

# Overcoming SMEs' resistance to learning through a metaphor/storyline approach: A qualitative assessment of a novel marketing intervention

Josef Cohen

## Corresponding author:

Dr Josef Cohen

Derby University

United Kingdom

Email: [sticks33@gmail.com](mailto:sticks33@gmail.com)

## Abstract

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) have a high failure rate when compared with larger firms, even when controlling for the age of the business. This is a problem because SMEs are important for job creation and economic growth. Instructor-led intervention strongly predicts SME survival. Marketing is one area in which intervention can improve performance. However, to date, few interventions exist to improve marketing skills and strategy among SMEs, and none have been subjected to rigorous examination. Additionally, interventions often face the problem of resistance to learning among SME managers and employees. The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to assess a short-term marketing intervention with a metaphor/storyline approach, to answer the following research question: What is the meaning of the intervention program for participants, and how does the intervention change SMEs' organizational culture? Pre- and post-intervention interviews, along with a researcher's log, provided qualitative data for coding analysis. Results revealed five categories pertaining to the changes effected by the intervention: (a) perceptions of marketing, (b) organizational structure, (c) organizational culture, (d) marketing activities and sales, and (e) brand awareness. It was concluded that the intervention overcame resistance to learning and resulted in some operational changes at participating SMEs, but lasting structural and cultural change were minimal after the intervention.

**Key words:** SME marketing, small business marketing, business intervention, marketing intervention, metaphor, storyline approach, training, adult education

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## Introduction and Background

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) have a high failure rate when compared with larger firms (Alawa & Quisenberry, 2015; Delmar & Shane, 2003, Storey, Keasey, Watson, & Wynarczyk, 2016). Firm size and probability of failure are strongly inversely correlated, even when controlling for the age of the business (Haswell & Holmes, 1989; Purves, Niblock, & Sloan, 2016). Such high SME failure rates are a problem because SMEs are important to job creation and economic growth (Gilmore et al., 2001; Jones & Rowley, 2011; O'Dwyer et al., 2009), and they thereby contribute to the stability of national economies (Maron & Lussier, 2014).

Instructor-led intervention strongly predicts SME survival (Lussier & Corman, 1995; Maron & Lussier, 2014). Therefore, it is important to design interventions that can help improve SME business success and reduce the SME failure rate. Marketing is one area in which intervention can improve performance. In Israel, where the present study takes place, 24% of managers of failed SMEs claim that their failure was due to their inability to market strategically (Friedman, 2005). This was the top-cited failure reason, with finance (20%) being the second most common. Several studies around the world have identified good marketing as a key to SME business success (Bates, 1990; Moutray, 2007; Shane & Delmar, 2004), because it helps SMEs remain competitive against larger firms (Van Scheers, 2011). Without marketing knowledge, SMEs may experience difficulty remaining solvent, and bad marketing may make existing problems worse (Jovanov & Stojanovski, 2012; Moutray, 2007).

Tock and Baharub (2010) indicated a need for a facilitator-led intervention that teaches SME managers and employees to effectively implement marketing to be competitive. However, few such interventions have been developed, and, to my knowledge, none have been subjected to rigorous empirical examination. This lack of research on marketing interventions targeting SMEs is one of the problems addressed in this study.

Another key problem is that, in SME contexts, there is often strong resistance to learning on the part of managers and employees (Furst & Cable, 2008; Frese et al., 2003; Legge et al., 2007; Spangler et al., 2004). There is a need for research

examining interventions with the potential to overcome resistance to learning in SME contexts. In my opinion, a different paradigm is needed to address the SME resistance to learning among SME managers and employees and thus improve their marketing knowledge, based on existing literature related to SME training needs. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine short-term, facilitator-led intervention designed to improve SMEs' marketing skills and strategies while avoiding resistance to learning. This study was originally part of a larger, mixed-method study, the quantitative results of which have been published elsewhere (Cohen, 2017).

### Training Methods in SME Contexts

Research suggests that there are unique requirements for successful training programs in SME contexts (e.g., Wenger, 2000). Legge et al. (2007) explored SME managers' study method preferences and found that managers tend to expect quick, practical, and no-embellishments training. According to Kuster and Vila (2006), case analyses and lectures, which are common training methods in business, are not effective because they lack connection to learners' practical contexts. Similarly, Kerin et al. (1987) recommended using practical training for managers' and employees' marketing education. Raelin (1990) found that training programs in the field (as opposed to in the educational system) should be tactical, focused, practical, and effective. They should also focus on implementing the material in real life. Finally, Fraser et al. (2007) claimed that, when conducting a training program, collaborative, interactional techniques are better than lectures given to groups of workers.

Despite these findings suggesting that the traditional lecture method is not effective in the case of SME managers and employees, Kuster and Vila (2006) indicated that there is a tendency among developers of employee and manager marketing education to rely on traditional methods of teaching. Instead of traditional, instructor-led strategies, organizational learning programs should focus on active learning. This establishes the need for a new marketing training approach targeting SMEs using active learning approaches.

Felder and Brent (2009) defined active learning as "anything course-related that all students in a class session are called upon to do other than simply watching, listening and taking notes" (p. 2). Active learning is an important programmatic approach for encouraging and enhancing entrepreneurial learning (Jones et al., 2014). This is especially true in family-run SMEs (Lionzo & Rossignoli, 2011) and for marketing educators (Ramocki, 2007).

### Theoretical Background

The practical, active training intervention used in this study was developed following a hierarchical, four-tier theoretical framework. This framework has its foundations in existing theoretical and research literature related to organizational behavior and SME marketing. Each tier contains an important theoretical concept that represents a specification of the previous tier: organizational culture, organizational learning, continued professional development (CPD), and metaphor/storyline training. Figure 1 presents a schematic of the theoretical framework, and the following paragraphs describe the tiers and their hierarchical structure in greater detail.

