Trappist Monastic Food Products: Devout Expansion for Enhanced Community Service

After his morning meditation, Brother Raphael was excited about facing the day's challenges as production manager of the Trappist Monastic Food Products (TMFP), a business enterprise of The Superior of Our Lady of the Philippines Abbey, Inc. This day was particularly challenging for Brother Raphael because he was finalizing a report on TMFP's performance and considering how to grow the company for the future. He marveled at TMFP's transformation from a small-scale producer of fruit jams and jellies to a GMP/HACCP-compliant producer[i] of diversified product lines.

Brother Raphael felt pressured to bring TMFP to a higher performance level to better sustain its operations within the monastery and expand its assistance to the impoverished community of Guimaras. In particular, he was looking for new sources of revenue to increase the coverage of their educational support program for poor and deserving students in Guimaras. Adding to the pressure, Brother Raphael understood that the pursuit of TMFP's growth could not compromise the Trappists' way of living, mindful that those involved with the operation lived their life by the Rule of St. Benedict.

[i] GMP (Good Manufacturing Practices)/HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point) are legal requirements that food producers must comply with to ensure food safety, fair trade, and promote global competitiveness. TMFP was certified by the Philippine Food and Drug Administration (FDA) as GMP/HACCP-compliant.

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Suddenly, the phone rang and disrupted his thoughts. "Brother Raphael, would you consider selling Trappist products to the Japanese?" a voice on the other line queried. Three years prior, an opportunity to bring TMFP products to Japan was presented, but Brother Raphael put pursuing the Japanese market on hold then to focus only on the domestic market. TMFP had been performing remarkably well in the local market of late, which caused Brother Raphael to wonder – was now the opportune moment to enter the Japanese market? Was TMFP ready to start directly exporting its products? Was directly exporting the best mode of entry into the Japanese market? Brother Raphael clutched the phone, pondering TMFP capabilities to outreach into the Japanese market.

The Superior of Our Lady of the Philippines Abbey, Inc.

The Superior of Our Lady of the Philippines Abbey, Inc. was founded in 1972 by 7 monks who came from different monasteries in the United States of America. It belonged to the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (O.C.S.O). As Cistercians, the monks followed the Rule of St. Benedict which specified the ideals and values of a monastic life.[1] The monks commonly took vows of fidelity to monastic life and devoted themselves to a life of contemplative prayer, sacred reading, and work.[2] Cistercians belonged to the "religious of the Order of Cîteaux, a Benedictine reform, established at Cîteaux in 1098 by St. Robert, Abbot of Molesme in the Diocese of Langres, for the purpose of restoring as far as possible the literal observance of the Rule of St. Benedict." [3]

"St. Benedict's conception of a monastic community was distinctly that of a spiritual family. Every individual monk was to be a son of that family, the Abbot, its father, and the monastery its permanent home."[4] "The Abbot, by virtue of his office, administers the temporal possessions of the community, exercises a general supervision for the maintenance of monastic discipline, provides for the keeping of the Rule, punishes and, if need be, excommunicates the refractory, presides in choir during the recitation of the Office, and at Divine Service, and gives the blessings."[5] "All the officials who are to assist him in the government of the house are appointed by him and have their authority from him. He may dismiss them at his discretion."[6] The Abbot at the Superior of Our Lady of the Philippines Abbey, Inc. acted as a "father, teacher, and ruler,"[7] and assigned each of the 25 monks at the Abbey specific tasks in addition to their spiritual duties.[8]

The Philippines Abbey was located in Jordan, Guimaras Island, Southeast of Panay and Northwest of Negros Islands in Western Visayas, Philippines (see **Exhibit 1**). Guimaras Island was famous for its beautiful "beaches, waterfalls, springs, off shore islets, and … mango[s]."[9] The "carabao" mango (Manifera indica) produced in Guimaras Island was listed in the 1995 Guinness Book of World Records as the sweetest fruit in the world.[10]

