

Right Intentions Leading to Wrong Results: A Case Lesson on Helping Thai Locals Sustain Their Business Community

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Abstract

This qualitative research study focuses on the efforts of a local community to develop sustainable operations and the difficulties encountered achieving this goal. Specifically, cognizant of the fact that right intentions can sometimes lead to wrong results, it seeks to answer the following question: What are the lessons learned on spearheading a project designed to help Thai locals sustain their business community? A case study was conducted by a group called the Marketing Knowledge Management for Community Enterprise to assist several local businesses regrouped as the Agricultural Home Group and located in the Pang Moo Sub-District, Muang District, Mae Hong Son Province. The methodology included a community forum, focus group meetings, marketing field trips, and on-site visits, each activity serving a specific purpose. Lessons were captured in a Refraining Matrix that included four theoretical perspectives derived from the central question: a product line, distribution channel, growth strategy, and sufficiency perspective. The findings indicate that improvements were hindered by a reluctance to take risk, a lack of competence in digital communication geared toward tourists, a failure to have a clear vision as well as lack of discipline and enthusiasm of the participants. A discussion on the practical methods to get locals more focused and motivated to sustain their local businesses in their community is provided.

Keywords: Channel of Distribution; Growth Strategy; Local Business Community; Sufficiency, Sustainability.

1. Introduction

The sustainability of some local business communities in Thailand can be credited to a group of leaders within those communities who make the most of seminars and workshops learn to overcome resistance to change and navigate through the challenges that changes bring about (Gibbons et al., 2018). These communities have been shown to thrive over the long term. While getting local community members to attend seminars and workshops designed to help their communities become economically more sustainable is generally not an issue as most are keen to attend, the implementation of the recommendations made at these seminars and workshops

is far from satisfactory. As a result, many of the problems raised remain unresolved. This is especially the case with the issue of sustainability. It has been found that, even though seminars and workshops do provide valuable guidance, the lack of discipline of some community members render them almost meaningless (Denney et al., 2018). The result is that resources provided by institutions to initiate projects designed to assist communities in getting their businesses to operate soundly cannot attain their goals. No matter how substantial they may be, if recipients are lacking the drive for self-improvement, the projects at the core of the seminars and workshops will not come to full fruition (Kala & Bagri, 2018). It is quite clear that, while benevolence to help remains strong, what is needed is a genuine willingness to improve things.

This paper provides a case lesson on initiating a project for helping the businesses of a local community based in Northern Thailand to become more sustainable. It seeks to draw lessons on spearheading such a project by focusing on key learning points. Specifically, the case study developed for this research aims to assess whether the product line, the channel of distribution, the growth strategy, and the implementation of the concept of sufficiency as applied to that community are efficient enough for sustainability. To do so, the following research questions have been articulated:

- Are the (i) product line, (ii) the channel of distribution, (iii) the growth strategy adequate for sustaining the local business community?
- Is the concept of sufficiency properly implemented to ensure the sustainability of the local business community?

To address these questions, the study begins with a review of the relevant literature on product line, channels of distribution, growth strategy, and sufficiency, all key concepts at the core of sustainable local business communities. The ‘reframing matrix’ used as the conceptual framework and the contours of the case study developed for this research are then introduced. This leads to an analysis of the lessons learned from the workshop conducted to help the local business community members develop sustainable operations. Finally, the paper offers its own conclusive perspectives on practical methods to get locals more focused and motivated to sustain their local businesses in their communities. Before proceeding with this research study, it is important to note, though, that for the scholars spearheading the project (the authors), what is taught in the classroom and learnt from past research is truly tested in the reality of the business environment, where dynamic factors inexorably redefine how theories really work in the real world and inescapably need some improvements to remain relevant and fit with reality. Herein precisely lies the importance of this case lesson as it takes into account the variables of business operations and adopt practical ideas to broaden efforts to help Thai locals operate their small businesses in a sustainable way.

2. Literature Review on Sustaining a Local Business Community

Before discussing the four key concepts at the core of the research questions, this section first considers the notion of sustainable project.