**Organizational culture.** The persistent lack of marketing knowledge among SMEs can be identified as a problem of organizational culture. Schein (2011) defined organizational culture as:

a pattern of shared basic assumptions that a group learns as they solve problems and situations of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked effectively validating its use and thus is suitable to be taught to new members as the correct way by which they should perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (p. 241)

Organizations that do not regularly implement marketing concepts and strategies to solve problems and that do not share marketing knowledge openly among members suffer from organizational cultures that are not supportive of marketing. For this reason, organizational culture is taken as the foundation of the theoretical framework for the intervention examined in this study.

Cultural factors play a key role in determining organizational outcomes. Organizational culture affects the way employees behave in a company (Moreland et al., 2013). Managers use organizational culture to focus their employees' attention on the company's priorities and to define how they want employees to behave (Berson et al., 2007). Therefore, organizational culture contributes to a business's success (Prajogo & McDermott, 2011).

Organizational culture is closely related to the extent of knowledge sharing within the organization (Fox, 2004). Knowledge sharing helps employees find important information easily and quickly (Ismail Al-Alawi et al., 2007). A culture that is not supportive of knowledge sharing leads employees to retain the knowledge they have, so latent knowledge does not become active within the organization, even if that knowledge would better the organization (Saint-Onge & Armstrong, 2012). It is therefore necessary for the organization to set in place measures that favor the sharing of knowledge (Roberson et al., 2012), including marketing knowledge, by establishing an appropriate culture.

In many organizations, environments of uncertainty, dynamism, and independence, as well as a strong need for better utilization of information and knowledge systems, hinder performance (Bowling, 2007). The development of an organizational culture that embraces knowledge sharing remains instrumental in influencing employee growth (Shafritz et al., 2015). The intervention investigated in this study emphasizes change from closed cultures of independence to open cultures of knowledge sharing.

**Organizational learning.** One way for an organization to enact culture change and acquire knowledge resources is via the organizational learning process. Thus, the next tier of the theoretical framework consists of organizational learning. This process is critical for the organization, since it enables the organization to adapt to its surroundings and to maintain and even increase its competitiveness. Thus, organizational learning contributes to the survival or development of the organization (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2010; Cheng et al., 2016; High & Pelling, 2003; Simsek & Heavey 2011; Trong Tuan, 2013). Organizational learning is a relatively new concept; in the past, there was a less dynamic economy and a relatively slow adjustment

Figure 1.:Theoretical Framework



was required, so there was no need for a concrete theory of and approach to organizational learning (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2010; Dencker et al., 2009; Tyre & Von Hippel, 1997).

According to Law and Chuah (2015), there are two main definitions of organizational learning. The first is a knowledge-level definition, which holds that organizational learning occurs when “individuals acquire new knowledge and incorporate it into the workplace so that the collective set can reach its shared visions” (Law & Chuah, 2015, p. 10). The second is a learning-level definition, which focuses on different levels of the organization at which learning can occur. Although individuals are the organization’s learning agents, learning can occur at team and organizational levels. In this view, the knowledge acquired by individuals does not directly influence the organization, but rather shared knowledge and meanings constitute changes that manifest at higher levels.

Organizational learning involves integration of new and existing knowledge in the daily conduct of the organization, with the aim of improving employee performance, outcomes, self-efficacy, and openness to change (Bates & Khasawneh, 2005; Castro & Neira, 2005). Existing employees may bring knowledge with them, or knowledge may be acquired through, for example, training interventions. Each piece of knowledge is acquired in a certain context, which can be either active or latent (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2010). Latent knowledge has an effect on the active context by means of which the learning takes place. For instance, a psychological environment in which employees feel comfortable with each other (latent context) affects the learning capacity of the organization (active context). Furthermore, the accumulated knowledge is embedded in the organizational context and therefore alters the contexts through which learning takes place (Coen & Maritan, 2011).

Organizational learning is often beset by resistance to change on the part of employees and managers (Legge et al., 2007). The organization is a cooperative system that depends on the willingness of its members to support it. The participation of the employees is particularly important during periods of change, when the organization is attempting to create new types of situations that differ from existing ones (Furst & Cable, 2008). Uniquely, SME managers, who are often entrepreneurs who founded the business, can also resist change, thinking that they know everything there is to know about their business (Frese et al., 2003; Spangler et al., 2004). Compounding this problem is the fact that SMEs often do not have the resources to hire highly knowledgeable employees, so existing organizational knowledge maybe be limited. Successful interventions aiming at organizational learning must therefore impart new knowledge while addressing resistance to change.

The intervention explored in this study utilizes the principles of organizational learning to provide the organization with adaptive tools that will allow it to better interact with the business environment and, thus, better exploit opportunities in the environment, enhancing survival probabilities of the organization. The intervention takes the everyday experience of the participants as a resource for discussion of marketing issues; then, the intervention changes the active knowledge of the participants by introducing new knowledge about the experiences discussed. In addition, participants are encouraged to try out their new knowledge when confronted with actual encounters with clients in their daily business activities, and these experiences are later discussed in the group to foster more active content learning.

**Continued professional development.** Continued professional development (CPD) is one path to sustained organizational learning, and this concept forms the third theoretical tier of the intervention in this study. CPD is defined as a

process of lifelong learning for professionals, with the following advantages: personal development; assurance that professionals are up-to-date, given the rapid pace of technological advancement; assurance for employers that their employees are competent and adaptable; and development of skills and knowledge (Fraser et al., 2007).

Lydon and King (2009) found that successful implementation of CPD programs is explained by factors related to organizational learning, such as classroom environment, contents of the program, and teaching method. The relevance and coherence of the CPD program were also found to contribute to CPD program's impact (Penuel et al., 2007). Successful CPD enhances the ability of a firm to adapt to its business environment. This is true because CPD involves learning and knowing more about the market, market forces, competition, and technologies. The result is that a CPD program increases firm performance and survival rates, as well as its ability to innovate and lead the market (Lenburg, 2005).

This traditional view of CPD emphasizes the flow of knowledge from instructor to student. More recently, a less one-sided view of CPD has grown in popularity. Fraser et al. (2007) recommended interactive CPD programs that allow the student to be an active and equal partner in the learning process. Such methods are believed to increase student involvement in the learning process, thus enhancing understanding, memorization, and implementation of new knowledge (Fraser et al., 2007).

