

“Most Wanted Maid”: The Route to the Right Product Strategy for the Domestic Worker Business in Thailand

Kaniya Nantamontry

A DBA Student, Interactive Online DBA Program, LIGS University, Hawaii, USA.

kaniya.mobile@gmail.com

Abstract

When recruiting domestic workers, either at home or abroad, most domestic worker companies generally focus on service strategy and overlook product strategy, yet a key component of the 4Ps marketing mix. The need for these firms to articulate a coherent product strategy is at the core of this qualitative research study. Its aim is to determine what qualifications domestic workers should possess and define a “product” strategy accordingly. Data was collected from the author’s observations and a focus group, who consisted of representatives of the various categories of employers of domestic workers, i.e., those with different preferences in terms of gender and nationality. All are clients of recruiting companies to which they turn when they need domestic workers. Findings indicate that the qualifications of an ideal domestic worker can be grouped into four categories; Ability, Appearance, Attribute, and Background. Moreover, a “product” strategy should focus on two specific actions, recruiting and training domestic employees to meet their clients’ criteria. It was found, however, that there was no magic way for an ideal domestic worker to be “produced”.

Keywords: Product Strategy, Domestic Worker, Qualifications, Recruitment, Training

1. Introduction

The domestic worker business in Thailand has been expanding in the last decade as more companies are entering the field. Acting as intermediaries between domestic workers, Thai or foreign, and their potential employers (households) and helping them make their way through the complex legislation regulating their hiring, most notably overseas helpers, these companies essentially focus on recruiting domestic workers who fit the profiles sought by the families in need of domestic help. Many of these companies are new entries in a market that has been growing as two-income families have become the norm, leaving their children and, in many cases, their elderly parents in the care of domestic workers (nuclear families are slowly replacing extended families). As parents are busy pursuing their careers and often working long hours away from home, much of the daily running of their household thus rests on domestic helpers; hence the need to recruit those with the ‘right’ qualifications. This raises among other issues the question of what the right qualifications are or to put it another way, what skills employers expect their domestic employees to have.

This paper seeks to address this question, which is of great import to recruiting agencies as they strive to meet the specific needs of their clients. It takes the view that these companies have yet to focus on the Marketing Mix and argues that even though product strategy primarily applies to product, its use can be extended to the recruitment of domestic workers (Acutt, 2019). Seen from this perspective, the issue then becomes ‘what kind of product householders seek?’ and can therefore be answered using part of the marketing mix approach (Kotler, 1967). While many domestic worker companies are focusing on improving their services, such as for example, creating a fast-speed recruiting service or developing an efficient screening process,

they should not overlook the importance of product development, which in this case thus refers to the qualifications domestic workers should possess when they are placed in the homes of their employers. This is another way for them to provide value to their clients.

Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following questions: What qualifications should an ideal domestic worker possess? Which ones are absolutely critical? How can such qualified workers be “produced”? Research is conducted through a focus group discussion consisting of selected customers of recruitment agencies who are representative of the various categories of employers of domestic workers, i.e., those with different preferences in terms of gender and nationality. All are clients of recruiting companies to which they turn when they need domestic workers.

2. Theoretical Background

- Marketing Mix

Kotler (1967), who is regarded as the ‘father’ of modern marketing, has long principled the so-called “Marketing Mix”. Initially, it comprised the following four pillars, product, price, place, and promotion, which are known as the “4Ps”. In the 1990s, the four Ps were adapted and became the four Cs in order to place less focus on the business and more on the customer (Lauterborn, 1990). The 4Cs adapted from the 4Ps include consumers, costs, convenience, and communication (Shapiro, 2001). Additional Ps elements emerged in the latter era. They are process, people, partner, payment, people evidence, and packaging (Möller, 2006). The marketing mix is crucial for any businesses because it allows them to make the right marketing decision and execute the effective marketing plan to gear the business to the right direction (Hakansson & Waluszewski, 2005). It is the kickoff key to any marketing plans. This research focuses on one pillar, product. Product or service is the starter for every business. Offering the right product or service to target customers is the first important thing the business needs to address, before considering anything else. The process of seeking the right product is known as “Product Strategy” (Kotler & Keller, 2012).

- Product Strategy

Product strategy is the backbone of product design (Rayport & Sviokla, 1994). It tells the full story of the product a team is building; who will use it and why they will use it. It also defines the course of action that an organization must complete to develop a product, and keeps everyone involved in product development on track (Babich, 2020). Product strategy is where the product development team conducts the study to seek for the right product to sell to target customers. It is where the company spends most investment herewith. Without the right product to sell, your company will not have the revenue to grow and will not sustain in the future. Later on, when the business finalized the product to sell and service to offer, the next step is to consider “Product Marketing”.

