
EXPORTING PROBLEMS OF MALAYSIAN SMES: A RECENT SURVEY

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Abdul Jumaat Mahajar
Mohd Khairuddin Hashim
School of Management Universiti Utara Malaysia

Abstrak

The notion that exporting provides firms with both a growth opportunity and a major challenge has produced an extensive stream of studies. While a good number of empirical studies have concentrated on the exporting problems of firms in western and developed business societies, limited research has examined problems faced by Malaysian small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). This study attempts to address this issue. The findings of the study suggest that Malaysian SMEs faced exporting problems as espoused in the literature

Key Word : Exporting, Malaysian, SMES, Developed Business Societies

INTRODUCTION

Exports are often crucial to a firm's financial health and its growth prospects. For individual firms, developing export markets can be both a growth opportunity and a major challenge. Moreover, given the prospect of stronger competition, maturing markets as well as limited domestic market opportunities, firms (both large and small) must give strong consideration to expanding their exporting activities.

Given the major contribution of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in recent years in the areas of employment enhancement and the increase in the amount of exports of SME-manufactured products (currently more than 80% of the total manufacturing firms in Malaysia are SMEs), it would appear vital to encourage more smaller businesses to export, and to increase their share of the total exports.

Despite the fact that foreign markets can offer firms better opportunities for long term growth and profitability, previous studies have indicated that the complexities and challenges of the international marketplace inhibit the entrance of many SMEs. With regard to this, a good number of studies have dealt with various export problems faced by small businesses in developed countries (Julien et.al, 1994 and 1997; and Kathawala et. al, 1989).

However, this related issue has received limited research attention in the small business literature in Malaysia. Despite the importance of SMEs and the increase knowledge in exporting activities, very little research has been done to examine the exporting problems of SMEs in the Malaysian context. This study was conducted to address this issue. The study reported in this article attempted to provide an insight into the nature of the exporting problems faced by Malaysian SMEs. In doing so, this study would assist in our understanding of the reasons why SMEs in Malaysia fail to reach their export potential.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ogram (1982) defined exporting firms as those that have exported over the last three years and that their exporting sales represent at least one percent of their gross annual sales. Exporting is considered the most common mode of entry into international business among SMEs. According to Young et. al (1989), SMEs find exporting attractive because of minimal business risks, low resources commitment and high flexibility of actions. Furthermore, Terpstra and Sarathy (1994) suggested that exporting can provide individual firms a competitive advantage by improving their financial position, increasing their capacity utilisation, and raising their technological standards.

Although exporting appears to be attractive to SMEs, previous empirical studies have indicated that exporting

firms faced various obstacles. An earlier study by Alexandrides (1971) found that smaller firms faced difficulties in initiating exporting. Alexandrides concluded that high intensity of competition in foreign markets, little knowledge of exporting activities, insufficient understanding of export payment procedures, and difficulties in identifying foreign market opportunities as the major reasons why firms fail to initiate exporting.

Similarly, Bilkey (1978) discovered some of the most formidable barriers to successful small business exporting. These were: (1) high risk; (2) insufficient financing; (3) protective foreign government regulations; (4) inadequate distribution channels; (4) insufficient knowledge of marketing opportunities abroad; (5) difficulties in understanding foreign business practices; (6) difficulties in conforming to foreign product standards and specifications; (7) difficulties in collecting payments from foreign customers; (8) inadequate representation in foreign markets; and (9) lack of foreign marketing connections.

Based on a survey of firms in the paper industry in the United States of America, Bauerschmidt et. al (1985) also found various reasons why firms failed to export. These included: (1) high value of the U.S. dollar in relative to foreign currencies; (2) high transportation costs; (3) high risks involved in selling abroad; (4) high foreign tariffs on imported products; (5) lack of capital for foreign expansion; (6) lack of government assistance; (7) competition from local firms; (8) lack of foreign channels of distribution; and (9) language and cultural differences.

