

# The Role of Marketing Strategies in Enhancing the Success of SMEs in the Event Management Industry in Bulawayo

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## Abstract

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are the key drivers of growth and development in the global economy. The significant contribution of SMEs is also a reality in Zimbabwe as they have proved to be the bedrock of the country's economy. SMEs operating in the event management industry in Bulawayo are instrumental in executing a wide array of events, ranging from weddings and corporate gatherings to cultural festivals and exhibitions. The event management industry in Zimbabwe has experienced significant growth and diversification in recent years. As a result, numerous small event management companies have sprung up across the country, each seeking to carve out a niche in this burgeoning market. The Bulawayo Metropolitan Province has witnessed a surge in event activity, spanning arts, culture, sports, and business. This province's distinct characteristics, along with its potential for growth in the events sector, creates an opportune setting to investigate the nuanced relationship between marketing strategies and event success. The study was guided by the pragmatism philosophy and the abductive approach. Data was collected from participants chosen through purposive sampling. The study concluded that successful SMEs not only attracted new customers through marketing efforts but also prioritised customer satisfaction, leading to repeat business and positive word-of-mouth referrals. There is a need for SMEs to develop a distinctive and memorable brand identity that sets them apart from competitors and consistent branding across all marketing materials and platforms that help build brand recognition and trust among clients.

**Keywords:** Business success; Customer retention; Event management; Marketing strategies; Small and Medium Enterprises.

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are the key drivers of growth and development in the global economy (Dlamini & Schutte, 2020). The significant contribution of SMEs is also a reality in Zimbabwe as they have proved to be the bedrock of the country's economy (Dlamini, 2021, RBZ, 2016). SMEs operating in the event management industry in Bulawayo are instrumental in executing a wide array of events, ranging from weddings and corporate gatherings to cultural festivals and exhibitions. As this sector of the economy develops, marketing has become increasingly important in boosting brand recognition, consumer engagement, and the competitiveness of these businesses (Mair & Weber, 2019).

Event management plays a significant role in global economic development as it stimulates economic growth, generates revenue, creates employment opportunities, and enhances the overall well-being of communities (Bowdin et al., 2019). On the African continent, events contribute significantly to the local and national economies, as well-organised events attract tourists, both domestic and international, leading to increased visits to the region and supporting the growth of the tourism and hospitality industry (UNWTO, 2020; Getz & Page, 2016). The contribution of the events industry is also a reality in Zimbabwe, as the sector significantly contributes to economic development and growth as these companies stimulate economic activity in various sectors, create direct employment opportunities for various professionals, promote local businesses, and establish the country as a desirable destination for future events and conferences (Muresherwa, Tichaawa, & Swart, 2022).

According to Mandal et al. (2022), tourism-related events can boost a destination's reputation and advance a nation's economic development (Daniels & Tichaawa, 2021). Event management also plays a significant role in the destination marketing strategy for destinations and attractions (Jamaluddin & Ghani, 2022), which increases the level of competition for attracting tourists and their money (Getz & Page, 2016). Event marketing is a crucial component of event management since it interacts with various organisational facets. Marketing is crucial to the effective launch and management of events. However, in Zimbabwe, many event management companies seem to be struggling to find the desired target audience and market their products in the region (Gutu, Zimucha, & Mushayavanhu, 2023).

More recently, event management as a process of planning an event has been regarded as one of the finest marketing techniques because it enables face-to-face engagement and gives customers an experience with the company as compared to generic commercials (Kerzner, 2019; Chen, 2011; Page & Connell, 2014). It also provides for adequate or categorical communication with those who focus on customers. No matter how

meticulously an event is planned, and every variable placed correctly, execution on the day of the event should be closely and continuously checked (Ryan, 2016).

Several scholars have highlighted that proper use of marketing strategies is an essential tool for success, especially for small businesses in the modern business environment. Furthermore, Schermerhorn and Bachrach (2017) opined that the application of marketing tools is imperative for successful businesses as it promotes sustainable competitive advantage.

