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Small Business Marketing Strategies for the First 5 Years

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Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Shiina Pai

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Walden University
2017

Abstract

Small Business Marketing Strategies for the First 5 Years

by

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MS, Georgian Court University, 2011

BS, Berkeley College, 2009

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

July 2017

Abstract

Small businesses have an integral role in the U.S. economy and represent 99.7% of all employers in the United States; however, approximately 50% of small business start-ups fail within the first 5 years. Developing and implementing a well-formulated marketing strategy is critical to the success of business because a marketing strategy provides long-term benefits for a company's financial performance and increases the survival rate. The objective of this case study was to explore the marketing strategies that small retail business owners use to sustain their businesses for the first 5 years. The population was 5 successful retail-based small business owners in New York and New Jersey who had developed a well-formulated marketing strategy and sustained their start-ups for the first 5 years. The conceptual framework built upon Porter's competitive strategy theory. Data collection involved semistructured, face-to-face interviews and a review of company marketing documents. Data analysis involved coding and populating the data in software. Thematic analysis and methodological triangulation of the data revealed several themes: online marketing, marketing knowledge and planning, market research, and customer acquisition and retention. The findings of this study contribute to social change through the potential to improve economic activity, create stability in the local economy, and decrease small business failure rates by using marketing strategies effectively. Application of the findings could also lead to increased employment in communities where small businesses are located to improve the standard of living of local residents and contribute to effective positive social change.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

This section will include an overview of the business problem and the methodology I used to explore the marketing strategies that small retail business owners use to sustain their businesses in the first 5 years. I will also provide a critical review of the professional literature regarding the business problem and justify the need for new research in this area. This section will also include a discussion of important contributions to the existing body of literature by providing supportive data on effective small business marketing strategies.

Background of the Problem

Small businesses are valuable, innovative components of the global economy (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015; U.S. Small Business Administration [SBA], 2015). According to U.S. small business regulators, a small business has 500 employees or less (Gilmore, McAuley, Gallagher, Massiera, & Gamble, 2013). Many small business owners fail to develop sustainable marketing strategies for their companies (Porter, 1986). In a highly competitive small business marketplace, small business owners encounter new marketing challenges to promote and define their market positions (Hutchinson, Donnell, Gilmore, & Reid, 2015). Small business owners often fail to implement marketing strategies to stimulate and promote the growth of their businesses (Hutchinson et al., 2015). Researchers have agreed that marketing provides long-term benefits for a company's financial performance and increases the survival rate (Fillis, 2015; McDonagh & Prothero, 2014; Rollins, Nickell, & Ennis, 2014).

Marketing is a set of practices used to promote a business and exploit growth opportunities as well as various outlets to sell and expand production categories (Weber, Geneste, & Connell, 2015). These practices ensure consumers receive quality service and increased profits (Fillis, 2015). Approximately 30% of small business start-ups fail within 2 years, and 50% of start-ups fail within the first 5 years (Barber, Wilson, Venkatachalam, Cleaves, & Garnham, 2014). The results of this study make an important contribution to the existing body of literature by providing supportive data on effective small businesses marketing strategies.

Problem Statement

Small businesses have an integral role in the U.S. economy and represent 99.7% of all employers in the United States, but approximately 50% of small business start-ups fail within the first 5 years (SBA, 2015). Business survival depends on the owner's leadership capabilities and ability to create an effective marketing strategy (Ciasullo & Troisi, 2013). The general business problem is that small business owners who are unable to develop a well-formulated marketing strategy may not successfully sustain their start-ups. The specific business problem is that some small retail business owners lack the marketing strategies to sustain their businesses for the first 5 years.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the marketing strategies that small retail business owners used to sustain their businesses for the first 5 years. The population for this study was five successful retail-based small businesses in New York and New Jersey. The sample was five small business owners who had

successfully developed a well-formulated marketing strategy and sustained their start-ups for the first 5 years. Entrepreneurs might be able to use the results of this study to launch enterprises using marketing strategies that will ensure they create a sustainable business. The implications for positive social change include creating stability in the local economy and decreasing business failure rates by using marketing strategies effectively. As a start-up becomes successful, business owners may choose to support charity events and community outreach programs to catalyze positive social change.

Nature of the Study

The three research methodologies are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method (Vaitkevicius & Kazokiene, 2013). Researchers use qualitative methods to explore phenomena through text, participant observation, and in-depth interviews (Morse, 2015). While quantitative researchers examine the statistical significance of the relationships and the differences between two or more variables (Hatefi, Torabi, & Bagheri, 2014). A quantitative method involves statistical data but does not include an opportunity to develop a deep understanding of a phenomenon (Spillman, 2014). Mixed method researchers combine qualitative and quantitative data to generate findings (Vaitkevicius & Kazokiene, 2013). Neither the quantitative nor mixed methods approach was appropriate for this study because I did not plan to interpret statistical data. A qualitative approach was most appropriate to explore the marketing strategies of small business owners who had sustained their businesses for at least 5 years (see Hyett, Kenny, & Dickson, 2014).

Ethnography, phenomenology, and case studies are examples of qualitative research designs (Cahyadi & Prananto, 2015). Ethnography involves studying an intact cultural group, and a researcher can use an ethnographic design to collect interview data in a traditional setting over a sustained period (Armstrong, 2013; Cahyadi & Prananto, 2015). The ethnographic design was not suitable for this study, which included a focus on the strategies owners of start-up businesses use rather than on the culture of a certain group of people. In phenomenological studies, researchers can use interview data to provide an understanding of a phenomenon that several people experience over a period of time (Armstrong, 2013). A phenomenological design involves drawing on the experience of individuals to understand the meaning of experiencing a phenomenon, so this design was not appropriate for this study. The third option, the case study approach, involves exploring a situation, an activity, or an individual in detail using qualitative data (Rao, 2014). Researchers use case study designs when seeking to identify and understand themes (Cahyadi & Prananto, 2015).

For this study, the case study design was suitable to ensure a comprehensive and complete understanding of the business problem. Case study design is useful for studies with open-ended questions to draw upon participants' insights and views (Yin, 2014). Conducting this study resulted in an understanding of the subject and detailed and insightful information for small business owners seeking to sustain their start-ups. A case study design includes intensive analysis, and researchers can use data resources such as records and documentation to triangulate data (Rao, 2014). For these reasons, the case

study design was the most suitable approach for understanding the phenomenon under study and for identifying the specific business problem using multiple sources.

Research Question

What marketing strategies do small retail business owners use to sustain their businesses for the first 5 years?

Interview Questions

1. What marketing strategies have you used to sustain your business?
2. How did your marketing strategy evolve as your business transitioned from a new business to a known business?
3. What were the notable results of the marketing strategies during the transition?
4. What three marketing-related strategies were the most helpful in sustaining your business in its first 5 years?
5. How did you identify and address the three specific marketing-related strategies that were the most helpful in sustaining your business in its first 5 years?
6. What innovations and novel marketing strategies did you employ for your business in its first 5 years?
7. How would you define the success of your current standard of marketing measurement?
8. What marketing performance tools have you implemented to track trends and calibrate profitability?

9. What aspects of your marketing strategy helped you rise above your competition?
10. What else could you share about using marketing strategies to increase sustainability?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that I selected for this research study was Porter's (1986) competitive strategy theory. The purpose of the conceptual framework is to understand the context of a study through the literature reviewed (Menon & Yao, 2017). Porter's framework includes three generic competitive strategies: (a) cost leadership, (b) differentiation, and (c) cost focus (Farrell, 2015). The key element of Porter's competitive strategy theory, also defined as *competitive advantage*, is the belief that organizational leaders have the ability to create more value and attract more sales than their competitors (Menon & Yao, 2017). Competitive strategy theory served as the contextual foundation for this study and was suitable for exploring small business owners' experiences regarding the development of marketing strategies to ensure their businesses could sustain for the first 5 years.

Since 1986, Porter has established a strong reputation across the business industry (Salavou, 2015). The focus of Porter's (1986) competitive strategy theory is on productivity growth, and the theory includes two levels of business organization: the corporate level and the functional level (Farrell, 2015). On the corporate level, employees use tactics that align with the corporate strategy to achieve long-term goals, and business leaders use functional-level tactics, such as marketing, production, and sales programs,

within the company to achieve short-term goals (Porter, 1986; Salavou, 2015). Leaders who apply Porter's competitive strategy are likely to minimize costs and create profits for their businesses (Farrell, 2015). When small business owners develop well-formulated sustainable business marketing strategies for their companies, the businesses will have a competitive advantage and are likely to sustain their businesses for the first 5 years (Porter, 1986).

Operational Definitions

In this subsection, I will provide the operational definitions for commonly used terms related to marketing small businesses. The definitions of these terms are from peer-reviewed journal articles and government websites.

Business sustainability: A sustainable development plan or ability to maintain the survival of a business that in turn creates profits for the company (Cohen & Kietzmann, 2014).

Competitive advantage: An advantage businesses have over their competitors. This advantage may allow business leaders to solve problems and threats, as well as sense opportunities (Li & Liu, 2014).

Competitive strategy: An action plan that helps a company outperform competitors in the marketplace. The goal of an effective competitive strategy is to deliver better value and achieve an advantage over competitors (Block, Kohn, Miller, & Ullrich, 2015).

Electronic marketing (e-marketing): Using technology for marketing in business settings to create opportunities for stronger customer relationships (Andries & Czarnitzki,

2014). E-marketing often includes digital marketing as a technique to achieve and compete in the virtual innovative marketplace (Oliveira & Toaldo, 2015).

Marketing: A set of practices used to promote a business and exploit growth opportunities as well as various outlets used to sell and expand production categories. These practices ensure consumers receive quality service and increase profits (Fillis, 2015).

Marketing strategy: A strategy that plays an important role in creating sustainable results and increasing a lasting effect for competitive advantages. Marketing strategies are essential for business leaders to learn more about their market, largely the customer-targeting segment and company positioning (Toaldo, Didonet, & Luce, 2013).

Social media: An online platform that hosts opportunities for web users to interact by creating, exchanging, and sharing information. Social media can encourage participation as well as interactions between potential clients and companies (Ho, 2014).

Start-up business: A start-up business is a new venture. Business expenses are usually higher than revenue while businesses are in a growing stage (SBA, 2015).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are ideas that researchers believe are true without any evidence or confirmation (Carpenter et al., 2013). Assumptions carry risk and may lead to misleading results (Carpenter, Roger, & Kenward, 2013). I made several assumptions during this research process. The first assumption was that my participants would provide honest answers to all the open-ended interview questions during the face-to-face interviews.

Researchers should use qualitative face-to-face methods to interview businesspeople or should use topics related to entrepreneurship experience to gather a rich understanding and engage with the participants (Galloway, Kapasi, & Whittam, 2015). My second assumption was that every small business owner had a strategy to retain a competitive advantage. Business owners should lead teams with a clear goal plan and challenge beyond the market limits (Carpenter et al., 2013).

Limitations

Limitations represent potential weaknesses or problems in a study that can affect the final review of the research (Utian & Maamari, 2014). These weaknesses and problems are beyond the control of a researcher (Yin, 2014). The two main limitations of this study were study design and time constraints for collecting information from participants.

Another limitation was that five small business owners did not represent the entire perspective of and every insight into the owners of retail-based small businesses. The geographical region that I focused on was New Jersey and New Jersey, which restricted the pool of participants for the multiple case study. The case study design was the most appropriate design option for this study. Researchers using a case study approach should achieve a substantial understanding of the subject and provide detailed, insightful information (Ody-Brasier & Vermeulen, 2014).

Delimitations

Delimitations represent boundaries and factors within a researcher's control (Ody-Brasier & Vermeulen, 2014). I delimited the scope of the study to the marketing

strategies business owners had used to sustain small retail businesses for the first 5 years. The sample consisted of five successful retail-based small business owners located in New York and New Jersey. Another factor that narrowed the study was all the participants needed to have more than 5 years of experience operating their business and acting as the main decision maker. The participants had different experiences with various backgrounds, but all the study participants met the qualification criteria, as I also carefully reviewed each participant's company website, newsletters, and online marketing activities.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because I obtained data on the contributions of small business owners from multiple sources, provided insights into how to sustain a business, and included implications for social change. Understanding how owners of other small companies used marketing strategies to sustain their own businesses for at least 5 years can help entrepreneurs develop a competitive advantage and transition toward a more stable and sustainable business future (see Anderson & Ulla, 2014; Awan & Hashmi, 2014). The implications for social change in this study are insights that may positively influence social conditions.

Contribution to Business Practice

My focus in this qualitative case study was exploring resources to help small business owners develop effective marketing strategies to achieve sustainability. Many small business owners lack capital, managerial resources, and market power, but they have innovative and flexible business practices (Awan & Hashmi, 2014). The results of

this study help to reduce the gaps within research on small business owners by providing insights into how to sustain their business. The findings clarify the potential barriers in the business process with regard to marketing strategies and provide insight into how small business owners who have sustained their business for at least 5 years maintain a competitive advantage (see Daskalakis, Jarvis, & Schizas, 2013). Small business owners can use such information to differentiate themselves from their competitors and to increase profits through effective marketing strategies (see Anderson & Ulla, 2014; Ciasullo & Troisi, 2013).

Implications for Social Change

The results from this study have multiple implications for strong positive social change for small business owners. The findings may contribute to the human condition through creating jobs and generating revenue in market economies and in local economies. The results of this study may also contribute to social change by improving economic activity, as small business owners may better understand how to sustain their businesses. Other small business owners may benefit from this study by using the findings to develop and improve the quality of their marketing strategies to reduce the risk of failure in small businesses (see Eggers, Kraus, Hughes, Laraway, & Snycerski, 2013; Stelmokien & Endriulaitiene, 2015). Increasing the longevity of small businesses could lead to local economic development, the creation of job opportunities for the local community, and increase employment to improve the standard of living of residents (see Ghobakhloo & Tang, 2013).

