MARKETING CAPABILITIES FOR INNOVATION-BASED COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE IN THE SLOVENIAN MARKET

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Abstract

The primary role of marketing within the competitive advantage is innovation. The customer value-based differentiation strategies will drive the company's market research efforts, its selection of target markets, its product development processes, its market communications programs, and its delivery processes. These processes require many specific capabilities that enable the firm to carry out activities necessary to move its products or services through the value chain. We must explore the role of distinctive marketing capabilities in competitive strategy of the company. As sources of competitive advantage, companies try to create their product or service differentiation by developing higher product or service quality, by using their knowledge to solving marketing problems, by communicating with their customers, and by satisfying customer's needs. We also would like to confirm that superior customer service lead to company's innovation. The paper closes with the implications of the findings and highlights promising future research avenues.

Keywords: competitive advantage, innovation, marketing capabilities, entrepreneurship, customer service

Introduction

In recent years the resource-based view of the firm has become a dominant paradigm in management literature. This paradigm has been extended to marketing and to studying the assets and capabilities underlying superior performance in the marketplace (Day, 1994: 37; Fahy et al., 2000: 63). The resource based view of the firm has an inward focus in that it considers a firm's resources as primary sources of competitive advantage. Providing these internal resources (products/services, capital, technology, specialised knowledge, human resources, contacts and networks, meet certain criteria (e.g., difficult to

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imitate and difficult to substitute), then they can form the basis of creating a superior competitive advantage (Patterson, 2004). This paradigm has been extended to marketing and to studying the assets and capabilities underlying superior performance in the marketplace. Resources enable the firm to develop a sustainable competitive advantage, and create customer value in the marketplace (Fahy et al., 2000). Although different types of resources can be identified (e.g., organisational culture, marketing assets), the discussion in this paper is focused on marketing capabilities.

For firms competing in a global marketplace, innovations play an increasingly vital role in achieving superior performance (Bindroo et al., 2012: 17). Customers are important relationship partners who possess unique information that can be advantageous to the competitors (e.g., related to services, marketing communication, new technology, and customer preferences) (Bindroo et al., 2012: 18). The company must exploited many differences in an offering, and the value of these is dependent upon the importance to the customer. In identifying and serving customer needs for products and services, timing of exploiting sustainable resource, executing differentiating capabilities or launching an innovative technology are critical factors (Adhikari and Gill, 2011: 76).

Entrepreneurship is essential for the firm to accumulate dynamic capabilities and to create sustainable competitiveness (Charlie and Yan, 2011: 513). Entrepreneurs have to create value and to keep close observation on the performances of the value added procedures of the value chain. Value chain can be defined as »an integrated series of processes that produces service or product« (Guy, 2011: 63). According to Lee (2004: 104), »high speed and low costs, though essential, are not enough to maintain sustainable competitive advantage«. Thanks to new technology, executives can divide up their company's value chains, handle the key strategic elements internally, outsource others and coordinate all essential activities more effectively to meet customer's needs. Companies that understand this build their strategies around knowledge of developed core skills and developing new products or services to differentiate from other companies (Adcock, 2001).

Effective sales management, products, pricing, advertising, and distribution in any business has always required that marketing managers found available marketing capabilities in the company and organized them to create competitive advantage (Mathur, 1997: 199). It is the need of a business to focus on the areas of its core competencies, specifically those where it can deliver a real competitive advantage. It should be able to identify and accommodate other companies, which can contribute their capabilities to ensure value to customers (Adcock, 2001).

The research consists of two parts: the theoretical foundation of the role of marketing capabilities for the competitive advantage and the empirical analysis, based on the primary data collected. The research has encompassed the analysis of strategic marketing sources of competitive advantage in the sample of Slovenian companies. This paper defines marketing as a function of the firm dealing with the mobilization of organizational resources for the acquisition and integration of market-based knowledge to value creating activities of the company; and the coordination of activities required for the company to reach its targeted customers with superior products and services. The assessment of the innovation in the sample companies is one of the indicators of the entrepreneurial activity.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, the theory of competitive advantage is explored, focussing on marketing sourcing for sustained competitive advantage. Second the empirical results of the sample Slovenian companies were examined and the results were presented. The paper concludes by discussing implications for future directions and the conclusions from the study.

Marketing sources for competitive advantage of a firm

Competitive advantage is taken here to mean the strategic benefits gained by a firm over its rivals that enable the firm to compete more effectively in the marketplace, which then leads to superior profitability (Bharadwaj, Varadarajan and Fahy, 1993). This focus is based on the integration and coordination of firm activities towards satisfying customers in an effort to maximise long-term profitability (O'Cass and Voola, 2011: 629).