The intervention examined in this study adapts this strategy to the SME marketing environment. CPD programs are effective even when short in time and number of sessions (Lydon & King, 2009). Studies have shown that most participants in short CPD programs changed their professional behavior after attending the programs, to a moderate to significant extent. Short CPD programs are necessary, as professionals are not willing to take part in long programs (Lydon & King, 2009).

**Metaphor/storyline approach.** The most specific level of the present intervention's theoretical framework is the metaphor and storyline approach; the CPD program uses this approach to enhance participant learning. This section describes how the metaphoric storyline approach helps participants make sense of marketing by expanding the options for learning and understanding, providing real world experience, and overcoming resistance to learning.

A metaphor is figurative language that links one specific object to another by alternating various descriptions of the objects. Figurative language expresses something that, in everyday life, denotes a connection to one area while transferring that denotation to another area, which is analogous to the first (Bremer & Lee, 2007). A metaphor has two parts: the topic and the information that spurs the metaphor (the vehicle). The topic identifies what the metaphor is about, and the vehicle is an analogy that creates a link between the topic and other global contexts. For example, in the advertising sentence "Budweiser, the King of Beers," Budweiser is the topic and the rest of the sentence constitutes the vehicle (Bremer & Lee, 2007).

Metaphors are used as part of marketing and management educational programs because they expand the options for learning and understanding by encouraging participants to

expand their areas of thinking. Metaphors enable participants to consider broad ideas, rather than specific, defined questions. In addition, this way of thinking is suited to how humans commonly think, which makes studying via metaphors more natural to many students (Fillis & Rentschler, 2008).

Another advantage of using metaphors is that they are relevant for the practical world, not just for academic thinking, which makes the educational program more accessible for participants. This is an especially important condition of success in business training (Kuster & Vila, 2006). Finally, the use of metaphors helps bridge the gap between the concepts and academic theories in the practical world of management, increases the cooperation and exchange of views between the two worlds, and narrows the cultural gap between them (Fillis & Rentschler, 2008).

Metaphors can be used in CPD programs as a means of explaining complex concepts and of breaking up these concepts into simple ideas, which can be related to on a practical level. Metaphor is particularly appropriate to marketing, since the use of metaphors is extensive in everyday marketing, ranging from the use of metaphors in publishing to promote brands to strategic marketing thinking, which includes concepts that are all metaphorical, such as the term 'brand personality' (Cornelissen, 2003; Durgee & Chen, 2006).

Mills (2008) showed that teaching marketing ideas using metaphors can be very effective. Mills found that using metaphors from jazz, a type of music, in the marketing world could have a profound impact on the behavior of participants in educational programs. Mills (2008) claimed that using such metaphors can teach participants knowledge of marketing issues, giving them the ability to creatively use that knowledge in their everyday professional lives and promoting leadership and confidence (Mills, 2008).

In his definitive study, Mills (2008) attempted to teach students strategic thinking using metaphors from jazz, whereby the instruments, skills, timing, and rhythm were all analogous to marketing situations. The students learned marketing methods when they applied the jazz metaphors to the field of marketing. The study showed that students perceived the lessons as very interesting, and they saw how their skills in strategic marketing thinking improved. The author noted that the jazz metaphor facilitated students' understanding of marketing concepts and marketing problems. In addition, it activated creative thinking with regard to possible solutions to marketing problems. Mills (2008) found that using metaphors not only enhanced students' ability to act on their marketing knowledge, but it also promoted creative listening and increased collaboration among organization members.

Storyline is a strategy of active learning developed in Scotland (Solstad, 2009). Solstad (2009) showed the success of the strategy with teachers and students. The storyline approach was designed and tested for classrooms, not SME settings. To date, no other research addresses the use of storyline approach as a strategy for learning in SMEs. Therefore, the present study will be, to our knowledge, the first to test the storyline approach in a small business setting.

## Research Question and Objectives

This study was guided by the following research question: What is the meaning of the intervention program for participants, and how does the intervention change SMEs' organizational culture?

The objective of this study was to understand participants' subjective perceptions of the intervention in order to describe the organizational change process resulting from the intervention and determine whether this novel form of intervention holds promise for improving SMEs' marketing abilities. I accomplished this by (a) conducting pre- and postintervention semistructured interviews to explore participants' perceptions of the intervention and generate rich descriptions of the organizational change process, and (b) taking researcher notes during the process of the intervention to understand the process of change on a day-to-day basis.

Because this is a qualitative research question, there are no formal hypotheses. However, I supposed that the intervention would change participants' perceptions of marketing, particularly with regard to marketing processes. I also supposed that the intervention would increase the extent to which participants engaged in collaborative efforts related to marketing, including the development of new marketing strategies and tactics. Finally, I supposed that the intervention would lead to personal empowerment, new energy for marketing, and a renewed belief in the SME organizations' potential to advance in their respective markets.

## Materials and methods

To address the need for a novel approach to marketing education and development among SMEs, we conducted a qualitative, phenomenological investigation of a facilitator-led marketing intervention designed to enhance marketing knowledge, skills, and strategy among SME participants. This section contains a description of the intervention program, of the setting and sample, and of the methods of the study itself.

### Intervention Program

The intervention program explored in this study consists of four facilitator-led sessions held onsite at SME locations. Each session lasts 90 minutes and is attended by all members of the organization, including managers and employees. During each session, the facilitator presents part of a story based on a metaphor. The storyline connecting all four sessions involves a castle in a large kingdom, with three knights who must work together using their strengths to attract villagers to the castle and defend the castle from attacks by neighboring castles. Each session includes several developments in the story arc, each of which connects to a concrete marketing concept with an expected learning outcome. After hearing each story, group members complete an individual assignment reflecting on the content of the story. The group is then asked to discuss the story and reach a consensus decision, with the help of the facilitator's mediation, about how the story should progress. Next, the facilitator shares the metaphoric connection between the story and SME marketing concepts, skills, or strategies. During this stage, the facilitator emphasizes how the

group's decisions could be applied to marketing in the SME's real-world context. The group's decisions are connected to the following session's stories for continuity.

