



## EXAMINER'S REPORT

MAY 2002

### STAGE 1 PROJECT

## Marketing in Small Businesses in Ireland

### General Comments

This year in the Stage 1 project there was solid representation of higher grades (As and Bs), with just over fifty percent of candidates in this range, with one in five achieving an A grade and the warm congratulations of the examiner. Over a quarter of candidates were graded C, 17% graded D and 6% failed.

It was most encouraging to see the range of small business investigated by candidates. This is a vibrant sector and a direct economic contributor, whose importance is duly noted by national agencies. The prevalence of such businesses allowed candidates great freedom to explore economic sectors and arenas of commerce they had not been exposed to previously. For many, such choice seemed to be embraced with open arms, for others 'the shop next door' was good enough. Typically, retail/wholesale, tourism/hospitality and arts and crafts were the sectors which drew the most attention.

### CONTENT & TECHNICAL ISSUES

It is worrying (and obvious) to the examiner that only a select minority of students bothered to consult past examiner's reports. In these past reports, and indeed in this present report, lie the structural and tactical keys to success in the Stage 1 project, and should **NOT** be ignored, or seen as additional burden of reading materials. As is typical of previous years, the 2002 project had four identifiable requirements, but as is also typical of previous years, candidates selectively '(mis)read' the brief.

### Content Issues

The brief asked candidates to select a small business with which they are familiar, and detail their assumptions. The vast majority researched the definition of a small business by contacting representative organisations such as SFA, ISME and Chambers of Commerce of Ireland. However, too many completely ignored this most basic request and ploughed head-on into projects based on multinational organisations, with hundreds of employees (in one case thousands). This was an unacceptable and most basic error.

One fifth of the total marks were allocated to the provision of a summary of the background to the chosen business and the core activities it is engaged in. A significant number of students showed a clear over-reliance on discussion of the company's background to 'fill' the work requirements. Included in some weaker projects were lists of product ranges (pages in some cases) with and without price lists and even company profit margins. Although a relevant requirement, the company profile should not form most of the project.

The third component of the project required attention to be paid to the marketing activities of the business, and to describe in detail how the company has faced the continuing challenges for survival. This section in most projects was dealt with adequately, and many analyses were

founded on principles of the marketing mix and market segmentation. But those who concentrated solely on sales and promotion principles were ignoring wider salient themes. As to whether the company's marketing strategies give it a competitive advantage over competitors, it was here that there was, more often than not, 'gushing' and 'glowing' approval for the business's strategies without critique or balance, which even at this stage students should be developing an acuity for.

In the final section of this project candidates were required to put forward general recommendations which could be relevant to other small businesses regarding marketing activities. This was not an optional section of the project. If the question calls for recommendations, make sure your answer includes some – and make them as specific as possible. Those who engaged in this requirement generally showed a solid and well researched grasp of small business marketing operations and developed incisive recommendations of real worth. However, a final reminder is that such recommendations must be appropriately referenced if not the candidate's own ideas.

### **Technical Issues: Presenting & Packaging Your 'Product'**

Across the board, there existed an appalling carelessness in the presentation of projects. Hand written corrections are NOT appropriate, correct use of the English language and punctuation ARE. Hand-stuck on graphs and tables, misspellings and syntactical errors, indicate complete abandon. With widely available software there are NO excuses for such carelessness. Even a simple once-over proof reading would have addressed many of these outstanding issues. There also still remains an obvious inadequacy of knowledge in how to reference sourced material, despite frequent past recommendations. Candidates must be reminded that the name of the person(s) interviewed does not constitute a bibliography. If candidates are in any doubt how to cite, look to essential text books; they offer very appropriate frameworks for referencing. A final technical issue is the inclusion of the required abstract. It appeared that some candidates felt this to be optional, it is absolutely not.

It is the stated objective of this examiner that such lack of attention will in future be viewed extremely negatively. Presentation and packaging skills make a difference, especially at the margins.

### **EXAMINER'S RECOMMENDATIONS**

- **Answer the question.** In order to answer the question you need to have organised yourself. Plan your Project: establish the main points and list them or use a mind map. Go back to the plan as you are answering to avoid omitting an important point. This technique should also add logic to the development of your argument.
- Structure your answers so that your material is easy to read and easy to follow. This means: underlined side-heading to separate one part of your answer from the next (especially where a project has 4 requirements); and clearly differentiate between your 'Introduction' and your 'Recommendations'.
- If the question calls for recommendations, make sure your answer includes some – and make them as specific as possible.
- Be professional – in other words, reflect the view that Marketing is there to make a contribution to an organisation, but also PRESENT your work in a professional manner appropriate to The Marketing profession.