

Marketing for Service Quality - Contractors' Perception: UAE Case Study

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Abstract

This paper is based on the findings of in-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews with owners, directors and senior managers of twenty contractors' organisation in the United Arab Emirates construction industry. Then the research findings were reported and sent back to those who participated in the interviews in a form of a validation report for their review and comments. The objective of this paper is to explore the marketing concept, cost and activities within the contractors' organisation in the United Arab Emirates construction industry. The results indicated that marketing function has been slightly accepted as legitimate management activities in the UAE construction organisations (15% of respondents). Furthermore, the majority of companies (80% of respondents) consider marketing cost as a wasting of money since most projects were awarded to the lowest price offer. More than 85% of the interviewed contractors indicated that they do not have marketing departments or divisions in their companies; instead they have a public relationship department with the focus on the documentation of current project and the internal magazine of the company. Only 15% of contracting companies have a separate marketing division with a few staff and little budget. The result also indicated that there is much confusion among contractors on the definition of the marketing concepts and its purpose and activities.

Keywords:Marketing, Service Quality, Marketing Orientation, Differentiation and Marketing Research

1. Introduction

The construction marketing environment is characterised by fierce competition, uncertain economic conditions and increasingly more influential, demanding and better informed clients (Preece and Tarawneh 1996). This puts more pressure on contractor organisations to understand the marketing conditions and client requirements and expectations in order to exceed, rather than simply meet or satisfy client expectations. In adapting to this pressure contractors have to look to marketing initiatives as a way to create and sustain competitive advantages and to have clear understanding to the opportunities and threats associated with the construction market (Gunhan and Arditì 2005).

The increased competition with more sophisticated and demanding customers have forced many service companies to compete on quality of products and supporting services as well as the final products. All organisations, whether in construction, manufacturing or service industries, compete to some degree on service (Zeithaml et al 1990). However, it is extremely difficult to find even one industry for which service quality is unimportant. Most manufacturing companies such as Ford Motor, Corning Glass Works and others place a great deal of emphasis on the role of service quality and its effect on client perceptions (Zeithaml et al 1990). Manufacturing have found it difficult to establish sustainable competitive advantage only on technology development and they place more attention and resources to value-added activities and services as a prime source of superiority (Hiltor 1992).

Top management needs to be committed to supporting client orientation, and the construction team needs to have the necessary customer communication skills. Firms need to identify and understand what most influence client satisfaction to highlight areas which need further attention and improvement. This needs to be translated into a client satisfaction programme combined with a marketing strategy. Management are advised that to ensure client total satisfaction they adopt a holistic perspective of service quality as a long term differentiation strategy in addition to the quality of the final facility. The role played by the key project manager also influenced the success/failure of their marketing strategy (Florence and Pervez 2007).

2. Marketing concept

Marketing is defined as "the management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer needs profitability" (Curtis 1994). According to the Institute of Marketing; marketing concept is defined as the "management function which organises and directs all those business activities involved in assessing and converting purchasing power into effective demand for a specific product or service and in moving the product or service to the final customer so as to achieve the profit target or other objectives" (IOM 1973). Furthermore, marketing is also defined as "... identifying and satisfying the needs and wants of consumers by providing a market offering to fulfil those needs and wants through exchange processes profitably" (Woodruffe

1995).

These definitions focus on the process of establishing customers' needs, perceptions and requirements for the purpose of satisfying them at a profit to the company and customers alike. The first step of this process is to identify the customers' needs, wants and demands. Those needs, wants and demands should be translated into products and services that fulfil customers' requirements. The guiding concepts for customers to choose between the different offers lie in several factors, which may be regarded as the cost, values provided and their satisfaction with those products and services. The selected products and services need to be delivered via an exchange process for money. This interchange process takes place over a period of time and transactions, during which a kind of relationship may be established. However, the core concepts of marketing are presented in figure 1.

