

Abstract:

Purpose □ This paper seeks to examine how sustainable SMEs utilize their networks. Here utilization refers to activities SMEs perform in network and how the SMEs are influenced by and influence networks. While the importance of networks has been acknowledged in SME marketing research, linking sustainability to SME networking has been a more neglected area of research.

Design/methodology/approach □ A multiple case study of two Finnish SMEs operating in the food sector was conducted for this study. The main methods applied to gather the research data were group and individual interviews.

Findings

□ This study shows that SMEs utilize their networks as a source of opportunities and resources and their networks can serve as an avenue for change towards sustainability. Moreover, learning in the network was identified as a key process through which the enterprises and the network evolve.

Research limitations/implications

□ The main limitation of this paper is that the case study interviews were conducted at a single point in time and thus the study is based on historical instead of follow-up data.

Practical implications

□ SMEs are encouraged to develop skills (e.g. willingness to solve problems), which on the one hand, help them to utilize the network as a source of opportunities and resources and, on the other hand, influence the network to develop it further.

Originality/value

□ This paper demonstrates that SMEs utilized their networks to bring about enhanced sustainability, a perspective less understood in previous research. Moreover, the study connects sustainability to SME networking, which is also less studied, but a highly valuable way for resource-constrained SMEs to enhance social and ecologic sustainability.

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