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore what marketing strategies small retail business owners used to sustain their businesses for the first 5 years. In this literature review, I will explore various marketing strategies for small businesses through the competitive strategy concept and theory. My review of the literature review will include 188 peer-reviewed journal articles, and 99% have publication dates between 2013 and 2017. I will provide a critical and thorough evaluation of information collected from published books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and government websites.

In this subsection of the academic literature review, my objective was to explore relevant literature on the topic of marketing strategies in small businesses to contribute depth and understanding and to identify the need for the study. The articles reviewed came from the Walden University library and government websites. I used the following databases and search engines to search for relevant professional and academic literature: Business Source Complete, Google Scholar, Sage Premier, and information and technology databases. My literature review search strategies included using key words with various combinations of *small business sustainability*, *small business failure rate*, *successful small business*, *small business marketing strategy*, and *small business marketing management*. The next subsection will begin with an overview of the competitive strategy theory. The review will also include the importance and characteristics of small businesses and consumer marketing relationships used and recommended by small business leaders. The following subsection will include a

discussion of the tools that business owners use, such as Internet marketing and branding techniques, to develop profitable relationships with consumers. The literature review will also contain a review of marketing in small businesses.

Overview of Competitive Strategy Theory

My objective with this qualitative case study was to explore resources to help small business owners to develop and to improve effective marketing strategies to achieve sustainability for their businesses (see Ciasullo & Troisi, 2013). In this study, I used Porter's (1986) competitive strategy theory as the conceptual framework. Porter's framework includes three generic competitive strategies: (a) cost leadership, (b) differentiation, and (c) cost focus (Farrell, 2015). The sustainability of a company refers to how much a firm's profitability can continue to serve as the fundamental element for the business to survive and generate economic stability (Banker, Mashruwala, & Tripathy, 2014). Most companies' main goal is achieving competitive advantage through uniqueness and acts of innovation, and business owners should emphasize their firm's core competencies to implement a competitive strategy that leads to improvement and increases effectiveness (Brem, Maier, & Wimschneider, 2016).

Porter's strategy theory is the dominant framework that provides the most competitive strategies for businesses (Salavou, 2015). Porter discovered strategy theory in 1980, and researchers have described Porter's competitive strategies as the most effectively researched in the business strategy literature (Block et al., 2015). Business owners who implement Porter's competitive strategies are more likely to achieve sustainability and survive (Banker et al., 2014). Salavou (2015) suggested that modern

scholars should revise and balance the theory to find a better fit for existing business challenges. In contrast, Teti, Perrini, and Tirapelle (2014) noted that Porter's strategy is still relevant for leaders pursuing sustainability. Organizational leaders need to learn and invest new knowledge and technology skills continually for their organizations to maintain a superior performance and to gain a sustainable competitive advantage (Lin & Tsai, 2016; Porter, 1985).

Business owners can use Porter's competitive strategy to increase survival rates and profitability (Miles, 2013). Both cost leadership and differentiation strategies are valuable resources for small businesses (Block et al., 2015). Leaders of small businesses can use the competitive strategy to strengthen their capability to stay sustainable against the competition (Teti et al., 2014). The focus of the differentiation strategy is delivering premium quality and service flexibility so organizational leaders can maintain competitive capabilities by creating unique markets and inimitable products or services (Kato, Nunes, & Dey, 2016). This strategy also entails high technological capabilities and cultivates innovate work environments. A successful company vision should align with using new technologies and doing business differently (Brem et al., 2016).

Many small business owners are more likely to adopt cost leadership strategies than differentiation strategies because instituting cost leadership strategies requires less time and fewer costs (Kato, Nunes, & Dey, 2016). Implementing a cost leadership strategy involves seeking cost reductions and minimizing the costs of marketing expenses and product development (Thomason, Simendinger, & Kiernan, 2013). This strategy often entails charging customers the lowest cost to compete with competitors and using

technology to enhance operation efficiency and remain profitable (Miles, 2013). Owners of start-ups must be willing to accept lower wages, as lower wages ensure fair compensation for employees. Although the cost leadership strategy seems to be easy for start-up leaders to adopt, this type of strategy may have lower growth potential (Cusumano, 2013; Zabukovšek, Šišovska, Mravljak, & Bobek, 2015). Leaders who adopt this strategy run the risk of their business being more fragile when facing challenges and changes in the marketplace (Block et al., 2015). Cost leadership has a positive influence on firms' performance, as it enhances cost efficiency (Banker et al., 2014). The focus of cost leadership is on the low cost of operations through quality management, cost minimization, low overhead, and new technology improvements (Banker et al., 2014). However, Lieberman (1982) contended that company leaders who focus on applying cost leadership strategies tend to face challenges creating innovative ideas, as focusing on cost leadership strategies makes organizations inflexible. Porter (1985) posited that making high-quality products has a positive effect on organizational performance, as it creates higher value for both the consumers and the product. Conversely, customer perceptions of brand quality will be lower if company leaders choose to focus on a cost leadership strategy rather than to follow a differentiation strategy or a cost focus strategy (Miles, 2013). Teeratansirikool et al. (2013) found that a cost leadership strategy has the highest average return on a company's investment and a positive effect on an organization's performance.

Porter (1986) presented a framework associated with cost leadership, and the differentiation strategy will help company leaders to retain a sustainable competitive

advantage. Banker et al. (2014) investigated archival data from businesses to determine the sustainable strategies employed within the businesses and found that companies whose leaders used the differentiation strategy effectively had a successful financial performance, as the strategy has a greater effect on long-term planning. However, differentiation strategies carry higher risks and initial instability, and differentiation strategy hinges on providing unique qualities only found in certain products or services (Lattuch, Pech, Riemenschneider, & Weigert, 2013). Block et al. (2015) discovered that leaders of small start-up businesses are more likely to implement a cost leadership strategy, as it requires less planning and less capital than the differentiation strategy. To achieve competitive advantage through a cost leadership strategy, it is necessary to reduce production expenses, including the labor force, technology costs, and costs of raw materials (Vera, 2016). Start-up business owners need to minimize costs and increase productiveness to defend against competitors (Block et al., 2015). Miles (2013) suggested company leaders invest in equipment and new technology, as these investments will help to increase productivity flow. Effective communication and clear business goals help reduce costs (Birasnav, 2014). Furthermore, organizational leaders use a cost leadership strategy to improve business performance by increasing employee productivity and reducing employee absenteeism (Vera, 2016). Birasnav (2014) also noted that business owners should practice and improve their leadership skills to minimize costs. The focus of the cost leadership strategy is on cost minimization through resource allocation (Vera, 2016). Leaders who are attentive to asset use and capital expenditures and focus on

developing operational efficiency will improve company assets and the production process (Orobia et al., 2013).

The customers rated the companies based on the service, product, and sense of satisfaction with the goods. Miles (2013) conducted a quantitative study with more than 180 feedback surveys from customers who received service from several companies. These companies aligned with Porter's competitive strategy theory and the leaders were seeking to enhance service to maximize profit (Porter, 1985). Miles found when business leaders used Porter's competitive strategy, there was an effect on customer relationships and business performance. Cost leadership strategies include aggressive low-cost production and involve targeting the lowest price to compete with competitors (Miles, 2013). This type of strategy is achievable through a variety of methods, such as reducing expenditure in office settings and increasing customer service to improve efficiency (Mathooko & Ogutu, 2015).

The differentiation strategy involves creating unique products and services to attract new customers and to increase customer loyalty (Mathooko & Ogutu, 2015) and has a positive effect on organizational performance. Business leaders use the differentiation strategy, which often involves customization, to differentiate the unique qualities of their products or services from competitors and to highlight the elements that consumers find desirable in order to increase product prices (Kennickell, Kwast, & Pogach, 2015). Banker et al. (2014) recommended focusing on making high-quality goods and services consistently reliable to affect the financial performance of a company positively. When business leaders focus on a differentiation strategy, they also improve

the quality of the organizational culture. In the long term, business leaders will be able to achieve sustainability (Kennickell, Kwast, & Pogach, 2015). Leaders of small companies cannot position themselves in the higher priced segment of the market (Davicik & Sharma, 2015), and therefore, leaders of small companies should gain more knowledge to improve their marketing strategy through product differentiation. Leaders who invest more in marketing using the differentiation strategy can improve brand performance and customer loyalty significantly (Davicik & Sharma, 2015). A company's marketing strategy and capability affect consumers' willingness to pay a higher price and their loyalty toward the brand (Pehrsson, 2016; Vera, 2016). The differentiation strategy involves marketing innovations, such as creating new products and improving customer responsiveness by offering superior service, which all help to strengthen the company's competitiveness (Porter, 1986). Company leaders will find it valuable to focus on customizing sales and service and on marketing responsiveness manifested by developing long-term relationships with each customer (Pehrsson, 2016; Vera, 2016). Including extensive communication internally with employees and externally with customers is crucial (Sigalas, 2015). Marketing innovativeness is central to the differentiation strategy and involves intensive efforts to create new products and new ways to access potential markets (Porter, 1986). Marketing innovativeness also has a positive effect on companies' competitiveness and adds value to businesses (Porter, 1986). Researchers have shown that firms whose leaders choose differentiation as a competitive strategy will be more successful than their competitors will and will give their firm a strong

competitive position (Sigalas, 2015). If business owners pursue a differentiation strategy, they can achieve superiority and sustainability in the short term (Banker et al., 2014).

To improve business performance, business leaders should consider aligning their business strategy to achieve superior performance (Kaliappen & Hilman, 2014). Parnell, Long, and Lester (2015) contended that Porter's theory is the most relevant and beneficial theory for privately owned businesses. This theory, when simplified, means that owners must choose a strategy that competition has not overwhelmed. To plan successful strategic management, organizational leaders must identify rival companies (Parnell et al., 2015; Porter, 1986). In the United States, a majority of leaders of new start-up businesses adopt a differentiation strategy to attract consumers by cornering a niche market sector (Parnell et al., 2015). Due to a limited amount of financial and human capital resources, the leaders of many start-up businesses often choose cost leadership strategy as another strategy to follow (Parnell et al., 2015). Differentiated products and services lead to more innovation efforts from the business owners and managers and require higher risk for financial investment (Porter, 1986). Parnell et al. emphasized the need for business leaders to pursue either the differentiation strategy or the cost leadership strategy. Many business leaders can successfully use a combination strategy that incorporates two or more strategies (Parnell et al., 2015). Organizational leaders must consistently embark on discovering new markets while fortifying strategic capabilities to stay competitive (Porter, 1986).

Businesses whose leaders focused on financial success often have the most profitable performances when using competitive strategies to differentiate themselves

(Lillestol, Timothy, & Goodman, 2015). Many organizational leaders have used Porter's (1986) competitive strategy to survive challenging times. Efficient and competitive marketing strategies are critical and essential for a business to develop (Lechner & Gudmundsson, 2014). A positive correlation exists between the four generic strategies that organizational leaders can use to ensure above-average returns (Lechner & Gudmundsson, 2014). The focus of Porter's competitive strategy theory is on cost leadership, differentiation, and cost focus. The results of Lechner and Gudmundsson's (2014) study showed that the innovativeness of the organization has a substantial effect on the organization's survival. Business owners engaging in excessive risk taking or competitive aggressiveness have an increased probability of failure (Lechner & Gudmundsson, 2014).

The ultimate goal of any business is to achieve a competitive advantage over rival companies. Pursuing a cost strategy entails a detailed structure with a focus on process efficiency (Huo, Qi, Wang, & Zhao, 2014). Cost leadership strategy requires owners and managers with high-level skills to support stability and increase the efficiency of control management (Mesu, 2013). A high level of communication is necessary between the organization and the suppliers to reduce the product development cost. Cost leadership strategy leads to better financial results. In contrast, the emphasis of the differentiation strategy is on creating premium product value, but not on cost reduction (Porter, 1986). To cope with a competitive marketplace, leaders of companies pursuing differentiation strategies should strengthen their skills and build a highly innovative working environment and team (Huo et al., 2014). Huo et al. (2014) also encouraged company

leaders to experiment with innovative ideas to help motivate team members to learn and communicate effectively, which helps the company financially. Cost focus strategies narrow the market into niche segments (Farrell, 2015; Salavou, 2015).

Importance and Characteristics of Small Businesses

Small businesses are valuable, innovative components of the global economy (SBA, 2015). Approximately 60–80% of small businesses in the United States create job growth; small businesses have the advantage of flexible management structures, and leaders use this flexibility to adapt to competitive and constantly changing business markets (Classen, Carree, Gils, & Peters, 2014). Small businesses experience faster growth and are more likely to become successful compared to larger corporations (Blackburn, 2014). Blackburn, Hart, and Wainwright (2013) asserted that another essential characteristic of small businesses is the willingness to engage in risk-taking behavior, particularly regarding opportunities. The desire to take risks and use formal business strategies allows small business owners to have successful future sales endeavors and contribute to the economy (Blackburn et al., 2013). Risk taking also helps foster innovative thinking, which enhances a company's culture (Saunders, Gray, & Goregaokar, 2013). However, risk-taking behavior requires resources to provide proper training for employees. Darcy, Hill, McCabe, and McGovern (2014) focused on discussing the unique characteristics that small business owners should pay attention to for long-term sustainability and competitive advantages. Small business owners should consider investing in their firm's development, particularly human resources (Darcy et al., 2014). Small businesses must work beyond the traditional sources of competitive

advantage (Darcy et al., 2014). Products or services might be easy to replicate, but human resources are difficult to imitate from within an organization. Employees of small businesses are likely to make more meaningful and sustainable contributions to the company.

Kajalo and Lindblom (2015) focused on studying small retailers and discovered that small businesses have more opportunity and flexibility to enhance their market orientation from their direct and close contact with their customers compared with larger companies. Researchers have found that it was not sufficient to have only market orientation and entrepreneurial orientation as the sole strategy focus. Although market orientation can serve as the cornerstone of a marketing strategy, both market orientation and entrepreneurial orientation have a positive effect on business performance, and market orientation cannot be the only focus. Small business owners should understand the value of market and entrepreneurial orientations and must excel in other strategies to complement both orientations (Kajalo & Lindblom, 2015). Leaders manage small businesses differently than larger corporations. Volery and Mazzarol (2015) defined small businesses as being independently owned and operated by owners who act as the primary decision maker for major operating decisions. Small business owners have a small market share (Volery & Mazzarol, 2015). A small business is flexible, and its leaders are able to adapt swiftly to changes. A small business's flexibility also leads to developing innovative products and services (Mastur & Soriano, 2014).