The Philippines Abbey had a farm where monks cultivated rice, corn, and various vegetables for guest and monastery consumption. The Philippines Abbey also owned a large orchard of mango trees, guavas, and other fruits. The fruits were transformed into value-added products at a processing plant where Brother Raphael and four other monks worked. Also, the Abbey had a gift shop where processed products were available for visitors to purchase. Moreover, there was a large church built in 1997 and a modern guesthouse with private facilities. Foreign and local tourists who visited the Guimaras Island usually traveled to the Philippines Abbey. While visiting, tourists meditated and conversed with the monks for counseling and confession. The tourists bought food and souvenir items produced by the monks at their gift shop, as well. Monks not working at the processing plant were assigned to maintain the guest house, gift shop, orchard, church, farm, and other areas in the monastery.[11]

Exhibit 1

Jordan, Guimaras Island

Source: "Locator Map of Jordan, Guimaras." WikiPilipinas. 29 April 2008. Web. 5 July 2014. <http://en.wikipilipinas.org/index.php?title=File%3APh_locator_guimaras_jordan.png>.

Philippines Abbey Entrepreneurs

In compliance with Chapter 48 of the Rule of St. Benedict, which stipulated: "for then [we]re they truly monastics when they live[d] by the labor of their hands," [12] all monasteries were expected to be self-supporting communities.[13] To accomplish this requirement, monks engaged in manual labor that helped to support the operations of the Abbey and acted as a service to the impoverished community of Guimaras Island.[14]

Philippines Abbey monks took pride in doing manual labor because they viewed it as God's creative activity and, thus, they considered the work as a part of their daily life, never expecting to be paid in return for their efforts. The monks abided by a life of selfless service where profits were not a primary motivation for the Abbey's entrepreneurial activity. Instead, the bottom line was a measure of how well each business enterprise was accomplishing its mission.[15]

The American-founding monks of the Philippines Abbey engaged in productive activity that was in line with the traditions of Cistercian Order. Thus, they engaged in the production of wine. However, the wine business did not prosper due to quality problems with the grapes grown on Guimaras Island. Next, the monks engaged in a poultry production, but in like manner, the venture did not last long due to problems relating to the Trappist Abbey's water supply.[16]

Entry into the Food Industry[17]

Despite a few failed ventures, the succeeding generation of monks persisted in entrepreneurship and tried producing guava jelly. They chose guavas because of the abundance of the fruit on the Abbey and its surrounding area. Initially, the jelly was intended for monastery and guest consumption only. However, satisfied guests encouraged the Abbey to sell the jelly to the general public. The initial small-scale production of the guava jelly began in 1974 inside a small processing area made of bamboo located at the Abbey. The first few batches of jelly were bottled in plain packaging and labeling because the monks were unfamiliar with the marketing value of good product packaging. The jellies distribution was limited to the small gift shop inside the monastery. The monks decided to use the brand name "Trappist," which was an international brand name used by monasteries belonging to the O.C.S.O. Promotion of the Philippines Abbey's products was limited to word-of-mouth.

In 2000, the Philippines Abbey product mix expanded with the introduction of new variations of jellies and jams made from available fruits on Guimaras Island, as well as the introduction of new product lines such as dried mangos. The Abbot appointed Brother Raphael to oversee the operations of the Abbey's production facility in late 2005. In the same year, the business venture was established as a distinct and separate unit from the Philippines Abbey and was registered as Trappist Monastic Food Products (TMFP) with the Department of Trade and Industry. Despite the separation between the business venture and the Abbey name, TMFP was still owned and operated by the Philippines Abbey. TMFP's production plant still remained on site with the Abbey despite the name distinction.

Production and Marketing Challenges [18]

During Brother Raphael's first few months as production manager, he dealt with seemingly insurmountable technical problems. As far as the jam and jelly product lines were concerned, poor handling during the manual filling process resulted with inconsistent product quality. The manual and inefficient sealing of jelly bottles contributed to the product's short shelf-life. On the other hand, the dried mango production was adversely affected by the absence of a drying facility at the Abbey and TMFP's current air drying system was inefficient and time consuming. A poorly managed manual packing process caused delays in the production of bakery products. Aside from production problems, there were also marketing issues such as poor product packaging and labeling, as well as low market awareness of TMFP's products.