The intervention program avoids using traditional methods of teaching. Instead, it is based on play-like interaction, using metaphors, between the moderator of the intervention and the participants, and does not relate to marketing issues and concepts directly in an academic tone, but rather compiles a storyline with the participants that relates to their everyday working experience and imaginary themes, such as mediaeval villages, knights, and kings. This approach should allow the participants to become involved in the process of learning, retain interest in the contents of the meeting, and practice an effective learning process.

The issue of resistance to change is addressed by relating to marketing issues and ideas in a tangible rather than threatening or boring way, thus making the experience of learning fun and empowering. The use of metaphors in the intervention, which are used to mask marketing theories learned behind a fun metaphor simulation, is designed to assuage fear of change and of confronting academic knowledge. Furthermore, since participants are an integral part of an active learning process, managers and staff need not be threatened by the program and experience changes they themselves make.

## Setting and sample

The setting for this study consisted of SMEs in Israel. Inclusion criteria included:

1. The SME was active in Israel.
2. A minimum of four employees worked directly for the SME.
3. A minimum monthly turnover was NIS 30,000, VAT included.
4. The SME was not a non-profit organization.
5. The SME had been in operation for less than 10 years.

After placing an advertisement and contacting potential participants, 10 SMEs approached the researcher in a period of one month. Three did not qualify, and two stated that they were too busy. Five qualified and were interested in participating in the study.

If potential participants expressed interest and were qualified, the researcher conducted interviews with the managers to further describe the study and to establish their willingness to cooperate. I informed them that, as part of their participation in the study, they would be administered an intervention designed to improve their marketing ability and business outcomes. If, after this interview, the SME owners were still interested in participating, they provided consent in writing. The SME owners were able to withdraw from the study at any time. All businesses participated in the study of their own free will and received no compensation for their participation other than the intervention. Table 1 (next page) details the characteristics of the five SMEs included in the study.

Printing, five employees were excluded because they did not have tenure and did machinery-related work only. At Telepele, one of the two investors was not involved in the daily operations of the business and was thus excluded. The same was true

Table 1: Characteristics of research participants

Field	No. of Employees	No. of participants	Pseudonym	SME Age	Notes
Print	10	5	ABC printing	4	Highly competitive market
Communication	7	6	Telepele	2	Expensive service for business
Food services	5	4	Food for Thought	2	Home based operation
Internet	4	3	Interneto	2	Highly competitive market
Hi-tech	6	4	Future Chair	1	Product development. dependent on investors' funding

of two investors at Future Chair. Interneto had one technical employee who just supported the data with no involvement in the daily operations and worked from home; this employee was thus excluded. Food for Thought had one employee who was only 15 years old and was thus excluded. This yielded a final sample size of 22 participants. The following paragraphs describe each SME setting in more detail.

**Participant 1: ABC Printing.** ABC Printing had a staff of 10 employees in a highly competitive market. The owners and staff had no prior knowledge in marketing and believed that only the price will attract clients. The existing marketing message was confused (see Ries & Ries, 2009). Relations with suppliers were positive, but there was little ongoing contact with a client base. Clients were for the most part walk-ins, because of the location of the business. Employees appeared to be in low spirits and expressed concern that the situation in the organization might result in closure. Participation in the intervention was prompted by the fear that they were about to go under. Communication between the two owners, Suzan and Mark, was far from ideal. They did not share common core values or goals and aspirations for the organization, nor any articulated marketing strategy.

**Participant 2: Telepele.** Telepele was a highly organized company. The hierarchy and the distribution of tasks were clear, regular meetings were held with the staff and management, and advertising and other marketing operations were performed. However, the unique voice of the SME was not manifested in its marketing efforts, nor was there a clear understanding of the competitive advantages of the company. The organization's main competitor was a large major leader in the market, and the company tended to copy aspects of the competitor's advertising campaigns. Telemarketing operations were at the core of sales generation. Management was disappointed with the telemarketing department and complained about results.

**Participant 3: Food for Thought.** The owner of this organization had no formal education in marketing or business and operated based on intuition. Allocation of resources was sporadic; no clear marketing scheme was employed; there was no website, no strategic marketing look of the business, and

client development was poor. Core values were vague, as was the corresponding marketing and graphic language. Internal communication at Food For Thought was good; all those involved wanted the business to succeed. Competition by similar and larger companies was strong.

**Participant 4: Interneto.** Interneto's financial state was poor, and the CEO had a hard time envisioning a brighter future for the company in the competitive Israeli market. There was disagreement between the two managers (who are a father and son) about running the business. The son had an education in business and marketing, but found it difficult to influence his father's views regarding management of the company. Disagreements between the two resulted in the absence of a clearly articulated strategy for the company, a common vision, or core values. Employees worked from home. There was no organizational identity, the website was not updated regularly, and there was no means of developing a strong client base. The main stream of clients was generated by advertisements, occasional mass e-mail distributions, and word of mouth. The general feeling of the staff was negative.

**Participant 5: Future Chair.** The organization was in the final stages of developing its product. A sample was available online and sales had begun. However, money was fast running out. Communication between the owner and staff and between the CEO and investors was good; all wanted the business to work better. Nonetheless, the business strategy was not clear and this often resulted in disagreements. The CEO had a formal education in marketing; however, she found it hard to influence investors' views on how to manage the SME and move towards better marketing operations. During the first year of this business, no real business connections were made; prospective clients showed little interest in the product, and the existing investors were losing interest in the company. The investors took on a private business consultant prior to the intervention. The CEO was confused and unsure of the future of the SME, mainly in terms of growth, allocation of funds, and investments. The website was not updated regularly, and the sales person had no training, no clear sales goals and methods, nor a defined budget.

## Research Instrument

The research instruments consisted of a semi-structured interview guide and a researcher log.

