



THE IMPACT OF EDUCATION IN THE COMPETITIVENESS OF THE AGRICULTURAL INDUSTRY

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Abstract

The development and progress of the wider agricultural sector enters a distinct era of evolution. Agricultural production and related services are facing new dynamics and encounter challenges regarding social, financial and ecological issues. Those issues create opportunities and needs of entrepreneurship in the rural communities. Investments in new knowledge gained through formal and non-formal education and technology applied research addressed to farmers, services' organizations and to consumers would assist sustainability of rural areas.

Key words: agriculture, sustainability, education, entrepreneurship

INTRODUCTION

The current social trends and the economic conditions have brought many changes in consumers' attitudes and behaviors. At the same time, the environment in which consumers make purchasing decisions in order to cover their nutritional needs is changing rapidly (Pagoulatos, 2003).

The changes in the environment are affected by social, political, economic and lately, environmental forces which influence also the purchase decision process for food and other products.

In addition, quality concerns have lead customers to a continuous information search in regards to food production practices. The negative environmental impact conventional agriculture has due to inefficient resource management resulted to an increased demand of high quality foods. High quality food is considered healthier and safer for consumption by animals and humans.

The increased demand for food products of high nutritional value is the result of consumers' higher educational level, which leads to higher expectations. This demand leads to a market of new and different food products (Deliza et al., 2003).

In this highly competitive environment, opportunities regarding consumers' need satisfaction may rise. These opportunities relate to innovative production methods, new technology applications, quality assurance, food safety, marketing practices and the preservation of natural resources.

A number of producers have managed to face those challenges successfully, which approximately are similar across Europe. Some of the best practices that have been applied in order to capitalize on the opportunities could be recorded and

documented in order to serve as a model for successful practices of entrepreneurship.

Training facilitates the dissemination of knowledge and skill development which lead to behavioral changes of any profession. Furthermore, training helps to increase awareness on a number of issues and to disseminate best practices that inspire participants during training processes.

THEORITICAL BACKGROUND

In the framework of "Agrimarketing" project that took place with the support of the Leonardo Da Vinci EU Program, current needs of contemporary agribusiness and good practices applied were taken into consideration in 6 different countries (United Kingdom, Greece, Italy, Turkey, the Czech Republic and Hungary).

Emphasis was given to enterprises based in mountainous and disadvantaged areas.

Those case studies were chosen carefully in order to compose a practical educational tool capable to assist entrepreneurs to seek for changes and suitable decisions for planning management tactics in their businesses.

All developed activities by this project aimed to improve professional training on topics concern marketing of agricultural products. These activities were addressed to farmers, merchants, consultants and agribusiness trainers.

The case studies also tried to present challenges those business people may face.

METHODOLOGY

Each case study had the following structure:

Summary – It outlines the topic. Each selected case study represents successful entrepreneurial practices;

History – It describes current business dynamics, situation and reasons that lead to internal evaluation and changes;

Challenges of the market – It describes the business environment for change;

The business' reaction – It analyses the current business response and highlights practices of changing and adapt new conditions;

Results and conclusions – It describes results of efforts made.

The case studies focus on specific subjects emerged from research of educational needs. Some of those refer to the logistics chain and the selection of suitable distribution channels, analyze best practices, while other case studies refer to the analysis of the marketing mix, the development of products, the added value products, the chances for promotion and distribution, the branding and packaging. Besides, an examination and analysis of specific issues regarding agricultural market products and services, such as local products, gastronomic tourism, production of biological products, and protection of the environment and control of quality certification were examined.

CASE STUDIES

Two case studies from two different countries are presented as examples in this paper. They both cover innovative high quality products and services. Local market needs, consumers' satisfaction and principles of environmental protection were taken into consideration.

Case study from Hungary

Subject: Biodiversity

The business activities of Mr Szomor – an agronomist/businessman from Apaj of Kiskunsag region have extensive profile and linked to characteristics of natural landscape and habitat of the region. Those characteristics relate to genetic material preservation of the Grey cattle breed. Furthermore, his business contributes to the restoration of downgraded wetlands of Kiskunsag National Park by offering appropriate habitat for migration birds. Simultaneously the business is active in fish farming to cover local market needs. As a result the operation shows significant annual turnover.

The above highlights the relationship of agricultural business prosperity and regional environmental protection and biodiversity issues (Agrimarketing, 2008).

Case study from Greece

Subject: Market research

For the accomplishment of its educational aims, the Thessalonica Agricultural & Industrial Institute (best known as the American Farm School) introduced in 1936 milk pasteurization in Greece, which became one of its the main products ever since.

A market search has been conducted for the identification of consumers' needs regarding products and services. This search supported the change in packaging, the production of new dairy products and the establishment of a new educational activity regarding dairy science. Besides, strong evidence was produced about the positive input of the new milkery investment towards supporting innovative education and applied research in the food sector.

The school gained good reputation for its educational programs and products produced from education, and because of that, a niche market of added value products is created locally all these years. Definitely, the new investment adds new values in the long reputation of the institute (Agrimarketing, 2008).

APPLICATION OF EDUCATIONAL MATERIAL

The development of educational material aimed to knowledge and experience transfer and to creation of discussion platforms among trainees, trainers and consultants.

Case studies were chosen as a method of presentation, knowledge transfer

and education. This method is used often to adult education and belongs to methodologies in reference to hands on learning.

Case studies refer to real situations and examine challenges of everyday life while recommend progressive solutions. The method is more effective in applied knowledge. Therefore, the case studies can generate an interesting and innovative framework where trainees learn by doing and adopt later those practices in their own businesses.

Dewey (1938) declared that every real form of education is born from experience. Hands on learning build on trainees' experiences and it creates new. Every experience carries elements from the past and influences the creation of new. Finally, trainees are ready to apply what they learned and verify results.

The described educational material promotes an active participation of the adults during the process by opening space to capture individual experience and knowledge.

The ultimate goal of the produced educational material is to provide the necessary means to challenge continuous self training and information update.

CONCLUSIONS

The developments in the agri-food sector are rapid. Consumers' attitude has changed towards consuming quality products of high nutritional value.

Both producers and entrepreneurs of the agri-food sector should seek opportunities to update and renew their knowledge.

Creation and maintenance of markets for their products should be a primary goal of every entrepreneur.

Education helps to equip people with necessary knowledge and skills to address key issues of personal and professional growth.

The goal of the produced educational material provides to adults the necessary means to continue self training on subjects of their main concern.

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