Organization Structure[19]

Brother Raphael was a registered nurse prior to joining TMFP. He disciplined himself to learn how to manage the business and perform in a leadership role for TMFP. Four other monks occupied mid-level positions with TMFP. Like Brother Raphael, the other monks had no formal training in business management. Nevertheless, all learned the job through hands-on experience. One Brother handled the accounting system, the second took care of the delivery process, another maintained the equipment and machinery, and the fourth monitored the production processes and operations. Each Brother was passionately committed to their role at TMFP. In addition, Brother Raphael hired 40 regular full-time employees for the processing plant.

Production Manager [20]

Brother Raphael closely monitored the work of his fellow Brothers and all regular employees to ensure that TMFP operated smoothly. As production manager, Brother Raphael's duties ranged widely. He supervised the operations of the processing plant, sometimes even preparing and mixing ingredients for various products due to the confidentiality of product formulas. The sales function, such as talking and negotiating with distributors and buyers, was also handled by Brother Raphael. He spent a considerable amount of time networking with government agencies for possible technical, financial, and marketing assistance to improve production efficiency, product quality, and the overall competitiveness of TMFP.

Brother Raphael handled these responsibilities because he was the only Brother that had in-depth knowledge about TMFP's operations and its future strategic direction. In spite of the heavy workload, Brother Raphael maintained a calm and peaceful demeanor; however, he acknowledged the need to delegate some of his responsibilities to others in the organization so that he could focus on critical issues requiring immediate action. To accommodate the distribution of work, Brother Raphael started training his Brothers and other employees to handle more tasks. Brother Raphael never considered hiring professional managers to help within the organization because of the potential for conflict arising from differences in lifestyle choices.

Government Support

Brother Raphael sought the assistance of the Philippine government through the Department of Science and Technology (DOST) in order to resolve technical problems TMFP faced.[21] The company qualified under DOST's Small Enterprises Technology Upgrading Program (SETUP), a government program designed to help small and medium sized enterprises "adopt technological innovations to improve their operations and thus boost their productivity and competitiveness."[22] SETUP enabled "enterprises to address their technical problems through various technology transfer and technical interventions such as technology acquisition, technology training, process and equipment design, packaging, productivity improvement, packaging and labeling, waste management, and laboratory and testing services, among others."[23]

As a SETUP beneficiary, TMFP was able to upgrade its food processing and packing system with the acquisition of equipment and materials such as a stainless steel steam jacketed kettle, filling machine, form fill seal horizontal machine, and packaging materials.[24] The government advanced the payment for the acquisition of equipment, giving TMFP 3 years to repay the total cost of the assistance, without paying interest.[25] TMFP received technology training for the use of preservatives and additives, as well as GMP and HACCP, technical assistance in product packaging and labeling, and consulting services on increasing productivity, cleaner production, energy audits, and efficiency.[26]

The interventions of DOST upgraded production efficiencies, increased product quality, and improved the financial performance of TMFP. The assistance with product packaging "increased [the] shelf-life of jams from 6 months to 1 year" and "reduced packing time from 8 hours to 2 hours."[27] The assistance with the acquisition of modern equipment improved product quality consistency and increased production volume from 120 kilos of products to 480 kilos per month.[28] The support given in the adoption of new technologies enabled TMFP to produce and commercialize sulfide-free dried mangos and facilitate compliance to food safety legal standards like GMP and HACCP.[29]

The assistance increased "total assets by 4,400% from Php 400,000 to Php 18 m[illion]"[30] (USD$9,422 to US$424,028 at Php42.45/USD $1),[31] and increased "annual gross sales by 1,900% from Php 1 m[illion] to Php 20 m[illion]"[32] (about USD $23,557 to USD $471,143 at Php42.45/USD $1).[33] Additionally, there were tangible improvements made to facilities and equipment, along with improvements in product packaging and labeling (see **Exhibit 2**).[34] In 2013, TMFP was adjudged as the best SETUP adopter for Western Visayas (a regional level competition) and ranked second at the national level.[35]

Exhibit 2

Improvements from DOST Interventions

Source: itd-dost."Trappist Monastic Food Products." SlideShare. LinkedIn Corporation, 1 Aug. 2013. Web. 24 Aug. 2014. <http://www.slideshare.net/itd-dost/food-processing-trappist-monastic-food-products>.