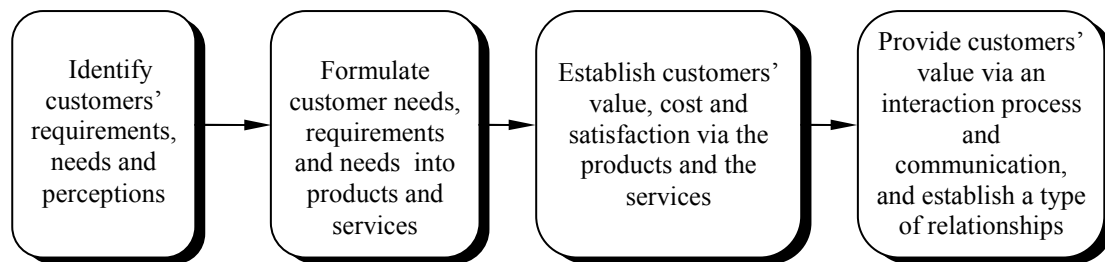


Figure 1. Core concepts of marketing (Adapted from Kotler 1994)

The concept of marketing is defined as an essential approach for achieving competitive advantages (Vassie 1969). In addition to that Vassie stated that marketing is "exploitation by an organisation of all the actual and possible differences between its offer and the offers of competing organisations to give it a commercial edge over them". According to Vassie's definition companies should seek all the possible way to gain the advantage over its competitors. However, a company can achieve a commercial edge over its competitors by dedicating more efforts to the marketing concepts presented in figure 1 above. In this regards marketing has been considered as a competitive means which enhances the company's ability to gain and sustain a competitive advantage.

3. Marketing research

The core concept of marketing management indicated that organisations need to recognize, predict and understand customers' needs and wants. Management needs to learn about customer changing needs, competitor actions, marketing environment and so on. However, the way to study the company's marketing environment is through marketing research, in its different forms.

Usually marketing research understood as the process of identifying the customer needs and wants in a systematic manner and determining the impact of marketing activities on customer's perceptions and attitude (Baron and Harris 1995). Baker (1996) has indicated that marketing research can be defined as "the objective gathering, recording and analysing of all facts about problems relating to the transfer and sale of goods and services from producer to consumer or user".

However, the purposes of undertaking marketing research can be summarised as "to reduce the areas of uncertainty surrounding business decisions" (Baker 1996). Woodruffe (1995) has identified two general aims of conducting marketing research, namely, to reduce the amount of risk and uncertainty associated with planning, and to observe performance after the implementation of the plans. Kotler (1994) has supported this by stating that marketing research is conducted to provide managers with a better understanding of the marketing problems. MacCarthy and Perreault (1993) have suggested that the reason for undertaking marketing research is to gather information that decision makers can trust in making their decisions.

Therefore, information and feedback about competitors and customers need to be timely, accurate, and available to assist managers in arriving at effective solutions to marketing management problems (Polat 2010, and Ardit, Polat and Makinde 2008). Collecting information from many sources, internally and externally, is a valuable decision making tool for managers (Parasuraman et al. 1988). Systematic analysis of customer and competitor's feedback and the general market information is vital for competitive strategies development. It also helps companies to better understand their customers' requirements, perceptions and expectations and to take the required corrective actions to close any gaps between their actual performance and customers' perceptions and expectations.

Therefore, this requires companies to establish and maintain a suitable business culture that will produce the necessary behaviour. Such culture should enable companies to deliver better-quality to achieve customer satisfaction and gain their loyalty. Market orientation has been suggested as the business culture which will

deliver high levels of quality and customer satisfaction (Narver and Slater, 1990).

4. Marketing strategy

Kotler (1994) has stated that the heart of strategic marketing can be described as Segmentation, Targeting and Positioning marketing (STP Marketing). The following examines the components of STP respectively.

4.1. Market segmentation

Market Segmentation suggested that it is normally difficult for a company to operate and serve all customers in a broad market (Kotler 1994). Customers may be too many, dispersed and have different buying requirements. Companies will be in a strong competitive position to serve particular customer segments of the market. Thus companies need to identify the most attractive market segments that can serve effectively rather than competing everywhere.

Market segmentation can be defined as “the act of dividing a market into distinct groups of buyers who might require separate products and / or marketing mix” (Kotler 1994). McCarthy and Perreault (1993) have come with a similar definition when they said that a market segment is a “homogeneous group of customers who will respond to a marketing mix in a similar way”.

