A Qualitative Investigation into Developmental Relationships for Small Business Apparel Retailers: Networks, Mentors and Role Models

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The purpose of this investigation was to gain an understanding of the use, function, and support dimensions of developmental relationships for small business apparel retailers by applying focus group data collection techniques and interpretive analysis. Data collection took place through eight focus groups with small business owners/managers in six mid-western communities. Results indicate that, indeed, networks, role models, and mentors are viewed as necessary and important mechanisms for information, support, and guidance. However, focus group participants noted a lack of access to such developmental relationships. In terms of functions performed, having a business colleague to confide in, and relate to, was of particular importance in gaining access to knowledge and support in decision-making. Gender differences in the use and perceived value of the developmental relationship were also noted. Based on the study results, four hypotheses were inductively developed and pose areas for further research investigation.

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by
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The purpose of this investigation was to gain an understanding of the use, function, and support dimensions of developmental relationships for small business apparel retailers by applying focus group data collection techniques and interpretive analysis. Data collection took place through eight focus groups with small business owners/managers in six mid-western communities. Results indicate that, indeed, networks, role models, and mentors are viewed as necessary and important mechanisms for information, support, and guidance. However, focus group participants noted a lack of access to such developmental relationships. In terms of functions performed, having a business colleague to confide in, and relate to, was of particular importance in gaining access to knowledge and support in decision-making. Gender differences in the use and perceived value of the developmental relationship were also noted. Based on the study results, four hypotheses were inductively developed and pose areas for further research investigation.

Introduction

Economic development continues to be a dominant societal, political, and educational initiative across the nation. Stimulants to economic development and growth are many and varied but increasing attention is given to the role small business initiatives have on job creation, employment, and economic advancement.

The compilations of facts and figures assessing the small business environment suggests that, indeed, small business development is positively impacting the economic climate through new job creation and employment opportunities, gross national sales, high technology employment, and technology innovation. According to the 1999 U.S. Office of Advocacy Economic Indicators Report, "Small business contributed significantly to the economy's growth. Small business indicators were positive: the number of employer firms increased, business termination declined, employment in small business rose, and business bankruptcies fell" (p. 3).

Despite the economic benefits and opportunities provided by small business initiatives, small business continues to be inextricably linked to high failure rates and problematic challenges. Small business statistics currently suggest a 50-80% failure rate for small businesses in their first five years of operation. While the impact of small business development has recognizable, far-reaching economic benefits, realization must be given to the effect small business failure has on

the local, state, and national economy. Research efforts directed toward factors associated with the conduct and performance of small business firms have the potential to positively impact small business survival and longevity.

The Literature

In the past several decades, developmental, sociological, and psychological theorists have brought increased attention to the mentor, role model and network role although developmental research from the perspective of the small business owner has received little attention from the research community. Recognition of owner/manager limitations, coupled with simple organizational structures anchored in the behavior of the leader (Borch & Arthur, 1995) has generated recent interest in the existence and use of support and developmental relationships (i.e., mentors, networks, and role models) as a means of acquiring additional knowledge and guidance. Recognizing the supportive impact such developmental relationships can provide, individuals engaging in business ownership are being urged to develop a network of people to access for expanded knowledge, additional support, and alternative ideas (Aldrich & Zimmer, 1986; Tjosvold & Weicker, 1993). Use of, and access to, developmental relationships appears to be particularly critical for the growing population of female business owner/managers.

Government statistics confirm that women are starting businesses at unprecedented rates of speed in many areas (Olson & Currie, 1992; Putnam, 1993), but retailing is an especially relevant area of interest. The Bureau of Labor Statistics notes that small business sectors will account for approximately 60% of new job creation between the years of 1994 and 2005 and that about 88% of these jobs will be in retail trade and services.