**Interview guide.** I developed a pre- and post-intervention semi-structured interview guide with prepared questions followed by probes, allowing participants to express themselves at length on focused topics (see Ardley, 2005). Questions for the interview guide were informed by existing literature and by the aims of this research. The interview guide was also designed to create a relaxed, trusting atmosphere (see Shkedi, 2003). Before and after the intervention, interviews consisted of the same set of 21 questions:

1. Please explain what marketing means for you.
2. At present, in your opinion, are the organization's marketing activities managed professionally? Please explain.
3. At present, please spell out the main marketing concept that represents or unites the organization. Do you think that the rest of the organization's workers would agree with you?
4. How do you think your competitors, suppliers, customers, colleagues, family, perceive you (think about you)? Please explain.
5. Please state your position in the organization. In your opinion, is your current position connected to the marketing system? Please explain.
6. At present, do you have a sense of confidence in the organization's marketing system? Please explain.
7. Do you feel that you can initiate new elements and add to the organization's marketing system? Please explain with regard to your own position as well.
8. Please elucidate your organization's uniqueness versus the competition in your field of activity.
9. At present, do you think that the marketing messages are conveyed sufficiently and efficiently?
10. In your opinion, will new and returning customers come and buy from the organization?
11. Please detail the following dimensions with regard to most of the services/products sold by the organization: functionality, emotional value, and image value.
12. Please state a few sentences that recur among the organization's staff when encountering the organization's customers.
13. Please state your organization's unique colours and their significance (or: why did you choose those colours specifically).
14. Please state the organization's slogan and its meaning (or: why did you choose this slogan).
15. Please list the regular criteria through which your organization is managed from an operative perspective.
16. Do you feel that the staff meetings at the organization are exhaustive and efficient from your perspective? Please state the frequency of the meetings.

17. Do you feel that focused efforts are made to create positive rumours for different audiences that come into contact with the organization? Please explain.

18. Do you feel that the advertising spread of the organization is guided by strategic thinking? Please explain.

19. In your opinion, is there enough input for following different trends in the target market, competitors, legal changes etc.? Please explain.

20. In the case of developing new services/products, in your opinion is there planning aimed at development guided by dimensions such as perceptions of the organization, image values, overall strategy and trends? Please explain.

21. Please explain whether, in your opinion, there is sufficient activity in the field of marketing for the organization.

**Researcher log.** In addition to the semistructured interviews, I also kept a researcher log to shed additional light on the effects of the intervention. For each research log entry, I recorded the day and time, the content of the entry (my observations of the training session), an associative reflection, and an inductive conclusion. This structure helped me create a well-organized, repeatable log (see Sabar, 2002) that will help readers get a detailed and better understanding of the research process (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and will lead to greater reliability (see Shkedi, 2003).

Use of a research log acknowledges that the researcher is not an outsider, but rather is part of the happenings, taking part in as well as interpreting the phenomena for the reader, so he can make sense of what took place in the field (Sabar, 2002). This was especially important in the present study, since the researcher was also the consultant delivering the intervention to participants.

Drawbacks of researcher logs include that the log may be biased and not reliable (Fan et al., 2006), the researcher may lack introspection abilities, the researcher's understanding may not reflect the situation, and participants may perform better when they know they are being observed (McCarney et al., 2007). I overcame these obstacles by recording the log discreetly and taking into account differences in my observations and participants' feedback to identify potential bias. In the current study, this research tool was used to express the researcher's thoughts and reflections on the intervention process.

## Methods

Data for this qualitative, phenomenological study were collected in four phases. The first phase consisted of instrument development and focus group review of the research instruments. The second phase consisted of pre-intervention semi-structured interviews to evaluate participants' perceptions of the marketing skills and abilities at their organizations. The third phase consisted of the delivery of the intervention and data collection via the researcher log. The fourth phase consisted of a post-intervention semi-structured interview.

**Data collection.** Semi-structured pre-intervention interviews took place at the SME's business place, face-to-face, in a closed room with just the participant and the researcher. Interviews were held just before the start of the first intervention session. I asked for the participants' permission to record the interviews

and transcribed them later, allowing for accuracy, transparency, and flexibility during the interview process. Participants were made to feel comfortable and able to respond honestly and fully with guaranteed confidentiality in comfortable, private settings. The interviews took 15 minutes on average.

Post-intervention interviews were conducted three months after the last intervention session. This three-month latency period gave time for the SMEs to work and assimilate the intervention's teachings. Interviews were held either face-to-face or via e-mail. The same interview questions were used in both interviews. The rationale for this procedure was to compare participants' responses to both qualitative and quantitative questionnaires before and after the intervention.

**Data analysis.** I used a multistage, open coding approach to analyze qualitative data for emergent themes (see Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). To ensure validity of qualitative data, I analyzed all qualitative data as they came in, rather than waiting until the end of the study, to ensure that the right data were being collected and that the research question could be answered. In addition, early analysis of data is very helpful in identifying patterns, or major themes in the data (Sabar, 2002). I also validated qualitative data by performing member checking, whereby I showed the researcher's log and interview transcripts to participants to check whether or not they agreed with the interpretations of their observed behaviors (see Huberman & Miles, 2002).

**External validation,** which is a separate phase of the validation process in qualitative research, occurs when the data matches the theoretical sources or other research data (Sabar, 2002). This type of triangulation indicates the robustness of the findings and allows for generalization of findings. To create naturalistic generalizability, I went back and forth between deduction, induction, and reflection during the research process. This process was documented in the researcher log. Connections between findings and existing theory are detailed in the Results and Conclusions sections.

Qualitative data were divided into primary and secondary datasets for analysis. Primary data were directly derived from informants, and secondary data came from the researcher's log and the SMEs' marketing materials. For both primary and secondary data, content analysis was used to create themes that described the main issues discussed by research participants. Content analysis is a process of arranging and structuring the data gathered for interpretation and grasping its meaning. I used a code system to create categories, by which a number represented each meaning category. Further, I highlighted categories using a color-coding scheme for easier analysis and mistake avoidance.

There are two categories of content analysis: structural analysis and subject analysis (Shkedi, 2003). Structural analysis highlights the relationships between processes in the field, while subject analysis emphasizes the descriptors of the processes being studied, including the participant's feelings, beliefs, and thoughts. In the current research, the content analysis process combines both methods (Coen & Maritan, 2011). It is worth mentioning that this analysis is culturally dependent (Shkedi, 2003), and therefore some of the meaning of the content might be lost in the translation of the qualitative data from Hebrew (the language in which the original data was collected) into English (the language of this report).