Several variables can be used to segment customer markets. Those variables can be divided into two broad groups, namely, consumer characteristics or non-behavioural variables and consumer responses or behavioural variables (Kotler 1994). Researchers may segment customer markets according to their characteristics or non-behavioural dimensions. Then they examine whether these customer segments have different attitude or response toward a certain product or services. Similarly business or industrial markets segmentation can be undertaken by using many of the variables used to segment customer markets. For, example geographic variables, benefit sought and usage rate can be employed to segment business markets. However, other new variables are required to segment business market due to the differences between customer and business markets. Kotler (1994) has reported a number variable for business markets segmentation such as:

1. Demographic variables such as (industry, company size, and location).
2. Operating variables such as (technology, user/nonuser status and customer capabilities).
3. Purchasing approaches such as (purchasing-function organisation, power structure, nature of existing relationships, general purchase policies and purchase criteria).
4. Situational factors such as (urgency, specific application, size of order).
5. Personal characteristics such as (buyer-seller similarity, attitude toward risk, and loyalty).

4.2. Positioning and differentiation strategy

Positioning refers to how customers perceive and evaluate companies’ service and products (Woodruffe 1995). Particularly, it refers to the way in which customers rank a service or a product attributes against those of competitors. Kotler (1994) defined positioning as “the act of designing the company’s offer so that it occupies a distinct and valued place in the target customers’ mind”. This is supported by Baker (1996) who stated that positioning is the process of achieving a unique place in a competitive environment for a product or service such that some customer segments perceive the particular services to be different from competitors. Thus, the important step in positioning is to identify the key factors that customers use to evaluate performance and to distinguish between competing alternatives (Baker 1996). However, customer perceptions stem from their beliefs about service’s or product’s value which make up their attitude toward those services and products. Therefore, a company’s positioning must grow out of understanding how the target segment defines value and makes choices among competitors.

Woodruffe (1995) identified the advantages of service and product positioning. First, positioning is essential for the success of marketing strategies because it involves a careful design of the company’s offer to suit the needs of the target segments. It enables the company to better design their marketing mix i.e., the four Ps (price, product, place and promotion). Second, it enables the company to respond positively in competitive environments and recognise market opportunities. Third, it enables a company to satisfy specific markets better than its competitors.

Company’s services and products position in the customer’s mind will be influenced by the way they differentiate them. Differentiation strategy requires that a firm strives to be unique in its industry along certain attributes that are widely valued by customers (Porter 1985). Companies can achieve differentiation based on the product, the delivery system or process by which it is sold, the marketing approach etc. Differentiation strategy refers to the attributes that make a service or product stand different from those of competitors. Thus companies who want to adopt a differentiation strategy need to select and emphasise the attributes that are different from their competitors.

Differentiation has been defined as “the act of designing a set of meaningful differences to distinguish the company’s offer from competitors’ offers” (Kotler 1994). In this regard a company may be seen as more caring toward its customers, more responsive to the customer needs, more reliable or providing more value for money than its competitors. Porter (1985) indicated that a company can differentiate itself by providing something unique and valuable to customers beyond simply offering a low price.

Service and product attributes have different values for customers. Thus, they have different influence on the customer's perception of the company's service and products. Companies need to understand aspects of customer behaviour before developing their positioning and differentiation strategies (Woodruffe 1995). First, a company needs to determine the attributes of its offer that customers rate most highly. Second, it needs to know how customers rank its performance against those of its competitors' along those attributes. Finally, it needs to know who makes the decisions and try to influence their perceptions. However, proper marketing activities and communication are important to achieve the above goals.

4.3. Market targeting

After the segmentation process, managers identify the major market segments, focus on or target one or more of these segments and prepare their marketing programs specifically for each selected segment. Therefore, market targeting can be defined as "the act of developing measures of segment attractiveness and selecting one or more market segments to enter" (Kotler 1994). Obviously target marketing may be characterised as "micro-marketing" where marketing programs are designed according to the specific needs and wants of customer groups. However, the ultimate framework of target marketing is "customised marketing" (Kotler 1994). This also means that company's products, services and marketing programs are adapted to the requirements of a distinct customer or buying organisation.

Target marketing has several advantages. First, it assists companies to identify marketing opportunities better. Second, companies can develop the appropriate offer for each selected market. Third, company's prices, advertising and distribution channels can be adjusted to reach the selected market efficiently. Also target marketing provide companies with the opportunity to focus their efforts on customers whom they have the highest chance of satisfying.

5. How And Why To Apply Marketing To Construction?

Despite the acceptance of marketing as a business function there still much confusion on the precise meaning of marketing and how it could be applied to construction (Gunhan and Arditi 2005 and Richard 1981). However, the full benefit of marketing as a management philosophy has come late to construction industry (Fisher 1991). Therefore, the role of marketing is to adjust the construction organizations' relationships with changes within the industry and the external environment (Silas, Issaka and Brain 1996).