Developmental relationships such as mentors, role models, and networks continue to be the subject of attention in many traditional fields, academic disciplines, and professional groups. Carsrud, Gaglie, and Olm (1987) identified the use of mentors and mentoring relationships as the fast tract method for orienting novices to new situations and for breaking in young professionals and new managers. Kennedy (1997) writes that there is not a way to discuss success in entrepreneurship without discussing mentoring. The author notes that "my own career has been positively influenced by mentors every step of the way. Becoming a mentor is part of entrepreneurship that goes beyond improving profits or producing the newest, fanciest gadget-it's passing on valuable information to those just getting started in business" (p. 88).

Past researchers agree that rarely does entrepreneurial activity take place in isolation, but through social interaction and the acquisition of knowledge needed. According to Carsrud et al. (1987), many entreprenuers report having benefited from the existence of a role model in their workplace, business, social context or the family. Scherer, Adams, Carley, and Wiebe (1989) write that role models are important factors in issues of career preference and career development in that "an individual is more likely to express a preference for a particular occupation or career if that individual has observed a model successfully performing activities associated with that career or occupation" (p. 55).

The last decade has also offered developmental, sociological, and psychological theorization related to the role of such relationships in business performance and success. Notable writers in

the entrepreneurial literature have included Aldrich and Zimmer (1986) and Starr and Fondas (1992). Aldrich and Zimmer offer a conceptual social network theory integrating the entrepreneurial process. The researchers theorize that the strength and endurance of relationships (strong tie versus weak tie) are characterized by the level or extent of normative (socially-expected action based on roles) and exchange behavior (mutual contributors). Through strong and weak tie relationships, individuals are provided with additional opportunities and resources (Aldrich & Zimmer, 1986; Nelson, 1989). The socialization process of entrepreneurs was further expounded in Starr and Fondas (1992) Model of Entrepreneurship Socialization. Starr and Fondas depict the socialization agent's role in the development of new entrepreneurs. Recognition is given to the development of coping strategies (e.g., building relationships, mapping key people, locating and accessing social networks, finding out how and why things are done) to gain control in a new environment in order to reduce uncertainty and improve perceptions and interpretations. Tjosvold and Weicker (1993) address the importance of relying on a network of people for support and encouragement to overcome challenges and obstacles. Tjosvold and Weicker (1993) state that entrepreneurs may operate their own independent businesses but they do so in a network of individuals which serve to offer encouragement and support and to provide assistance in overcoming obstacles and challenges.

Rosenfeld (1996) researched the impact of cooperation and competitiveness on small and medium-sized enterprises and found that the majority of the businesses he had investigated reported increase sales and employment, new products developed and greater market share through networking functions. He further concluded that many of the benefits of networking have not been identified in the literature.

Through a variety of business, personal, and social networks, entrepreneurs are able to obtain information and resources for business operations. Schor (1997) found that networking was instrumental in improving job performance, enhancing visibility and gaining access to information, enlisting support and advise, and assisting with career development and advancement.

According to Doe (1998), networks are quite effective in providing and enhancing the exchange of information that can lead to either business success or failure. Specific business areas particularly noted by Doe, which benefit through open exchanges, include business planning, marketing, product line development and merchandise presentation. In addition, such networking relationships are instrumental in forming and shaping strong social ties and trust. While Uzzi (1996) found that the binding tie in most networking situation is the degree of similarity in overall goals, Birley, Cromie, and Myers (1991) determined that most small business owners did benefit from a support network consisting of a wide variety of individuals ranging from relatives to business associates. Entrepreneurs were encouraged to develop a business network since cooperative abilities were a distinguishing characteristic of the successful entrepreneur.

Past researchers have further noted that increased attention must be given to the concept of networking to identify barriers to small and medium sized business networks (Rosenfield, 1996). Kanter and Eccles (1992) discuss the need to further knowledge pertaining to the study of developmental research and network benefits focusing on characteristics of networking along

with their use. Through this research, "academics have an opportunity to better understand the nature of networks in a way that will be of great theoretical and practical relevance (p. 527).