The event management industry in Zimbabwe has experienced significant growth and diversification in recent years. This growth can be attributed to various factors, including increased disposable income, a growing desire for unique and memorable events, and the emergence of a vibrant middle-class population with a taste for luxury and entertainment. As a result, numerous small event management companies have sprung up across the country, each seeking to carve out a niche in this burgeoning market (Muresherwa, Swart & Tichaawa, 2023). In this dynamic and competitive landscape, small event management companies face several challenges in gaining visibility, attracting clients, and achieving sustainable growth. One key avenue that has emerged as a game-changer in marketing and promotion for these businesses is social media (Zigomo & Hull, 2018). With the proliferation of internet connectivity and smart phone usage in Zimbabwe, social media platforms have become integral tools for reaching and engaging with potential clients.

Bulawayo, as the second largest city in Zimbabwe, with its diverse cultural heritage and burgeoning tourism industry, is well poised to leverage its unique assets to host a wide array of events, ranging from cultural festivals to business conferences (Kabote, Mamimine, & Muranda, 2019). The Bulawayo Metropolitan Province has witnessed a surge in event activity, spanning arts, culture, sports, and business (Shereni, Mpofo, & Ngwenya, 2018). This province's distinct characteristics, along with its potential for growth in the events sector, creates an opportune setting to investigate the nuanced relationship between marketing strategies and event success.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Marketing Strategies for SMEs in Event Management

Marketing is a crucial component of every successful business plan since it helps clients form positive opinions about the brand (Ellis, 2010). Establishing an appropriate marketing plan can enable an organisation to align with its goals. Getz (2018:57) noted that "some event managers continue to have reservations about incorporating marketing strategies into event planning". Marketing strategies are a set of deliberate and purposeful actions designed to achieve specific business goals by promoting products or services, building brand awareness, and effectively reaching target audiences (Kotler & Armstrong, 2021). These strategies involve a combination of marketing elements such as product development, pricing, distribution, and promotion to create a cohesive and impactful approach for achieving organisational objectives. Page and Connell (2014) highlighted that implementing robust marketing strategies is crucial for the success of SMEs, especially in the event management industry. The following subsections provide an in-depth analysis of key marketing strategies.

### Digital Marketing

Digital marketing has become an integral component of successful marketing strategies, particularly in the event management industry, as it emerges as a transformative force in the industry, reshaping how businesses promote, organise, and engage with audiences (Mogos, 2015). Digital marketing encompasses various online channels and techniques to promote events, build brand awareness, and connect with target audiences. Compared to traditional marketing techniques, digital marketing is more productive and economical and enhances engagement with your audience prior to, during, and after the event. Together with setting clear goals for the growth of the company and its brands, the digital marketing strategy must also align with the business plan (Ellis-Chadwick & Chaffey 2012). Since digital marketing is so widely used, it is crucial that all businesses, including SMEs, adopt it as it spreads information about the company or its products. Marketers have used email blasts, direct marketing, telemarketing, informational websites, television, radio, and other media in the past (Tiago & Pinheiro, 2014). According to Bayo-Moriones & Lera-López (2007), as cited in Tiago & Pinheiro (2014), considering the consumer's perspective, the use of information communication technologies offers several benefits, including efficiency, convenience, richer and more participatory information, a broader selection of products, competitive pricing, cost reduction, and product diversity.

### Relationship Marketing

Relationship marketing is a strategic approach that emphasises building and maintaining long-term relationships with customers (Jones & Comfort, 2017). Rather than focusing solely on one-time transactions, this marketing philosophy prioritises customer satisfaction, loyalty, and engagement over the entire customer life-cycle. According to Ndubisi (2007), relationship marketing is a customer-centric approach that not only focuses on transactions but also prioritises the creation of lasting connections. Through fostering trust,

encouraging engagement, and continuously adapting to customer needs, businesses can build a foundation for sustained success in an ever-evolving market (Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2015). Ndubisi (2007) stated that effective communication is a cornerstone of relationship marketing and fosters two-way communication, transparency, and responsiveness. In event management, open communication channels and timely updates with clients contribute to relationship building. Relationship marketing is associated with reduced marketing costs, operational efficiency, streamlined communication, and understanding client preferences, which contribute to cost-effective event planning (Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2012).

In the dynamic and competitive landscape of event management, relationship marketing plays a pivotal role in establishing and maintaining meaningful connections with clients and stakeholders. Unlike transactional approaches, relationship marketing in event management prioritises long-term partnerships, customer satisfaction, and mutual growth (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Satisfied clients are more likely to return for future events and recommend the event management services to others. Cultivating strong relationships is not just a business strategy but a fundamental necessity, as it offers SMEs a powerful framework to establish and maintain lasting connections with clients, suppliers, and stakeholders (Neuhofer et al., 2012). For SMEs in the event management industry, relationship marketing is not just a strategic choice but also a fundamental aspect of survival and growth. By focusing on personalised service, open communication, and client loyalty, SMEs can foster enduring partnerships that contribute to long-term success in this vibrant and competitive industry (Neuhofer et al., 2015).