A study of marketing communication in the UK construction indicated that marketing is still undeveloped and viewed with scepticism (Morgan and Morgan 1990). Shearer (1990) highlighted the problem of what is meant by marketing in construction and found a dominant view that marketing in construction is basically selling promises, since clients are being asked to buy something which has not yet been produced. Male and Stocks (1991) referred the reluctance of using marketing and the confusion over its meaning in construction to the issues of what is meant by "product" in construction.

The lack of understanding and appreciation of marketing roles and marketing research in construction is evident (Morgan and Morgan 1991). Thus, the lack of client information on perception, satisfaction, and requirements and future development leave contractors in dark about what are clients looking for and expecting from them. However, this can help in widening the perception differences between the two groups, clients and contractors, on marketing and service quality. The lack of co-ordination and communication across contractors departments leave the front line employees unaware of the client requirement and therefore clients' perceptions and satisfaction may suffer. Further, the lack of employees training on interpersonal and communication skills and client education activities undertaken by contractors could adversely affect client's perceptions and assessment of the contractor's service.

Male and Stocks (1991) indicated that product in construction is a service which end up with an ownership. Therefore, the total offering of Jordanian contractors is a combination of service and physical product. This enable construction marketer to benefit from tools and techniques developed for both aspects. Since manufacturing and services are becoming increasingly interrelated, as suggested by Woodruffe (1995) and Zeithaml et al (1990), thus Jordanian contractors need to look at marketing with the concept of the total service offering in their mind. However, Jordanian contractors are encouraged to direct their marketing on the new focus which is recognised as becoming increasingly important: services from non-service providers, as phrased by Woodruffe (1995). This approach includes the service elements of manufacturing and production process. Thus, the role of additional services provided by manufacturing such as supporting services, training, warranties etc., has become a strong source of differentiation. That is the service element of the total service offering of Jordanian contractors is proposed as a key factor in establishing the company competitive advantage.

Despite the obvious differences between marketing of physical goods and service marketing, the underlying concepts and management decisions are much the same (Woodruffe 1995). However, marketing research, planning and the development of marketing mix strategy (the four P's: product, price, promotion and place) are equally important for both services and physical good marketing. However, the marketing mix could be extended for service industries to include another three Ps: people, process and physical evidence. Also marketing-

oriented organisation, whether in service or manufacturing sectors, need market intelligence to identify the market needs and fulfil them, thereby satisfying both the client and the firm objectives. The same is applicable to Jordanian contractors who need to have a clear picture of what clients are looking for, what they are evaluating during the service interactions, and how do they rate them compared to a competitors to be able to develop their own strategy and model of service marketing.

6. Research Methodology

6.1. The Sampling Frame

A national, cross industry study investigating the concept of marketing in the context of United Arab Emirates construction industry was undertaken. A sampling frame was prepared from the Construction Contractors Directory in UAE which provides a detailed list of Contractors companies working in UAE construction industry. According to the Department of Economic Development in UAE – Abu Dhabi, Contractors were qualified into a number major divisions or groups, which are the Special Group which is the highest qualification, then the First degree and the Second degree which is the lowest qualification. However, for the purpose of the current research the special, first and the second degree of qualification were targeted to collect information from regarding the research questions.

The aim was to generate a list of (20) respondents who were involved in marketing, business development and public relation departments. The list included one key or senior manager in marketing or business development functions from each of the top 100 UAE contractors companies. The researcher has worked from early 2008 to 2012 as Coordination and Engineering Manager at one of the largest main contractor in UAE. This has provided him with a great deal on information and access to many contractors' companies which helps to collect information from the right persons at the contractors' companies. In fact and due to the competitive and busy nature of the construction industry it will be very difficult to have the time to set with any contractors' personnel for long time. Therefore, the researcher experience in construction guides him to many companies who are willing and interested to set dates for the interviews of the current work.