Small business owners often rely on their leaders to develop innovative activities (Andries & Czarnitzki, 2014). Innovation is about identifying opportunities to create new

products or services, and the capability to develop a competitive advantage is a critical link to a company's long-term survival (Andries & Czarnitzki, 2014). Andries and Czarnitzki (2014) also recommended hiring educated and experienced managers, as they will have a better effect on performance. Some researchers have found a positive link between a firm's success and great employees. For example, a positive association exists between the resilience of business owners and managers and the success of a firm (Ayala & Manzano, 2014).

Consumer Marketing Relationship

Customer relationship management is a process of creating potential value to products, as well as continuously building an appropriate relationship with customers (Saarijärvi, Karjaluoto, & Kuusela, 2013). Consequently, organizational leaders should focus on empowering consumers through the media environment and deepening their customer relationship, as strong customer relationships act to strengthen organizations' competitive advantages in the marketplace (Chakravarty, Kumar, & Grewal, 2014).

Customer engagement activity is a top priority for many marketers. Consumer engagement allows interaction between groups and allows the conscious and active exchange of product or service information with other customers, which extends interest in consumer communities (Dessart, Veloutsou, & Morgan-Thomas, 2015). Fang, Xiaoling, Minue, and Palmatier (2015) studied customer relationship management in the advertising platform, as customer relationship management is an optimal strategy used to guarantee positive returns to businesses. Attracting new and existing buyers will increase the product-click rate as a result of new revenue. Clicking refers to the number of times a

person clicks on advertising content, such as a company website link or marketing-related images (Laroche, Kiani, Economakis, & Richard, 2013). Fang et al. also concluded that when buyers have an interest in and an attraction to a product, they will click on the advertising links, which has direct positive effects on the businesses. Improving the ability of online users to search items through keyword searches will lead to a higher rate of clicking as a result of attracting new and retaining existing buyers.

In a quantitative analysis conducted to examine the reliable measurement of retail customer experience to provide guidelines for retail practitioners for strategy improvement, Shilpa and Rajnish (2013) suggested that organizational leaders should incorporate the three dimensions of joy, mood, and leisure to form an emotional connection with their customers, which is a factor for creating superior quality service. Understanding and integrating the key elements of emotion from customers into marketing strategies will significantly affect profitability and customer satisfaction and lead to better management results (Shilpa & Rajnish, 2013). Jee and Ernest (2013) conducted a quantitative study and indicated that not all marketing techniques can help business leaders successfully induce consumer spending. According to the value-attitude-behavior model, personal values influence consumers' behavior (Chikweche, 2013). Personal values can affect consumers' purchase intentions and their perspective on products. Jee and Ernest found different marketing techniques created a significant difference between consumers' satisfaction and behavioral intention. Jee and Ernest suggested marketers study different types of consumer characteristics and incorporate marketing techniques accordingly (Jee & Ernest, 2013).

Business leaders should focus on engaging with customers and providing excellent customer services. Eighty percent of small businesses are dependent on the customer satisfaction and purchasing experience (Chakravarty et al., 2014). Striving to ensure superior customer service and increasing a company's customer orientation will enhance business performance and value. Marketers need to focus on multiple customer orientations to improve company performance (Chakravarty et al., 2014). All business leaders must adapt to the challenges of electronic marketing management (Rad, Ghorabi, Rafiee, & Rad, 2015). Marketers pay attention to customers' perspective, as well as the quality of communication between consumers (Rad et al., 2015). Electronic customer relationship management involves adapting Internet technology to provide a database for selecting and maintaining customer service strategies. Business leaders should effectively manage interactions as well as customer data collection, as it is critical to identify the target market group to create more value to the business. Fifty-two percent of retail business leaders have made electronic customer relationship management their priority in strategy planning (Rad et al., 2015). Business leaders use electronic customer relationship management to obtain individuals' purchasing preferences and other data resources. Customized data software enables business leaders to attract and predict customers' buying behavior and improves customer loyalty. Electronic customer relationship management is essential to the success of a business, and management must understand and support it fully.

Service quality is a key factor for business performance, customer satisfaction, and profitability (Gensler, Völckner, Egger, Fischbach, & Schoder, 2015). Service quality

refers to the core benefits of service, which include packaging, product features, and customer service, all done to attract more buyers. Gensler et al. (2015) recommended that marketing practitioners implement standardized benchmark treatment to help organizational leaders evaluate total service quality. Business leaders can rate the benchmark treatment on a statistic scale and allow marketing practitioners to assess and improve upon the quantifiable results. These results will serve as a direct link for consumers to give feedback and share their perceptions of total quality (Gensler et al., 2015). Consumer engagement activity is a priority for many marketers (Dessart et al., 2015). Consumer engagement involves not only interaction between organizations, but also the conscious and active exchange of product or service information with other consumers, which extends interest in consumer communities. When consumers share feedback with each other through an online platform, the reviews help marketers gain a better understanding of consumers' motivation and purchasing decisions. According to the research evidence, by actively engaging with consumers through social media platforms, negative comments from unsatisfied customers have decreased (Dessart et al., 2015). Marketers actively engage to improve and prevent defective products or negative events from building up and hurting organizations (McCann & Barlow, 2015).

Keng, Tran, Liao, Yao, and Hsu (2014) investigated four types of customer experiences that affect customers' attitude and perception of product knowledge. Company leaders should focus on the experience that reflects customers' perceptions of a product's quality and value. Customers are seeking uniqueness in a product; customization makes a product unique and appeals to consumers' buying decisions (Keng

et al., 2014). Business owners should enhance virtual advertising and encourage online reviews to stimulate buyers' knowledge and desire to purchase a product (Keng et al., 2014). Customers obtained through virtual experiences and online product reviews demonstrated more brand awareness and were more susceptible to persuasion. The content of the online reviews provides valuable insights and detailed information about a product or service and becomes the most relevant source for customers making purchase decisions (Gensler et al., 2015). To optimize the quality of customers' shopping experiences, one of the key factors is to increase consumers' product knowledge level (Keng et al., 2014). The success of a business depends on the presence of active consumers, and implementing marketing strategy is an invaluable source in sustaining a business as well as increasing the up-selling and performance (Jones et al., 2015). Consumers' attitude affects the relationship marketing strategy, and understanding consumers' behavior is only beneficial to companies when improving and implementing these strategies (Harvey, Edrada-Ebel and Quinn, 2015). Approximately 39% of consumers had an unfavorable response toward some marketing tactics, but the results demonstrated approximately 70% of consumers' responded to marketing strategies positively (Jones et al., 2015). Kotylak, Michałowska, and Danielak (2015) conducted a quantitative survey study for an online shop with more than 100 respondents and noted that the business leaders should strive to build trust and understanding of consumers' behavior, as consumers' perspective will influence consumers' spending activities. The goal is for business leaders to achieve a competitive advantage by motivating repeat purchases and increasing customer satisfaction. Kotylak et al. concluded the top

challenges that business leaders face are a lack of satisfaction from previous purchases, a lack of communication between consumers, a delay of notifications of shipping information, and delayed delivery.

In contrast, Jones et al. (2015) noted the problems that negatively affect customer satisfaction are the indifference of a company's service and employees, dissatisfaction with products, and discovery of a better price and product from competitors. Consequently, adapting to an information society is important for businesses. E-commerce is a driver in an information society. Business leaders must improve their market understanding and integrate with their suppliers and vendors by adapting technology into their business operations (Zabukovšek et al., 2015). Internet use provides many opportunities, including lower prices and greater accessibility to diverse consumer groups. Consumers will be more likely to repurchase a product or service when they feel satisfied, which means they will generate positive emotions and create a commitment to the brand. Consumer satisfaction has a positive correlation with commitment and loyalty. Therefore, organizational leaders need the ability to improve the social image and corporate social reasonability (Pérez, García, Salmones, & Bosque, 2013).

Internet Marketing

Sawmy and Ladkoo (2015) explored the history of e-commerce, which began in the late 1970s, although many business leaders started to embrace online business in 2000. There are many benefits from conducting an e-business, including a reduction in human resources. However, there are still companies whose leaders are unwilling to change and accept the online business revolution in the marketplace; therefore, they tend

to struggle to sustain their businesses in a digitized market environment (Sawmy & Ladkoo, 2015). In an online shopping survey conducted through Worldpay Global, Sawmy and Ladkoo revealed that the reason a majority of online consumers chose online shopping was convenience and better prices compared with in-store options. In contrast, Sloan, Bodey, and Gyrd-Jones (2015) discovered that consumers prefer going to the physical store to engage in interactions with employees and to see and feel the products.

The Internet has transformed businesses into e-commerce markets in a virtual space where consumers can be from anywhere in the world (Rad et al., 2015).

Mallapragada, Grewal, Mehta, and Dharwadkar (2015) noted that effective marketing management is critical for achieving competitive advantages in the marketplace.

Mallapragada et al. also noted there is a positive effect on consumers' satisfaction when company leaders increase their companies' independence.

As technology advances, social sharing has become many marketing professionals' strategic concentration; for example, many consumers seek product reviews written by other consumers (Sloan et al., 2015). Consumers often reach out through an online community before making a purchase. Customers tend to believe other customers' perspectives are more credible than the information released from the company. Customer-to-customer communication is a valuable source for organizations. With careful monitoring, knowledge sharing is a key factor when building an online communication strategy. In Jones, Simmons, Packham, Bynon-Davies, and Pickernell's (2014) case study findings, information technology (IT) led to more business opportunities and increased business competitiveness in the marketplace. Organizational

leaders need to adopt proficient information communication technology skills, as information communication technology is a potential driver for ensuring business growth and sustainability (Jones et al., 2014). Jones et al. suggested that marketers should improve market knowledge and maintain a company website to meet the basic operational online management involved with stock levels, special offers, and promotions. Business websites have an immediate positive effect, contribute toward increased sales, and bring significant improvements to customer relationships. Jones et al. revealed that business leaders should use web tools to structuralize their IT strategy and noted there are many cost-effective online tools to support business technology practice. Fillis (2015) conducted a study to explore the adoption of technology for marketing and found that the use of technology for marketing in business settings created opportunities for stronger customer relationships. Technological skill has become the essential marketing tool for business leaders to promote their products and services (Fillis, 2015). However, Hassan, Nadzim, and Shiratuddin (2015) also discovered that many small business owners fail to incorporate their digital knowledge with their marketing strategies, as the owners must have specific goals for their online presence. Many business leaders approach their customers without having a formal marketing plan or measurement strategy. A combination of a lack of marketing planning and knowledge of technology has become a threat and a barrier to organization success. Alford and Page recommended a test-and-learn approach for business leaders to learn to develop a well-formulated marketing plan.

Using digital technology when engaging small businesses is part of the supply chain and customer relationship management and production process. Technology can be beneficial, but can also cause potential threats to a business. The potential disadvantage is marketers' insufficient knowledge and technological ability (Mazzarol, 2015). To remain competitive, marketers need to be able to implement their technology skills concurrently with their marketing strategies. Mazzarol (2015) found that companies whose leaders are using technologies that are more advanced are much more profitable than those who adopt only the basic level of technologies. Mazzarol concluded that if small business leaders advance technological abilities within their business, the effect on productivity would be positive. Technological advancement allows employees to respond efficiently to consumers and increases customer service satisfaction. Leaders of small businesses who fail to align with their digital technology ability and marketing strategies have a more sustaining risk (Dhar, 2015). When leaders translate higher levels of technology productivity into higher profitability, the level of inefficiency of labor and competitive intensity also increase (Ren & Dewan, 2015).

Hassan, Nadzim, and Shiratuddin (2015) conducted a quantitative study with more than 3,000 marketers on using social media to promote their businesses and discovered that 97% of participants used social media. Benefits included helping to reduce business costs, improving the quality of customer relationships, and increasing brand awareness without having to overspend on advertising (Hassan et al., 2015). Many businesses are still in their infancy with regard to using social media platforms as their marketing strategies and tools to create more business. Social media interactions can

serve as a communication tool for consumers to share information and feedback on products or services with small businesses. Each engagement online enables small business owners to connect with consumers. Online marketing provides opportunities to generate brand awareness and improve relationship marketing (Jaidka, Khoo, & Na, 2013). Social media is an active advertising tool for marketers and dominates consumers' spending decisions and intentions. By using segmentation, marketers can differentiate consumers' behavior and precisely target the right groups and categories. Noel found that the active consumer segment has the greatest effect on brand awareness, as the actives are open to social media communication and more likely to pass on product information to other consumers by sharing their feedback on various social media platforms (Noel, 2014). The other type of consumer group discussed is the talkers, who become the purchasing motivators, as sharing behavior promotes products throughout the social networking community.

Business outcomes increase when leaders effectively adapt information systems through personalization (Kaptein & Parvinen, 2015). Business leaders use technology to implement systems to serve as customer recommenders, pricing systems, and style options, as a recommender enables consumers to receive personalized products through digital marketing content (Hogarth-Scott, Watson, & Wilson, 1996). When organizational leaders can increase and employ multiple advertising channels, more online searches occur, and a company's brand has higher exposure rates (Laroche et al., 2013). Marketers should consider the consistency of long-term effects for total marketing impressions and online exposure. A large advertising campaign can stimulate buyers' search behavior and

drives more business to a company's website. Laroche et al. (2013) also emphasized the importance of conducting research on different products, as it may lead to creating a stronger strategy across different product categories. When business leaders increase user involvement through online marketing activity, such involvement will maximize brand exposure and searches on a company's brand (Laroche et al., 2013). Wu, Wen, Dou, and Chen (2015) explored the effectiveness of consumer brand acceptance through online communication and studied the results of brand evaluations by consumers. The findings indicated that when organizational leaders designed and invested in online communication creatively, the consumers' perspectives of the brand improved (Noel, 2014).