In the Results section, I demonstrate the themes by quoting participants directly. Quotations were chosen for their ability to clarify the theme in the participants' words. When choosing a quote, I followed the guidelines that the quotes support the main idea of the paragraph, be punchy and direct, and come from a participant source.

## Results

Figure 2 shows the five categories that emerged from the data, as well as the first-round codes that were reduced into these final five. In the following subsections, each category is described in detail, with illustrative excerpts from the interviews. Participant names have been changed for anonymity.

### Category 1: Perceptions of Marketing

Before the intervention, participant organizations lacked an understanding of the essence of marketing, the difference between sales and marketing, and the need for a marketing plan for the business. Therefore, they made use of tactical solutions for immediate problems instead of constructing a strategic business plan to guide their way in managing the business' survival and growth. The following quotations illustrate this tendency:

*Reliability and quality. What we produce in this company, many companies do. Besides reliability and quality, I do not have anything to offer them. And that is the problem here, that all printing presses do the same thing...* (Suzan, ABC Printing)

*Marketing is all about advertising.* (Dan, Food for Thought)

Because success was attributed to advertising campaigns rather than a marketing approach, the majority of participants demonstrated little knowledge of the factors contributing to success in the companies they operated.

The following responses illustrate participants' responses to the interview question, "In your opinion, are your marketing activities in the organization run in a professional way?"

*In my opinion, [activities] are not conducted in a professional manner, because we do not have any knowledge about it. We do everything only according to the knowledge we have. Like me, for example, I market in an aggressive way; I simply go to companies and offer them what I have to sell.* (Joe, ABC Printing)

*In my opinion, no, because there is no marketing system. I do not know if this is common in SMEs. We have a marketing person, but he does not only do marketing. He also works on a commission basis. He is not enough, that's for sure.* (Avivit, Future Chair)

After participating in the intervention, organization members knew more marketing terms than before, were more aware of marketing and its role in conducting a business and of marketing issues in managing a business, as well as of how this new knowledge can help them do better work in the everyday conduct of the business. With respect to marketing awareness, participants were much more focused and were able to give concrete and relevant examples from their companies, contrary to their preintervention responses. A change in personal and operative marketing approaches towards a more professional way of using marketing tools was observed.

*Before [the intervention] we had no direction whatsoever. There was no coordination, as if we were just shooting in all directions,*



Figure 2: Data Categories and Themes

<b>Category</b>	• <b>First-round coding themes</b>
<b>1: Perceptions of Marketing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding the firm's marketing activities</li> <li>• Existing knowledge of marketing</li> <li>• Understanding the firm's marketing capabilities</li> <li>• Understanding strategic and tactical processes</li> </ul>
<b>2: Organizational Structure</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Standard operating procedures</li> <li>• Organizational Hierarchy</li> </ul>
<b>3: Organizational Culture</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication across organizational functions</li> <li>• Creating a common vision and common goals</li> </ul>
<b>4: Marketing Activities and Sales</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of media and sales channels</li> <li>• Marketing communications</li> <li>• Graphics, colors, logos</li> </ul>
<b>5: Brand Awareness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge of brand awareness</li> <li>• Prioritization of brand awareness</li> <li>• Reactions from customers and vendors</li> </ul>

with no rules or order. After the process, we were much more focused and we chose customers who were more suitable. That helped us create markets for our product. (Don, Future Chair)

Marketing is an integral part of the organization, a way of life, in your head all the time. It dictates the way you work, it determines the marketing language you use, and it is a dominant factor in the life of the business. You can definitely say that we are always talking about knights. (Dan, Food for Thought)

The marketing system works well because it is also part of the job, and it's not just marketing per se. For example, when our CEO talks to customers, she also markets. The marketing is 'slipped in' to the job. (Mark, ABC Printing)

### Category 2: Organizational Structure

Although there appeared to be a general understanding of the division of roles in the organization, it was also the case that, as relatively new SMEs, workers tended to have more than one role in the organization. As one respondent put it, "My role in the organization is 'pach zavel' (trash can—or catch all)" (Sara, Food for Thought). The same holds for definitions of functions and operating procedures. In response to the interview question, "Could you specify criteria according to which the organization operates?" two referred to being on time as most important. A few participants had further remarks:

Actually, since the business is mine and I am the CEO, all the marketing falls to me. I am the one who decides how to route, where to advertise, and how much to invest in marketing, and then it's repeated all over again. (Joe, ABC Printing)

You do it in the best way you can, there's no such thing as roles, you work when you need to, and do everything you can. I think that the division of roles that we have built up is still not clear. (Dor, Interneto)

During the intervention, the researcher log indicated a change in thinking, in which the division of roles in the organization is connected to the marketing dimension of the organizational roles. It seemed that all members of the group were involved in marketing, came up with ideas, and seemed to be more marketing oriented, even if their job was not directly linked to marketing (Researcher log entry). Additionally, participants' comments, as noted in the researcher log, demonstrated a process of increased understanding:

Dura: I can understand better how to organize the marketing function of the organization (Researcher log entry)

After the intervention, interviews revealed a sharpening of the functional definition of the employees in the organization, particularly those responsible for marketing:

The organizational structure is more organized, and my staff and I have each been allotted our roles. This means that everyone has his role defined, which was not the case before. Before this I felt that I had to do everything and carry everything on my shoulders. Today I spread it around a bit more. (Sara, Food for Thought)

Yet, most of the organizations did not implement significant structural changes:

Change in the structure of the organization has still not been implemented. There is no change in the structure. (Bob, ABC Printing)

I sensed no significant changes in the level of the organizational structure. Not something that I could put my finger on. But I hope that it will come. (Dean, Telepele)

It appears that the intervention did not move the organization to make any significant longitudinal structural changes. At the same time, the conceptual internalization helped the

organizations reformulate their goals and marketing objectives, and consequently redefine the responsibilities and authority of the various functions. These changes helped increase employees' sense of security and facilitated the delegation of responsibilities, thus reducing the pressure on the managers.