Additionally, Kau and Tan (1986) also suggested that certain significant differences existed between small and large firms that exported. In comparison to large firms, these authors claimed that small firms faced more difficulties in overcoming export problems such as in establishing foreign contacts, getting information about foreign markets, establishing distribution network, promoting products overseas and employing good exports sales personnel.

Gripsrud (1990) further noted that exporting obstacles and opportunities vary from product to product even within the same industry due to the differences in demand and tariffs between products. The author found that differences in taste across different countries posed problems for exporters moving into new markets. For instance, according to Gripsrud, the Japanese food products market attached much emphasis on fat content, size, colour and other attributes that sometimes do not fulfill the requirements of other markets.

The survey by Tseng and Yu (1991) also revealed that Taiwanese firms experienced various problems when exporting. Among these were: (1) the lack of foreign market information; (2) limited trading knowledge of personnel; (3) inappropriateness of price/quality for the needs of the market; (4) low profit prospects; (5) the existence of various financial constraints; (6) the prevalence of fierce competition; (7) perceived high level of risks; and (8) various legal constraints (either in home or host countries).

METHODOLOGY

This study was based on small and

medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Malaysian manufacturing sector. The data was gathered from 166 small and medium-sized enterprises that export. An SME was defined as a firm with 300 or fewer employees and as one which is actively managed by its owner/s. These firms were selected from the 1998 Federation of Malaysian Manufacturer Directory.

Questionnaires consisting of 44 questions were sent to 214 SMEs located in the 12 states in West Malaysia. Of the 214 questionnaires mailed, 166 firms responded (a response rate of 77.6%). In addition to the postal questionnaires, face-to-face interviews were also conducted with the top management in 48 of the 166 firms.

The purpose of the personal interview was to obtain an indepth understanding of the problems faced by the exporting small and medium-sized enterprises in Malaysia. The interviews were held separately with the Managing Directors, the Chief Executive Officers, the General Managers or the person designated as the most knowledgeable in exporting activities of the firms. In the interviews, the discussion questions were focused on identifying the problems relating to the exporters.

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

The structured survey questionnaire used in this study consisted of three sections and 44 questions. The 14 questions in sections one and two were used to obtain the information concerning the respondents and the firm characteristics. The remaining 30 structured questions in the

third section were designed to measure the barriers to exporting that the firms faced in the course of their operations. These 30 questions which were adapted from the work by Bauerchmidt et. al (1985) served as a basis for querying the exporting problems as perceived by each respondent. The respondents were asked to rate each item

the firms current export activities. Following this, the interviews focused on establishing the exporting problems that the firms confronted in the course of their operations. The determination of the exporting problems for each case was made on the basis of the views and suggestions of the respondents. The views and sugges-

Table 1. Firms by the 12 States

States	No. of Company	Percentage
Selangor	50	30.1
Federal Territory	30	18.1
Johore	16	9.6
Malacca	7	4.2
Perak	11	6.6
Pahang	6	3.6
Penang	6	3.6
Negeri Sembilan	6	3.6
Kedah	6	3.6
Perlis	9	5.4
Terengganu	9	5.4
Kelantan	10	6.0
Total	166	100.0

on a five-point scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. The questionnaire was tested prior to mailing to the respondents. The coefficient alpha scores of the 30 measures of export activities ranged 0.68 to 0.90.

The interviews were conducted to generate information specific to this study. The discussion questions were directed primarily at obtaining detailed information on the problems faced by the firms. The interviews which lasted from one and a half to two hours in length began by reviewing

tions to the interviews are discussed together with the postal survey findings.

BACKGROUND OF THE SAMPLE FIRMS

Firms from 21 industries were represented in this study. A majority of these firms (close to 50%) were from the food, plastic, electronic, wood, metal and chemical industries. Tables 1 and 2 provide the information on the locations of the firms and the types of industries they represented.