Creative online media generate interest through word of mouth and online community buzz (Wu et al., 2015). By encouraging consumers to contribute and share their feedback through online marketing activities, marketers can promote their products. Encouraging consumers to provide feedback also allows consumers to use their creative talents to promote products and influence the online community (Elkhani, Soltani, & Ahmad, 2014). Creative Internet marketing has become an essential tool for interacting and communicating with consumers. Wu et al. (2015) recommended that organizational leaders design their online marketing as creatively and uniquely as possible, as consumers will respond with positive feedback and brand reputation will improve.

Büyükbaykal (2015) discussed the varieties of information technologies available. Technology drives the forces for social change, and business leaders rely on technology as their foundation to share information quickly. Information technology has an effect on

almost all aspects of everyday life, ranging from education and transportation systems to the global economic system. Information sharing has contributed to the interconnected world and to time savings, as people no longer have to be in a certain place to perform their tasks. Consumers can use technology tools to compensate for the place and time differences when sharing information. Technology communication is a primary tool for business leaders and is a growing fundamental need for everyday life (Weber et al., 2015). Büyükbaykal emphasized the importance of education, as education serves as a medium of transferring new information, skills, and knowledge. Weigert (2013) noted that there is a strong correlation between marketing strategy and innovation performance. Companies whose leaders prepare for advancements in innovation are more likely to be successful because they are capable of finding a solution that brings customers satisfaction. When company leaders fail to fulfill customers' needs, they risk losing potential business. Sixty-five percent of business owners considered technology and market drivers as equally important (Weigert, 2013). Business owners must focus on market insights and consistently seek new technology improvements. Weigert noted that business owners should lead teams with a clear goal and with challenges that extend beyond the market limits.

Cummins, Peltier, and Dixon (2016) indicated that although many companies have tight budgets for advertising, business owners should not underestimate the power of digital advertising and online marketing. Digital advertising and online marketing affect both in-store and online sales. Fulgoni (2014) shared that over 60% of consumers spend time shopping on websites instead of purchasing items in physical stores.

Consumers have the ability to compare prices and find information through the Internet, and mobile technology enables even more flexible access to make saving and buying decisions (Truglio-Londrigan, 2015). Business owners and retailers should recognize it is essential to structure a well-planned marketing strategy with a digital campaign, as digital campaigns are one of the factors of a successful online or brick-and-mortar business.

Social media has become an essential networking tool for not only individuals but also companies by supports organization and enabled their marketing team to build and expand relationships with their consumers (Ho, 2014). Social media has changed consumer behavior from a marketing perspective. Organizational leaders use social media to share valuable resources, such as product and service information; to communicate; and to receive feedback from consumers for areas of improvement. Social media also allows high levels of involvement and participation and encourages interactions between organizations and consumers. Ho (2014) also noted that building a long-term relationship and repeated interactions will enhance relationships with consumers and create brand trust. Ho's findings indicated that the greater the brand trust consumers have for a company, the more positive the effect will be for community identification. When consumers share feedback with each other through an online platform, the reviews help marketers gain a better understanding of consumers' motivation and purchasing decisions (Truglio-Londrigan, 2015). By actively engaging with consumers through social media platforms, negative comments from unsatisfied customers have decreased. Keinänen and Kuivalainen (2015) indicated that a correlation exists between social media use and the benefits to a company. Marketers use social

media as a medium to communicate with customers, as well as an effective tool to benefit marketing relationships (Keinänen & Kuivalainen, 2015).

Marketers can use online platforms to connect and engage with the consumer community (Yap & Lee, 2014). It is crucial for marketers to understand the effect of the online community on consumers' perspectives and decision behavior. The modern information age has affected consumers' buying motivations. Yap and Lee (2014) recommended that marketers improve their company's relationship with consumers by designing their marketing strategies with high levels of involvement and engagement in the online community. When marketing practitioners can effectively communicate with consumers through an online community, the results will fulfill consumers' emotional attachments as well as provide valuable positive feedback. Yap and Lee (2014) also noted that marketers must focus on the direct and indirect effects of consumer loyalty behavior. Marketers must focus on cultivating a database of online information on the quality, accessibility, and attraction of the brand for the organization. Grossberg (2015) conducted a quantitative study with 21 interviews with individuals from three companies. According to the findings of the interviews, Grossberg indicated that when building long-term relationships with consumers, the marketing team must advance its technological knowledge and communication skills. Building the right relationship with the right people and making the right decisions is one of the many key factors in building a sustainable business (Bauman, 2015).

Branding

Branding is a valuable marketing tool used to build up consumers over time and can serve as the foundation for marketing activities for small businesses (Agostini, Filippini, & Nosella, 2014). Branding is a marketing prerequisite for all small business owners (Asamoah, 2014). Brand building requires a concerted and effective effort in both management and implementation (Miller, 2014). Some researchers noted that branding is particularly important for new small business owners, as traditional small business owners do not give much thought to brand and marketing activities because of capital constraints and the globally competitive environment (Asamoah, 2014). The lack of financial resources can make it challenging to invest in managerial skills, technology, and marketing activities (Classen et al., 2014). Branding creates brand awareness and is a necessary marketing tool for small business leaders to create sustainable businesses (Asamoah, 2014). Achieving the purpose of branding requires organization owners and marketing teams to build up and maintain long-term perseverance. Extant literature included suggestions to focus on executing goals and integrating marketing activities into a business (Resnick, Cheng, Simpson, & Lourenço, 2016).

Branding serves to personify the products and services a company offers and allows consumers to identify the brand, as the brand may link to the logo, trademarks, or slogans. All these symbols may serve as a means to create loyalty among consumers toward a brand (Agostini et al., 2014). A brand evokes consumers' desires and helps create an image that consumers can associate with their identity. A brand is a marketing tool that substitutes for communication between consumers and a company (Asamoah,

2014). Brand images create emotional attachments and perceptions from consumers. The emotional aspect has an association with what consumers think of products and services (Arai, Ko, & Ross, 2014). Brand positioning refers to active marketing communication between an organization and the target market group (Manel, 2014). Brand management is vital to building a strong brand orientation and marketing performance, as brand orientation includes brand identity in close engagement with target consumers (Gundala & Khawaja, 2014). When small business leaders effectively implement and execute brand-oriented management that includes market research to understand more about their competitors, profitability and competitive advantage will increase (Gundala & Khawaja, 2014).

Buil, Martínez, and Chernatony (2013) investigated how company leaders should manage brands, as brand equity is an essential marketing activity and holds monetary value for organizations. Successful marketing strategies include understanding brand equity in different marketing segments and understanding how brand equity influences consumers' behavior. Buil et al. discussed brand equity in detail and noted it consists of paying a premium price, brand loyalty, brand preference, and purchasing intention. Buil et al. examined the cause of consumers' behavior decisions on their willingness to purchase products and services at a premium cost and proposed that although brand awareness is necessary to help bring in positive influence, brand equity is crucial for creating value and increasing purchase intention. Consumers are willing to pay a premium price when they perceive quality and commit to a brand (Buil et al., 2013).

Gibson and Seibold (2014) suggested that marketers should extend a company's brand image to quality to align with socially responsible environmental values. Gibson and Seibold recommended marketers who develop strategies should not only integrate personal need and satisfaction but also recognize the power of being socially responsible to achieve positive marketing outcomes for businesses. Shams, Alpert, and Brown (2015) investigated consumers' perceptions about brand innovativeness through a self-report scale collected from managers and found that innovative thinking generates growth and profitability for almost any business and helps business leaders create sustainable competitive advantage to compete with other companies. The success of many firms depends on how consumers perceive the brand. Shams et al. also suggested that business owners use technological features to create product innovativeness or use attractive packaging designs and bright and flamboyant logo colors and brand name properties to create feelings of surprise and happiness to signal brand innovativeness. Consumers' judgment about brand is a key contributor to the success of a business (Shams et al., 2015). When companies successfully achieve brand and market orientation, the leaders will establish reputable brand recognition, which will help strengthen the company's competitive advantage (Urde, Baumgarth, & Merrilees, 2013). As information is transparent to the marketplace, it becomes a greater challenge for business leaders to control how their consumers perceive their brands and products (Holliman & Rowley, 2014). Brand reputation plays a pivotal role in social media marketing, and buyers recognize the reputation of brands (Holliman & Rowley, 2014). As a brand becomes more established, it provides stakeholders and leaders of other organizations confidence

when entering a committed business relationship. A better brand reputation may involve paying a higher cost, such as paying more for premium digital content with special features, for marketing research on online content or background music. Business leaders should understand that customers should also support the creation of such content.

Biedenbach, Bengtsson, and Marell (2015) indicated that word-of-mouth information could affect businesses' consumer-based relationships. Word of mouth is a reflection of both consumers' behavior in business activity as well as business-to-customer activity. Marketing practitioners should define both buyers' and suppliers' relationship strengths to identify the factors that contribute to high-quality relationships (Biedenbach et al., 2015). During business transactions, word-of-mouth information plays an important role when consumers share their feedback about products and services, share their enthusiasm, and make recommendations to influence consumer transactions. When consumers, buyers, and suppliers are content and trusting in their business transactions, they will stay loyal and recommend the business through word of mouth (Biedenbach et al., 2015). Ekman, Erixon, and Thilenius (2015) investigated how IT can support companies with internal marketing and purchasing transactions. Information technology can increase customer satisfaction rates by integrating IT systems into customer relationship management and company resource planning. Information technology systems are essential for companies to collect and store data transactions, customer preferences, sales records, and suppliers' strengths and weaknesses. Ekman et al. noted that marketers have not extracted the maximum potential from IT systems and

proposed that IT systems should align with a company's marketing practices to improve the company's marketing functionality.

Marketing in Small Businesses

Marketing is an activity and process for engaging and communicating. Marketing creates customer value and includes an emphasis on building close relationships with consumers and society (McDonagh & Prothero, 2014). Small businesses must have a marketing strategy based on meeting customers' needs and exceeding the quality of the services or goods from the competition to generate a consumption relationship with customers in a competitive marketplace (Yu, Ramanathan, & Nath, 2014). Marketing involves research, branding, and cultivating a relationship with customers, sales, and development. An example is the correlation between marketing management's effect and company performance (Kozlenkova, Samaha, & Palmatier, 2014). Marketing provides long-term mutual benefits between customers and companies. An organization leader's goal is to increase customers' satisfaction and develop a loyal relationship. The higher the degree of customer satisfaction is, the greater the commitment the customer will have to the brand (Romero et al., 2014). Consequently, leaders of small businesses must build strong marketing capabilities, including the ability to combine employees' skills with available resources, knowledge of the competition, and target markets to enhance their competitive advantage (Yu et al., 2014). McDonagh and Prothero (2014) concurred that the focus of sustainability marketing must be on building a long-term relationship with consumers.

To maximize business profit, small business leaders need to harness and improve their marketing resources and capabilities (Martensen & Mouritsen, 2014). The market-oriented focus is on understanding targets as well as fulfilling customers' needs (O'Cass, Ngo, & Siahtiri, 2015). O'Cass et al. (2015) also found that a company's marketing orientation does not directly influence business performance, but is largely responsible for producing marketing knowledge resources that can help enhance consumers' satisfaction and financial performance. When marketing management has a combination of both marketing ability and resource knowledge across other functional areas, the company will have more opportunities to achieve goals. Chikweche (2013) contended that company leaders needed to consistently review customers' needs and update their marketing strategies. Chikweche also suggested that companies that are more market oriented tend to adapt to rapidly changing market dynamics. Some factors that serve to motivate business owners to remain sustainable and compatible, as well as to reduce threats of new entrants, are market experience and capital investment (Chikweche, 2013). Companies that lack marketing strategy structures such as market research will not perform as well as the companies that use motivators and consistently improve their strategic framework to meet the market's needs (Martensen & Mouritsen, 2014). Many traditional business owners still do not consider marketing strategy a business planning priority (Rollins et al., 2014). Owners of smaller businesses tend to embrace and implement social media in marketing as their long-term plan (Rollins et al., 2014). However, many businesses suffer from a lack of marketing skills and fail to use social media in marketing. Based on Rollins et al.'s (2014) findings, business owners and

marketers should continuously adapt and enhance their technology skills in social media and digital marketing.

Martensen and Mouritsen (2014) conducted an Internet survey with a sample of more than 400 marketing managers and provided suggestions based on the results. The findings indicated business owners should learn about marketing investments and understand the effectiveness of marketing implementation. One of the few priorities for companies is to retain competent employees and respond to the marketplace in a timely fashion. Martensen and Mouritsen also discussed achieving the value of a marketing strategy. In this situation, company leaders must understand how to prioritize marketing investments based on business performance and marketing capabilities. The activities link to technology development, customer-orientation satisfaction, cost control, new product development, marketing planning, communication, and implementation (Martensen & Mouritsen, 2014). Marketing activities help increase the efficiencies of marketing managerial actions and providing innovation and collaboration to businesses (Galpin, Whittington, & Bell, 2015). Marketing improves and maintains customer relationships and helps fulfill market needs, and as a result reduces business failures.

Fillis (2015) explored entrepreneurial marketing endeavors through the lens of successful biography analysis. Fillis noted the importance of using marketing operational skills to maximize business profits and discovered that small business owners' strong motivation and willingness to take risks and remain proactive and responsive to customer needs was central to business success. Fillis concluded that because small businesses have limited resources in comparison to larger corporations, it essential for small

business owners to exploit growth opportunities, continuously improve customers' long-term relationships, and focus on the strength of delivering meaningful and extra value to customers.

Views Related to Previous Research and Findings

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how small business owners successfully developed a well-formulated marketing strategy and sustained their start-ups for 5 years. Business survival rate depends on leaders' capability to develop and improve the quality of marketing strategies. Marketing strategies are essential for business leaders to learn information about their market and about consumer and company positioning to reduce the risk of failure in small businesses (Stelmokien & Endriulaitiene, 2015; Toaldo et al., 2013).