- Sustainable Projects Helping Local Business Communities

Shiel et al., (2016) concluded that it is quite challenging to get a big overview amongst stakeholders involved in projects. According to them, without a proper structure and enabling platform to get a firm dialogue with the community, the capacity development for sustainability will mean different things for each individual or group. As Zollo, Cennamo, and Neumann (2013) stated, both the “identification of the enabling and hindering factors behind the success of these transformational processes, and (in a more normative perspective) an understanding of which approach to the change challenge might work under what conditions” (p. 13), need to be addressed to help companies move forward. The process of helping a local

business community become sustainable thus begins with addressing the social, economic, cultural, political, and ecologic dimensions which are integrated as a means to improve quality of life (Azizia, Biglarib, & Joudi, 2011). Approaches that can be changed to get company members become more innovative towards delivering a worthy product or service to their customers need to be identified (Bocken et al., 2014). This requires facilitators to acknowledge the traits, functions, and individual mindsets (value systems, beliefs, motivations, emotions, and psychological dispositions) of the participants (Foss, Heimeriks, & Winter, 2012).

- Developing Sustainable Product Lines in a Local Business Community

In their study on socially responsive and sustainable product design, Melles, de Vere, and Mistic (2011) concluded that “most successful examples of socially responsible design have emerged from co-design where designers have engaged effectively with communities and then co-designed and co-manufactured a solution that utilizes local or regional materials, craftsmanship and expertise, facilities, new skills and knowledge acquisition, empowers the community, and allows the user to ‘own’ the solution” (p. 149). Getting people to accept the idea of having a sustainable product line requires the participation and input of other people in the community in terms of sharing knowledge, discussing ideas, and listening to the critical issues that need to be focused on (Clark et al., 2009). This will prevent products from being unwanted and unsold (Aguñaga, Henriques, & Scheel, 2018). Thus, having a seminar designed to enlist the help and receive the feedback of the local business community in incorporating a sustainable product line is a good way of securing their collaboration (Nunkoo & So, 2017). It will provide for a good understanding of the product line. Olya, Alipour, and Gavilyan (2018) concluded that representatives of all the community groups should be included in initiatives and meetings/seminars so that they could voice their opinions about the sustainability and tell whether they are satisfied with the process. Workshops should provide a platform for participants to discuss the realities of managing sustainability. First and foremost, they should promote an exchange of knowledge and practices dealing with the environment, being innovative, and getting closer to the idea of having a sustainable society (Muñoz-Pascual, Curado, & Galende, 2019).

- Sustainable Channels of Distribution in a Local Business Community

The channel of distribution acts like the communication process between sellers and buyers and develops into a collaborative arrangement and commitment to share knowledge, resources, and capabilities for upholding sustainability (Villa et al., 2017). In their study on a sustainable channel relationship, Sheu and Hu’s (2009) found that the source member with relatively more power does not always mean to be a winner in markets without any aid from the target member’s resources. They argued that instead, source member “should regard himself/herself as a channel manager aiming to enhance the channel integrative collaboration by effectively allocating channel resources, e.g., the manufacturer’s technical and logistics resources as well as the dealer’s marketing-information resources, through the appropriate use of power influence strategies so as to improve the collective channel performance” (p. 27). When conducting a workshop, facilitators can direct participants to see where the challenges dealing with sustainability may reside, most notably issues on distribution channels and securing the full collaboration of those who are part of the network system and value chains (Joshi, 2018; Bendul, Rosca, & Pivovarova, 2016). Having an open discussion during seminars and workshops about improving the capability for innovation and technological productivity within the channels of distribution enables firms to be more prepared when competition gets tough and matured to handle changing situations (Stachová et al., 2019).

- Sustainable Growth Strategy in a Local Business Community

Gallo, Antolin-Lopez, and Montiel (2018) found that local businesses contribute more to sustainable growth when they locate value creation near the sources of production. Local

community businesses can never be too sure of the market and economic environment to be in a long-lasting stable condition. Resiliency needs to be nurtured along the way as a form of growth (Akemu, Whiteman, & Kennedy, 2016). The capabilities of individuals and communities for anticipating the shocks and disturbances and overcoming crisis need to be developed (Boeri et al., 2017). Locals will need to take into consideration how basic infrastructure facilities like roads, shopping options, health care, education, banking, utilities, and sanitation, can have a multitude impact on the satisfaction of community members (Mathew & Sreejesh, 2017). In short, projects supporting the growth of local business must be able to recognize the barriers that plague performance (Picciotti, 2017).