### **Branding**

Baum et al. (2020) asserted that branding is a strategic process that involves creating a unique and memorable identity for a product, service, or company. They further stated that branding goes beyond logos and visual elements, encompassing the overall perception, values, and personality associated with the brand (Baum et al., 2020; Chen & Popovich, 2018). However, effective branding establishes a connection with the target audience, fosters recognition, sets the brand apart in a competitive market, and helps position the brand in the market, defining its unique value proposition and setting it apart from others (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kapferer, 2008). Moreover, branding establishes visual and conceptual markers that make a brand easily recognisable and distinguishable in the market. A strong brand builds trust, instils confidence, and fosters loyalty among consumers who consistently choose the brand over competitors (Cova, Salle, & Goudey, 2011).

A well-established brand adds tangible financial value to a business, making it an asset that can influence customer choice and drive revenue. Smith & Zook (2011) stated that a compelling brand story and identity contribute to employee pride, engagement, and a sense of purpose within the organisation. According to Bowden (2009), consistent branding across all channels and touch-points ensures a coherent and unified representation, reinforcing the brand's message. Branding is a holistic and ongoing process that goes beyond visual elements; it shapes the perception and experience associated with a brand. Hence, a well-crafted brand identity and strategy contribute to a brand's success by fostering recognition, trust, and loyalty among consumers, and it is an investment that pays dividends in the form of customer preference, market positioning, and long-term business growth (Baum et al., 2020; Morgan, Vorhies & Mason, 2010).

According to Cheung and Thadani (2012), event management companies thrive on their ability to create unique, memorable experiences, and effective branding is essential for these companies as it not only establishes a distinct identity but also communicates their expertise, values, and the essence of the events they create. In the event management industry, branding is not just about creating a visual identity; it is about creating a narrative and an experience as it creates an emotional connection with clients and attendees, making them not just participants but advocates for the brand's ability to deliver lasting, unforgettable moments (Cova et al., 2011). Chen and Popovich (2018), as well as Morgan et al. (2010), stated that branding for SMEs in the event management industry is crucial for establishing a unique identity, fostering trust, and attracting clients. However, while academic literature on specific branding strategies for SMEs in event management might be limited, Chen and Popovich (2018) cited that the general principles of branding and small business branding could be applied. SMEs can tailor these strategies to their specific contexts, emphasising the unique value they bring to clients' events. Smith & Zook (2011) also cited that continual innovation, a personalised approach, and a consistent online presence are key elements for SMEs aiming to build a strong brand in the competitive event management sector.

### **Networking Events**

Networking events play a crucial role in the event management industry, offering opportunities for professionals to connect, share knowledge, and build collaborative relationships (Kolb, 2014; Burt, 2005). Networking events facilitate the exchange of information, resources, and opportunities among professionals and can enhance social capital, fostering trust and cooperation within a professional community (Burt, 2005). Successful networking events require careful planning, attention to detail, and an understanding of participant expectations (Shone & Parry, 2004). According to Goldblatt (2002), event planners should consider the overall experience, including venue selection, agenda design, and networking opportunities.

However, the rise of digital platforms has transformed networking events, enabling virtual interactions and global participation (Kolb, 2014; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Furthermore, virtual events require unique strategies for engagement, including interactive features and effective content delivery (Peters, Boden, & Smith, 2010). According to Ellison et al. (2007), networking events serve as platforms for professionals in the event management industry to connect, exchange ideas, and explore potential collaboration. Hence, creating opportunities for relationship building among event planners, suppliers, and other stakeholders.

### **Challenges faced by SMEs in the event management industry**

SMEs in the event management industry encounter a range of challenges that affect their operations and overall success. These business entities encounter a multifaceted set of challenges that necessitate strategic planning and resilience. From financial constraints to operational hurdles and the need for technological adaptation, understanding and addressing these challenges are crucial for the sustainable growth of SMEs in this dynamic industry. The following subsections provide an in-depth analysis of these challenges.