Moreover, the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) extended assistance to TMFP, which included relationships with raw material suppliers, enabling TMFP to easily access high quality and reasonably priced production inputs. DTI also aided with the participation in local trade fairs that resulted in increased sales in the domestic market. Likewise, DTI coordinated a trade mission[ii] to Japan that included Brother Raphael, increasing TMFP's cross-cultural knowledge and exposing TMFP's products to Japanese buyers. Additionally, entrepreneurship training, human resource development skills, and overall business knowledge improved because of DTI.[36]

[ii] Coordinated overseas visit by a group of business executives to meet potential buyers, distributors, agents; learn first-hand the target export market; and attend market briefings

The Philippine government enacted two major laws that governed the development and promotion of small and medium enterprises (SME's), namely: the Magna Carta for Small Enterprises or Republic Act (RA) 6977 as amended by RA 8289, and the Barangay Micro Business Enterprises (BMBEs) Act of 2002 (RA 9178).[37] The Magna Carta for Small Enterprises or Republic Act provided for improved access to financing, adequate business support, training on entrepreneurship and worker skills, and connections to large companies.[38] The BMBEs Act of 2002 provided fiscal and non-fiscal incentives like "income tax exemption, exemption from coverage of the minimum wage law, priority to a special window set up, technology transfer, production and management training, and marketing assistance program[s]."[39]

Exporting and Importing in the Philippines

The Philippine government instituted business reforms to facilitate trading across borders that led to a reduction in the number of documents, time, and cost[iii] required to export and import products. The improvement of an electronic customs system in 2011 specifically added functions like electronic payment and online submission forms that reduced the time and cost involved in exporting and importing products.[40] A total of 6 documents were required per exported shipment from the Philippines, taking 15 days from start to finish completing an exporting transaction. The costs associated with all the procedures required to export goods was about USD $585 for a 20-footer shipment.[41]

The upgrading of a risk management system and electronic data interchange (EDI) system in 2009 decreased the time needed to complete procedures for importing goods.[42] Seven documents were required per imported shipment, taking 14 days to complete. For a 20-footer container, the costs associated with imported goods was estimated at USD$660. The performance of the Philippines as far as the number of documents, time, and costs for trading across borders was comparable to countries in East Asia and the Pacific.[43]

Expanding Product Lines[44]

Brother Raphael introduced baked goods such as barquillos (thin, rolled wafers), bischoco (a baked bread topped with butter and sugar), otap (a puff pastry sprinkled with sugar), and mango bars to fulfill his vision of transforming TMFP as a full line processed food producer. He realized that if TMFP focused only on fruit based products, it may not be able to operate year round due to the seasonality of fruits.

Baked goods encountered a lukewarm response from consumers during the products initial market roll-out. This was because these baked goods were almost identical to those already available in the market. Thus, Brother Ralph innovated TMFP's product line by incorporating mango chips into the baked goods recipes. Success followed once the "improved" products, such as mango otap, mango barquillos, mango bischoco, mango bars, and fruit bars, were introduced in the local market (see **Appendix 1**).

[iii] Documents required to export and import include bank documents, customs clearance documents, port and terminal handling documents, and transport documents. Time required to export and import includes obtaining all the documents, inland transport and handling, customs clearance and inspections, port and terminal handling (ocean transport time not included).Cost required to export and import include all documentation, inland transport and handling, customs clearance and inspections, port and terminal handling (official costs only, no bribes)

With the successful redesign of the new product lines, Brother Raphael considered other ways to innovate TMFP's products. In fact, he began to experiment with new formulas that he hoped would someday penetrate the Filipino food market. He believed in continuous innovation to stay ahead of the competition and keep consumers excited about TMFP. Notwithstanding the well-meaning advice of his friends to add product lines slowly, Brother Raphael set a goal to introduce at least 2 new products to TMFP's product mix every year.