THE RESULTS

Firm Characteristics

Table 3 below displays the characteristics of the 166 firms in the survey. As shown in Table 3, vast majority of the firms have been involved in exporting activities

full-time employees of the responding firms varied, around 50 percent of the firms have 100 to 300 employees.

The average annual sales (the past three years) for majority of the firms ranged from one million (Malaysian Ringgit) to 50 million. Of the 166 firms, 77 (44 percent) had sales between 11 to 50

Table 2. Firms by Industries

Type of Industry	No. of Firm	Percentage
Automobile	6	3.6
Beverage	7	4.2
Carbon	5	3.0
Cement	6	3.6
Chemical	10	6.0
Electronic	15	9.0
Fertilizer	5	3.0
Food	23	13.9
Leather	6	3.6
Machinery	5	3.0
Marble	3	1.8
Metal	10	6.0
Paper	5	3.0
Petroleum	3	1.8
Pharmaceutical	4	2.4
Plastic	18	10.8
Rubber	5	3.0
Steel	7	4.2
Textile	8	4.8
Wood	14	8.4
Tobacco	1	0.6
Total	166	100.0

for more than five years (more than 80% of the firms). Out of the 166 firms, 112 firms (71 percent) have been exporting for more than 13 years. Although the number of

million; 46 (28 percent) had sales of less than one million; 31 (19 percent) had sales between one million to five million; and the remaining 16 (10 percent) had sales of b

tween six to 10 million.

The figures regarding the percentage of export sales as a part of gross sales suggest that exports accounted significantly for more than 68 percent of the gross sales for 113 of the 166 responding firms. For another 20 firms, exports accounted for less 10 percent of their total gross sales.

However, for the remaining 33 firms export sales accounted between 11 to 50 percent of their total gross sales. About 90 percent (150 firms) of the total of 166 firms have been in operations for more than five years. Out of the 166 firms, 105 (63 percent) indicated that they exported their products to more than 30 countries. An-

Table 3. The Firms Characteristics

Firm Characteristics (n=166)	Frequency	Percentage
Years involved in Exporting:		
2 and less	15	9.0
3-7	15	9.0
8-12	18	10.8
More than 13 years	112	71.2
Number of Employees:		
10-20	46	27.7
21-99	36	21.7
100-300	84	50.6
Average Annual Sales (past 3 years):		
Less than one million (RM)	46	27.7
1-5 million	31	18.8
6-10 million	16	9.6
11-50 million	73	44.0
Export Sales as Percentage of Total Sales:		
Less than 10%	20	12.1
11% -20%	16	9.6
21% -30%	10	6.0
31% - 40%	4	2.4
41% - 50%	3	1.8
More than 51%	113	68.1
Age of Firms (years):		
Below 5	16	9.6
6-10	35	21.1
11-15	31	18.7
16-20	33	19.9
More than 21	51	30.7
Number of Exporting Countries:		
1-5 countries	43	25.9
6-10 countries	8	4.8
11-15 countries	7	4.2
16-30 countries	3	1.8
More than 30 countries	105	63.3

Other 43 firms (26 percent) had exported to between one and five countries.

Respondents Characteristics

As shown in the following Table 4, 103 (62 percent) of the 166 respondents had attended a university and obtained either

a bachelor or a master's degree. Most of the respondents were male (133 respondents or 80.1 percent). Of the 166 respondents, 141 (84.9 percent) were married and 23 (13.9%) were singled. Vast majority of these respondents have been with their present firms for more than five years. Most of these respondents (74 percent) had

Table 4. Respondents Characteristics

Respondents Characteristics (n=166)	Frequency	Percentage
Highest Level of Education:		
Secondary School	32	19.2
College or Institute	31	18.8
University	103	62.0
Highest Level of Certificate Received:		
School certificate	32	19.2
Diploma	31	18.8
Bachelor's degree	76	45.8
Masters degree	27	16.2
Marital Status:		
Married	141	84.9
Single	23	13.9
Divorced	2	1.2
Sex:		
Male	133	80.1
Female	33	19.9
Length of Service (years):		
3 and below	7	4.2
4-6	17	10.2
7-9	57	34.3
10-12	51	30.8
13 and above	34	20.5
Age (years):		
25 and below	21	12.7
26-35	47	28.3
36-45	63	38.0
46 and above	35	21.0

served between four to 12 years. Thirty four (21 percent) of the respondents had worked in their firms for more than 13 years.