#### **Financial Constraints**

Financial constraints are a prevalent challenge for SMEs in the event management industry and these entities often face difficulties in securing sufficient capital for various business needs, including event planning, marketing, and infrastructure development (Shamsuddoha et al., 2017). According to Getz and Carlsen (2018), irregular cash flow is a common challenge for SMEs in event management due to the seasonal nature of the industry and delayed client payments. SMEs often operate with limited marketing budgets, hindering their ability to promote events effectively and reach a broader audience. Baum et al. (2020) posit that adoption of advanced event management technologies may be restricted by financial limitations, affecting operational efficiency and competitiveness. Furthermore, allocating resources for critical aspects such as venue selection, equipment, and skilled personnel can be challenging due to financial constraints, thus affecting the overall quality of event execution (Shamsuddoha et al., 2017).

Kumar and Dash (2019) stated that budget constraints might limit SMEs' ability to invest in ongoing training for their staff, affecting the development of essential skills in event planning and management. SMEs may encounter unexpected expenses related to regulatory compliance, licensing, or last minute changes in event logistics, affecting their financial stability (Jones & Comfort, 2017). Getz and Carlsen (2018) cited that intense competition in the event management industry may lead to pricing pressure, affecting SMEs' profit margins and financial sustainability. Financial constraints pose substantial challenges for SMEs in the event management industry, affecting their ability to invest in essential resources, technology, and marketing. Recognising and addressing these financial challenges is crucial for the resilience and sustainable growth of SMEs in this dynamic and competitive sector.

#### **Intense Competition**

The event management industry often experiences market saturation, with numerous SMEs offering similar services, leading to heightened competition (Kuratko et al., 2015). This industry is highly competitive, with SMEs contending with both local competitors and larger firms. Relatively, low barriers to entry enable new entrants, intensifying competition as more businesses enter the market (Jones & Comfort, 2017). Kumar and Dash (2019) posit that price competition and frequent discounting strategies among SMEs in event management can create a challenging environment for maintaining profit margins. SMEs in event management often face competition from diverse players, including larger firms, specialised agencies, and freelancers, creating a dynamic competitive landscape. Online platforms and directories make it easier for clients to discover and compare various event management SMEs, intensifying competition based on online visibility (Covin & Wales, 2012). Jones and Comfort (2017) stated that fluctuations in demand for event management services could result in fierce competition for available clients during peak seasons.

Chen and Popovich (2018) asserted that building and maintaining client loyalty could be challenging due to the wide array of choices available, leading to frequent client switching. Gupta and Govindarajan (2004) cited that the constant need for innovation and unique event offerings drives SMEs into an innovation race, contributing to increased competition. Globalisation allows clients to explore event management services beyond local providers, increasing competition from both domestic and international players (Kuratko et al., 2015). Moreover, SMEs may face challenges in creating a distinct brand and effective marketing strategies to stand out in a crowded market. Hence, intense competition in the event management industry poses significant challenges for SMEs, requiring strategic differentiation, effective marketing, and continuous innovation to thrive in a dynamic and crowded marketplace (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2004). Understanding the specific factors contributing to competition is essential for SMEs to develop resilient business strategies.

#### **Limited Marketing Resources**

SMEs often operate with restricted marketing budgets, limiting their ability to promote events effectively. According to Smith and Patel (2018), limited marketing resources pose a significant challenge for SMEs in the event management industry, as these entities often operate with constrained marketing budgets, limiting their ability to invest in comprehensive promotional activities. Baum et al. (2020) stated that allocating

resources for marketing efforts, including staff, tools, and materials, can be challenging for SMEs that need to balance multiple operational priorities. SMEs may lack in-house marketing expertise, hindering their ability to develop and implement effective marketing strategies. Furthermore, the lack of financial resources may restrict SMEs from exploring diverse marketing channels, limiting their reach and exposure. SMEs often find it challenging to compete with larger event management firms that have more substantial marketing budgets and resources.