- Sustainable Sufficiency in a Local Business Community

Sufficiency is a shorter term for ‘meeting needs.’ It is a practical method of meeting needs without compromising others who are also dependent on resources to make a livelihood and sustain their living (Missimer, Robèrt, & Broman, 2016). To assess the rate of sustainability of a local business community it is necessary to take into consideration how their daily routine operations may have an impact on the wellbeing of people, economic morality, and the environmental habitat (Shen, 2014). As a means of getting a local business community to be sustainable, sufficiency does not mean sacrificing quality. It requires to be mindful of the resources used and make sure that they would not degrade their social community (Praswati & Aji, 2017). Still, while the practice of being sufficient is a virtue model for local businesses in the community to follow, the reality is that barriers, such as lack of time, interest, and human resources can demotivate the practice (Chazireni & Zvitambo, 2020). Workshops can be the agent connecting participants and empowering them to find the resources they need to develop their plans for being more sustainable in their local business communities (Connor & Bent-Goodley, 2016). There is, however, a risk that the cultural heritage and customs of local people will be commodified. Preventing the marginalization of a culture will entail local businesses to be engaged with an active community participation and demonstrate a better connection with all the locals (Rashid, 2020). As Clausen and Gyimóthy (2016) pointed out, “Local communities are neither cohesive objects nor homogeneous instruments of implementing community-based development initiatives. It is therefore necessary to differentiate actor participation or influence in terms of their power networks and positions in various geographical, economic and cultural constellations” (p. 325).

3. Research Methodology

As noted in the introduction, this qualitative research is based on a case study whose lessons were captured in a Reframing Matrix.

- Reframing Matrix

A Reframing Matrix was used as the conceptual framework and case lesson methodology. As a tool designed to look at organizational problems from different perspectives and expands the range of creative solutions that can be generated (ODI.org, 2006), the matrix was used to capture the lessons learned from the workshop on sustaining a local business community. Recall from above that the aim of this study is to answer the following query: What are the lessons learned on spearheading a project designed to help Thai locals sustain their business community? Four research objectives, referred to as theoretical perspectives, were derived from this central question, each one addressing a specific issue as follows:

- *Product Line Perspective* – Are the products offered generating the type of brand reputation needed to sustain the local business community?
- *Distribution Channel Perspective* – Is the value chain (also referred as value chain) helping the sustainability of the local business community?

- *Growth Strategy Perspective* – Are the plans for achieving a higher market share contributing to a sustainable local business community?
- *Sufficiency Perspective* – Are the needs being met compatible with sustaining a local business community?

- *Case Study*

As part of the methodology used for this research, a case study was conducted. It involved two groups: a group called the Marketing Knowledge Management for Community Enterprise (hereinafter, MKM group), and the Agricultural Home Group, a substituted name used to protect the identity of the stakeholders, located in the Pang Moo Sub-District, Muang District, Mae Hong Son Province.

- *The MKM Group*: The group consisted of five researchers who had been following the Agricultural Home Group since 2009 as part of a project designed to help local business community members adopt sustainable practices. The MKM group collaborated by providing data to the case related to the research questions articulated for this study. The data was obtained through interviews, which enabled members of the MKM group to relate their answers to the information in their documentary notes and their previous experience interacting with local business community members. Photos and images of the local community who participated in prior workshops and actions promoting/selling their products were also used to provide a more vivid description.

- *The Agricultural Home Group*: The group regrouped three local business organizations. To protect their identity and maintain confidentiality, their names were changed to Soybean Inc., Bean Group, and Sesame Oil Alliance, respectively. The three of them took part in the market test that was conducted at three stores located in Chiang Mai Night Bazaar and two shopping malls in the Chiang Mai province. These places are well known for carrying high end products and branded goods. Consumers frequently visit them to buy their favorite items.

The methodology used in this case study to improve product development and learn how to make distribution channels work to the benefit of the community included a community forum, focus group meetings, marketing field trips, and on-site visits. Each method served a specific purpose. The aim of the community forum was to allow participants to learn about the problems and requirements of marketing, distribution channels, expanding a product line for creating growth. Having focus group meetings enabled the group leaders and sample representatives to gather in-depth information on sales strategies, distribution channel development, trade show attendance, and roadshows and initiate specific projects. Group meetings were carried out to analyze the potential of production and marketing, and jointly looking for group representatives to be part of the sales team of the group and help distribute products to the market more widely. The purpose of onsite visits was to accumulate business experience and develop a vision. Once the main issues had been identified, focus groups were set up to zero in solely on developing the products and distribution channels with the goal to expand the market from Mae Hong Son to markets in Chiang Mai and other neighboring provinces in the northern region along with markets in the central region. The idea was to implement a better distribution of income and make the community stand on its own.