The capability-based theory suggests that a firm can achieve competitive advantage through distinctive capabilities possessed by the firm and that the firm must constantly re-invest to maintain and expand existing capabilities in order to inhibit imitability. Marketing capability of a firm is reflected in its ability to differentiate products and services from competitors and build successful brands and firms with strong brand names can charge premium prices in foreign markets to enhance their profitability (Weerawardena, 2003).
The marketing concept that has existed for many years was one of the first strategic frameworks that provided firms with a sustainable competitive advantage (Kumar et al., 2011: 16). The goal of marketing strategy is to understand how firms obtain and sustain a competitive

advantage. This goal is applicable to all types of organizations that compete in a competitive market (O'Cass and Voola, 2011: 628). It has been argued that market orientation has a positive influence on business performance (Le Meunier-FitzHugh and Piercy, 2011: 287).

The differentiation strategy emphasizes competition with a unique product on the entire market. In this case, the company has been developing an entirely new product in order to differentiate itself from its competitors, or improving an existing product by differentiating it from similar competitor products by design, usage characteristics, taste, etc. The final goal of the differentiation process is creating a product brand by which the company will be recognized in its industry. This is a very ambitious goal, which presumes that the company possesses large advantages in the fields of research and development, design, marketing and quality control (Buble et al., 2003). Capability creates no competitive advantage if it is easily achieved (imitated) by one's competitors. Thus, the potential sources of competitive advantage of a firm are those capabilities that are difficult to develop (Buble et al., 2003). Competitive advantage can come form any of the parts of an offering, but if the synergy exists, the combination will be stronger that the individual parts.

In intangible nature of an offering goes further than the service encounter. All marketers must remember to design and deliver the non-tangible product benefits that customers inevitably demand. Excellent physical and service characteristics alone are seldom enough to guarantee customers satisfaction and competitive effectiveness, achieving a balance of these product components aspects requiring attention from marketing. This should embrace all other contracts between supplier and customer at any level and the second requirement is the consistency between all elements of the offering so that each is supportive and leads to a balance from everything that is done (Murray and O' Driscoll, 1996).

Differentiation, as a means of achieving competitive advantage, could come from either the tangible or the intangible parts of an offering. While the merchandise (core offering) could be tangible or intangible, it is important to separate this core offering form the support (advice, instructions or assistance) given to augment the total product. It is possible to move away from a pure commodity - that is, the "expected" state, where both the product and the support and undifferentiated and no competitive advantage exists – and develop an offering that has real additional benefits for customers (Mathur, 1997).

Some author argue that managers are usually focused too much on core competencies of enterprises, critical sources and key factors of business efficiency, instead of being focused on the strategic coordination of activities of enterprises, which is a central factor in achieving a competitive advantage (Buble et al., 2003).

The dimensions of competitive advantage

Competitive advantage can be viewed as a firm's ability to contribute more customer value than its competitors (Wu, 2012: 160). Sustainable competitive advantage is being determined by three major components, these are high perceived value and low delivered cost. All the above components will be part of the input that customers will use when they evaluate the perceived competitive position of an offering (Adcock, 2001).

It is suggested that entrepreneurial firms pursuing innovation as a key thrust in their competitive strategy build and nurture distinctive marketing capabilities. In turn, marketing capabilities lead to higher organizational innovation intensity and sustained competitive advantage (Weerawardena, 2003). In this paper are examined interrelationships among marketing capability and organizational innovation.

Marketing capability

Competitive advantage of the company is focussing on the inside elements of the company. For those inside elements the variety of terminology can be summarized. It includes “resources”, “invisible assets”, “strategic assets”, “firm resources”, “capabilities”, “competency” and “core competencies” (Juttner and Wehrli, 1994). The capability-based theory claims that the competitive advantage of a firm derives from its capabilities. Different authors use different expressions to describe the sources of capability-based competitive advantage. The most common expressions found in the related scientific literature are the following: core skills, distinctive capabilities, organizational capabilities, organizational capital, dynamic capabilities and core competencies (Buble et al., 2003).