- Product Marketing

Product marketing defines the positioning, value proposition, and messaging of a product (Harrell & Frazier, 1999). These constructs educate internal salespeople and external customers and create tools to ensure that they understand the product that is being brought to market (Choo, 2020). In short, the task of the product marketing team is to communicate product message to target customers. Once the product is finalized by the product development team, it needs to be marketed effectively by product marketing team (Belch, 2001). This means that the people on that team need to work on how to effectively communicate the product feature to target customers via the right communication channels and with the right communication tools in order to create needs among them and in the end stimulate purchase. It is also important to note that with the exponential rise of e-commerce the marketing mix concept is bound to evolve and include new constructs (Jackson & Ahuja, 2016). As we saw earlier, this research

aims to study the domestic worker sector in Thailand and its product strategy. Based on the above, this means that this about the right product to sell, or, in other words, how to come up with the most qualified domestic workers capable of performing effectively with employers. Unlike some businesses where the product development team plays a key role, this business does not require a product R&D team. What needs to be done is to understand thoroughly employers' insights as to what the qualifications of an ideal domestic worker are and then try to find the right candidates with such qualifications.

3. Methodology

To effectively craft a product strategy, some major concerns need to be discussed before first. Bhasin (2021) has conclusively summarized the 7 steps of the product strategy development process that are essential. They include:

1. *Idea Generation*. This is where all the ideas are thrown in whether it is practical or not. The limitless imagination is needed in this first step.
2. *Idea Screening*. This step is where all the ideas are filtered. At last, all the impossible ideas are left out and the possible ones are kept for the further steps.
3. *Concept Development and Testing*. This step is to bring together all the filtered ideas to create the product concept. The concept will then be tested with target customers.
4. *Marketing Strategy and Development*. Once the product concept is done testing, the marketing strategy to market this new product will take place.
5. *Product Development*. This step is to bring together all the intangible product ideas that completely tested to create the tangible product prototype.
6. *Test Marketing*. This step is to test the product prototype with target customers in order to be certain that the company has developed the right product to the right market.
7. *Commercialization*. This is the last step of product development process. It simply refers to advertising and public relations.

This research, however, only focuses on the first two steps, idea generation and idea screening. It is the author's view that they are the sole steps that are applicable to the context of this study since in fact, as emphasized earlier, the "products" in this study are human beings. Therefore, as such, they obviously cannot be developed, the way the product development step would be applied if the issue were to develop a new product or innovate an existing one.

- Study Design

According to the Qualitative Research Consultant Association (QRCA), a global community of qualitative professionals that educates and advances qualitative methods, practices, and standards, it is preferable to use a qualitative methodology when a new product concept is to be developed and in need of in-depth understanding about customers. It is also preferable to determine how they feel toward the company and its brand, in other words, when emotions and attitudes toward something need to be studied (QRCA, 2021). Moreover, as stressed by Hammarberg, Kirkman, and de Lacy (2016), a qualitative methodology is used to answer questions about experience, meaning and perspective, most often from the standpoint of the participants. These data are usually not amenable to counting or measuring (Hammarberg et al., 2016).

In contrast, a quantitative approach is appropriate when factual data are required to answer the research question, when general or probability information is sought on opinions, attitudes, views, beliefs or preferences and when variables can be isolated and defined. It is also most appropriate when the variables can be linked to form hypothesis before data collection and when the question or problem is known, clear and unambiguous (Hammarberg et al., 2016). Since this research seeks to understand what an ideal domestic worker would be like in the eyes of employers, the research methodology most appropriate is a therefore qualitative

approach since it makes possible to obtain in-depth information from the sample. Another compelling reason to adopt such an approach in this study is that it enables the use of a focus group discussion, a tool that encourages wide debates and the expression of contradictory arguments. Indeed, this is an important tool to use in this research in order to encourage all participants to discuss as many details as possible in depth. However, it is important to note that it is only when a discussion is truly open and invites the sharing of all sorts of ideas that the focus group discussion can be expected to be effective. A qualitative methodology also allows the author's observations to be used as secondary data.