Study Objectives. In the past two decades, developmental, sociological, and psychological theorists have brought increased attention to the mentor, role-model and network role through developmental research. Developmental relationships in small business retailing, however, have received little attention from the research community. The purpose of this research is to gain an understanding of the use, functional, and support dimensions of developmental relationships (i.e., mentors, networks, role models) for small business apparel retailers through qualitative methods of inquiry. Qualitative methods are particularly needed in view of the lack on information and research available on the use, functional and support dimensions of developmental relationships. Due to the lack of information on the subject in the small business research literature, qualitative research methodology were applied to this investigation through focus group data collection techniques and interpretive analysis. According to Morgan (1997), focus groups form the basis of a complete study to explore new research areas through the collection of qualitative data.

Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) write that focus groups as a research methodology are particularly useful for exploratory investigations where little research has been conducted in the area under investigation so as to obtain general information about a particular subject area and in generating impressions. The researchers also state that it is common, and perfectly appropriate, for focus group interviews to result in the development of hypotheses to be tested through future research methodologies and additional investigations.

Qualitative research methods offer opportunities to contextualize phenomenon under investigation in ordinary surroundings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Krueger (1994) writes that focus groups, as a qualitative research method, provide valuable descriptive information pertaining to the phenomenon under investigation and help to ensure that subsequent quantitative investigations adequately address salient factors. Focus groups offer flexible, relatively inexpensive, data rich study methods (Frey & Fontana, in press) that provide an opportunity for the investigator to spend time with study participants (Langer, 1991) and to address face validity of responses (Javidi, Long, & Vasu, 1991). Further advantages of focus groups offered by Krueger (1994) address the increased candor of this methodology and the ability of the moderator to probe for participant responses.

The following objectives were specifically addressed in this investigation.

1. Explore the use of mentors, networks, and role models in small business apparel retailing.
2. Identify functional and support dimensions of developmental relationships in the small business apparel retail environment.
3. Offer new theoretical propositions related to developmental relationships in small business apparel retailing based on the exploratory investigation for future research studies.

Methods

Instrument Development. Consistent with the writings of Krueger ([1988](#)) and Morgan and Krueger ([1998](#)); careful thought was given to the development of the questions offered for focus group discussion. Krueger ([1994](#)) writes that questions posed to group participants need to be structured so that they are open-ended rather than dichotomous (allowing respondents to address the question from various points-of-view and dimensions); carefully prepared (so as to capture the intent and essence of the investigation); focused and sequential (presented in a format that moves from general overview questions to specific areas of critical importance).

Question format (see [Appendix A](#)) included *opening questions* which functioned as an initial icebreaker as well as to establish a common ground or similarity of experiences for the study participants. The *transition question* was used to closer link the participants to the intent of the investigation but to do so within a general context. The *key questions* served to address the core or central dimensions of the investigation and the ending or *closing question* brought the discussion to closure by allowing participants an opportunity to offer any final opinions or views on the topics addressed.

Study participants did not have access to the questions in advance of the focus group session convening. Questions were posed verbally by the moderator and offered in written format as well.

A brief background questionnaire was used to collect demographic information from the group participants. Demographic content included gender, age, marital status, household type, education, business ownership strategy, and years in business.

Sample Selection. Populations of interest in this investigation were small business apparel retail owners and managers. The state of Iowa was used as the site for the investigation due to proximity and travel time. Iowa also represented a mid-western state that offered strong small business growth potential. To allow for respondents from variously sized communities, all Iowa communities were identified using the following sampling frame: small towns were identified with populations up to 25,000; medium towns were identified as those with populations ranging from 25,000-50,000; large towns had populations greater than 50,000. Since a sample of two towns from each of the three size categories was desired, minitab was used to sort and organize communities and populations into the three size categories. Simple random sample selection from the aforementioned categories then took place.

Through contacts established with the assistance of area personnel at business support agencies, a pool of small business apparel retail owners and potential study participants from the selected communities were located. The local Chamber of Commerce Office, Small Business Development Centers, and small business groups and organizations in the selected communities was of critical importance in locating individuals (both male and female) interested in the intent of the investigation and willing to contribute their time and input to a focus group activity.