The findings from the literature review indicated that organizational leaders should focus on empowering consumers through Internet marketing and branding to deepen their customer relationships to create customer value and should focus on building close relationships with consumers and society to remain competitive in the marketplace (Chakravarty et al., 2014; Saarijärvi et al., 2013). The focus of sustainability marketing must be on building long-term relationships with consumers and identifying opportunities to create new products and services (Andries & Czarnitzki, 2014; McDonagh & Prothero, 2014). Customer engagement activity is a top priority for many marketers, as it allows consumers to exchange product or service information with other customers, which extends interest in consumer communities (Dessart et al., 2015). Positive financial returns are more likely in the long run when business leaders

incorporate consumers' emotional connection when creating products and services (Fang et al., 2015). Chakravarty et al. (2014) indicated that more than 80% of successful small businesses are dependent on customers' satisfaction and purchasing experience.

Chakravarty et al. (2014) also noted that all business leaders must adapt to the challenges of electronic marketing management. Fifty-two percent of small business owners have made Internet marketing customer relationship management as their priority in strategic planning (Rad et al., 2015). Electronic customer relationship management is critical to the success of a business (Mallapragada et al., 2015), and marketers need to implement their technology skills concurrently with their marketing strategies (Mazzarol, 2015).

Many small businesses leaders are still learning to use technology and social media platforms as their marketing strategies and tools to create more business (Jaidka et al., 2013). A combination of a lack of marketing planning and knowledge of technology has become a threat and a barrier to the success of organizations (Fillis, 2015). Small business owners should consider the consistency of long-term effects for total marketing impressions and online exposure, and marketers should consistently seek new technology improvements and advancements (Laroche et al., 2013; Weigert, 2013). Lastly, branding is a marketing tool that serves as the foundation for marketing activities for small businesses (Agostini et al., 2014; Asamoah, 2014). Small business leaders who effectively execute branding management that includes market research to understand more about their competitors may experience profitability and achieve competitive advantage (Gundala & Khawaja, 2014).

Porter's competitive strategy theory was the dominant framework in this study that involved finding effective strategies for businesses. Business owners who implement Porter's competitive strategies are more likely to achieve sustainability for the first 5 years (Banker et al., 2014). Teti et al. (2014) noted that Porter's strategy is relevant for leaders pursuing sustainability and suggested that organizational leaders need to learn and invest new knowledge and technology skills continually for their organizations to maintain a superior performance and gain a sustainable competitive advantage (Teti et al., 2014). A qualitative case study method was the most suitable method for determining which effective marketing strategies small business owners need to help sustain their businesses for the first 5 years in operation.

Summary and Transition

The literature review included both scholarly articles and company marketing documents. The review began with identifying the marketing tools and techniques that small retail business owners use to sustain their businesses for the first 5 years. Following the introduction was a search for insight into successful marketing strategies used by small business leaders to sustain their businesses for the first 5 years. Some of the marketing strategies I found included implementing Porter's competitive strategy theory and understanding the importance and the characteristics of small businesses, Internet marketing, and branding and marketing in small businesses.

Section 1 included an introduction to the essence of this qualitative study and included foundational elements of the study: (a) problem statement; (b) purpose statement; (c) nature of the study; (d) central research question; (e) interview questions

that contributed knowledge to the research question by aligning with the conceptual framework; (f) operational definitions; (g) assumptions, limitations, and delimitations; and (h) significance of the study. The literature review included the following topics: (a) overview of competitive strategy theory, (b) importance and characteristics of small businesses, (c) consumer marketing relationships, (d) Internet marketing, (e) branding, and (f) views related to previous research and findings. The purpose of the qualitative case study was to explore the marketing strategies that small retail business owners used to sustain their businesses in the first 5 years. In this study, I collected data from five small business owners through open-ended, semistructured interview questions.

Section 2 will include an in-depth discussion of the research method and design, population and sampling, data collection instruments, and techniques used in the study. To ensure research reliability and validity, Section 2 will also include a detailed description of data collection and organization techniques, data analysis techniques, and reliability and validity. Section 3 will include the research findings, a detailed description of the empirical evidence, and the conceptual framework related to the research question. In addition, Section 3 will contain a discussion regarding implications for social change, research recommendations, and research reflections.

Section 2: The Project

This section will include an in-depth discussion of the method I used for this study on marketing strategies employed by a selection of small business owners. In this section, I will discuss my role as the researcher, the research design, the population and sampling, the data collection method, and the data analysis method. I will also discuss the steps I followed to ensure the confidentiality, validity, and reliability of the study findings.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the marketing strategies that small retail business owners used to sustain their businesses for the first 5 years. The population for this study was five successful retail-based small businesses in New York and New Jersey. The sample was 5 small business owners who had successfully developed a well-formulated marketing strategy and sustained their start-ups for the first 5 years. Entrepreneurs might be able to use the results of this study to launch enterprises using marketing strategies that will ensure they create a sustainable business. The implications for positive social change include creating stability in the local economy and decreasing business failure rates by using marketing strategies effectively. As a start-up becomes successful, business owners may choose to support charity events and community outreach programs to catalyze positive social change.

Role of the Researcher

I held face-to-face interviews with small business owners located in New York and New Jersey. I did not have a personal relationship with any of the small business owner participants. To minimize the potential effects of familiarity on the results of the interview, the participants were not members of my immediate social or professional network. Although my profession involves working closely with a marketing team as a liaison between the marketing team in a U.S. office and an overseas production team, my career experience did not affect my research findings. To mitigate bias in my research, I clearly acknowledged my career experiences, ensured they remained separate from my research, and was consistently mindful of them when conducting my research study.

I followed the ethical principles and guidelines for researching human subjects as provided in the *Belmont Report* (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979). The *Belmont Report* requires (a) interviewees to sign a consent form to participate in the interview; (b) researchers to respect participants' freedom of voice and judgment; and (c) researchers to protect individuals and society from harm by minimizing harmful practices, maximizing their benefits, and treating individuals equally (Yin, 2014). I created an environment where participants were able to answer the interview questions as freely as possible, without fear of having their responses rejected. The informed consent form that the participants signed to express their willingness to participate detailed everything they could expect from the interview. I did not withhold any information from them. They were aware that no risk would occur from answering the interview questions. The interview questions were clear, so participants did not find it difficult to understand

them, and I adjusted my questioning based on the participants' language, rationality, and maturity.

An interview protocol can serve as a guide to gathering data from participants (Yin, 2014). Farrell (2015) highly recommended implementing a semistructured interview protocol to allow in-depth engagements and to clarify potential miscommunications through dialogue. For this study, I created an interview protocol that included interview questions pertaining to the main research question. The focus of the interview questions was exploring the marketing strategies used to own and manage a small business successfully. The questions I developed were consistent across participants to ensure there was no researcher bias. Researchers use interview protocols to ensure that even though there are different participants with different styles of responding, researchers will still be able to ask the same questions in the same way (Yin, 2014).

I also created informed consent letters and gave them to the potential participants to sign if they expressed a willingness to participate in the study. I then conducted the interviews with the participants individually and transcribed each interview. After collecting the necessary data through the interviews, analyzing the data and presenting the findings followed. According to Yin (2014), research bias may affect various phases of the research process, including data collection and the analysis. To minimize personal bias prior to interviewing participants, I triangulated the data to review the findings for any researcher bias by using multiple resources to establish and check for accuracy. I also enhanced the validity of the results by incorporating member checking, which involved

sending the interview records to the participants via e-mail to ensure my interpretation did not leave any gaps within the responses.

Participants

The participants were five small businesses owners in New York and New Jersey who had successfully owned and managed their small business for at least 5 years. After I completed the process of identifying successful small business owners as defined by the SBA (2015), potential participants needed to meet the following qualifications: (a) owned a small business in New York or New Jersey at the time of the study with a minimum of five employees, (b) highly involved in marketing activities to promote products and services, and (c) acted as a chief decision maker.

Purposive sampling was appropriate for my selection of five participants identified as having developed marketing strategies for their small businesses in New York and New Jersey to be successful for at least 5 years. A purposive sampling is a judgment technique in which researchers decide what needs exploring in depth and choose suitable participants who can and are willing to provide information that contributes to the research (Gambari & Yusuf, 2016). My thought process behind this choice was that individuals who had firsthand experience owning and marketing a small business successfully for 5 years might have had insights into the most useful and successful marketing strategies to maintain a profitable small business within these two states. Limiting the problem to qualified small business owners limited the number of individuals eligible to participate.

Each of the five participants selected received information about the study procedures and received a request to sign an informed consent form from me. I then conducted individual, face-to-face interview sessions with each participant. Member checking and probing questions provided me with an opportunity to continue to inquire into new sources until there was no new information and data saturation occurred. Data saturation is the point at which adding new content does not add any new insights or themes in emerging data (Vaitkevicius & Kazokiene, 2013). Data saturation is vital because it addresses the content validity of a study. Researchers can conduct multiple interviews until they reach data saturation (Tsang, 2014). Ensuring data saturation involves achieving the same findings through continuous interviews or interviewing until the data obtained make no further contributions to a study (Agostini et al., 2014).

The procedures I used for study sample recruitment included contacting small business owners in New York and New Jersey who met the inclusion criteria via phone and e-mail as well as through business seminar events and other business networking events and inviting them to participate. I sent an informed consent letter through e-mail to potential participants who identified themselves as meeting the criteria and having an interest in participating. The informed consent letter included an explanation of the rights of individuals as participants of the study, the study procedures, the process I had chosen to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants and the data collected, as well as the process to ensure no violations of any ethical guidelines would occur. Potential participants signed the informed consent form to indicate they understood their role in the study.

Research Method and Design

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to learn about marketing strategies used by individuals who operate and manage their own small business. In line with the purpose of this research, I conducted a qualitative multiple case study, as this research method and design was the most suitable to complete the study and obtain the desired information to answer the overarching research question. The next subsections will include details of the method and research design.

Research Method

Researchers should choose the correct research method to provide meaningful results (Yin, 2014). For this study, I chose a qualitative approach. The qualitative research method is the best approach for developing an understanding of management design (Dey, Binsardi, Prendergast, & Saren, 2013). In this qualitative study, I investigated and uncovered practitioners' work experience through in-depth interviews to develop a clear understanding of the process of building small businesses that sustain for the first 5 years. Researchers should use the qualitative method to discover the essence of a phenomenon (Gunaydin & McCusker, 2014). Researchers also use the qualitative methodology to provide deep insight into work involvement on multiple levels (Garcia & Gluesing, 2013). Galloway et al. (2015) suggested using qualitative methods to study businesspeople or entrepreneurship-related topics to develop a rich understanding and engagement with the participants. Furthermore, Yin (2014) noted that the qualitative method is the most suitable method to learn about and explore people's experience.

Accordingly, I chose the qualitative methodology as suitable for identifying and examining the techniques the participating small business owners used effectively.

Researchers base quantitative methods on statistical analysis or interpretation to determine the relationships and differences between two or more variables (VanScoy & Evenstad, 2015). A quantitative approach is more suitable for studying trends across large groups by mathematically measuring the trends using rating scales or preference ranks (Vaitkevicius & Kazokiene, 2013). Collecting statistical trends across a large group was not an effective way to gather specific data for this study, as each method used by successful small business owners would have subtle nuances that the excess data would obscure. Mixed methods research is an approach that includes both qualitative and quantitative data, such as demographic and numeric data, that draw on all possibilities to obtain the findings (VanScoy & Evenstad, 2015). The mixed methods approach is useful for collecting both quantitative data and qualitative data (Gunaydin & McCusker, 2014). As there were no statistical data to interpret, both the quantitative and the mixed methods approaches were inappropriate for this study. My goal was to identify and understand what marketing strategies small business owners used to sustain their business for the first 5 years; therefore, a qualitative research methodology was appropriate.

Research Design

I employed a multiple case study design in this qualitative study. Researchers design case studies to explore situations, activities, or individuals in detail by collecting qualitative data (VanScoy & Evenstad, 2015). For the purpose of this study, the case study was the best approach for collecting data as a case study design supports the

collection and investigation of data within a complex and detailed context (see Yin, 2014). VanScoy and Evenstad (2015) noted that a case study approach is an ideal method to employ to learn interviewees' experiences in interviews and through in-depth data collection by using open-ended questions rather than through numeric data collection. Exploring the marketing strategies of five small business owners involved considering each business owner a unique case. Each interview allowed me to learn and understand the marketing strategies that the small business owners within each case used to sustain the business for at least 5 years.

Another qualitative method I considered but determined not appropriate for this particular study was a phenomenological research design. Researchers conduct phenomenological research to investigate topics based on participants' experiences and personal perspectives, which can be particularly useful when studying information from everyday life (VanScoy & Evenstad, 2015). The focus of phenomenology is on understanding individuals' experience and revealing the essence of their lived experience of the phenomenon, instead of focusing on the properties of the experience (Tomkins & Eatough, 2013). The focus of this particular study was not the experiences of small business owners who marketed their businesses to be successful but on identifying what marketing strategies the small business owners used to operate and manage their small businesses successfully, and so, a case study was design was more appropriate.

Ethnographic research is another qualitative method used to understand a specific group; however, this method was also not appropriate for the study. The focus of ethnographic studies is different cultural settings within a society, with the primary

purpose of understanding the theory through human interactions (Huo et al., 2014).

Studies with an ethnographic design involve observing cultural relationships in day-to-day observations among participants instead of focusing on supporting a specific phenomenon within a contemporary context (Yin, 2014). The ethnographic design includes a high level of involvement and engagement with participants within their organization's culture and environment. The greatest drawback to this method is that the observation can be costly and time consuming (Stadler, Reid, & Fullagar, 2013).

Although the participants of this study were a select group within society, they were not from a particular culture, and the strategies used to manage and operate their small business successfully in society, rather than their experiences as a group, was the focus.