Morris et al. (2002) stated that limited resources might result in insufficient investment in digital marketing, impeding SMEs from harnessing the full potential of online platforms. Due to resource constraints, SMEs may struggle to conduct extensive marketing research, affecting their understanding of market trends and customer preferences. Limited resources may hinder SMEs from investing in robust branding initiatives, reducing their visibility and recognition in the market (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2004). Due to budget constraints, SMEs may heavily rely on traditional marketing methods, potentially missing the reach and efficiency of digital strategies. Moreover, limited resources may make it challenging for SMEs to sustain long-term marketing campaigns, thereby affecting the consistency of their promotional efforts. Limited marketing resources present a formidable challenge for SMEs in the event management industry, affecting their ability to compete, reach a broader audience, and establish a strong brand presence (Smith & Patel, 2018). Recognising these challenges is crucial for SMEs to strategically allocate their resources, explore cost-effective marketing solutions, and maximise the impact of their promotional efforts.

### **Operational Challenges**

Operational challenges such as coordinating logistics, including transportation, equipment set-up, and event materials, significantly impact the efficiency and effectiveness of SMEs in the event management industry (Dellarocas, Zhang, & Awad, 2007). Getz and Carlsen (2018) also cited that choosing suitable venues and managing relationships with various venues present operational challenges for SMEs in the event management sector. Effective coordination with multiple stakeholders, including clients, vendors, and sponsors, require streamlined communication and poses operational complexities. Moreover, ensuring events are executed on time demands precise planning and operational efficiency, which can be challenging for SMEs with limited resources (Qi, 2010). Getz and Carlsen (2018) stated that acquiring and managing a skilled workforce, including event planners, coordinators, and on-site staff, poses challenges for SMEs in terms of recruitment, training, and retention (Kerzner, 2019; Chen, 2011; Page & Connell, 2014).

Integrating and adapting to new event management technologies may present challenges for SMEs with limited resources and technical expertise (Getz & Page, 2016). Maintaining quality standards in event delivery is challenging for SMEs, especially when operating with limited budgets and resources. Kerzner (2019) stated that adhering to local regulations, permits, and licensing requirements poses operational challenges for SMEs in the event management sector, and developing effective crisis management plans and responses is crucial for SMEs in this industry, given the unpredictable nature of live events. Implementing sustainable practices, such as waste reduction and eco-friendly events, may pose operational challenges for SMEs striving to balance environmental considerations with client demands (Chen, 2011). Operational challenges, ranging from logistics and venue management to staffing and sustainable practices, significantly affect SMEs in the event management industry (Page & Connell, 2014).

### **Limited Access to Technology**

According to Ginting et al. (2023), limited financial resources may restrict SMEs in the event management sector from investing in advanced event technologies, including event management software, registration systems, and virtual event platforms. Abubakar, Bass, and Allison (2014) also stated that SMEs might face challenges in adopting new technologies due to a lack of awareness about available solutions and insufficient education on the benefits and implementation processes. Additionally, resistance to change within SMEs and a preference for traditional methods may hinder the adoption of technology, even when it could enhance operational efficiency and competitiveness (Budņiks & Didenko, 2014). SMEs may lack in-house IT expertise, making it challenging to assess, implement, and manage technology solutions effectively, and the complexity of integrating new technologies into existing operational processes can be a barrier for SMEs, especially when there is a lack of dedicated IT personnel (Jianwen & Wakil, 2020).

Abubakar, Bass, and Allison (2014) posit that insufficient technological infrastructure, including reliable internet connectivity and hardware, may impede SMEs from fully leveraging digital solutions. The fast pace of technological advancements may make it challenging for SMEs to keep up with the latest tools and trends, potentially leaving them at a competitive disadvantage (Page & Connell, 2014). SMEs may hesitate to adopt certain technologies due to concerns about data security and privacy, especially when handling sensitive client information (Kumar, Samalia, & Verma, 2017). Limited access to training programmes on new technologies may hinder SMEs' ability to up-skill their workforce for effective technology imitation. SMEs may be hesitant to adopt certain technologies due to concerns about vendor lock-in, limiting their flexibility and ability to switch solutions if needed (Jianwen & Wakil, 2020). Limited access to technology is a significant impediment for SMEs in the event management industry, affecting their ability to innovate, streamline operations, and stay competitive in a rapidly evolving digital landscape. Kumar, Samalia, and Verma (2017)

suggested that overcoming these challenges requires a strategic approach, including addressing financial constraints, enhancing IT literacy, and fostering a culture of technological innovation within SMEs.