The exploratory nature of the study obliged the selection of a judgmental sample. This indicated that one key or senior individual was judged to be a reliable source of information on their organisations' activities than lower-ranking managers (Philips (1981). In concord with Philips' conclusion Patterson et al. (1997) reported that one key respondent is appropriate if he/she has a senior or ownership position. They added that such respondents and their direct involvement in their organisations' "boundary-spanning activities" qualify them to respond on behalf of their companies. Conant, Mokwa and Varadarajan (1990), indicated that "in the face of time and resources constraints the single informant approach allows for a large number of organisations to be surveyed". Likewise Patterson et al. (1997) stated that it would be very difficult to hunt multiple respondents over several months and it may decrease the response due to respondents changing functions within the company; leaving the company altogether or becoming too busy to continue participation.

However, a senior respondent approach was selected to obtain data for a number of reasons. First, care was taken to ensure that the respondent has a senior occupation, knowledge and they were suitable and willing to participate in the study. Generally the respondents occupy senior positions in their organisations such as owners, chairman, managing directors, executives, directors, and senior managers.

6.2. Procedures of data collection

Giving the exploratory nature of the research, semi-structured, in depth face-to-face interviews as the main data collection technique were conducted with selected experienced personnel from the marketing and business development departments of (20) UAE contractors chosen from the top 100 organisation as presented below .

A semi-structured interview was selected in order to set a framework and not to deviate from the main research topic due to the lack of understanding and different interpretations of those concepts from the people working within UAE construction. It was also appropriate to start with a relaxed discussion of such new topic to UAE construction industry, i.e., marketing. However, at the beginning of each interview respondent was told about the aims of the research. Further all respondents were asked for their permission to record the interviews and assured that their identity and the given information will remain confidential.

The interviews were taped, transcribed and analysed to determine the common themes and key phrases related to respondents' general perceptions and assessments of their marketing activities. The findings of the interviews were presented in the form of a validation report and sent back to the individuals who were participated in the interviews to provide their comments on the analysis of the information provided by them in the first place.

6.3. Design of the interviews

For an interview which required the minimum possible time from each interviewee, taking into consideration the nature of the interviewees, semi-structured in-depth face-to-face interviews were considered appropriate for the exploratory phase of this study as explained earlier.

Given the exploratory nature of the research and the sparse literature on marketing in construction industry, open ended questions were used to identify the most important aspects of the research topic and to seek any relevant

suggestions from the participants. Therefore, a national, cross industry study investigating the concepts of marketing was undertaken. A sampling frame was prepared from the Construction Contractors Directory in UAE. The research questions, related to the research objectives, were directed toward experienced and senior managers within contractors' organisation who were specifically involved in the marketing and business development activities.

Following the same framework adapted by Parasuraman et al. (1985) and Baker and Lamb (1993), the discussion about marketing centred on contractors' experience and perceptions to this concept. Respondents were asked to give background information for themselves and their companies. They also asked to define marketing and to give their opinion on the differences between marketing and selling in construction. Detailed information was also collected concerning marketing activities for each specific company.

6.4. The Pilot interviews

Piloting is essential for any research to enhance the reliability and validity of the finding of the main research. Initially (5) firms involved in the provision of contracting services were contacted randomly. The aim was to aid our understanding of how to define and perceive marketing at a time where nothing has been published about marketing in UAE construction industry.

Based on the results of the piloting interviews, the main data collection technique was modified to take into account the suggestions made by the respondents. By doing so the authors hoped that the interview questions became face valid, and therefore, ready to be used in the main data collection stage.

7. Data Analysis

The study goal was introducing a further understanding of the concept of marketing in the United Arab Emirates construction industry. In order to incorporate the findings and views of previous researches, (20) interviews were conducted with experienced and senior individual within contractor organisations as stated earlier. The interviews were undertaken at their offices and at their convenient time. The interviews findings were presented in the following sections, while questions asked the interviewees were covered a wide range of issues concerning marketing activities.

7.1. General Information

Table 1, shows the types of personnel interviewed and other information on the types of firms that participated in the interviews. However, the personnel and firms name were remained anonymous.

