traditional products. More studies need to be conducted to determine broad uses of traditional crops. For example, while groundnuts are used more as a luxury item in western cultures, for example, sweets and snacks, they are commonly used as a staple food by black consumers. More importantly, they can be prepared in a number of ways, mostly unknown to the western culture. Processing factories turning to these by-products could broaden their market share and profitability by accommodating one or more of these traditional processes.

The development of appropriate crop models is an intricate problem. The challenge is to determine the possibility of creating varieties of favoured traditional crops which will produce high yields, remain acceptable to consumers and tie in with traditional seasons. For example, rather of insisting that jugo beans be planted before the end of December, it will be preferable to develop a jugo bean variety, still acceptable to consumers, which will yield well if planted after the summer rains. Successes do exist, for example, the adaptation of maize varieties to specific locations within different provinces in South Africa

(Somergraansentrum, 1995). Similar efforts should be made with South African traditional crops.

A second phase would be to try to adapt these crops to fit in with western crop models. For example, the timing of the new jugo bean variety after the summer rains must be such that it does not delay tomato planting if jugo beans are to be planted in rotation with tomatoes.

## 6. CONCLUSION

South Africa is in a state of change and renewal. Past failures have many deep-rooted causes. This paper demonstrates that in the arena of small farmers a lack of appreciation for custom, culture and tradition probably has had a negative effect on the ability of these farmers to produce and penetrate markets. That traditional custom has specific influences on production and marketing is beyond question. An understanding of these influences and patterns, and the adaptation of development and training approaches, probably will improve the production and marketing principles of the small farmer. Further, research and product development of traditional crops will broaden the market base and the economy, not only of the Nkomazi Region but Mpumalanga and South Africa as a whole. This is a major challenge at a time when increased access to land as a result of land reform should have as a major aim the sustainable use of resources for human and economic stability via the generation of wealth.

## NOTE:

1. The phrase "small farmer" is used broadly to describe existing (and future) black small holder agricultural operations in Southern Africa. However, it should be emphasised that the impact of culture is not directly related to the size and extent of an operation but rather to the extent to which one is influenced by tradition. In this regard it can be argued that tradition is likely to have more impact on subsistence and emerging small scale commercial farmers than on established larger scale commercial farmers. Therefore, this article refers to any small farmer within a traditional sphere of influence.

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