- *Data Analysis*

The analysis of the data was done by gathering the responses from the interviewees on the four research questions and allocating them to one of the perspectives in the Reframing Matrix.

4. Results and Case Lesson Analysis Under the Reframing Matrix Approach

One of the findings from the community forum was that products from the Agricultural Home Group were not developed as a brand to capture consumers' interest. Moreover, they did not

include information on expiration dates, the ingredients they contain, and nutritional facts. This made it difficult for quality control. In addition, packaging had not been modernized to keep the goods in safe conditions. The MKM group then worked with the Agricultural Home Group on a project initiation designed to address these issues. When the focus switched on how to get the products to a wider consumer base and perk their interest, it was discovered that while there was an effort among members of the Agricultural Home Group to develop a brand and update packaging, the distribution channel in place was too limited for local businesses to have direct market access to a wider group of consumers. The Agricultural Home Group was advised to conduct consumer research on the targeted groups and develop communication channels to make clear the benefits from buying products such as fermented soybean sheet, peanut, pea beans, and sesame oil. Market penetration strategies were introduced. In addition, the group was advised on how to conduct consumer research about the targeted groups and in today's age of social media on the need for their products to demonstrate their quality to potential repeat customers, who often rely on peer reviews for their purchases.

Despite gaining some valuable information and good learning experience from the focus groups and the projects initiated as a result, it was discovered that some challenging issues remained unresolved due to shortcomings in regard to the real aims of the group, most notably a lack of enthusiasm within the group to keep going forward and a lack of clear vision for a concise developing plan. It was also found that a fear of risk associated with action kept them from making much-needed aggressive business decisions. Another issue that came up was a lack of investment for developing expanding the product line, which shut out any opportunity for group members to showcase their skills and abilities to help promote their products on social media. In addition, of great import here, it was found that some of the products still needed to be registered with the Food and Drug Administration, a requirement to operate legitimately. Moreover, it became evident that the group was not equipped to use commercial language that would appeal to and be understood by foreign tourists and was also unable to use digital information to reach out to a greater market via posting the benefits of their product lines. In short, even though they had been working with the MKM Group since 2009, local businesses were still at developing stage and needed to keep on learning about the markets and their potential.

The following list of the issues identified during the case study captures the key findings in this research study:

1. Lack of solid managerial skills.
2. Inability of underdeveloped products to enhance the brand.
3. Limited distribution channels.
4. Inability of product range to expand marketing potential.
5. Initial focus only on developing existing products and distribution channels to expand the market.
6. Lack of enthusiasm at the community forum, focus groups, marketing field trips, and on-site visits conducted as part of the research project and case study.
7. Failure of some products to be registered with the Food and Drug administration.
8. Use of social media not optimized to enhance the credibility of the products.
9. Lack of enthusiasm stemming from group leaders' lack of clear vision and fear of taking risk.
10. Insufficient investment limits group members opportunity to showcase their skills and abilities and promote their products.
11. Group ill-equipped to communicate with foreign tourists and in a digital format.

To be in line with the research aims, these learning points were then analytically processed through the four theoretical perspectives that made up the structure of the reframing matrix as shown in Figure 1.