Table 1, Type of personnel and firms interviewed

Contractors' Symbol	Respondent position and Experience	Respondent qualification	Firms rank or level	Areas of speciality
1	Head of Purchasing Department (8 years)	BSc Mechanical Eng.	First Class	Water and Water treatment
2	Development Manager (15 years)	Master in Economic	Second Class	Building
3	Estimation Manager (11 years)	BSc Civil Eng.	First Class	Building
4	General Director (25 years)	BSc Electrical Eng.	Third Class	Electromechanic
5	General Director (15 years)	BSc Civil Eng.	Second Class	Building
6	Vice Director (16 years)	BSc Electrical Eng.	Second C lass	Building
7	Technical Manager (13 years)	MSc Architectural Eng.	First Class	Building
8	Sales Manager (10 years)	MSc Civil Eng.	Second Class	Electro-mechanic
9	General Director (29 years)	BSc Electrical Eng.	Second Class	Building
10	Public Relation Manager (30 years)	BSc Civil Eng.	First Class	Building
11	General Director (20 years)	BSc Mechanical Eng.	First Class	Building
12	Project Manager (13 years)	MSc Construction Management	First Class	Building and Management
13	Sales Managers (5 years)	BSc Civil Eng.	First Class	Building
14	Contract Manager (9 years)	BSc Civil Eng.	First Class	Building
15	Technical Manager (13 years)	BSc Civil Eng.	First Class	Building
16	Owner (25 years)	Higher Secondary Education	First Class	Building
17	Project Manager (13 years)	MSc Construction Management	Second Class	Building and Management
18	Project Manager (10years)	BSc Civil Eng.	First Class	Building
19	Project Manager (18 years)	BSc Civil Eng.	Third Class	Building
20	Project Manager (12 years)	BSc Civil Eng.	First Class	Building

7.2. Marketing definition and activities

The majority of the respondents (11 out of 20 which equal to 55%) suggested that marketing can be defined as presenting the company technical ability with the suitable cost to convince the prospective clients that the contractor can do the job on time within budget and according to the required specification.

A number of respondents (6 out of 20 as a percent 30%) defined marketing as promoting the company services and products in the best possible manner in a minimum cost and maximum profit to persuade the client to buy and to award their project. A small number of contractors (N=3 equivalent to 15%) have no idea about the definition of marketing.

It is evident from the above definition that construction people have different perceptions toward the marketing concept and activities compared to other industries. However, cost is their main concern when they are talking about marketing concept and activities. This is maybe due to the norm of the construction, where projects are awarded to the lowest cost. In this regards a culture changed is inevitable in construction to perceive marketing as an essential management tool.

Only three out of twenty contractors have a separate division of marketing in their companies (only 15%). The number of staff in each division is only three persons with a small budget. The responsibility of the marketing division is limited and only focused on gathering information about the number and type of future projects. Whereas the rest of the interviewed contractors (17 out of 20 equal to 85%) have no division for marketing and they do not see any importance for it. Again this is another proof that marketing in construction is perceived differently. This is expected since marketing as a concept and management tool is new concept to construction personnel.

8. Discussions and Conclusions

It is possible that current is the only research to indicate the failure of the contractors in the United Arab Emirates construction industry to adopt modern marketing concept and activities. Based on the questions asked during the interviews, it is evidently clear that marketing function has been slightly accepted as legitimate management tools in the UAE construction organisations. This is maybe because of the system of awarding projects which is mainly based on the lowest price. That is why the majority of respondent give cost top priority when they define marketing concept. It is clear also that the culture of construction regarding marketing activities and their costs is governing contractors' perceptions.

However, only three contractors have a separate marketing division with a few staff and little budget. On the other hand the majority of contractors (85%) they do not see any benefits of marketing and saw marketing as an extra cost. In this regard contractors feel that they do not need any marketing activities since projects are awarded to the lowest price. The result also indicated that there is much confusion among contractors on the definition of marketing concept. Furthermore, contractors see marketing as gathering information about the type and number of prospective projects and to be qualified for these projects. They put more concern on the pre-qualification process which is carried out by clients before awarding their projects. Contractors see that pre-qualification stage is the only stage where marketing is relevant.

It is obvious that marketing as a concept and management tool is new to the construction industry. However, culture and attitude change toward marketing activities are compulsory if construction to benefit from. Therefore, marketing in the context of the UAE construction industry should be precisely defined, and its boundaries, benefits and activities must be clearly stated and identified.

The results also support the need for a specific programme and workshops for educating contractors' personnel with the UAE construction industry on the importance and benefits of marketing. They need to change their perception toward the importance of marketing and its effects on their business improvement and success. Contractors need to develop a viable marketing strategy as opposed to competitive bidding procedure in order to get benefit from marketing activities. Therefore, marketing concepts with the construction industry in the UAE is still virgin and more research on this regards is required. Further research is required on developing such strategy in construction. The role of project manager as a decision maker in construction project and their rule on the success or failure of marketing strategy need to be investigated as well.

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