Therefore, the qualitative research design most appropriate for this study was a multiple case study design. Researchers use the case study research design to identify the real-life decisions made in the context of a chosen phenomenon (Guay, 2013; Yin, 2014). This study involved exploring the real-life decisions regarding marketing strategies used within the context of a small business that contribute to the success of the small business. A strength of the case study research design is the narrative description within the methodology (Yin, 2014). A narrative includes a specific activity, personal relationship, or group interpretation, which in this case was operating and managing a small business in New York or New Jersey and the owners' interpretation of marketing strategies that contributed to the success of their business. Researchers use the case study research design to learn the actions taken within a given context and to collect responses from those involved (Halabí & Lussier, 2014). Using a multiple case study research approach

provided insight into the marketing practices and strategies small business owners in New York and New Jersey used to be successful.

Population and Sampling

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to identify the marketing strategies used by five small business owners who had successfully owned and managed their businesses. The population for this study was five successful small business owners in New York and New Jersey. Participants selected for this study had firsthand experience owning and marketing a small business successfully for at least 5 years in New York and New Jersey and were potentially capable of providing insight into the most useful and successful marketing strategies used to maintain a profitable small business in these states.

Eligible participants met several qualifications. At the time of the study, participants owned a small business in New York or New Jersey with a minimum of five employees, had a high level of involvement in marketing activities to promote products and services, and acted as a chief decision maker. All participants indicated they met the qualifications by signing a consent form and through purposive sampling. Recruiting the sample involved contacting small business owners within New York and New Jersey via phone and e-mail, as well as through business seminar events and other business networking events. I selected seven small business owners to participate, although the study included only five; the additional two participants served as alternative participants if any participants changed their mind and withdrew from the study. Interviews took place with five small business owners who volunteered to participate in the study.

Member checking took place with each participant until data saturation occurred. Using multiple data sources can provide substantial and reliable data (Yin, 2014). The goal for participant selection in a specific study is to engage the individuals who can provide the most relevant and plentiful data regarding the topic; therefore, people who are most likely to be knowledgeable in the topic of interest must be the ones selected for the study (Yin, 2014).

A purposive sampling strategy was suitable for choosing the most information-rich cases to study. A purposive strategy is an ideal method to explore a targeted population group, especially for studying cases in small to medium organizations (Barratt, Ferris, & Lenton, 2015). A purposive sampling strategy provides broader perspectives across the resulting findings when compared to the snowball sampling method, which researchers use for collecting samples through referrals from participants (Hyysalo & Usenyuk, 2015). Barratt et al. (2015) also noted that the purposive sampling technique is the most effective and commonly used method when exploring participants' perspectives and experiences in depth in a study. Therefore, a purposive strategy was the most beneficial choice for my qualitative case study research.

Qualitative research designs tend to have a relatively small sample (Guo, Lu, Wu, & Zhang, 2015). To reach an appropriate sample size, researchers should not focus on a large volume of data, but on the quality of the sample (Guo et al., 2015). Researchers should be careful when planning for the sample size in the preliminary stages of research (Stadler et al., 2013). Therefore, the focus was on a smaller sample. A sample size of five participants was appropriate. The objective of this research was to collect sufficient data,

ensure the quality of the evidence, and achieve data saturation. Saturation occurs when results repeat and create a pattern, which signals the quality and completeness of a study (Marais & Wyk, 2014). Without data saturation, research during the process analysis phase is incomplete (Marais & Wyk, 2014). Data collection involved interviewing five participants until reaching the data saturation point. Recorded interviews with participants took place in a professional setting at a time convenient for the small business owners. A careful review of each participant's company website, newsletters, and online marketing activities prior to interviews revealed questions regarding these marketing avenues to include in individual participants' interview questions. The interviews took approximately 45 minutes to ensure sufficient time for the participants to answer each question thoroughly. If data saturation had not occurred with five participants, I would have invited more participants using targeted sampling or using the snowballing method by asking the five participants to provide the names of people they knew who would be familiar with the topic.

Ethical Research

Research is a tool used to obtain new information by investigating and reviewing existing sources to reach new conclusions and establish facts. Researchers must be able to protect each interviewee's privacy throughout the research process (McLaughlin & Alfaro-Velcamp, 2015). To ensure the ethical protection of data in a study, researchers should only include individuals who are willing to participate (Yun, Han, & Lee, 2013). Receipt of approval to conduct research from Walden University Institutional Review Board (Approval No. 06-06-17-0499837) was the first step completed before contacting

individuals to participate in the study. All participants indicated their willingness to participate, and the study did not violate any ethical guidelines. Potential participants received a request to sign an informed consent form to ensure they understood their role in the study. All potential participants received the informed consent form and provided their informed consent before interviews and data collection began. Signing the consent form indicated that they had read the explanation of the study, agreed that their participation would be voluntary, and understood that the study would include a coding system to ensure confidentiality. Researchers use consent forms to protect the privacy of individuals willing to participate in studies (Wallace & Sheldon, 2015); individuals who decline to participate are not be subject to negative consequences. Participants who wished to withdraw from the study after agreeing to participate could do so without repercussions. Participants understood they only needed to contact me to express their desire to withdraw.

As part of the informed consent process, participants understood that there would be no incentives and that their participation would be voluntary and strictly based on their interest in the study. Participants were able to receive a copy of the findings of the study so they could take advantage of the insights gained from the research. To maintain confidentiality during response collection, all interviews included alphanumeric codes to replace participants' names. Using alphanumeric codes protected the participants' identity throughout the study. Interview data will remain in a locked and secure location for 5 years. Afterward, the destruction of both hard and soft copies will take place.

Data Collection Instruments

In this qualitative case study, I was the primary data collection instrument. The reason for conducting this study was to collect data from various sources, including company website and marketing materials, and to interview small business owners to obtain in-depth information based on their own experiences. Collecting data using observational skill during the interview session is an effective way to collect reliable evidence (Jones et al., 2014).

Semistructured interviews with five retail small business owners in New Jersey and New York were the secondary data collection instrument. Researchers employ a semistructured interview technique to collect data to understand the participants' behavior to analyze the data more efficiently (Ahmad, 2014). The interview is the most effective method of data collection for studies, as it involves personal interaction and requires the cultivation of a trust-based relationship between a researcher and interviewees (Yin, 2014). After the participants signed the consent form, there was an opportunity to answer all questions or concerns that the participants might have had about the study. A prepared interview protocol (see Appendix A) served as a guide for the interview session. Researchers use protocols to structure interviews (Ahmad, 2014). The interview protocol might have led to a better constructed, step-by-step process throughout the interview session.

The semistructured interview method included asking probing questions and obtaining participants' opinions. Due to the nature of semistructured questions, participants can answer in their own words (Yin, 2014). Researchers use a case study to

explore questions with strong support through multiple perspectives (Ahmad, 2014). In addition to interviews, other data sources included (a) the organization's website and other social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram; (b) observations of participants during a marketing meeting; and (c) physical artifacts such as marketing materials used in the store or storefront. Using different data sources provided in-depth information of the five distinct cases from which to observe and analyze the multiple perspectives of marketing strategies used by small business owners to be successful.

The interview included 10 open-ended questions aligned with the research question and recorded using an application on my iPhone called Voice Record Pro. All the transcribed interview files will remain in a password-locked data file. Each question was suitable for exploring the participants' use of specific marketing strategies to operate and manage their business successfully. To ensure the reliability and validity of my research data, NVivo software served to validate and enhance the accuracy of the interpreted and coded data to identify themes. In addition, I enhanced validity by using multiple forms of evidence, including interviews and official documentation from the participants' companies. Multiple sources of evidence add rigor to a study through triangulation to obtain a well-rounded understanding of a phenomenon (Yin, 2014). An interview protocol ensured consistency throughout the interview process to capture small business owners' experiences related to their successful marketing strategies for helping the business sustain the first 5 years (see Appendix A). Member checking helped to avoid internal validity concerns. Higman and Pinfield (2015) noted that the essence of validity is the integration of evaluative judgment from the collective insights of all participants.

Member checking and evaluating participants' validation of the research findings helps to ensure a study does not leave any gaps within responses (Higman & Pinfield, 2015).

Participants had an opportunity to review their interview responses, my interpretation of the transcribed interviews, and my notes taken during the interview for accuracy.

Participants also had the opportunity to add any additional thoughts related to marketing strategies used for their small business.

Data Collection Technique

After receiving approval to conduct this study from the Institutional Review Board, the next step was to contact small business owners via telephone and e-mail to explain the purpose and the benefits of the study. Individuals who agreed to participate in the study received a consent form to sign before interviews began. Participants set an interview location and time convenient to them. Each interview began with an explanation of the purpose of the study and a review of the consent form to allow any questions regarding the study. Participants understood that their identification and information would remain confidential and that they had the right to withdraw from the study. Before each interview, a review of the company's website and any online marketing materials, including newsletters, Internet advertisements, and marketing blogs took place. In addition, participants received an invitation to provide any physical artifacts related to marketing their small business. Physical artifacts could include past and current marketing materials, such as magazine, newspaper, or coupon advertisements; signage; or brochures. Participants were able to discuss each artifact and provide information about the marketing strategies used in the respective firms.

Attending participants' marketing meetings served as an opportunity to learn about actions and discussions pertaining to the strategies used for operating and managing a small business successfully.

Interviews were the primary data collection technique. Semistructured face-to-face interviews are the most productive and appropriate data collection technique for qualitative research. The advantages of employing a semistructured interview include flexibility and capability to retrieve detailed, in-depth, and rich personal experiences, views, and opinions within the interview responses. Researchers use semistructured interviews to explore experiences while modifying the pace and the way to address the questions (Hunter & Cox, 2014). Another advantage is that a semistructured interview method allows researchers to use open-ended questions to have more opportunities to engage on a personal level of response during the interview session (Ahmad, 2014). When a study includes open-ended interview questions, respondents can express themselves freely, share insights and experience, and provide detailed responses (Hunter & Cox, 2014). Researchers also use open-ended interview questions to ask follow-up or other resourceful questions that can be beneficial to the findings (Jones et al., 2014). The disadvantage of semistructured interviews is they often include observations and therefore have a tendency to reflect biased opinion (Yin, 2014). Participants provided documentation that included online marketing materials for review and analysis. The advantage of using documentation as data is it saves time in interviews and is helpful for tracing the history of businesses (Williams & Gemperle, 2015). A disadvantage of using

documentation as a data collection method is that participants may intentionally withhold information that they do not want to reveal (Yin, 2014).

Member checking helped to ensure the reliability and validity of the data collected and interpreted in the transcribed interviews. Member checking also serves to enhance and strengthen a study (Trepal, Stinchfield, & Haiyasoso, 2014). Each participant received a copy of the interpretation of the interview session via e-mail and was able to provide comments or corrections in a follow-up phone call. As a form of confidentiality and protection, each business owner received a code, such as SM1, SM2, SM3, SM4, and SM5, where SM referred to small business owner. Each data code represented the small business and the participant. Using member checking, methodological triangulation, and an audit trail increases the trustworthiness of findings and strengthens data credibility (Collins & Winter, 2014). Researchers apply member checking to assess the accuracy of themes and findings based on participants' experience and correspondence during the interview session (Higman & Pinfield, 2015). Using semistructured interview responses and other collected data sources was suitable for conducting an analysis of multiple cases to answer the research question in this study.

Data Organization Techniques

The data organization tools used were Zotero, Microsoft Word, Microsoft Excel, and research logs. All participants' correspondence will remain in secure, electronic, password-protected files on a USB drive for 5 years. Properly planning data organization increases the efficiency and credibility of a study (Lahat, Adali, & Jutten, 2015). The goal for transcribing each audio recording was to capture each participant's entire interview.

Participants member-checked the transcripts and responded to probing questions to provide additional information until no new information was available. Participants were able to read the transcript and my interpretations, which prompted additional thoughts for them to share. After member checking was complete, I assigned codes for each participant in Microsoft Excel and logged their responses to the open-ended questions. Participant identities should remain anonymous and secure (Wagstaff & Williams, 2014); the participant identification codes used were SM1, SM2, SM3, SM4, and SM5. Codes protect participants' confidentiality and identity (Amit & Hogarth, 2013).

Journals, data, and references included individual categories and themes.

Organizing the data collected is a critical feature for successful research (McCormick, Lee, Cesare, Shojaie, & Spiro, 2015). Researchers can manage and store reference sources using Zotero licensed software (Amit & Hogarth, 2013) to organize and retrieve detailed information from the web-based storage management platform through access secured with a password. The research file also included the scanned signed consent forms. All files were only accessible with passwords that no other parties knew. I am the only person with access to the files. All the raw data materials will remain in a locked cabinet and the interview responses and other business artifacts will remain stored electronically for 5 years in a hard drive with password protection.

Data Analysis Techniques

Yin (2014) recommended using three analysis strategies for analyzing case study data. These analysis strategies are (a) relying on propositions to shape data collection, (b) developing a case framework for organizing the case study, and (c) considering rival

explanations for qualitative and quantitative data. Finding an appropriate analysis strategy is critical for finding the answers to research questions (Finfgeld-Connett, 2013; Yin, 2014). For this study, I relied on a case description or framework and found rival explanations through data analysis. The more rival explanations that a researcher addresses, the more trustworthy the results will be (Stacey, Pollock, & Crawford, 2015). Developing a case framework provides an anchor for a study and includes the literature and personal experiences as its basis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A framework continues to develop as themes emerge from data analysis, and returning to the conceptual framework ensures the analysis is reasonable in scope and that it provides structure for the final report (Yin, 2014).

Qualitative researchers use inductive data as a tool set to explore the trends, patterns, themes, and categories in a study (Harrison & Rouse, 2015). The interview sessions served as the primary data source. Descriptive categories of participant responses included words, numbers, and phrases. Employing NVivo 10 software supported the analysis of the interview transcripts during the research. NVivo 10 is a program qualitative researchers commonly use to gather open-ended interview questions and answers. In turn, researchers can convert the questions into documents and transform them into themes and trends (Yin, 2014). Transferring interview transcripts into NVivo 10 populates and identifies the commonalities of data given by participants (Woods, Paulus, Atkins, & Macklin, 2015).