### Category 3: Organizational Culture

Prior to the intervention, there was reportedly little notion of the organizational vision or goals, no common language, and minimal communication between different levels or functions within the organization. Meetings were held sporadically and with no clear agenda or procedure.

*There is no common marketing strategy...we are all shooting small arrows in all directions.* (Dura, Future Chair)

After the intervention, respondents reported a change in the situation, towards a common language among organization members, based on the "knights" metaphor used in the intervention. For example:

*The concept of the 'knights' is a very strong thing for us, and constantly arises when thinking about advertising. We highlight it constantly.* (Dan, Food for Thought)

*Before the process, the marketing idea was not as clear to the staff as it is today. In meetings that we had, everyone saw things differently, and we had no consensus, nor a clear knowledge of our main goals. Today we are more geared towards speaking a common language than we were before.* (Dean, Telepele)

*The intervention created a dialogue here, a conversation, a discussion...about where we've come from and where we're going, what is important to us and what isn't, what we have to do, and how we see things. Discussion was created here that wasn't there before. The words were translated into actions, so actions came into being.* (Riki, Telepele)

The researcher log concludes that the intervention seems to have created a real cultural change among the organizations in this study. For example:

The entire organization seems to be able to communicate much easier: people use the same terminology, are willing to discuss difficult issues, and are much more open with each other. (Researcher log)

The conceptual internalization helped the organizations communicate more effectively, focus more on objectives, and understand the unique operational track of the organization.

### Category 4: Marketing Activities and Sales

Before the intervention, organizations were not satisfied with their marketing efforts:

*Communication with our customers is not good enough. Advertising and public relations are not good enough.* (Gal, Interneto)

*I am a little stuck, as I do not know how to advertise our good products.* (Doron, Interneto)

*Advertising is not sufficient as I do not know where to advertise.* (Dudu, Food for Thought)

After the intervention, there was evidence of increased marketing activities, in both frontal and non-frontal (online) areas, as well as increased sales:

*I feel that there is a lot more activity going on because of the proper marketing procedures we learned. There is movement, deals are being closed, and I definitely think that when I am facing a customer I know what to talk about and how to talk.* (Sara, Food for Thought)

*Our statistics on the website (which was enhanced due to the process) show that we have more entries, more people staying on the site for longer, and I think there was also an improvement in the sales due to this process, and, of course, the innovations... I see that we sell more, the sales graph has risen, there was a 30% growth in the first month after the intervention, and in the next month it could go up another 30%.* (Dor, Interneto)

From a visual standpoint, participants had adopted the usual standards of the industry in their graphic presence, so that, in practice, instead of differentiation and innovation, they demonstrated conformism and colourlessness. For example, the company that offers catering services chose a black uniform typical of many organizations involved in food service, and their slogan was "Catering and Event Production." The representatives of the company were not aware that this message does not indicate the uniqueness of the organization versus competition in the industry. During and after the intervention, there was evidence of operative changes in various organizations, towards better branding of the firms:

The owners are happy to make big changes in the company's marketing scheme. The logo will be changed, and the website will be changed. (Researcher log).

The CMO has started a process to change the graphic design of the company. This will include the website, brochures, business cards etc. (Researcher log).

*I would like to say that I am truly in a different place today, my advertising looks different, my ads are more dignified, more professional, more appealing. Now when I look back on my old ads, they were really amateurish and unprofessional. I really enjoyed all the meetings, I personally had a lot of fun there, and I really wanted to keep on going, keep on being supported...* (Sara, Food for Thought)

Due to ethical considerations, it is not possible to present full documentation of the physical changes carried out. However, Table 6 illustrates that changes occurred in the companies' presentation, in a way that protects the identity of research participants.

Post-intervention, there is some evidence that the marketing changes were effective from a sales standpoint:

*I have already seen that the intervention shaped our thinking and the message we convey. A few customers have already joined us because of the change. The marketing mode is a lot more professional, whereas before it consisted mainly of just giving the price and that was it.* (Bob, ABC Printing)

The researcher log concluded that marketing changes had been implemented in all the organizations without exception. In addition, the order and organization that resulted from the intervention allowed the SMEs to understand the meaning, visibility, and marketing concept of the organization on an applied level.

Table 2: Marketing activities that changed following the intervention

SME	Change
Future Chair	Changes made to matching of appearance in the company's various marketing materials, including the leading colour identifier, marketing text, its slogan, business cards, website and promotional signposting, general office appearance, a new advertising campaign was launched.
Telepele	Changes made in the leading colour of the SME, new logo design, new website design, new slogan, renewed textual content and pictures. The change was implemented on the website, various advertisements with new media and business cards.
Interneto	Changes made in the leading colours, the changes were implemented in the company's marketing communications, which included advertisements, website, general office appearance, business cards, letterhead.
Food for Thought	Changes made in the leading colours, a new logo and a new slogan were created, a new website was built. A new advertising campaign was launched, as well as new business cards, t-shirts which matched the new look, workbags, a new slogan, new pictures, and different text descriptions for the SME's products.
ABC printing	Changes were made in the leading colours, a new logo and a new slogan, and a new website built. New advertising was implemented, as well as new business cards, t-shirts that matched the new look, workbags, a new slogan, new pictures, and different text descriptions for the firm's products.

### Category 5: Brand Awareness

This category refers to how outsiders view the company. Before the intervention, the majority of respondents believed that their company and they themselves were viewed in a positive light by trade partners. However, there was also a consensus about the fact that no positive efforts were being made to present the company in a way that would improve their reputations. Participants' comments were generic:

*I think that, on the whole, most of them appreciate us, and we have a relatively good reputation.* (Gal, Interneto)

*I think that, all in all, the reviews are good, professional, but there's still a lot more to be done.* (Avivit, Future Chair)

Postintervention, participants made comments that were more practical:

*I think the firm is a lot more noticeable in terms of the customers. There is a lot more interaction with them. We improved communication with the suppliers too, but it is more in our interest to have better communication with potential customers, less with the suppliers. Our new way of communication is mostly demonstrated in the language we use, in what we offer, in how we focus our core capabilities, and how we want to bring it to the fore, to the customer.* (Suzan, ABC Printing)

*Competitors, suppliers and customers now think that we are a lot bigger than we really are, and that we have a reputation of being experts on the subject.* (Dor, Interneto)

However, the researcher log stated that there appeared to be a discrepancy between the improved awareness of the subject and how little it was implemented.