Data Collection and Analysis. Over a three month period, a total of eight focus groups took place in the six randomly selected communities. Specifically, two initial focus groups took place for the purpose of pre-testing the questions generated for the study and, subsequently, at least

one focus group interview took place in each identified community. The intent of the pre-tests was to evaluate the logical and sequential order of the questions posed in the group discussions.

Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) writes that there is no substitute for pre-testing focus group questions regardless of how experienced the research or how familiar the subject area as pre-testing gives opportunity to determine if questions are appropriate and to identify questions that are not easily understood. One procedure for pretesting is to have the first focus group function as the pre-test and, if no major changes to the focus group questions takes place, then the first focus group results are included in the subsequent analysis (Krueger, 1994). At the completion of both pre-tests, participants had an opportunity to openly discuss the structure and terminology of the questions posed, the dynamics of the group interaction, and the performance of the moderator (research investigator). Since testing did not result in substantive modifications to the questions posed during the focus group activity, all eight group results were subsequently incorporated into data analysis and study results.

Focus groups took place at conveniently located sites and in conference room settings. Groups varied in size from 4 to 15 members with time durations ranging from .5 hours to 1.5 hours. Groups were of mixed gender and represented a variety of age groups. Light refreshments were provided at each session but no incentive to participate was offered to group members.

While it was the moderators initial intent to tape record each focus group discussion, it became quite clear during the initial pilot sessions that the presence of the tape recorder disturbed the study participants and hindered their willingness to offer responses to the posed questions (although the content was not viewed as confidential or of a sensitive nature by the moderator/investigator). The decision was made, therefore, to remove the tape recorder and, in its place, the moderator rapidly recorded detailed hand written notes pertaining to each response. The process was subsequently used in all sessions for consistency of data collection techniques. Immediately after each session, while the information was still fresh and recent, the moderator relayed the complete and thorough hand written notes into a tape recorder, which was then subsequently reviewed and transcribed into a word processing program.

According to Stewart and Shamdasani (1990), it is the initial responsibility of the moderator to establish a non-threatening climate where group members feel comfortable to offer their comments and suggestions and to ensure active participation by all members. The authors also note that the presence of recording equipment may make group members uncomfortable (as was the situation experienced by the researcher). Krueger (1994) also addressed this discomfort with tape-recorded focus groups by stating groups and group behavior varies greatly and moderator flexibility is essential. Krueger writes that focus groups typically are recorded in two ways including tape recording and hand written notes. He further states that of the two, hand written notes are particularly essential. As directed by Krueger, the note taking by the moderator did not interfere with the spontaneous group responses to questions posed and responses were scribed in "such a manner that notes [were] complete and usable" (1994, p. 111).

Once the transcription of the recordings were complete, analysis of the recorded results took place using a three step system which included review and analysis of the transcripts and a bulleted summary of each focus groups results was prepared. (Krueger, 1994). Specifically,

taped content was transcribed; after review and analysis, a bulleted summary of the transcribed results followed; themes and descriptive phases were then extracted from the bulleted summary and collectively grouped for reporting purposes.

Trustworthiness. A second researcher also analyzed the transcripts for themes and descriptive phrases and established high levels of reliability in the reported results. According to Krueger (1994), the assessment of reliability may be carried out in a variety of ways including establishing that multiple coders come to general agreement (resulting in interrater reliability) in how results are coded and interpreted. Touliatos and Compton (1988) identify interrelated reliability as the degree of similarity in judgments between independent judges with a considerable agreement between judges indicating high interrater reliability. Krueger further notes that is safe to conclude that in most focus group investigations, general interrater reliability will be very "important because the emphasis is on general themes in the group discussion rather than specific units" (p. 111).

Descriptive and interpretive reporting methods (Krueger, 1988) were used to report the results of the study. In doing so, a written summary is offered based on the descriptive and collective comments and observations of the focus group participants along with interpretation on what the results mean.