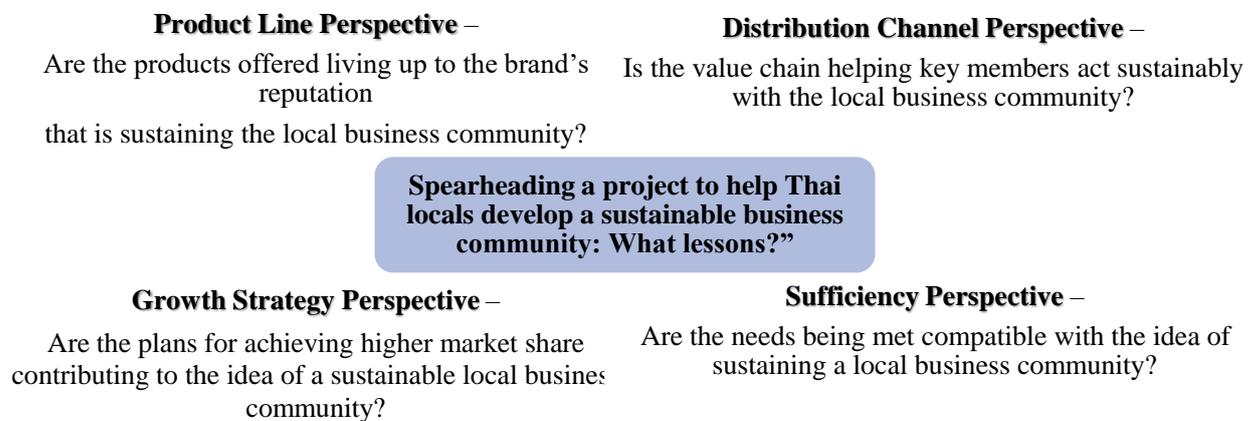


Figure 1: Reframing Matrix (created by authors for this study)

(i) Growth Strategy Perspective

It is important to note first that as part of the effort to help locals develop their product line of fermented soybean sheets, peanut, pea bean products, and sesame oil products and enhance brand reputation, due to the sensitivity of a working culture that is uncomfortable losing face, the emphasis was not to find faults and errors in the approach but to get members to reflect on what had been done that caused shortcomings in order to identify areas for improvement. While the borderline between open criticism and fact finding is thin, such an exercise was necessary to ensure a positive outcome. Finding out what could be done better from the process did not explicitly implied that what had been done thus far was wrong. It simply was the starting point to help make enhance the brand. The workshop was also a platform to help individuals to humbly start over and acquire the necessary managerial skills and capabilities to help their business move forward.

Local businesses should heed facts, not rely on assumptions on top of assumptions. Indeed, they would learn a lot more from those who have been constantly buying their products, especially from those who may have purchased them once and switched to other brands instead of sticking to their products and becoming loyal customers (Kuo et al., 2019). Such information would give them better ideas for being more innovative in design and value and retain customers by offering them greater benefits (value) and for creating the right conditions for potential new buyers (Abramovici et al., 2014). For example, suggestions for adding features to an existing product line could serve as an experiment to determine whether repeating buyers approved the changes or not, while it could simultaneously be a test to see who the new potential customers would be. True facts and information on the lack of popularity of some products would also facilitate debates and help local business managers decide whether to shut down some operations so that resources could be re-allocated appropriately and better utilized to develop other valued items along the product line that offer more sustainable perspectives (Badurdeenab, Aydina, & Brown, 2018).

(ii) Distribution Channel Perspective

The key point in helping local businesses to make the most of distribution channels is to ensure that the products not only reach buyers’ hand in good conditions but also provide

value based on their expectations of the brand. Given the limited distribution channels locals have to deal with, the forum was meant in part to help them determine which current network would assist them in ensuring that their customers enjoy sustainable quality and that the products meet the demands of those customers. Regardless of how the products are distributed, the local management and staff should be well informed about the uniqueness of each product and how they benefit buyers while being offered at reasonable prices (Vestrum, Rasmussen, & Carter, 2017). Besides, the profile of customers who have taken an interest in the products need to be analyzed for information that will then serve to understand how the existing channels of distribution can adversely impact those customers. A channel of distribution also functions as a tool for promoting the product line and as such sustains operations for members of the value chain to be respectfully involved in the business (SzczepańskaWoszczyzna & Kurowska-Pysz, 2016). Stakeholders in the supply chain could be invited to a workshop/focus group to discuss with their local business partners the challenges of trying to be sustainable, and brainstorm for innovative approaches to make the partnership more effective and enhance the mutual trust and efficiency through an effective allocation of resources (Ngo, Lohmann, & Hales, 2018).

(iii) Growth Strategy Perspective

The taste and demand for fermented soybean sheets, peanut, pea bean products, and sesame oil products sold as dry edible goods for appetizers or snacks can change. Local business operators and their key networking partners need to take the viewpoint that the unexpectedness can occur. To limit the risk of a change of taste among consumers, one strategy is to emphasize the health benefits of these products and keep upgrading their quality through new technologies, in other words, by adding more value to them without making the buyer bear the extra cost of doing so (Alam et al., 2015). In today's age of social media where one can be easily swayed or manipulated to support or cast doubt on a product, such reinforcement takes a sense of urgency (Kim, Kim, & Hwang, 2020). It is also strategically important to learn more about customers' decision-making process (Bertheussen, 2020).