Marketing capability is defined as integrative processes designed to apply the collective knowledge, skills, and resources of the firm to the market-related needs of the business, enabling the business to add value to its goods and services and meet competitive demands. In explicating the overall marketing capability of the firm it is important to examine the specific marketing processes that are adopted by firm in its competitive strategy. In this paper we have identified several processes

that are used by firms in their efforts to reach target customers with value-added products and services (Weerawardena, 2003).
The first process is customer service, defined as deeds, processes and performances which are largely intangible tasks that satisfy buyer or user needs (Adcock, 2001). Customer service is more than fast deliveries or product availability; it is primarily a way of providing an optimal supply process for the customer. Literature suggests that there is some evidence for a direct impact of customer service performance on market share, sales, or profits (Wouters, 2004). It is certainly true that no marketing strategy can be implemented without effective customer contact, and this involves all internal staff, as well as staff at partner distributors. These employees, whose meet customers but whose primary functions are not marketing – are the people who can ensure a product and, especially, a service meets customer expectations. They are people who are close to the customers all the time. They can usually tell more about the performance of existing products than any carefully structured research programme and they can sometimes actually spot opportunities that might lead to great new product ideas. So, customer contact point is obviously a critical resource within the organization (Adcock, 2001).

The second process is concerned with the effectiveness of promotional activities in gaining market share and sales growth. Communication with existing and potential customers is vital to marketing success especially on the terms of globalizations (Jerman and Završnik, 2012a). The challenge for marketer is to create a well-planned and comprehensive marketing communication program in order to achieve company objectives. We must integrate and coordinate different communication tools to achieve the desire results (Završnik and Jerman, 2011). The instruments of marketing communications comprise advertising, sales promotion, public relations, direct marketing and personal selling. Marketing communications can be described as »all the promotional elements of the marketing mix which involve the communications between an organisation and its target audiences on all matters that affect marketing performance« (Jerman and Završnik, 2012b).

Third is the quality of sales people. Sales force have taken a more strategic role in order to address the increased importance of buying process (Agnihotri and Rapp, 2011: 364). Direct selling efforts are one of the most important variable affecting a business firm’s competitive advantage. The salesperson is also a very expensive resource. The ability to differentiate products (to boost the image of products by attributes other than prices such as superior quality, image or services) marketed by the firm.

Next is the firm market research which can gain reliable marketing information to reduce uncertainty to tolerable levels and facilitate planning and control at a reasonable cost (Bingham et al., 2001). The next area of importance is the speed of product introduction. Rapid development of new products and services is an integral component of innovation-based competition. Next is the firm's marketing research, which is defined as a set of processes, needed to learn about customer needs particularly latent needs and to monitor competitor product and service offering. The speed of product introduction is another important factor of company's competitive advantage (Weerawardena, 2003).

These processes are adopted in varying degrees by firms in their efforts to reach respective target markets. In this paper the overall marketing capability of the firm is operationalized using these marketing processes.

Innovation

Through progressive and incremental innovation in the nature of the intangible resources, it may be possible to protect initiatives and create a combination and configuration that maintains their relative sustainability over time. The capability configuration approach requires a firm to remain original and creative, rather than an imitator, in creating a sustainable competitive advantage (Taghian, 2010: 829).

All types of innovations can lead to sustained competitive advantage. Although the literature suggests that innovations can occur in any value-creating activity, suggesting that it should be conceptualized to cover a broad range of activities, past innovation research is biased toward technological innovation. However, firms undertake both technological and non-technological innovations and all such innovations can lead to competitive advantage. In this paper, organizational innovation is defined as the application of ideas that are new to the firm, to create added value either directly for the company or indirectly for its customers, whether the newness and added value are embodied in products, processes, services, or in work organization, management or marketing systems (Weerawardena, 2003).

Marketing capability is critical at the product development stage where consumer needs and competition must be assessed and information shared for comprehensive new product ideas to be advanced into the development stage (Weerawardena, 2003). Based on this discussion, we argue that marketing capability is related at all types of innovations pursued by the firm. We suggesting that marketing capability can be a key source of competitive advantage, and can influence company's innovation. Accordingly, the relationship between marketing capability and organizational innovation is hypothesized.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Characteristics of the sample

The main research instrument for empirical investigation, i.e. a questionnaire, was developed on the derived theoretical basis. The covering letters with questionnaires were mailed to the corporate directors of 150 Slovene biggest enterprises. We choose the strata based on the annual income. The survey was conducted in December, 2011. This research is still in progress, so during the four-week period following the mailing, a total of 30 responses were received and that gave the response rate of 20,0 %. The results present in this paper are related to the sample of 30 respondents. The collected empirical data were processed with SPSS 17, where the emphasis was given to descriptive statistical analysis. We intend to use the regression analysis and hypothesis testing too as organizational innovation. The regression analysis and hypothesis testing produced very modest research findings because of the too small sample of the companies in the sample.