- Participants

The process of selecting participants to join in this research started with the random selection of current customers from three leading domestic worker recruitment companies in Thailand. These customers were evenly split into five major categories based on the origin of the domestic workers sought. Employers' domestic workers hiring requests indicate that 65 percent of employers prefer female non-Thai migrant workers, 20 percent prefer Thai female workers, while the remaining 15 percent prefer various types of workers (male workers, Filipino workers, etc). As a result, the research is neatly designed to select participants representative of the abovementioned groups and ensure that there are participants from each group in sensibly reasonable proportions. Based on all these considerations, 9 participants ($n = 9$) were selected from five types of employers with different hiring preferences as per below:

- Four are employers who prefer to hire non-Thai female migrant workers from either Myanmar, Laos, or Cambodia. It is estimated that this category of employers represents approximately 65 percent of the total number of employers in the domestic worker market in Bangkok.
- One is an employer who prefers to hire non-Thai male migrant workers. This type of employer occupies about 5 percent of Bangkok domestic worker market.
- Two are employers who have a strong preference for Thai female workers. They are representative of 20 percent of the employers found in Bangkok domestic worker market.
- One employer preferably hire male Thai workers as driver, gardener, pool cleaner, etc. This type of employer represents 5 percent of total number of employers in the domestic worker market in Bangkok.
- One employer who prefers to hire English-speaking workers (mostly Filipinos, both males and females). About 5 percent of the employers in Bangkok domestic worker market fall into this category.

The nine participants include seven females ($n = 7$) and two males ($n = 2$), a reflection of the fact that female household members generally have the final say in the selection of domestic staff except for two positions, driver and construction labor. The average age of the participants is 36, with participants' age ranging from 25 to 47. This is the most frequent age range of Thai employers as they are the ones who typically can afford to hire domestic workers for their households. Their educational background ranges from high vocational training to doctoral degrees (the average educational level is bachelor's degree).

- Procedure

The discussion was held in one session at the meeting room of one of the leading domestic worker companies. The facilitator was a qualified researcher. It started with ice-breaking statements and was followed by a casual report of their experience with domestic workers. This approach helped to create a relaxing atmosphere and encourage participants to open up. They were then asked about the qualifications they thought an ideal domestic worker should have (Q1). Many suggestions were made and a total of approximately 70 qualifications were retained. When asked 'why' next (Q2), the participants came up with solid explanations. They

were then asked to list the three most important qualifications and prioritize them (Q3). The last question was about how to find such qualified workers (Q4). It opened the door to much debating and provided solid and realistic analysis of the real hiring situation. The atmosphere remained relaxing and easy-going throughout. The focus group lasted for a good 120 minutes.

4. Findings

Regarding Q1 about the list of qualifications that an ideal worker should have, the results were quite similar regardless of the employer group to which the participants belonged. Some of the qualifications listed, however, were repetitive and overlapping and for these reasons were eliminated. Table 1 shows all the qualifications listed by the participants.

Table 1: Qualifications of an Ideal Domestic Worker in Thailand

Ability	Appearance	Attribute/Trait	Background
Good cleaning skills	Neat & Clean (Good personal hygiene)	Attentive to work, behave professionally	No financial difficulties
Good laundry skills	Healthy (No congenital disease)	Caring, creative, devoted, diligent	No religion limitations
Good cooking skills	Good personality	Can keep secrets, Reliable / Dependable	No cultural limitations
Good child-care skills	Good manners	Separate work from personal matters	No criminal records
Good elderly care skills	Properly dressed	Efficient, fast learning, flexible, frugal	
Basic technical knowledge	Cheerful	Good attitude towards employer, no trespassing on employer's privacy, , protect employer's interests	
Basic household repairing skills		Have empathy & sympathy for others	
Basic driving skills		Hard-working, helpful, honest, kind, loyal, maneuverable	
Basic pet-care skills		Tolerant, trustworthy, well-rounded, wise	
Basic sewing skills		Nice, Sincere, tactful, teamwork-oriented, not a complainer	
Basic handyman skills		Obedient, patient, polite	
Basic grocery shopping skills		Not addicted to the phone, not talkative, speak mellifluously	
		Punctual, responsible, self-discipline, sincere	

Source: Compiled by the author for this research study

As to Q2 (Which qualifications are essential), all participants came up with quite similar answers. Employer's expectations are quite high. Even though employers realize that such an ideal domestic worker, who possesses all or even most of these qualifications, is almost surreal and hard to find, they want versatile domestic employees, who can cater to their multiple needs. These covers everything and ranges from cleaning to taking care of everyone and everything in the house. For those hiring foreign helpers, these also include some rudimentary knowledge of the Thai language.