Other Innovations[45]

Brother Raphael improved TMFP's administrative system by automating some processes at the production plant. He went to China to buy new equipment for the plant to help increase efficiencies created with upgraded machinery. The production area was expanded to accommodate the new equipment and machineries, with a bigger storage area set aside for finished products. These innovations, new equipment, and improvements were funded using both internal funds and government grants and loans. Brother Raphael was known to put financial loan offers on hold from banks and financing companies because borrowing from private financial institutions would expose the monastery to unnecessary risks. An example risk associated with a private sector loan was the ramifications to TMFP in the event of failing to pay on a loan.

Constraints on Growth

A major constraint that limited the production volume of TMFP was the limited supply of fresh mango, a major raw material input for TMFP product lines. Importing mangos from suppliers outside of Guimaras Island was prohibited since the entire Island was declared a special quarantine zone free from the mango pulp weevil.[iv,46,47] The Philippine Government deemed it necessary to adopt this declaration to prevent the introduction of injurious mango pests present in other parts of the Philippines. The Island of Guimaras was the leading producer of the Manila Super Mango, which was considered to be one of the most delicious mango varieties in the world.[48] Brother Raphael claimed that he and other food producers in Guimaras were petitioning for the lifting of the ban.[49]

The short shelf-life of the mango and fruit bar product lines posed as another expansion constraint. The shelf-life of 3-4 months for mango products needed to be lengthened if TMFP wanted to export to other countries. Brother Raphael found a Japanese supplier of an anti-oxidant that extended the shelf life of TMFP mango bars. Results from trial runs with the anti-oxidant indicated that the shelf-life could be extended to 7-9 months. Brother Raphael, however, deferred finalizing the order for the anti-oxidant because the minimum order requirement by the Japanese supplier was a single 20-foot container per order. This volume was way beyond the needs of TMFP and was deemed an improbable solution to extending shelf life.[50]

[iv] Weevil (Sternochetus frigidus) is a small hard-bodied insect that develops inside the mango fruit and feeds on the pulp, thus adversely affecting the fruit quality.

Current Exporting Strategy

TMFP mango bars were already being exported to Guam at a rate of 1-2 tons per month. TMFP sold its products to a representative of the foreign buyer, who in turn dealt with the export documentation, shipping arrangements, and other details of exporting. The foreign buyer owned retail outlets to distribute the bars through and, at the same time, distributed TMFP products to other retailers in Guam. The goods were shipped via air to ensure that the shipments reached Guam in excellent condition. Transporting the mango bars via ship, which was cheaper compared to air transport, was not a feasible option because of the product's short shelf-life. Brother Raphael saw potential to increase the current volume of mango bars shipped to Guam provided the shelf life of the mango bars could be extended to at least 7 months. TMFP's products also found their way indirectly to other export markets when foreign tourists brought the goods back to their home country or when Filipinos sent them as gifts to family members, relatives, and friends residing abroad.[51]

Community Effects

The people and the economy of Guimaras Island benefitted from the presence of TMFP in terms of employment opportunities, civilian skill development, and an increased supply of raw materials. Specifically, the company supported 8 sub-contractors that employed a total of 40 workers, 20 packaging material suppliers that employed 200 workers, facilitated the backward integration for 12 mango farmers covering 40 hectares (98.842 acres at 1 hectare : 2.4711 acres)[52] of mango plantation, and supported the Filipino agricultural industry by buying from other local farmers for raw materials as needed. [53]

In addition to providing economic benefits, TMFP gave free medicines and medical and burial assistance to disadvantaged citizens of Guimaras. It also granted financial support for college education to the siblings and children of its workers. The Philippines Abbey planned to expand the coverage of its educational support to cover all disadvantaged students in Guimaras Island in the future. The education program was close to the heart of Brother Raphael because he considered education the best way to alleviate poverty and improve the quality of life in Guimaras Island.[54]

Current Markets

TMFP products were geared toward local consumers in the Philippines. Sales prospects for its baked products seemed promising. The increased consumer income and faster-paced lifestyles among Filipinos stimulated the consumption of convenience foods like baked goods.[55] The increasing number of grocery retail chains and bake shops also positively affected the consumption of pastries and cakes in the Philippines.[56]