Since the intent of the focus groups was to collect qualitative data on the subject, no attempt was made to approach the results from a quantitative perspective. Morgan (1997) writes that "those who can answer their research question without counting codes should feel well justified in doing so" (p. 62) and Krueger (1994), in addressing concerns in the use of number in focus group results, suggests that rather than referring to numbers and frequency of comments that "the researcher might consider the use of qualifiers such as: "the prevalent feeling was that…" or "several participants strongly felt that…" or even "most participants agreed…" (p. 155).

Results

Respondent Demographics

Each of the eight focus groups that took place averaged 6 participants. As indicated in Table 1, 56% of the respondents were female with 44% being male. Ages ranged from 20 to over 60 with the largest percentage (31%) in the age range of 50-59; over half the study participants were in the range of 40-59 years of age. The majority of the study participants (73%) were married and in two adult households (69%). Sixty percent of the participants reported living in a dual income household. Two thirds of the focus group participants reportedly had some college/university training or had completed a college/university degree. In terms of business ownership almost half the participants (48%) were sole proprietors with corporations being the second largest ownership strategy (40%). Years in operation ranged from 1-30 with the largest percentage of the respondents (27%) identifying a business that had been operating for five years or less.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

			N	%
Sex				
	Male		21	43.8
	Female		27	56.3
Age				
	20-29		6	12.5
	30-39		11	22.9
	40-49		12	25.0
	50-59		15	31.3
	Over 60		4	8.3
Marital Status				
	Single		6	12.5
	Married		35	72.9
	Divorced		5	10.4
	Widowed		2	4.2
Household Population				
	Adults			
		One	15	31.2
		Two	33	68.8
	Children			
		One	4	8.3
		Two	5	10.4
		Three	6	12.5
Household Profile				

	Single Income		19	39.6
	Dual Income		29	60.4
Education				
	Less than 12 years		0	0
	Completed high school (or GED)		6	12.5
	Some college, university training		15	31.3
	Completed college/university degree		17	35.4
	Some graduate work		6	12.5
	A graduate degree		4	8.3
Business Ownership				
	Sole Proprietorship		23	47.9
	Partnership		6	12.5
	Corporation		19	39.6
Years in Operation				
	1-5		13	27.1
	6-10		8	16.7
	16-20		7	14.6
	21-25		6	12.5
	26-30		5	10.4
	Over 30		4	8.3

Challenges to Small Business Apparel Retailers

In each focus group, participants were asked to identify past and present challenges they experienced in operating their small business retail establishment (see Table 2). Responses offered by the participants gave numerous insights into the difficulties associated with operating a retail establishment.

Table 2. Challenges to Small Business Apparel Retailers

Decline in Small Business Opportunities
Casual Friday Dressing Trends
Changing Patterns of Consumer Spending
Time Consuming Paperwork and Record Keeping
Community Solicitations for Donations and Contributions
Competition from Department Stores and Mass Merchandisers
Lack of Affordable Small Business Specific Technologies
Competition from non-store retailers and catalog companies
Rapid Fashion Change and Trends

The greatest amount of discussion from the participants addressed the decline in small business opportunities since the mid-80's resulting from the impact casual dressing has had on the small retailer around the country. Retailers spoke of the consumer's (both male and female) disinterest in appearance noting that the Casual Friday dress trends changed who could and would be successful in the apparel industry. Jeans in the work place and, in general, the more casual work environment meant that professionals were functioning with very casual wardrobes. Consumers were not spending their income on apparel; it was being channeled to other interests and needs --- namely electronics. Corporate casual trends over the years had resulted in major market changes that manifested through fewer small apparel retail stores and tighter markets for those in existence.

Challenges pertaining to general small business operations were identified including the amount to time spent on paperwork and record keeping. There was a general sense of being "buried in paperwork". Owners spoke of not being "able to do it all" but also recognized how difficult it was to give up ownership and to delegate authority to other employees. Interruptions were a daily occurrence: community members making ongoing solicitations for contributions and donations and drop-in sales people wanting to show their lines during unannounced store visits.