### Discussion and Conclusions

This study was designed to answer the research question: What is the meaning of a metaphor/storyline-based intervention program for participants, and how does the intervention change SMEs' organizational culture? The results indicated that the intervention program had five effects, as evidenced by the five qualitative main categories that arose from the coding process. Specifically, the intervention affected participants' (1) perceptions of marketing, (2) organizational structure, (3) organizational culture, (4) marketing activities and sales, and (5) brand awareness. This strongly supports existing research showing that organizational learning can lead to performance improvements and competitive advantage (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2010; Castro & Neira, 2005; Xenikou & Simosi, 2006). Moreover, theory suggests that marketing that uniquely positions the organization in the field will enable increase in sales in the long term (Ries & Ries, 2009).

Despite these positive results, the effects of the intervention on organizational structure and organizational culture were not pronounced. Several participants stated that they did not perceive any changes in these areas. Therefore, it can be concluded that the intervention may not have a significant effect on SMEs' organizational culture. This study revealed a weakness of the intervention, which is the inability to initiate a change of

organizational culture. This topic requires further examination of short interventions based on metaphor/storyline approaches. Despite this weakness, the intervention yielded practical, operational changes, indicating its potential for improving business outcomes through SME marketing training.

Although results showed a noticeable change in participant organizations soon after the intervention, literature suggests that no lasting change can be made if the organizational culture is not altered, and that only organizational culture can make short-term achievements, such as those gained from interventions, into permanent changes (Dvir & Oreg, 2007; Zhang, 2008). Schein (1990) proposed that an organizational culture is composed of three layers, and the results of this study provide support for the three-layer model. The intervention appeared to initiate change in this first layer, as indicated by participants like Dan, who stated that the concept of knights was used frequently in his organization after the intervention and enabled change to visible aspects of the SME. Additionally, results showed that participant organizations held meetings more frequently and discussed marketing issues more regularly. However, it was less clear that these changes penetrated to the second and third layers of organizational culture. These results support Schein's (1990) three-layer model of organizational culture, since the divisions between external, surface-level changes and deeper changes to values and assumptions were clearly visible. This interesting finding suggests a need for interventions that include long-term components designed to take a systematic approach to embedding external changes at deeper levels, in accordance with the recommendations of Dvir and Oreg (2007).

One of the key problems addressed in this study was resistance to learning on the part of SME managers and employees (Fox, 2004; Copley, 2008; Devins & Johnson, 2002; Kyriakidou & Maroudas, 2010). Learners may be impatient or unwilling to take part in traditional learning, expecting the learning process to be short and yield immediate results (Lydon & King, 2009; Zemke & Zemke, 1984). The intervention tested here appears useful for overcoming this barrier. The intervention was short and limited in time, and did not use the traditional mode of lecture teaching. Participants indicated that they felt the intervention was fun, which is another key to organizational learning success (Mills, 2008). Additionally, the intervention bridges the gap between marketing theories and the real world, and it generates solutions suited to the real world, as recommended by Fillis and Rentschler (2008). These findings suggest that the characteristics of the intervention may have overcome barriers to organizational learning, and other interventions using these characteristics could be similarly effective.

Zwan et al. (2009), asserted that organizations need CPD in order to survive. Results of this study support that conclusion. Prior to participating in the intervention, participants indicated in interviews that their survival was threatened by low earnings. Postintervention, participants noted an increase in sales and more positive response from customers. The researcher's log confirmed this, observing that participant organizations had more sales leads than prior to the intervention. This supports the notion that CPD can lead to better business results and that organizational learning that improves SMEs' organizational performance is feasible (Zwan et al., 2009).

The intervention program uses a narrative storyline approach to convey marketing concepts to the participants. This approach is based on theoretical and empirical foundation, indicating that metaphoric language can be useful in teaching new concepts to adults (Bremer & Lee, 2007; Cornelissen, 2003; Durgee & Chen, 2006; Fillis & Rentschler, 2008; Mills, 2008). The results show that this approach was indeed effective, as indicated in the participants' in-depth interviews.

### Future research

The current study contributes to filling a gap in the knowledge relating to metaphor/storyline intervention for improving marketing at SME businesses. More studies are needed that focus specifically on practical marketing for SMEs. Further research will also be required to better understand how short organizational learning interventions can translate to lasting organizational culture change. Finally, this study has only measured the outcome of the intervention on the short term. More research is needed to investigate the long-term impact of the intervention on marketing activities and business outcomes.

### Limitations

The research discussed here has a number of limitations. First, as an exploratory study, it was based on a convenience sample. It is not unlikely, therefore, that the sample is biased in the sense that it included organizations that a priori were seeking change. This sampling method reduces the generalizability of the findings. The small number of individual participants also limits generalizability. It is worth noting, however, that such a sampling method is very common in exploratory studies and in qualitative research, and the validity of qualitative data is judged by its comprehensiveness and the depth of the findings, rather than by its manner of sampling.

A further limitation of the research stems from the fact that the design of the intervention program and its evaluation were both carried out by the same individual. Therefore, once again, there is the possibility of evaluating bias in the data and in reported findings, caused by the emotional and professional involvement of the researcher with the research topic. Relatedly, the small sample of participants working directly with the researcher during the intervention may have led to social desirability bias in participants' responses (Weisberg, 2005). Therefore, the results should be interpreted with care and confirmed in future studies.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the innovative approach and methods of the intervention appear to have been effective for those who participated in the study. It united participants around common marketing goals, visions, and operative plans for the organization. Although changes at the organizational level appear to have been more limited, it is also the case that individual change is a catalyst for organizational change and growth (Prajogo & McDermott, 2011). Therefore, it can be concluded that metaphor/storyline-based intervention can be effective for improving SME business success through improving marketing skills and strategies.

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