Some of the possible limitations of the survey results should be noted. First, the low response rate might be considered a concern, but in fact, it is expected in organizational research as opposed to consumer research (Hansen, Swan & Powers, 1996). When small sample sizes are being employed, when each subpopulation of interest has fewer than 30 respondents, we should be very careful to ensure that any inferences are appropriate given the data collection. But in this paper a small sample represents a high proportion of our population and such concerns are less relevant (Bock and Sergeant, 2002).

The relevant data of the companies were provided mainly by members of the managing boards (73,3% of cases). Other respondents appeared in not more than three companies (See Table 1).

Table 1: Position of respondents in the companies

Position in the company	Frequency	Percent (%)
Members of the managing board	22	73,3
Head executive	2	6,7
Counselling specialist	1	3,3
Business consultant	2	6,7
Other	3	10,0
Total	30	100,0

The companies included in the sample are distributed according to industries (see Table 2).

Table 2: Distribution of the companies in the sample according to industries

Industry	Frequency	Percent (%)
Production of industrial products	10	33,3
Production of consumer products	5	16,7
Business services	5	16,7
Services for final consumer	4	13,3
Trade	6	20,0
Total	30	100,0

The sample consists of one company (3,3%) with less than 100 employees, 36,7% of the companies with less than 500 employees but more than 100, 40,0% of the companies with the number of employees bigger than 500 but smaller than 1001, and 20,0% of the companies with more than 1000 employees (See Table 3).

Table 3: Size of the respondents companies

Number of employees	Frequency	Percent (%)
51-100	1	3,3
101-500	11	36,7
501-1000	12	40,0
More than 1000	6	20,0
Total	30	100,0

Then respondents in the surveyed companies were asked about their largest sales geographic region. The respondents had the possibility to choose among different answers. The results show that the largest respondent sales market is Slovenia, followed by EU market. The next large sales market is the market of former Yugoslavian countries, followed by the market of East Europe (See Table 4).

Table 4: Respondents largest sales geographic region

Geographic region	Frequency	Percent (%)
Slovenia	29	96,7
EU	22	73,3
Former Yugoslavian countries	22	73,3
East Europe	22	73,3
CEFTA	18	60,0
USA	12	40,0
Pacific - Asia	9	30,0
Australia and New Zeeland	8	26,7
Japan	7	23,3
Africa	7	23,3
Latin and Middle America	6	20,0

The presented research findings in the continuation relate to the above-stated sample of companies.

Analysis and results

Marketing capability

The marketing capability scale captures the quality of the company's customer service, marketing communications effectiveness, the quality of sales force, market research ability and the speed of new product introduction. Scores on the marketing capability scale suggest that the firm possesses distinctive capabilities in the use of marketing tools and techniques. The reliability of construct was assessed by Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient. The measure had 5 items and reported an Alpha of 0,72.

Organizational innovation

Organizational innovation construct is operationalized in terms of the type of innovation. The types of innovation included are product, process, managerial and marketing innovation. The concept of organizational innovation had 4 items and the measure reported an Alpha of 0,76.

Both the construct, i.e. marketing capability and company's innovation were measured on the Likert scale. The respondents had to indicate their agreement with the statements on the on a 5-point Likert (1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree) scales. Despite the fact that the Likert-type measure does not claim to be more than an ordinal scale, it has, nevertheless, been accepted as a means of achieving interval measurement quality, and there are several arguments favouring a variety of positions on this issue (Avlonitis and Papastathopoulou, 2004).

We were interested if the correlation between different marketing capabilities and company's innovation exist. Accordingly, we make the hypothesis as follows:

Null hypothesis H0: There is no correlation between marketing capabilities and innovation.
Alternative hypothesis H1: There is a correlation between marketing capabilities and innovation.

Table 5: Correlation matrix between different marketing capabilities and innovation

CORRELATION		Innovation
The quality of our customer service is high	Pearson Correlation	0,450(*)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,012
We have trained sales persons in the company	Pearson Correlation	0,442(*)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,014
We ensure high budget for marketing communications	Pearson Correlation	0,444(*)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,014
Marketing research is a constant activity in our company	Pearson Correlation	0,457(*)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,011
Speed of the new product introduction	Pearson Correlation	0,499(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,005
Innovation	Pearson Correlation	1,000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	-
* Correlation is significant at the 0,05 level (2-tailed).		
** Correlation is significant at the 0,01 level (2-tailed).		