Responses to Q3 (the three most critical qualifications domestic worker should have) reveal almost similar choices. Since finding such an ideal and perfect domestic worker is almost impossible, the type of qualifications need to be prioritized. In other words, what should come

first? Should it be skills, appearance, background, or attributes? Unsurprisingly, the top three essential qualifications were almost the same for everyone.

1. *Good working skills* come first. No matter who you are, you must be able to perform basic tasks as a domestic worker. Working skills are the most important qualifications that most employers are expecting. The top three working skills include cleaning, laundry, and cooking.
2. *Attributes* or *Traits* come second. The top three traits that employers selected are “efficient, reliable, and hard-working.”
3. *Appearance* comes last. This is the least important qualification employers are expecting from a domestic worker (except for background). The top three dimensions of appearances are “neat and clean, healthy, and good manners.”

5. Discussion

Question 4 (Q4) about how to find such qualified workers or even produce them is at the core of this study. We now understand what the ideal domestic worker should look like. The question remains, however, as to how to create such great ‘products’; still a big puzzle for the domestic worker recruitment business. Obviously, since the products mentioned here refer to humans, they cannot be simply produced factory style. Moreover, few, if any, possess all of the qualifications listed by employers. This quest for the perfect candidate thus comes down to two main issues: how to attract high-quality candidates and how to train them to fit the profile sought after.

- How to Attract High-Quality Candidates

Wangyuenyong (2017) from Motive Talent Company, Thailand, has proposed a strategy for companies in this industry. Referred to as “Recruitment Marketing”, the strategy adopts a marketing methodology designed to attract candidates and have them join the domestic worker recruitment business. It starts with building the recruiting company’s brand awareness, which involves campaigns specifically targeted to get the attention of potential candidates, who will then consider whether they want to join the company. This should be done under the supervision of a seasoned marketing team. This could also be carried out by a marketing sub-team working with an HR team, who will then take the lead on the next recruiting processes; application, selection, and hiring. This first step is all the more critical as the domestic worker business in Thailand has become highly competitive industry with the arrival in the last decade of newcomers with extremely successful marketing communication strategies, along the lines described here. This means among other consequences that each domestic worker company must try to distinguish itself from competitors

Murphy (2018) suggests eight key recruitment strategies for recruitment companies that could also be suited for the domestic worker business, even though candidate qualifications differ from other fields. They include:

1. *Job Advertisement Clarity* – This requires providing all necessary details such as family members background, workplace locations, how to commute back and forth daily, etc.
2. *Campus Recruiting* – A number of schools and training centers in Thailand focus on training professional domestic workers. For talent seeking efficiency, setting up recruiting booths there would thus save time and reduce costs associated with recruiting the best talents.
3. *Flexibility* – Employer flexibility in terms of in/out time, days off, shift and so on could go a long way in attracting – and retaining – talented candidates. Not sticking to conventional work standards would also avoid dull assignments.
4. *Adding Perks* – Jobs with more special benefits would be more attractive to talented candidates. Such perks could, for example, include annual bonus, long-service award,

employee of the month announcement, and an attractive work area. They would add positivity.

5. *Organizing Competitions* – A talent-searched competition offering rewards such as money prize, could be an effective screening method that would give a chance to candidates to display their skills.
6. *Using Social Media Recruiting* – Utilizing a social media as a recruiting channel is another way to attract the best talent.
7. *Setting up Employee Referral Programs* – Candidates could be given money rewards as a motivation to refer other candidates.
8. *Shortening Hiring Time* – Recruiting companies should speed up the application process. The longer a candidate has to wait, the higher the chances he/she will not find that job attractive.

- *How to Train Candidates to Fit the Profile Sought After?*

All the qualifications listed in Table 1 can be grouped into 4 categories: Ability, Appearance, Attribute, and Background (AAAB).