Day-to-day competition from big business was an ever-present concern for the study participants. Mass merchandisers and department stores in neighboring major metropolitan areas offered more choice and better price points in many apparel lines. Noted strategies for successfully competing in the existing market conditions included developing trust and loyalty with the customer's base; initiating a low-price pricing strategy; training and developing knowledgeable sales people; focused niche marketing; and offering product uniqueness. Study participants also spoke of their needs for technology designed specifically for the small business retailer; technology that is currently only available to big-business due to high prices. Not only were computers and software at affordable prices needed but the importance of upkeep and technology sustainability was noted. To a limited extent, expansion concerns were addressed as owners had experienced rapid growth and suitable space for expansion was needed but unavailable.

Focus group participants addressed the impact non-store retailing and catalog sales were having on the small business environment. Competition from these sectors was continuing to increase

and participants predicted that the internet would be the next major form of competition with the increased number of computers and public interest in non-store shopping formats due to time savings offered and shopping convenience. It was believed that today's busy life styles had left many individuals time starved so consumers were turning to alternative shopping formats. Others noted how difficult it was to pay bills with so few customers on a day-to-day basis.

Finally, the impact of rapid fashion change was identified noting that women were searching for a sense of identity through apparel. The changing fashion trends were challenging to predict and maintain for a small business retailer.

Developmental Relationships (networking, role-models and mentors)

When questioned about available support and assistance for the small business retailer, numerous responses were offered including government agencies which provided valuable assistance and support such as Small Business Development Centers around the state, the Small Business Administration, Service Core of Retired Persons, as well as Area Education Agencies (see Table 3). State universities were also mentioned as a good source of useful and up-to-date information.

Table 3. Sources of Support and Guidance for Small Business Owners/Managers

Government Agencies

Small Business Development Centers
Small Business Administration
Service Core of Retired Persons

Area Education Agencies

State Universities

Suppliers and Vendors

Trade Publications and Magazines

Private Consultants

Accountants, Lawyers, Attorneys, Bankers

Seminars and Training Sessions

Chamber of Commerces

Retail and Convention Bureaus

Networks

Role Models

Mentors

Suppliers and vendors provided useful guidance on product selection and fashion trends. They were also useful resources in making knowledgeable decisions on competitive positioning strategies related to product offerings.

Written information in trade publications and magazines proved useful as an idea generating tool. Private consultants were used but respondents tended to shy away from out of town consultants and preferred to access only local consultants who were viewed as individuals with a strong knowledge based of the local market. Other less frequently mentioned sources of support included accountants, lawyers/attorneys, and bankers.

Pertinent information available through seminars and training sessions provided for retailers at trade shows, trade associations, and conventions as well as support provided by the Chamber of Commerce, Tri-State Convention Bureau, and the local Retail Bureau was frequently identified by the respondents as a valuable source in information.

Networks. Not only were the topics offered by trade groups and retail conventions viewed to be helpful, but the opportunity to interact with similar small business owners in non-competing trade areas provided a very valuable opportunity to share ideas and learn from others who experienced similar challenges. Such functions were viewed as offering a great networking opportunity.

Informal networking with and among other business owners in the community was identified as an important form of support by the study respondents. It was viewed as valuable community involvement and an important social outlet and business development opportunity. The time and opportunity to converse with non-competitors in similar areas of business; to share and compare ideas; to learn from others was viewed as a highly valued and worthwhile activity. To a lesser extent, spouse and family members were individuals who also offered informal support to the focus group participants.

There did exist among the female participants knowledge of more structured networking groups such as a women's network and women's clubs which provided female small business owners with opportunities to discuss issues and problems related to product marketing and technology and to share knowledge of successful business strategies gleaned over the years.

Study participants also spoke of a mid-west buying organization, as well as an independent association of small business owners that existed to allow retailers in neighboring communities with like merchandise to support each other with shared/split orders and purchase decisions. Network members met on a regular basis, attended market together; and sharing contacts and product information. Such networks offered cost effective buying opportunities and financial benefits through economies of scale. There also existed knowledge of a holiday marketplace network specifically dedicated to home-based businesses that offered an open product fair for a variety of seasonal products.