Analyzing the data included a focus on addressing the research question. Themes generated from each participant's data related to the research question centered on small

businesses and marketing strategies used for managing a successful small business.

Themes of similarities and differences need special attention (Curtis & Davis, 2014).

Similar analysis approaches are necessary with artifacts collected from participants and observations of participants (Curtis & Davis, 2014). Physical marketing artifacts analyzed included signage, newspaper advertisements, and magazine advertisements, as well as forms of online marketing materials, such as websites and social media platforms, to find themes, trends, similarities, and differences among the participating small businesses.

The qualitative content analysis involved an inductive process as well. This approach can involve using coding systems to categorize data for an accurate description, which improves the quality of the content analysis (Elo et al., 2014). Themes and trends from the analysis of each participant's data then underwent analysis against findings from other participants' data to determine the similarities and differences to form a cross-case synthesis.

The study included methodological triangulation, member checking, and an audit trail to strengthen the research design by integrating multiple sources of data to establish trustworthy results. Collecting data from only one source might result in insufficient evidence to make a conclusion (Trepal et al., 2014). Therefore, I triangulated the data obtained from the open-ended interviews with multiple qualitative data sources related to marketing the participants' small business, such as business websites, previously published marketing materials, newsletters, catalogs, and Internet advertisements. Researchers use triangulation to confirm findings, as triangulation reflects an attempt to obtain a thorough understanding of a phenomenon (Yin, 2014). Collecting data from

multiple sources supported the analysis of the interview responses to find differences and similarities. If researchers can substantiate various data sets with each other, the interpretations and conclusions drawn are likely to be credible and reliable (Mathooko & Ogutu, 2015; Yin, 2014). I transcribed interviews into a Microsoft Word document and securely stored all audio-recorded interview files. I e-mailed all participants a copy of my interpretations of their correspondence and conducted a follow-up member-checking interview to enhance the validity and reliability of the study. Researchers use member checking to determine the accuracy of interview data, and participants are able to approve the data collected by the researcher and thereby demonstrate the credibility of the interview data (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). I will provide a summary of results within 1 month after the completion of my study. Using an audit trail served to validate and enhance the accuracy of the detailed interpreted data and to locate all passages from participants who shared the same opinion. Using an audit trail benefits researchers through the verification and analysis of raw data and notes (Woods et al., 2015). I used an audit trail to generate a detailed description of the data collection and data analysis procedures in my research study.

Reliability and Validity

Researchers should consider the quality of a research design and identify correct measurements for the concepts and the findings of a study (Elo et al., 2014; Houghton et al., 2013; Yin, 2014). Addressing the quality of a study can include discussing the evaluation methods selected to establish dependability, credibility, transferability, and

conformability. Such methods may increase the trustworthiness and establish a chain of evidence for a case study.

Dependability

Member checking served to address the dependability of the data. Conducting member checking can indicate the accuracy of initial interpretations with participants. Using purposive sampling to identify and approach participants led to a higher likelihood of achieving data saturation at the completion of the five interviews. Researchers use member checking to determine the accuracy of interview data, and participants are able to approve data collected by the researcher and thereby demonstrate the credibility of the interview data. Participants had an opportunity to validate my interpretations from the content analysis to ensure the interpretations were valid. After data collection through interviews, observations, documentation, and online marketing strategies was complete, the analysis involved using data from each source to support the other data sources and to strengthen the study findings. Dependability often refers to the stability and the reliability of the data collected in a research study (Houghton et al., 2013). Reliability and validity ensure the quality and trustworthiness of the content in a qualitative study (Elo et al., 2014). Threats to research validity include personal biases, and Yin (2014) suggested using bracketing techniques to identify interviewees' experience and perceptions to avoid bias during the research process. I identified my personal beliefs and biased opinions prior to conducting the research. To establish dependability, researchers can employ methods such as member checking and validating interpretations against raw data (Agostini et al., 2014).

Credibility

Methodological triangulation served to establish credibility. Establishing credibility involves conducting a research study in a believable manner to enhance the value of the study (Elo et al., 2014; Houghton et al., 2013). The study involved recording interviews using an audio-recording iPhone application and collecting related official documentation and records to ensure the accuracy of the transcribed interview. In addition, the study involved using NVivo to identify and analyze themes from the various data resources. Yin (2014) noted that triangulation helps to establish validity by ensuring results reflect no bias and by enhancing the quality and credibility of the collected data.

Transferability

The external validity of qualitative research refers to the extent to which the findings of a case study are generalizable to other studies or to more than one setting (Houghton et al., 2013). Researchers can achieve transferability through data saturation, which will also ensure the validity of a study (Agostini et al., 2014). Ensuring data saturation involves achieving the same findings through continuous interviews or interviewing until the data obtained make no further contributions to a study (Agostini et al., 2014). Reaching data saturation has an effect on the quality of study findings and therefore on the credibility and validity of study findings (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Kasim & Al-Gahuri, 2015). The focus of data saturation is not on the quantity of the data collected but on the quality and depth of the data (Agostini et al., 2014; Fusch & Ness, 2015). Data saturation occurred by collecting rich and relevant data from multiple perspectives until no new themes or data emerged. If saturation had not occurred after interviewing the

sample of five small business owners, follow-up interviews would take place to obtain additional data until saturation occurred. Key informants are critical to the success of a case study; therefore, an interview can take place over an extended period of time rather than at a single sitting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 2014).

Conformability

Ensuring conformability involved using an audit trail and providing a detailed report of the data and a detailed interpretation of the data analysis. Establishing conformability is necessary; conformability means a researcher can confirm or check propositions made during the analysis process (Urhuogo, Addo, & Williams, 2014). Researchers can enhance the conformability of a qualitative study by creating an audit trail to ensure the data obtained during interviews and observations are accurate (Houghton et al., 2013; Urhuogo et al., 2014). Another term for the audit trail is a recording log maintained with detailed notes that researchers use to see the sequence of events and changes in the information collected (Elo et al., 2014; Urhuogo et al., 2014). Describing how to derive interpretations and conclusions from the data will establish the trustworthiness of the study through the dependability, credibility, transferability, and conformability of the study findings.

Transition and Summary

Section 2 included a discussion of the approach I used to conduct the qualitative research study on the marketing strategies employed by a selection of five successful retail-based small business owners located in New York and New Jersey. In this study, I employed a qualitative multiple case study design to collect data from multiple sources,

including physical artifacts, semistructured interviews, and observations, to answer the research question. Other topics I discussed in the section were the methods selected to organize, manage, and analyze the data collected and the steps taken to establish the dependability, credibility, transferability, and conformability of study findings.

Section 3 will include the findings of the study, including a detailed description of the analysis of the semistructured interview responses of small business owners, key findings, recommendations for further study, and implications for social change. Section 3 will also include a discussion of the application to professional practice, a detailed review of the data collected, and the findings related to the research question. I will end Section 3 with reflections on my doctoral study experience and a summary of the study conclusions.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore what marketing strategies small business owners used to sustain their businesses for the first 5 years. The data came from my interviews with five successful small business owners and from my review of marketing-related documentation and online resources used by the small business owners whose businesses were in New York and New Jersey. Using methodological triangulation of all the data sources, which included the interview data, website information, and social media marketing materials, I identified four emergent themes related to the marketing strategies used to ensure small business survival: (a) marketing knowledge and planning, (b) market research, (c) customer acquisition and retention, and (d) online marketing. My analysis of the collected data revealed a correlation between marketing strategies the owners used to generate profit and company sustainability.

Presentation of Findings

In this study, I collected data to address the overarching research question of: What are the marketing strategies small retail business owners use to sustain the business for the first 5 years? To generate and collect these data, I conducted qualitative semistructured interviews with the participants over a 3-week period. The duration of each interview was approximately 30 minutes. Additional data for this study also came from company online marketing materials and the published literature. Coding collected

data using NVivo was suitable for identifying reoccurring themes (see Weber et al., 2015). The four emergent themes I identified were (a) online marketing, (b) marketing knowledge and planning, (c) market research, and (d) customer acquisition and retention. After identifying the themes, I analyzed the findings using member checking and methodological triangulation. The competitive strategy theory served as the conceptual framework for exploring the overarching research question of this qualitative multiple case study. The competitive strategy aligned with both the literature and the themes. I added to the body of knowledge on this topic by comparing and examining the findings with the literature and the conceptual framework.

Themes

The first of the four themes that emerged from my analysis of the data was online marketing. Online marketing provides opportunities to generate brand awareness and improve relationship marketing (Jaidka et al., 2013). The second theme, marketing knowledge and planning, included participant statements that indicated business owners should expand knowledge continually and have a business marketing plan. The third theme, market research, emerged from participants' responses regarding the importance of organizational leaders understanding consumers' needs and preferences. The final theme was a focus on customer acquisition and retention, which some participants regarded as the core value of their business.

Theme 1: Online marketing. All participants noted that when business owners increase customer communication involvement through online marketing activity, the owners maximize brand exposure and searches on a company's brand (see Table 1).

Technological communication has affected business significantly, and leaders must focus on using online marketing tools to communicate with existing and prospective consumers. Online marketing communications can improve consumer's attitudes and buying decisions (Wu et al., 2015). The study results indicated that when small business owners invested in online marketing communications, it resulted in positive outcomes.

Table 1

Coding of Participants' Responses Related to Themes

Themes	Participants ^a	Responses ^b
Online marketing	5	29
Marketing knowledge and planning	4	18
Market research	3	11
Customer acquisition and retention	5	9
Total (duplicated)	17	67

^a Number of owners who answered interview questions. ^b Number of participant responses linked to the themes.

The Internet has become the primary marketing communication medium between businesses and consumers. Participant 3 suggested that business owners invest integrating online marketing strategy because almost 75% of customers at Participant 3's business read online reviews before visiting the business. Participant 5 recommended exposing the company's brand by sending complimentary products in exchange for Internet publicity and gaining exposure by having bloggers and Youtubers review product on public channels. The results of the reviews increased their revenues and online visibility. Participant 5 noted an aesthetically appealing presentation on a company's website is another key element to attract and connect with customers. Participant 3 expressed that the online marketing channels create opportunities and transparency for customers to access the information they need and noted that business owners should take advantage

of advanced online programs to collect consumer data and feedback and to track the results to make relevant decisions regarding marketing strategies. Eighty percent of the participants in the study noted that online reviews written by consumers have become the most successful online marketing strategy. When consumers share feedback and experience through an online platform, the reviews help marketers gain a better understanding of consumers' purchasing motivation (Gajendra & Wang, 2014). Customers read reviews to help them make purchasing decisions. Participant 3 stated that monitoring for negative comments and actively engaging with customers' feedback is also a key marketing strategy for building trust and promoting a company brand.

Participant 2 and Participant 3 both noted that companies optimize their online visibility by assigning the right keywords in the search engine. Both participants shared that it is crucial to identify the best related and the most profitable keywords that will be at the top of customer's search engine to drive the users to a business page. The participants indicated that choosing a particular keyword or keyword phrases that filter by the location and category would attract a potential audience.

The findings of this study were consistent with the literature I reviewed that indicated company leaders who prepare for advancements in online innovations are more likely to have successful companies because the leaders are capable of finding solutions that lead to customers satisfaction (see Fillis, 2015). Business owners must focus on market insights and consistently seek new technology improvements and advancements (Büyükbaykal, 2015; Moon & Lee, 2014). All the participants agreed that business owners should recognize the need to structure a well-crafted marketing strategy

integrated with online marketing tools and knowledge as Internet communication is a tool commonly used to sustain a business.

Theme 2: Marketing knowledge and planning. A lack of marketing knowledge and planning in business has become a threat and a barrier to the success of organizations (Fillis, 2015; Smith, Williams, Lowe, Rod, & Hwang, 2015). During the interview, Participant 1 shared a negative experience from soon after he began his business. Participant 1 failed to form a business plan due to a lack of marketing and business knowledge. He did not have any past experience with marketing and he did not finish college. All the participants stated that continuously learning new sources of business and marketing knowledge is a prerequisite to starting a business. Eighty percent of the participants in this study periodically enrolled in and sent their marketing managers to marketing seminar and training sessions to keep their business and marketing skills up to date. These participants claimed business knowledge and planning empower leaders and are guiding preconditions for sustaining a business.

Participant 5 had a similar experience as Participant 1, as Participant 5 had a lack of business planning knowledge and skills, and he mistakenly thought all he needed when starting a business was passion. Small business owners should consider the consistency of long-term effects for total marketing planning, and marketers should consistently seek innovative ideas for improvements and advancements (Wright, Wright, & Kooli, 2016). Participant 3 noted that business owners are responsible for staying as informed in their industry as possible, and business owners and marketing teams need to receive formal business training with a background or underlying education in marketing. Participant 1

and Participant 5 also noted the importance of actively learning new skills and integrating them into the marketing plan by visiting tradeshow and industry-related networking events. Participant 5 also sought more knowledge on marketing and business planning by listening to audiobooks and emphasized the necessity of keeping a company website current.

Eighty percent of the participants indicated the power of knowledge provided guidance and inspiration to the success of their businesses. Participant 5 shared that there was a time when the company's revenue grew but an accountant discovered that the company did not have enough return on investment due to an overexpenditure in marketing that was avoidable if the company would have had a marketing planning structure in place. A comprehensive marketing plan provides business owners complete control over their business and abides competitiveness in the marketplace (Keegan, Rowley, & Tonge, 2017; Mazzarol, 2015).

Theme 3: Market research. Effectively implementing market research to understand customers' thinking and to monitor market trends will lead to higher profits and competitive advantage (Gundala & Khawaja, 2014). During the interview, Participant 2 shared his market research experience that involved distributing surveys in a nearby neighborhood to determine customers' needs prior to opening his business. The survey provided him with useful information, and he used the results to improve upon and adjust his initial marketing plan. The business owners and marketing manager later used a focus group market research strategy to collect data from potential customers as they represented the target market. Companies that lack marketing strategies such as

implementing market research will not perform as well as companies whose leaders use motivators and consistently improve their strategic framework to meet market needs (Martensen & Mouritsen, 2014; Tarka, 2017).