With regard to the respondents' age, most (87 percent) were above 25 years old. Of the 166 respondents, 21 (13 percent) were below 25 years old. Hundred and ten

Table 5. Summary of the Survey Responses

Items:	Disagreed	Agreed	Undecided
1. Differences in products usage in foreign country	48.8	30.3	22.9
2. Language and cultural differences	46.0	25.3	18.7
3. Lack of foreign channels of distribution	18.7	54.3*	26.5
4. Difficult to select market in the foreign country	24.1	18.7	57.2
5. Differences in product specifications in foreign markets	30.7	38.6*	30.7
6. Difficulty collecting payment from foreign customer	32.6	37.3*	30.1
7. Unfamiliarity with government export assistance programs	32.5	20.5	47.0
8. Foreign business practices are difficult to understand	39.1	29.0	31.9
9. Confusing foreign import regulations and procedures	38.6	32.5	28.9
10. Risks involved in selling abroad	21.7	54.8*	23.5
11. Difficulty providing after sales service	28.9	44.0*	27.1
12. High cost of selling abroad	21.7	52.4*	25.9
13. Difficulty arranging a licensing or joint venture agreement with foreign firms	38.6	24.7	36.7
14. Managerial indifferences toward value of exporting	29.5	37.4*	33.1
15. Enforcement of high export tax by the home government	42.2	19.8	38.0
16. Lack of government assistance in overcoming export barriers	35.5	24.7	39.8
17. High value of foreign currency in export markets	28.9	54.2*	16.9
18. Management emphasis on developing domestic markets	39.8	42.2*	18.0
19. Competition from local firms in foreign markets	38.6	32.5	28.9
20. Lack of capital to finance business expansion into foreign market	28.3	59.6*	12.1
21. Problem quoting price with fluctuating exchange rate	12.0	56.2*	21.8
22. High transportation costs to ship products to foreign markets	67.5	18.7	13.8
23. Need to change pricing and promotion policies according to the condition of foreign market	6.6	21.7	71.1
24. Need to adapt products to meet foreign customer preferences	10.8	19.9	69.3
25. Lack of capacity dedicated to continuing supply of exports	29.5	43.3*	27.2
26. Lack of tax incentive by the home government for companies that export	29.5	26.5	44.0
27. Insufficient personnel to manage international trade activity	42.8	36.1	21.1
28. Difficulty gathering accurate information on foreign market	23.5	29.5	47.0
29. High foreign tariffs on imported products by foreign government	16.9	30.7	52.4
30. Competition from firms in home country in foreign markets	51.9	18.0	30.1

respondents (66 percent) were in the age group of between 26 to 45 years. The remaining 35 respondents (21) were above 46 years old.

Export Problems

In the survey, all the firms responded

problems are summarised in Table 6 below.