(iv) Sufficiency Perspective

In addressing issues related to sufficiency, it is important to draw lessons from past experiences, especially in cases where ideas were put into practice and had either benefitted the stakeholders involved or failed to meet the objectives (de Lange & Dodds, 2017). This includes revising existing frameworks for product line extension, channel of distribution upgrading, and growth strategy definition and question their execution. This may mean to continue with the operation and make moderate changes to the approach or implement some important changes (Piscicelli, Ludden, & Cooper, 2018). A focus on the soft side of affairs, such as the knowledge, skills, talent, and abilities of the people involved, is also on order as is a scrutiny of their level of motivation. As noted above, an unclear vision and a fear of taking risks can be counterproductive, let alone a low level of motivation can have a significant negative impact on sufficiency; hence the need, if necessary to turn to additional internal and external working partners (Hysa et al., 2018).

5. Conclusion

This study sought to answer the following question: What lesson can be drawn from spearheading a project to help Thai locals sustain their business community? To do so a case study was conducted with the help of a team of experts who had been working with the community since 2009. Activities included a community forum, focus group meetings, marketing field trips, and on-site visits. All these projects were designed to assist local Thais in sustaining their business community. An analysis of the lessons learned was conducted using a Reframing Matrix, built around four perspectives: product lines,

distribution channels, growth strategy, and sufficiency. The findings indicate that improvements toward greater sustainability were hindered by the lack of discipline and enthusiasm of participants, a reluctance to take risk as well as a lack of competence in digital communication geared toward tourists and a failure to have a clear vision. These were the wrong results for a project that had the right intentions. The community still needs assistance in becoming more sustainable. Nobody disputes this fact. However, while initiatives taken showcase themselves as patronage to the cause, they too often lack a sincere desire to get to the bottom of things, leaving many problems unresolved, most notably the motivation to change things within the community. There seems to be a paralyzing fear of effecting changes that results in a lack of a disciplined approach to problems to be resolved and improvements to be made as well as in a lack of enthusiasm searching for viable solutions.

As is the case with any process implementing new solutions, mistakes, errors, and failures when, for example in this case, trying to arrange the contents in social media for establishing credibility, are bound to be made. This should not be a cause for demotivation. On the contrary, this should be seen as a good opportunity for having more discussion about why the unfortunate situation occurred and what could be done if given a second chance (Sahakian & Seyfang, 2018). As to the failure of a clear vision, some reinforcement should be made so that the same issues would not resurface, keep circulating, and remain unresolved (Misiaszek, 2019). Forum, seminars, and workshops become sustainable when they actually provide some dynamic support along the learning process as opposed to being solely centers of interest. Moreover, an assessment on why certain group members are not able to meet their goals and consistently fall short of them would give facilitators an opportunity to design workshops that offer a platform for participants to lead the learning journey by explaining their management style and provide details on which competencies and capabilities are strongly required to develop the product lines, attract more buyers through more diverse distribution channels and enhanced promotion.

This would boost their motivation instead of putting them in a negative spotlight as is generally the case as they are made to confess about their lack of experience (Ioppolo et al., 2016). Thus, liaison is the key to help the local business community group members be mindful of what the possibilities are to sustain their ventures while also be aware of the current limitations and the need for innovation to take precedence in the working process (Ortiz & Huber-Heim, 2017). The project team can lay out situational facts by making the best of the forums, focus groups, marketing field trips, and on-site visit for participants to visually feel and determine from the circumstances the best course of action to take to accomplish the aims. In summary, the lessons on spearheading a project to help Thai locals sustain their business community could also serve as an awareness on how workshops can take a more proactive approach in helping locals not only become aware of shortcomings but also make all the necessary changes. Lessons can only go so far as project team leaders apply the acumen that enables participants to learn by changing and adapting while also helping their fellow peers to abide by the same behavior.

Finally, one of the benefits of this research is that it provides a realistic outlook for other researchers in charge of initiating a similar type of project to help local businesses become sustainable. It can raise awareness on the limitations of resources to get the desired results and point to other factors that would assist in the idea of sustaining a local business in the community. As a learning tool for undergraduates and/or postgraduates majoring in business, this work can also be a supporting tool in getting a good grasp on the critical factors that support sustainable management. In addition, it can provide a blueprint for similar endeavors. In terms of practical recommendations, further studies could be

undertaken focusing on geographic factors and on the kind of impact they would have on the practice of being more sustainable.

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