Support and assistance through networking opportunities (both informal and formal) was sought to assist with advertising decisions; strategies for attracting customers and business promotion; shared knowledge pertaining to customer problems; trend analysis; business location considerations, and negotiation tactics related to lease agreements and product selection.

Most interestingly, while focus group participants did have knowledge of the existence of formal retail networks, only six participants had actually experienced and specifically been involved in

such a network. Many focus group participants recognized the benefits of such groups and believed they were highly effective. Participants commented, specifically, that they had little access or availability to formal small business networks. In comparison, other individuals took advantage of informal networking opportunities and sought out individuals to share information with pertaining to the challenges of small business retailing.

Study participants recognized the need for stronger networking relationships (both informal and formal) and more concerted unification efforts to enable business owners to support each other to a greater extent than currently existed. They believed that like businesses should be sharing customers by sending shoppers to other area businesses if products were unavailable. There was recognition that such collaborative occurrences were rare. Finally, participant comments identified interning and job shadowing as a helpful and inexpensive way to expand knowledge and gain support.

Role Models

When questioned about the existence of role models in offering support and assistance, several individuals were identified by the focus group participants including non-competitors in a neighboring community who functioned as role model. The business owners had offered sound business advice and been a steady contact and support in assisting the participant in operating her business. She had even patterned her business specifically after the business owned by her role model.

A previous business owner was also identified as a role model. The individual was recognized to be helpful in generating ideas and also served as a reliable sounding board. He offered general advice and assistance in financial decisions.

Lastly, parents who had years of small business retail experience were identified as role models for a second generation business owner. She relied heaving on advice and council from her parents as she continued to manage and oversee the family business.

Mentors. To a very limited extent, focus groups participants spoke of past mentoring relationships related to their small business operation. A respondent was personally requested to serve as a mentor for a new entrepreneur in the area and to share information pertinent to business start-up issues. Another focus group member stated that she had benefited from a mentor at the time of business start-up. The individual who mentored her was someone with past business experience that she had been acquainted with for a number of years who provided valuable information to her related to business development. The relationship was identified as being very valuable in that she learned from her mentor's experiences and mistakes.

Another respondent had initiated a formal mentoring program in his business whereby the senior level employees mentored and trained the new junior employees. The mentoring relationships lasted several months to ensure that the junior employee was informed and knowledgeable of store operations and employee expectations.

Other respondents noted that they looked forward to building mentoring relationships and felt that small business managers/owners were not active enough in mentoring relationships. They spoke of how beneficial a mentor could be for a new business owner at the time of business start-up. Based on focus group discussions, the period of business start-up appeared to be the most critical and needed time frame for the development of mentoring relationships.

Developmental Relationships and Gender Issues

When focus group participants were questioned about gender issues related to developmental relationships, there was a general belief that both male and female managers/owners could benefit from networks, role-models, and mentors recognizing that the small business owner/manager faced many challenges and any help that could be provided would be valued and useful.

However, there was also the general realization that communication patterns and attitudes toward support and assistance did differ between genders. It was stated that women were more free to share information and were more likely to open up to others on business problems they were experiencing. Another participant commented that women were more likely to understand the role of support systems and understood the value of making needed connections. A male participant stated that he had personally experienced differences in the approachability of both men and women in offering support and assistance. Overall, he had found women business owners quite free and helpful when it came to offering support and guidance, whereas, male colleagues had protected their knowledge and information and been much less willing to involve themselves with other small business owners. He identified this difference as an ego-related issue noting that men wanted to be viewed as self-reliant and self-sufficient. To accept guidance and support from others was a threatening situation for men as it would suggest that they were indeed vulnerable.

Implications

The results of this study offers numerous implications to both the small business retailer, the business support community, and the academic researcher. The importance of developmental relationships can and should not be minimized for today's entrepreneur. The many challenges of small business ownership suggest that support and guidance offered by others more experienced is both valued and needed.

Opportunities for informal networking to take place are essential in building a sense of community in the small business sector and for developing support systems for both budding as well as experienced small business retailers. Trade meetings, chamber groups, conventions, and seminars could be structured so as to allow such activity to take place.