TMFP prospered in the domestic market despite having no advertising strategy and not offering special promotions on its products. Brother Raphael believed that since TMFP products were produced by monks, that the goods would easily draw attention, interest, and patronage of Filipino consumers, especially when 81.04% of the domestic population was Roman Catholic.[57] He further claimed that major national and local newspapers, magazines, TV programs, and government sponsored tourism campaigns featured the Philippines Abbey and TMFP products because the monastery was a popular tourist destination. Guests delighted with TMFP products created a free marketing buzz that drew attention from the media and bloggers that actively wrote about their experiences with TMFP products. In addition, TMFP piggybacked on an international brand name (Trappist) which was associated with strong brand equity.[58]

The Japanese Market

New kinds of dried fruits such as mangos, figs, and berries were becoming available on the shelves of supermarkets, convenience stores, general merchandisers, 100-yen shops, and other retail outlets in Japan.[59] These foods were individually wrapped in handy on-the-go packaging to be sold as snack items.[60] The positive growth in the sale of baked goods in Japan was driven by consumers switching from traditional rice products to baked goods, which were more convenient to prepare and consume.[61]

Rising awareness of health and wellness among Japanese consumers prompted the consumption of healthier snack bars.[62] Japanese consumers were highly concerned about food safety and traceability.[63] Moreover, "long working hours, changing household structures and [the] growing prominence of nuclear and single-occupancy households" boosted the popularity of cakes and pastries consumed on-the-go.[64] The Japanese desired high quality, nutritious foods at reasonable prices.[65] They, however, appreciated the taste of a quality product and were willing to pay a high premium for goods that met this demand.[66] They desired new flavors and were "increasingly interested in confectionery that ha[d] fresh, fruity, and sour tastes."[67] The Japanese were known to "eat with their eyes and view[ed] food as art."[68] To gain consumer acceptance a product's aesthetic appearance and packaging on the shelf had to be given detailed attention.[69]

Japan had specific food standards and regulations for foods produced in other countries such as the "Food Sanitation Act," "Consumer Product Safety Act," "Specifications and Standards for Foods Additives, etc. under the Food Sanitation Act," and "Specifications, Standards, and Testing Methods for Foodstuffs, Implements, Containers and Packaging, Toys, Detergents."[70]

Brother Raphael and three other producers from the Philippines went to Japan with a selling mission sponsored by the Philippine Department of Trade and Industry and Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), a Japanese government-related organization that promoted mutually beneficial trade and investment between Japan and its trading partner. After undergoing rigid screening, TMFP was selected by Japanese consultants from a list of several other producers from the Philippines because the company successfully passed two important criteria for JETRO: high marketability of products in the Japanese market and conformance with Japanese standards for production facilities and processes.[71]

The 3-day journey was held at the Philippine Embassy in Japan. According to Brother Raphael, TMFP's mango bars elicited heavy interest from Japanese consumers. In fact, trial orders were placed by some interested buyers. Some product adaptations were necessary to meet Japanese consumer requirements. Unfortunately, calamity (a tsunami) struck Japan and negotiations were suspended until further notice. The lull trigged Brother Raphael to reassess TMFP's readiness to transcend into an international market. After much discernment, he decided to put the Japanese expansion opportunity on hold due to limited production volume and the short shelf-life of TMFP products.[72]

Exporting for the Future[73]

Brother Raphael reflected on the past growth of TMFP and the opportunities that could bring the company to increased production in the future. He saw the value that TMFP brought to the disadvantaged populations in Guimaras. At the same time, Brother Raphael discerned that the growth strategies TMFP pursued had to be in accordance with the ideals and values of monastic life.

Brother Raphael was concerned that he may not have sufficient information to make a decision about whether TMFP products could succeed abroad, but he knew that if he did not start to expand internationally now, the company's opportunity for global growth could slip by. He needed to decide whether the company was ready to export directly to Japan and, if not, what specific areas should TMFP improve or develop to become more export ready. What other modes of entry, aside from direct exporting, should he consider? Brother Raphael sighed and continued his conversation with the Japanese inquiry, consciously aware that what he said could shape the future of TMFP's exporting capabilities for years to come.

Appendices

Appendix 1
Product innovations

Source: "Our Products." Trappist Monastic Food Products Trappist Monastic Food Products, n.d. Web. 31 Aug. 2014. <http://trappistfoods.com/our_products.html>.

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