**Market Volatility**

Market volatility is a notable challenge for SMEs in the event management industry, as these entities are susceptible to economic fluctuations, impacting consumer spending on events and, subsequently, the demand for event management services (Alzyadati & Asfoura, 2021; Kumar & Dash, 2019). The event management industry often experiences seasonal variations in demand, making SMEs vulnerable to fluctuations in client needs and preferences. Sharma (2020) stated that SMEs providing services for corporate events may face market volatility due to uncertainties in corporate budget allocations for events and marketing, and global events, such as economic crises, pandemics, or geopolitical shifts, can introduce sudden market changes affecting SMEs in the event management sector. According to Yong, Ziaei, & Szulczyk (2021), rapid technological advancements and shifts in consumer preferences for digital events can create market volatility for SMEs relying on traditional event management approaches. Changes in political landscapes and regulations can introduce uncertainty, affecting the organisation and execution of events and, subsequently, market dynamics for SMEs (Alzyadati & Asfoura, 2021). Changes in the competitive landscape, including the entry or exit of key players, mergers, or new market entrants, can contribute to market volatility for SMEs (Sharma, 2020). Fluctuations in consumer preferences and trends for event types and themes can create uncertainty for SMEs in anticipating and meeting market demands. Marchese (2023) stated that shifts in societal and cultural norms can influence the types of events sought by consumers, contributing to market volatility for SMEs adjusting to evolving preferences. Furthermore, variability in sponsorships and partnerships, which often play a crucial role in event funding, can introduce market volatility for SMEs relying on external support (Covin & Wales, 2012). Market volatility poses substantial challenges for SMEs in the event management industry, necessitating adaptive strategies, agile business models, and proactive risk management.

**Methodology**

Guided by the pragmatism research philosophy and the abductive approach, the study adopted a mixed methods research design. Pragmatism philosophy was chosen so as to enable the researchers to adopt both subjective and objective points of view (Saunders et al., 2019) and guarantee the best results (Nugrahanti, 2018). The abductive approach was chosen because it allowed for the exploration of complex and interconnected relationships that could not be easily captured through deductive or inductive methods individually. Mixed methods research design allowed for the comprehensive understanding of the role of marketing strategies in successful event management. Quantitative data was collected through a structured questionnaire from 132 participants while qualitative data was collected from 11 participants through in-depth interviews. Participants were chosen through purposive sampling so as to select a diverse range of SMEs in the event management industry in Bulawayo. The study was conducted in line with the contemporary principles guiding research (Fletcher, 2017).

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

**Response Rate**

Out of 150 questionnaires that were distributed, 132 were returned. This gave a response rate of 88% which was considered sufficient for statistical analysis to proceed (Daikeler et al., 2022; Gordon et al., 2019). 11 in-depth interviews were scheduled and also conducted to collect qualitative data giving a response rate of 100%.

**Reliability analysis**

The internal consistency of the research items was measured using the Cronbach alpha coefficient, and the results are shown in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Cronbach’s Alpha Reliability test**

Construct	Number of items	Cronbach’s Alpha	Status
Marketing strategies	7	.795	Acceptable
Attracting Customers	6	.885	Acceptable
Returning Customers	6	.911	Acceptable
Business success	5	.801	Acceptable
Challenges associated with marketing strategies	9	.751	Acceptable

The five Cronbach alpha values were all above 0.7 which indicated a strong and solid item covariance as argued by Saunders et al. (2019) and Gerber and Hall (2017). This showed that the instrument was reliable for the study.

### Marketing Strategies

The results revealed that email marketing, content marketing, social media marketing; search engine optimisation, networking, and word of mouth are the most important marketing strategies for marketing their products as shown by figure 1 below.



**Figure 1: Marketing strategies**

The findings revealed that SMEs are actively engaging with the audience on social media platforms, as shown by a 100% response. The interviewed respondents also highlighted that social media marketing helps SMEs build a community around their brand, and they share behind-the-scenes glimpses, client testimonials, and engage in conversations to enhance brand visibility and reputation. The respondents indicated that the most used social media platforms are Facebook and Instagram; they further revealed that Twitter and WhatsApp are used mostly in response to messages received from clients. The findings also revealed that 74% of the respondents used content marketing strategies. The participants highlighted that creating and sharing valuable content relevant to event planning and management helped them display their expertise. From the interviews, it came out that under content marketing, blog posts, infographics, videos, and case studies that highlight successful events have been observed. The results showed that SMEs used digital marketing techniques such as search engine optimisation (SEO) (86%), social media marketing (100%), and email campaigns (63%), to reach a broader audience and generate leads.