1. *Ability* - Ability refers to the necessary basic working skills of a domestic worker (cleaning, doing laundry, cooking, etc). Recruiting companies could hire trainers to help candidates develop certain skills before sending them to employers. Candidates could be tested for which working skills are deficient and later to be trained.
2. *Appearance* - Appearance (personality, personal hygiene, etc) can be improved and polished with the proper training. While the basic personality training offered to the candidates may not radically change their personalities overnight, it may lead to some improvements (candidates can be trained to get rid of the body odor, dress properly, ...).
3. *Attributes* - According to Koolen (2016), attribute refers to the aspects of a person that can be trained as opposed to traits that are ingrained attributes that can or cannot be trained. While domestic worker companies could share with candidates what positive attributes are most valued by employers, attribute training could be gradually done while working with employers. Learning by doing could help develop those skills sought after.
4. *Background* - As we saw earlier, background is not one of the top three priorities of employers. This is because they realize that one's personal background cannot be trained or changed. Indeed, this is the only area where employers do not expect training by domestic worker companies. Besides, having a challenging background does not make him/her a bad person and vice versa, having a 'ideal' background does not guarantee that he/she is a good employee.

It is important to keep in mind that although the product this research study seeks to define as the ideal product to develop, this product is actually not a product but a human being. Whatever qualifications will characterize the ideal domestic worker, we have to accept the fact that some qualifications are developable and some are not by dint of being a human being. For this reason, it is most useful to separate qualifications into two categories; developable and undevelopable. So, among the developable qualifications, what are the top three most important ones an ideal domestic worker should possess? And among undevelopable qualifications, what are the top three most important qualifications an ideal domestic worker should possess? This will make product strategy development more realistic and effective. Separating qualifications along these lines will allow companies to determine which ones should be further developed and which ones cannot be nurtured.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study sought to explore the type of qualifications employers wish domestic workers to have by using the first two steps of the product development process: idea generation and idea screening. Idea generation took place via Q1 and Q2. Interviewees' responses to Q1 enabled to establish a list of qualifications (almost 80), which were then regrouped under the AAAB acronym (Abilities, Appearances, Attributes, and Background). It was determined that the three AAA qualifications can be developed whereas the B qualification is considered not trainable. Most employers hiring domestic workers through domestic worker companies expect them to recruit prospective domestic workers with AAA qualifications and in the alternative train them, which in most case may prove to be a tall order. Responses to Q2 (the reason why such qualifications are essential) show consensus as all respondents concur on the fact that domestic workers are very important to their families. They are someone whom the family trusts to take care of everything and everyone in the household. In essence, they are practically family members as they to live under the same roof and possibly eat at the same table. Most family members have full-time jobs and desperately need someone who can clean, cook, and take care of children and elderly people who often need special assistance.

Idea screening took place via Q3 and Q4. The focus of Q3 is on the most essential qualifications in each AAAB category. These include cleaning, doing laundry, and cooking in terms of abilities; being neat, clean, healthy, and having good manners as far as appearances are concerned; and efficiency, reliability, and hard work in terms of attributes. That said, it is important to keep in mind that the term "qualification" is subjective. Each employer and each household have different standards and expectations regarding each qualification. Best skills according to one household could mean just good skills for another and bad ones for yet another. As the results indicate, background is regarded as not important. As Fiske and Malone (2013) noted, when hiring workers, employers not apply competence judgment but also warmth judgment. In other words, employers should not look for domestic workers that exhibit the right skills, those workers should also have the capacity to stir up feelings of affection and admiration as they engage with family members.

The answer to Q4 (about how to find such qualified workers or even "produce" them) is based on various primary and secondary sources of information. As noted earlier, while the term "product" may seem incongruous given that the "products" referred to as human beings, it is a useful way to address the issue of how to train/produce the "ideal" domestic worker. In many ways, choosing the right person to work with a family is similar to choosing what kind of people to be in our lives as a spouse.

Several strategies propose steps and processes for product development and could be used for "human" development, i.e., for effective recruitment, training, and marketing. By and large, they promote similar techniques, which in terms of marketing, involve employee referral programs, job vacancy advertisement, job events or talent search competitions, and social media recruiting, to name a few. One strategy that readily comes to mind is Bhasin's (2021) Product Strategy Development Process, from which this study borrowed idea generation and idea screening. While it is outside the ambit of this study to discuss the other steps it contains in detail, it should be noted that this is a cooperative process between marketing, research and development, and product development teams.

- Suggestions for Further Research

While this study only focuses on steps 1 and 2 for all the reasons discussed earlier, the other steps in Bhasin's (2021) model could possibly be applied in further similar studies. Emphasis could be placed on step 4 (the marketing strategy and development) or on the last step (Step 6, communication), two important steps in domestic worker companies' recruitment strategies.

Further studies could also pick up on the findings of this research and apply them to Pichler's (2015) Effective Product Strategy, a three-step strategy designed to boost sales. While initially developed for products and services, some of its dimensions could be applied to the domestic worker business.

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