Eighty percent of the participants hired experts from market research services and marketing agencies to conduct research, identify opportunities, and minimize possible risks in the marketplace. Market research involves identifying innovative opportunities to create attractive products or services, and the capability to develop a competitive advantage is a critical link to a company's long-term survival (Andries & Czarnitzki, 2014). Participant 3, Participant 4, and Participant 5 found the marketing agencies' professional support beneficial as the marketing agency specialist helped to test their product in the marketplace to track sales and profits. Participant 3 noted the marketing agency specialist provided accurate statistics, reports, and data sources through the market research service. Business leaders should effectively manage customer data collection because identifying the target market group is critical to increasing sales (Rad et al., 2015). The data collected by the marketing agency specialist helped the business leaders be aware of current and future spending patterns and preferences. Participant 5 noted that the marketing agency specialist was able to identify different groups of key purchasers in his industry, and with this knowledge, he was able to create a new product and offer it to a unique market group. Market research enables business leaders to establish strategies for groups of prospective buyers who have common needs and perceive the highest value for particular products or services (Farrell, 2015; Salavou, 2015), which allows business owners and marketing teams to increase efficiency by

focusing marketing on efforts that produce the ultimate return on investment to maintain business sustainability.

Theme 4: Customer acquisition and retention. Business leaders should focus on engaging with consumers and providing excellent customer services. Customer acquisition and retention leads to the long-term profitability of a business, and 80% of prospective businesses are dependent on customer satisfaction and the purchasing experience (Chakravarty et al., 2014; Koosha & Albadvi, 2015). During the interview, Participant 3 emphasized useful marketing strategies that he used to stand out from his competitors to create approachable relationships with customers and to create credibility and customer loyalty. Participant 1 stated the importance of ensuring his consumers had a superior buying experience. A customer life cycle refers to the process that consumers go through when considering purchasing and remaining loyal to a business, and retaining existing customer and acquiring prospective customers are equally important (Koosha & Albadvi, 2015). Participant 4 and Participant 5 noted that a word-of-mouth marketing strategy is one of the most successful drivers of revenue growth. When consumers feel satisfied with their service and trust in their business transactions, they will stay loyal and recommend a business through word of mouth (Biedenbach et al., 2015). Participant 2 stated that customers' needs will change over time, and business leaders need to work on building close relationships with consumers and society to attract new business.

Participant 1 and Participant 2 used referral programs to reward current customers and increase new customers. Participant 1 would give incentives to his advocates for any new business they brought. One of his marketing strategies was to build personal

connections with top advocates and inspire them to obtain high-value referral leads. In fact, Participant 1 and Participant 5's businesses survived through referral programs for the first year of operation. Incentives they used included discounts, credits toward the service, and upgrade incentives. Participant 1, Participant 2, and Participant 3 agreed that company leaders would find it valuable to focus on customizing service and on marketing responsiveness by developing long-term loyalty relationships with individual customers. Customer relationship management is essential to the success of a business, and management must understand and support it fully (Banker et al., 2014). Providing superior customer service is the key driver to the success of small businesses (Gensler et al., 2015).

Porter's Competitive Strategy Theory

Porter's competitive strategy theory served as the conceptual framework for this study. Business owners who implement Porter's competitive strategies are more likely to help sustain their businesses for the first 5 years (Banker et al., 2014). Eighty percent of the participants stated that they had learned through their past experience that the key to the success of their business is to define their marketing objective and have a structured strategy plan for their businesses that will enable the business to gain competitive advantage. Leaders who implement Porter's competitive strategy are likely to minimize costs and create profits for their businesses (Farrell, 2015). Eighty percent of the participants stated that organizational leaders need to learn new information relating to their industry and to increase their marketing knowledge on a continual basis. The goal is for businesses to achieve a competitive advantage by motivating repeat purchases and

increasing customer satisfaction. An organization leader's goal is to increase customers' satisfaction and develop a loyal relationship. The higher the degree of customer satisfaction is, the greater the commitment the customer will have to the brand (Romero et al., 2014).

During the interviews, participants shared their marketing experience and strategies to differentiate their product and service compared to their competitors. Participant 5 posited that making superior quality products had a positive effect on his organization's revenue. Leaders who effectively used the differentiation strategy showed that the financial performance was successful, as the strategy has a greater effect on long-term planning. Participant 3 and Participant 4 shared that when small business leaders effectively implement brand management, conduct market research to understand more about their consumers, and take extra effort to connect with customers, more profits and competitive advantage will result.

The competitive strategy theory applied to this study because the concept of this theory supports small business owners discovering the key marketing strategies to achieve sustainability and create competitive advantages for their businesses. All the participants in this study highlighted that the product and the service had to be exceptional and noted that business owners should focus on the core value of the product. Creating competitive advantage involves providing quality service, and the core benefits of service include packaging, product features, and after-sale service. Leaders of small businesses can use the competitive strategy to strengthen their capability to stay sustainable against the competition (Manoharan, Melitski, & Bromberg, 2015; Teti et al.,

2014). The ultimate goal of small business owners is to achieve a competitive advantage over rival companies.

Applications to Professional Practice

The findings that stemmed from this research study could provide small business owners new knowledge relating to marketing strategies and insightful resources about business survival factors. Business owners can apply the findings from this study to improve marketing knowledge and establish business readiness to sustain their businesses for the first 5 years. In addition, small business leaders can benefit from this study by increasing the likelihood of marketing success and profitability. The participants who participated in this study were successful small business owners in New York or New Jersey who had more than 5 years of experience operating their business and acting as the main decision maker. The results of this study included the following suggestions for small business owners seeking to use marketing strategies and overall business knowledge to increase business survival rates: (a) provide superior product and service; (b) continuously seek new marketing tools and improve knowledge as times change; (c) focus on marketing products without spending money; (d) focus on customer retention, relationship building with consumers, and acquiring new customers; and (e) track marketing strategies to identify what is working and what is not working.

Implications for Social Change

Reflecting on the findings from this research study, in alignment with Porter's competitive strategy theory, may lead small business owners to remain competitive by identifying effective marketing strategies. Understanding how owners of other small

companies have used marketing strategies to sustain their own businesses for at least 5 years can help entrepreneurs develop a competitive advantage and transition toward a more stable and sustainable business future (Anderson & Ulla, 2014; Awan & Hashmi, 2014). Implications for social change may provide insight that positively influences social conditions. Small business owners can use such information to differentiate themselves from their competitors and increase profits through effective marketing strategies (Anderson & Ulla, 2014; Ciasullo & Troisi, 2013).

The results from this study may have implications for strong positive social change for small business owners. The findings may contribute to the human condition through creating jobs and generating revenue in market economies and local economies. This study may also contribute to social change by improving economic activity, as small business owners may understand more effectively how to sustain their businesses. Other small business owners may benefit from this study by using the findings to develop and improve the quality of marketing strategies to reduce the risk of failure in small businesses (Eggers et al., 2013; Stelmokien & Endriulaitiene, 2015). Increasing the longevity of small businesses could lead to local economic development, create job opportunities for the local community, increase employment to improve the standard of living of residents, and contribute to effective positive social change (Ghobakhloo & Tang, 2013).

Recommendations for Action

In this qualitative multiple case study, I explored the marketing strategies used to own and manage a small business successfully. Small business owners encounter new

marketing challenges to promote and define their market positions (Kachaner, King & Stewart, 2016). Small business owners often fail to implement marketing strategies to stimulate and promote the growth of their businesses (Hutchinson et al., 2015). The recommendations from this research study may aid (a) small business owners, (b) leaders of community organizations, and (c) students and researchers who study marketing strategy and competitive advantage. Using multiple outlets to disseminate the findings of this study will maximize opportunities for small business owners to gain access to the information from this study. My goal is to distribute this research study in small business training seminars and publish it in a peer-reviewed journal to be available to students and researchers. Four recommended steps for action identified from the study are as follows: (a) conduct market research, (b) develop a marketing plan, (c) optimize the business website and online social media platform, (d) track the results of each type of marketing decision, and (e) employ a customer retention plan.

The first recommendation is to conduct market research to identify target customers' needs and desires. Examine any type of consumer data, including sales records and social media interactions. The second recommendation is to develop a marketing plan that should include specific goals and should focus on cost effective and tractable marketing tools. Starting with the lowest cost marketing tools can help to leverage the local community by sponsoring a local event in exchange for advertising a business or product. Giving product away so people can experience it can engage consumers and begin to build relationships with them.

A third recommendation is to concentrate on optimizing an online marketing strategy by developing an aesthetically pleasing and functional website. Design is the essence of branding and plays an important role in connecting with consumers. Business owners should also focus on the quality of the webpage and maintain consistency across all online marketing materials to build strong connections with existing and potential customers. The fourth recommendation is to track the results of marketing efforts quantitatively, as the return on investment is the fundamental measurement for a marketing strategy. Marketing measurement tools, including Google Analytics, Marketing Matrix, HubSpot, and Marketing Metrics help to track the effectiveness of a campaign and allow company owners to track numerical information to determine which strategies are working and which are not working. All the participants indicated that small business owners need to strive to provide superior products and services to retain customers and to focus on customer acquisition. Keeping current customers is just as crucial as acquiring new customers. Personal connections and customer loyalty are influential elements for gaining competitive advantage and generate revenue for businesses.

Recommendations for Further Research

The three limitations of this study were the study design, time constraints for collecting information from participants, and the sample size. The sample in this study, which consisted of five successful small business owners, may not represent the entire perspective of, and every insight into, retail-based small businesses. The geographical region was New Jersey and New Jersey, which restricted the pool of participants for the

multiple case study. The delimitation of the scope was targeted marketing strategies used by business owners to sustain a small retail business for the first 5 years. Future researchers could explore communication skills with consumers, brand awareness, and market research. Business owners who focused on preparing and enhancing their knowledge on marketing strategy had a higher chance of sustaining their businesses for the first 5 years. A quantitative study may allow a researcher to enhance the findings in this study by expanding the criteria to a larger population. Researchers may also consider conducting a mixed method approach. Opportunities for further research may include increasing the sample size as well as expanding to a more diverse geographic region to enhance the study results. Another recommendation for further research is to use multiple interview platforms, including web-based or Facetime interview sessions, to save time when interviewing participants. Using alternative interview platforms may help researchers to have sufficient time for data collection and data organization. Additional research may also expand the knowledge from the findings of this study.

Reflections

My passion for developing and implementing innovative strategies for business sustainability was the reason I decided to pursue a doctoral study on marketing strategy for small businesses. A review of the existing literature revealed many theories and strategies to help understand the fundamental knowledge of marketing and competitive advantage in business. The gap in the literature cultivated my vision to explore the phenomenon of innovative marketing strategy tools used by successful small business owners. My perspective and knowledge of business marketing expanded during this

extensive research process. The findings of this study affected me professionally and confirmed my belief about the importance of preparedness in marketing strategy development efforts and the power of continuous learning to maintain profitability and sustainability in a business.

Conclusion

In this qualitative multiple case study, I explored the marketing strategies that small retail business owners used to sustain their businesses for the first 5 years. The study consisted of data collected from face-to-face, semistructured interviews with successful small business owners. Four themes emerged: (a) marketing knowledge and planning, (b) market research, (c) customer acquisition and retention, and (d) online marketing. Sixty percent of participants indicated marketing knowledge and planning is fundamental for generating an innovative business approach and avoiding making poor business decisions. Participants emphasized the need for business owners to research, improve knowledge, monitor market trends, and make adjustments over time. In addition, market research provides a wealth of information about existing and prospective customers and about the competition. Business leaders can also use market research to discover and confirm the target market's interest and adjust products and services to align with consumers' need. Market research will also help business owners to form a comprehensive strategic marketing plan and to promote products to drive the long-term success of the business. All the participants indicated the quality of products and service is a core value of the business and increases customer retention. In conclusion, the multiple case study involved an approach to capture insightful knowledge from

successful small business owners about the marketing strategies that they used to sustain their businesses for the first 5 years. The results that stemmed from the data revealed the relevance of developing well-crafted marketing strategy plans to identify the best opportunities and tools to maximize the business profits and survival rates.

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Appendix A: Semistructured Interview Protocol

The main research question is to explore the marketing strategies that small retail business owners use to sustain their businesses in the first 5 years. In this qualitative case study, the interview will consist of 10 open-ended questions to gain ideas and insights from experienced small retail services business owners in the small business industry in New Jersey and New York.

Selecting participants	I will contact participants by e-mail or phone.
Setting time and place for interview	Interviews will take place in participants' private office or public place.
Explaining the research study and content	I will recap the research study's purpose, obtain verbal consent from each participant, and provide each participant a written consent form.
Recording the interview	I will record each interview and thank participant in person. I will mail out a thank-you card to each participant after the interview.
Transcribing the interview	I will transcribe each interview and e-mail transcription and interpretation to participants.
Member checking	I will contact each participant and confirm accuracy of the transcription.
Additional questions	I will ask participants follow-up questions based on the preponderance of responses.

Questions	I will take notes
1. What marketing strategies have you used to sustain your business?	
2. How did your marketing strategy evolve as your business transitioned from a new business to a known business?	
3. What were the notable results of the marketing strategies during the transition?	
4. What three marketing-related strategies were the most helpful in sustaining your business in its first 5 years?	
5. How did you identify and address the three specific marketing-related strategies that were the most helpful in sustaining your business in its first 5 years?	
6. What innovations and novel marketing strategies did you employ for your business in its first 5 years?	
7. How would you define the success of your current standard of marketing measurement?	
8. What marketing performance tools have you implemented to track trends and calibrate profitability?	
9. What aspects of your marketing strategy helped you rise above your competition?	
10. What else could you share about using marketing strategies to increase sustainability?	