The results of the survey showed that the owners and managers of SMEs prioritised customer happiness in their marketing efforts. The business owners further mentioned that they used marketing strategies to sell and customise their products as they were battling rivalry. Some of the respondents said:

*"To have an advantage over our competitors is the main goal of marketing in our company and we maintain a favourable reputation in the eyes of our clients thanks to marketing" [Respondent 6].*

*"Marketing helps us to customise our products and we provide a service that better suit the needs of our closely-knit customer base" [Respondent 2].*

The aforementioned quotations demonstrated that marketing is crucial for SMEs as well and is not just seen as the purview of big businesses. The growth and performance of event management SMEs rely on effective marketing (Kotler & Armstrong, 2021). These results showed that marketing is crucial in the event management industry, as products do not sell themselves (Kotler & Keller, 2015). According to the owners and managers of SMEs, marketing enables them to create and maintain enduring relationships with their clients. The SMEs can collaborate closely with their clients thanks to these alliances. Establishing enduring partnerships was identified as a crucial aspect of marketing.

### Spearman Correlation

In order to quantify the monotonic relationship between marketing strategies on one end and attraction of customers, retention of customers and organisational success on the other end, a Spearman correlation test was conducted and the results are shown in table 2 below.

**Table 2: Spearman Correlation values**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Marketing strategies</b>
Attraction of customers	0.652
Sig	0.001
N	132
Retention of customers	0.519
Sig	0.000
N	132
Organisational success	0.416
Sig	0.002
N	132

Table 2 shows that the correlations for attraction of customers, retention of customers and organisational success were all positive ranging from 0.416 to 0.652. The findings also showed that attraction of customers, retention of customers and organisational success were all significant at 5% level of significance.

### **Attraction of Customers**

A Spearman coefficient ( $\rho$ ) of 0.652 showed that marketing strategies were positively related to the attraction of customers. A  $\rho$  of 0.652 showed that the relationship was strong. The findings showed that an increase in the implementation of appropriate marketing strategies will result in a corresponding increase in the attraction of new clients. These findings indicated that effective marketing strategies will attract more customers among SMEs in the event management industry in Bulawayo. As such, effective marketing strategies are an essential tool for attracting customers in the event management industry in Bulawayo.

### **Retention of Customers**

A spearman coefficient ( $\rho$ ) of 0.519 revealed that marketing strategies were positively related to the retention of customers and was also significant at 5% level of significance. A  $\rho$  of 0.519 showed that the relationship between marketing strategies and retention of customers was moderate. The findings showed that effective marketing strategies will result in SMEs in the event management industry in Bulawayo retaining their customers.

### **Organisational Success**

A Spearman coefficient ( $\rho$ ) of 0.416 revealed a positive relationship between marketing strategies and organisational success. The  $\rho$  showed that the relationship was moderate. This indicated that increasing the implementation of marketing strategies will enhance business success.

### **Effective Marketing Strategies**

The respondents strongly agreed that social media marketing, content marketing, and using billboards had a positive impact on business performance. The findings revealed that content marketing, which provides valuable and relevant content through blogs, articles, videos, and other mediums, helped build trust and authority in the event management industry. The respondents also highlighted that content marketing not only attracted potential customers but also educated and engaged them. These findings concurred with the literature asserting that leveraging social media platforms to connect with your audience, share content, and build a community can be highly effective (Harb et al., 2019; Eggers et al., 2012). Social media allows SMEs in Bulawayo to humanise their brand and interact directly with customers.

The participants were also of the view that email marketing, paid advertising such as Google Ads and Facebook Ads, and networking are effective strategies for enhancing business success among SMEs. The respondents also revealed that building and nurturing an email subscriber list enabled businesses to maintain direct communication with their audience. From the interviews, participants also indicated that email campaigns are used to share promotions, news, and valuable content, keeping customers engaged over time. These results were consistent with the findings of Sithole et al. (2018); Buul & Omundi, (2017) & Haleem et al. (2017). From the interviews, it came out that offering special promotions, discounts, or package deals attracted new clients and encouraged repeat business. The respondents also highlighted that limited-time offers and seasonal promotions created a sense of urgency and drove bookings. One of the respondents said:

*“Sometimes we offer discounts to our repeat customers, and this has yielded good results”*  
[Respondent 5]

Literature also asserted that implementing customer loyalty programmes encouraged repeat business, and this involved offering discounts to repeat clients, providing exclusive benefits, or creating a tiered system that rewarded clients based on the number of events booked (Dolan et al., 2017). From the findings, it appeared that SMEs in events management in Bulawayo created a comprehensive marketing approach that seemed to enhance brand visibility, attract clients, and foster long-term relationships within the industry. These



findings were consistent with the findings of Agbogun (2022) who found that marketing strategies helped SMEs to increase their visibility, create brand awareness, and create a competitive advantage. The extant literature also showed that marketing strategies are essential for attracting potential customers and standing out in a competitive market (Mogos, 2015). These findings agree with the literature that effective marketing strategies allow SMEs to adapt quickly to changes in the market environment, ensuring that their products or services remain relevant (Kolb, 2014). These findings revealed that marketing strategies are integral to the success of SMEs by enhancing visibility, attracting, and retaining customers, fostering growth, and adapting to the ever-changing business landscape. A well-crafted and executed marketing plan can significantly contribute to the long-term success and sustainability of SMEs.

### **Challenges SMEs face in implementing marketing strategies.**

SMEs in the event management industry encounter a range of challenges that affect their operations and overall success. The results showed that SMEs are largely affected by limited resources, competition from large organisations, and failure to adapt quickly to changes due to limited resources and a slower decision-making process. SMEs typically have smaller budgets compared to larger corporations, making it challenging to invest in extensive marketing campaigns. They compete with larger, well-established companies that have more extensive resources and brand recognition. Literature showed that limited financial resources may restrict the use of various marketing channels and tools (Jones & Comfort, 2017). Kumar and Dash (2019) also stated that budget constraints might limit SMEs' ability to invest in ongoing training for their staff, affecting the development of essential skills in event planning and management. SMEs often operate with a small team, and team members may wear multiple hats. This can lead to a lack of specialised skills in marketing (Baum et al., 2020). The respondents also indicated that limited work force affected the execution and monitoring of marketing activities, as their organisations were understaffed.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The study concluded that successful SMEs not only attracted new customers through marketing efforts but also prioritised customer satisfaction, leading to repeat business and positive word-of-mouth referrals. Furthermore, marketing strategies enhanced business as they helped in increasing visibility and creating brand awareness. The study also concluded that marketing strategies contributed to revenue growth as they attracted new customers, retained existing ones, and developed effective pricing strategies and promotional activities. Furthermore, marketing strategies enabled SMEs to explore new markets and expand their reach through innovative marketing approaches.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

There is a need for SMEs to develop a distinctive and memorable brand identity that sets them apart from competitors and consistent branding across all marketing materials and platforms that help build brand recognition and trust among clients. SMEs should develop a strong online presence to connect with potential clients and stay competitive in the digital landscape. They need to conduct regular market research to understand changing trends, consumer behaviour, and preferences, allowing for the customisation of promotional efforts. There is a need for SMEs to collaborate with other SMEs, vendors, and organisations to co-promote events and share marketing resources, and networking which can lead to valuable insights and mutually beneficial partnerships. SMEs need to regularly monitor the effectiveness of marketing strategies through metrics and analytics and be prepared to adapt strategies based on the evolving needs of the market and changes in consumer behaviour. A flexible approach to marketing is crucial for long-term success.

SME owners should provide their employees with training in marketing skills or consider hiring individuals with expertise in marketing. Building in-house marketing capabilities ensures that the business can adapt to changing marketing trends and technologies. SMEs need to explore available government programmes and industry initiatives that support SMEs in the event management sector. This could include financial assistance, training programmes, or networking events that facilitate industry growth. The government, as the major policy-maker, should initiate training programmes and workshops focused on enhancing marketing skills for SMEs and establish funding programmes specifically tailored for SMEs in the event management sector.

### **Recommendations for future research**

More research is required to determine how marketing strategies affect the operational efficiency of SMEs across a range of industries. Future studies might consider investigating the factors influencing consumer choices, preferences, and decision-making processes when selecting event management services. Furthermore, there is a need to investigate the adoption of emerging technologies in marketing within the event management industry and explore how technologies such as virtual reality, augmented reality, or advanced analytics are being utilised by SMEs and their impact on customer engagement and business success.

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