In addition to the information from the survey, several exporting issues were raised during the interviews with the top management of the participating firms. According to the respondents, these issues complicate the entrance of the small busi-

Table 6. Summary of Exporting Problems Faced by Malaysian SMEs

Export Problems:	Percentage
1. Lack of foreign channel of distribution.	54.3
2. Difficulty to select a reliable distributor in the foreign country.	57.2
3. Risks involved in selling abroad.	54.8
4. Difficulty in providing after sales services.	44.0
5. High cost of selling abroad.	52.4
6. High value of foreign currency in exports markets.	54.2
7. Management indifference toward value of exporting	37.4
8. Lack of capital to finance business expansion into foreign market	59.6
9. Problem quoting price with fluctuating exchange rate.	56.2
10. Need to adapt products to meet foreign customer preferences.	69.3
11. Lack of capacity dedicated to continuing supply of exports.	43.3
12. Difficulty in collecting payment form foreign customers.	47.0

to the 30 questions on the barriers to exporting. The following Table 5 presents the intensity of the responses to the 30 items. The results of the survey indicated that the 166 respondents agreed with 12 items, disagreed with another 10 items and were undecided with the remaining eight items.

Based on the significant responses (responses with the highest percentage value), the 12 items agreed by the respondents as export barriers were considered as exporting problems. Determination of each of the exportig problems was made on the basis of the intensity of response by the participating firms. The 12 exporting

business exporters into the international marketplace. The issues gathered from the interviews are as follows:

1. The respondents stated that in addition to the severe tariff and non-tariff restrictions imposed by the developed countries, the complexity of the exporting procedures makes it tough for many exporters to penetrate the foreign markets. With regard to this, several of the respondents expressed a desire for export assistance.
2. Several of the respondents agreed that exporting is not meant for every small firm. In comparison to domestic firms,

these respondents claimed that exporting firms generally required more money, time and effort. According to them, not all small businesses are willing to invest the considerable time, money and effort in developing as well as retaining a foreign market.

3. Although most of the firms in the study have been exporting for some time, most of participating firms expressed the need for employing people with knowledge and experience in all aspects of international trade. During the interviews, many of the respondents reveal that they need people with specific knowledge and experience in areas such as transportation, export financing, tariffs, foreign markets analysis, documentation, insurance, foreign currency transactions, and freight handling.
4. The information from the interviews also indicated that many of the participating firms lack the pertinent information concerning the market and consumer requirements, import regulations, and foreign exchange requirements in certain countries, specifically in the new markets such as in Africa, Eastern Europe and Latin America.
5. During the interviews, several of the firms suggested that their inability to compete successfully internationally may be attributed to outdated technology and poor marketing.

DISCUSSIONS

The overall objective of this study was to identify the exporting problems faced

by SMEs in the Malaysian manufacturing sector. The empirical information resulted from this study indicates that the firms surveyed confronted various exporting barriers. In general, the results generated by this study suggest that exporting posed various problems to SMEs. The detailed classification results of the problems encountered by the small and medium-sized exporting businesses are discussed below.

Lack of Capital to Finance Expansion into Foreign Markets

Lack of capital was found as one of the most pressing problems facing the small businesses in this study. Many of the firms surveyed indicated that lack of capital had prevented them from further expanding their exporting activities. Furthermore, many of the firms in the study indicated that they were unable to get external financing for their export expansion programmes. With regard to this, the respondents expressed a desire for export financial assistance. To assist and encourage exporting among Malaysian exporters, the respondents suggested facilities such as loans for operating expenses as well as long term investment loans.

Differences in Product Usage in Foreign Marketplace

Differences in product usage in foreign market were also cited as one of the reasons why the firms hesitated to export. According to the respondents, the differences in product usage complicate the identification of product needs in a foreign market. In fact, some of the respondents

expressed a need for help in analyzing and managing the foreign marketplace.

Lack of Foreign Channels of Distribution

In order to access new market in foreign countries, good channels of distribution are important. However, in this study, majority of the respondents indicated that they lack effective channels of distribution. The responding firms suggested that the lack of effective channels of distribution make it difficult for them to penetrate as well as retain foreign markets.

Differences in Product Specifications in International Marketplace

The present study also suggested that the respondents were concerned about the differences in product specifications in international marketplace. According to the respondents, the differences in product specifications makes it more complicated for them to sell in certain markets. For example, the garment manufacturers and exporters were not prepare to enter the markets in western countries because they were not able to produce shirts and trousers that fulfill the requirements of the customers in those markets.