Indeed focus group participants yearned for the opportunity to be actively involved in a formal business network. Structured networking activity needs to increase and availability and functions of such groups needs to be advertised broadly. While all small business owners can benefit from such relationships, they may be more pertinent for female business owners due to more willing attitudes to share information with colleagues as was observed by study participants.

Small business retail owners recognized the importance of relationship building through role models and mentoring but little evidence exists that these activities were permeating the small business retail sector to much extent. A greater commitment to support is needed by the small business community for developmental relationships to significantly impact the lives and business operations of these individuals. Time and effort must be committed to the guidance and development of others less experienced; this appeared to be particularly critical at the business start-up stage due to unique challenges that surface at this time in the business life-cycle.

As for the research community, this study offered support to Aldrich and Zimmer (1986) and Tjosvold and Weicker (1993) who noted that developmental relationships could be of significant importance to women business owners for support in expanded knowledge, additional support, and alternative ideas. It also offered support to Kramer (1992), Buttner and Rosen (1988) that female business owners do have a lack of business support networks. However, based on the focus group participants, male business owners also suffer from a lack of support networks.

This study offered insights into developmental relationships from a qualitative methodological perspective. It also draws attention to the need to continue this vein of research toward a better understanding of business strategies that offer the potential to lead to successful business operations. Support and development through role models, mentors, and networks may be a critical element in overcoming high business failure statistics.

The study results are also helpful in identifying select areas that need further investigation including issues pertaining to gender differences in the use of developmental relationships and gender issues associated with communication patterns of business owners/managers. In addition, questions emerge from the data as to the measurable impact functions performed via developmental relationships have on business performance in terms of profits, loss, and sustainability. Developmental relationships should also be examined in relation to needs at different small business life stages.

Recognition is given to study limitations including the generalizability of this study's findings, the limited use of quantitative data analysis, and the use of hand recorded data. Additionally, the limited number of focus groups that took place for data collection purposes may not have allowed for a large enough response to sufficiently detect all potential issues pertinent to the use, function and support dimensions of developmental relationships.

Future Research Questions and Areas of Investigation

These research questions and areas of investigation have yet to be empirically tested and reported in the small business apparel retailing literature. They offer fertile groups of analysis with the possibility of contributing to the growth and success of small business retailing. It also poses the opportunity for identifying a support structure for addressing the continued myriad of challenges that contemporary retailers confront on a day-to-day basis.

To better understand the role of developmental relationships in small business retailing, four research hypothesis developed inductively from the focus group results are offered for further investigation.

H1: Successful small business apparel retail owners/managers are more likely than unsuccessful small business retailers to make use of developmental relationships.

H2: Female small business apparel retail owners/managers will place more importance on developmental relationships than male small business apparel retail owners.

H3: Functions performed in developmental relationships will differ between male and female small business apparel retail owners.

H4: Developmental relationships are of more importance in the business start-up stage than at any other small business life-cycle stage.

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Appendix A

Focus Group Questions

Opening questions:

Let's get better acquainted. Please identify yourself to the group and tell what kind of business you own/manage and where it's located. As small business owners, what kind of challenges do you face in your business? Thinking back, how have these challenges changed over time?

Transition question

What individuals or agencies do you seek out for support and assistance in dealing with business challenges?

Key questions:

What kind of supportive relationships have you been able to form with others for assistance purposes, to gather information, and to share ideas? (Probe with friends, organizations, agencies, colleagues that might have been supportive.) What impact do you believe networks have on small business and managerial development? What impact do you believe mentors have on small business and managerial development? What functions do these developmental relationships have in helping you establish and run your business? (Probe for specific examples of functions performed). Are these relationships more important for one gender than other and if so, how? (Probe for gender related difference and similarities).

Closing question

Do you have any final comments you want to offer pertaining to the questions posed this evening?

Endnote

[1]Minitab is a statistical software package that provides numerous basic as well as advanced data analysis functions. In this situation, minitab was used for sorting so that communities and community size could be grouped which allowed for random selection to take place.

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