The correlation coefficients between 0,300 and 0,700 are considerate that there's a moderate correlation between marketing capabilities and innovation. The test statistic exceeds the critical value so we reject the null hypothesis and conclude that there is a significant correlation between all marketing capabilities and company's innovation.

Because the pairwise correlation is found to be significant the relationship between the variables will be investigated by producing a regression model in the form of a linear equation. The independent variables (marketing capabilities) have been constructed on the basis of questionnaire items, detecting the distinct potential sources of the competitive advantage and innovation in the company. It is important to note that all the variables have been measured on a five-level Likert scale. For each independent variable, the average value and the standard deviation have been calculated.

Table 6: Marketing capabilities of the company

Marketing capability	Mean	St. deviation
Customer service	3,39	0,69
Sales person	3,77	0,86
Marketing communication budget	3,67	0,92
Market research	3,33	0,99
Speed of new product introduction	3,70	0,95

We would like to test if is the regression model with five predictors (i.e. customer service, sales person, marketing communication budget, market research and speed of new product introduction) significantly related to the criterion variable Y (i.e. company's innovation)? Non significant predictor variables were deleted from the initial regression model and the model re-run to give a parsimonious result. We test the equivalent null hypothesis that there is no relationship in the sample between dependent variable and independent variables, but we found significance level only at one specific marketing capability i.e. customer service. Accordingly to this, the null hypotheses, which we tried to reject by means of regression analysis, could be formulated as follows:

Null hypothesis H0: There is no relationship between the dependent and independent variables, i.e. The correlation coefficient between the dependent and independent variables equals 0 (H0: Rxy = 0).

Alternative hypothesis H2: There is a positive relationship between the dependent and independent variables, i.e. The correlation coefficient between the dependent and independent variables is significantly higher than 0 (H2: Rxy > 0).

For the tested relationship, we selected the regression model with the highest significance, i.e. the model with the significance closest to the significance level of 5%. To investigate the hypothesis, entering all variables in a single block, we found that the proposed model explains a significant percentage of variance in the innovation. Table 7 shows that 20,3 per cent of the observed variability in company's innovation is explained by the one independent variable i.e. customer service (R2=0,203; adjusted R2=0,174).

Table 7: Relationship between customer service and company's innovation

Independent variable (x)	Dependent variable (y)	R2	Adjusted R2	Model	(Sign.) α
Customer service	Company's innovation	0,203	0,174	Lin: y = 1,607 + 0.494x	0,012

Although the empirical results do not provide a high level of support to the conclusion, we believe that the positive relationship between the innovation in the company and its marketing capability (in this case "customer service") can be still accepted on the basis of the available data. Such a result is in accordance to the findings of other authors (Spanos and Lioukas, 2001).

Table 8: Results of regression coefficients

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
Model	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	1,607	0,739		2,176	0,038
The quality of our customer service is high	0,494	0,185	0,450	2,670	0,012a
a Dependent variable: Innovation					

Results from Table 8 indicate that we can reject the null hypotheses that the coefficients for customer service (Beta = 0,450, t =2,670, p =0,012) are 0. The beta weight (Beta = 0,450) shows that the quality of customer service have a significant influence on company's innovation.

Implications

The findings discussed above have some managerial implications. The critical success marketing capabilities put forward in this paper serve as building blocks for the development of high level of innovation in the companies. It provides useful guidelines in the form of the critical marketing capabilities that can affect company's innovation. In term of innovation are included all types of innovation: product, process, managerial and marketing innovation. The marketing capabilities proposed in the study also enhance the current practice of company's innovation for sustained competitive advantage.

Conclusion

The challenge for organisations today is to understand the factors that play a critical role in utilising marketing capabilities and their applications on business strategic objectives to enable them to compete successfully in today's marketplace. As sources of competitive advantage, companies try to exploit different marketing capabilities in order to create competitive advantage. They attempt to introduce new product, by satisfying customer's needs, by developing higher product or service quality, by training efficient sales person.

Top managers assessed that the most important marketing capabilities of companies for creating a competitive advantage and innovation. The study confirms that there is an association between all marketing capabilities and company's innovation. A statistical test did not support the hypothesis that a positive relationship exists between all marketing capabilities and company's innovation. But with statistical test confirm a positive relationship between one specific marketing capability (i.e. the quality of customer service) and company's innovation. Results suggest that marketing capability (the case of customer service) influences the company's innovation. The research contributes to theory and practice of strategic marketing by developing measures and refining measures of marketing capabilities and innovation. Further, the model captures the role of key decision-makers in the development of marketing capabilities.

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