Difficult to Collect Payment from Foreign Customers

Although majority of the survey respondents agreed that exporting provides a lucrative source of revenue for their businesses, most believed that collecting payments from foreign customers is a continuing problem for many businesses.

Foreign Business Practices are Difficult to Understand

The present study also reveals that many of the participating firms were unfamiliar with the business practices in foreign countries. Most of the firms indicated they lack specific knowledge about the exporting process in international marketplace. This lack of knowledge makes it difficult for the Malaysian exporters to understand export requirements as well as opportunities.

High Risk Involved in Selling Abroad

In this study, the responding exporters also expressed concern regarding the risks involved in selling abroad. Many of the small exporters in this study believed that they are at a disadvantage in terms of their degree of control over price and product. The present study suggest that this concern may be attributed to the lack of information and experience in the exporting process.

Difficult to Provide After Sales Service

Although most respondents believed the importance of providing after sale service to their clients, communication difficulties continue to complicate the identification of the after sale service needs in foreign markets.

Costly to Sell Abroad

Vast majority of the Malaysian exporters in the present study agreed that exporting is costly. Most of the respondents indi-

cated that they had to incur a lot of expenses in exporting. The responding firms suggested that the most important improvement needed to increase exports would be the reduction of transportation costs, freight charges, freight insurance, custom duties and the other expenses related to exporting.

Managerial Hesitation Towards Exporting

The results of this study showed that small business exporters in Malaysia have mixed views about the value of exporting. While some of the respondents believed that exporting could help their firms to diversify into new markets, improved their growth potential and increase their income, others were reluctant because of the risks involved. The findings of the present study suggested that their hesitation may be attributed to lack of expertise and experience in the exporting process.

Difficult to Quote Price in Foreign Currency

The results of the study suggested that foreign currency fluctuations create one of the most formidable barrier to successful small business exporting. The lack of knowledge and experience in foreign currency transactions make it difficult for the survey respondents to quote the prices of the products that they exported.

Lack of Capacity for Exporting

Finally, the present study also indicated that some of the small Malaysian business exporters lack the capacity to meet the demand in the foreign markets. Ac-

cording to these exporters, the lack of capacity makes it hard for them to increase their share in the ever-expanding foreign markets.

CONCLUSIONS

This study attempted to investigate the problems faced by small and medium-sized exporting businesses through a survey of 166 manufacturing firms. The information obtained from the participating firms indicate that there are various barriers to successful small business exporting. Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that 12 problems are prevalent among the SMEs surveyed. The 12 areas that the exporting SMEs are more likely to have problems are: (1) lack of capital to finance expansion into foreign markets; (2) differences in product usage in foreign marketplace; (3) lack of foreign channels of distribution; (4) differences in product specification in international marketplace; (5) difficult to collect payment from foreign customers; (6) foreign business practices are difficult to understand; (7) high risk involved in selling abroad; (8) difficult to provide after sales service; (9) costly to sell abroad; (10) managerial hesitation towards exporting; (11) difficult to quote price in foreign currency; and (12) lack of capacity for exporting.

Another conclusion that can be drawn here is that the results of the study also generally support the problem classification found in many of the earlier studies (Alexandrides, 1971; Bilkey, 1978; Bauerschmidt et.al, 1985; Kau and Tan, 1986; Gripsrud, 1990 and Tseng and Yu,

1991). At the general level, the findings of this study reinforce the general idea that complexities and challenges of the international marketplace inhibit the entrance of many SMEs (De Noble et. al, 1989).

Finally, having identified and raised the aforementioned issues, it is hoped that this study could assist us in understand-

ing why small exporting businesses fail to reach their export potential. Moreover, by understanding the problems encountered by small exporting firms, owner/managers may better equip themselves through various programmes such as information searching, education and training to better handle issues facing them.

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