

EXPORT MARKETING STRATEGIES AND EXPORT PERFORMANCE :

THE CASE OF U.S. MANUFACTURING COMPANIES

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Abstract

This study explored the export marketing strategies firms adopt to compete in export markets. Existence of export marketing strategy types, and their significant impact on export performance, were supported by this study. In export markets, differentiation strategy based on either extensive marketing or innovative products was found to be essential in achieving high export performance.

INTRODUCTION

Many enterprises in numerous industries are realizing the benefits of exporting overseas. Export markets represent a significant area of interest among both practitioners and academics, and provide companies with the opportunity to become less dependent on the domestic situation, and stimulate growth through increasing turnover and enhancing profitability. Export activity among firms is also of public and political interest as it can positively contribute towards society and the wealth of a nation, by fostering greater employment and fiscal contributions.

Despite considerable interest in the area of exporting among academics, very little research has been conducted on export marketing strategies in export markets. Most previous research on exporting has focused on firm, managerial or market characteristics associated with whether or not firms export, e. g., size of firm, top management's commitment to export, and size of foreign markets (e. g., Aaby & Slater, 1989; Bilkey, 1978; Cavusgil, 1976; Gornez & Valenzuela, 2005; O'Cass & Julian, 2003; Zou & Stan, 1998).

Also, previous export marketing research has rarely taken into account the concept of strategy--integration of many marketing variables. Most studies of export

marketing strategy (including many international marketing textbooks) have dealt with relationships of only one (or two) export marketing methods, e. g., pricing, promotion, and control over distribution channels, with export performance (e. g., Albaum & Tse, 1999; Bilkey, 1987; Calantone, Kim, Schmidt & Cavusgil, 2006; Cavusgil, 1976; Cavusgil & Zou, 1994; Flor & Oltra, 2005; Morgan, Kaleka & Katsikeas, 2004; Solberg, Stottinger & Yaprak, 2006). In other words, these studies have identified only independent forces of marketing methods on export performance. More research, therefore, is needed to examine the interdependent relationships of marketing programs with export performance, in attempts to identify which combinations of export marketing activities (i. e., strategy types) are most effective for firms in export markets.

The purpose of this research study, therefore, is to make an initial attempt in exploring export marketing strategy by identifying prevalent types of the strategy. Specifically, the objective of this study is threefold:

(1) to find prevalent patterns (or key underlying dimensions) of export marketing strategy;

(2) to determine types of export marketing strategy used by firms to compete in export markets, and;

(3) to identify what types of export marketing strategies are instrumental in providing companies with competitive advantages in export markets, thereby leading to high export performance.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND PAST RESEARCH

While there have been several studies investigating relationships between generic strategy types and marketing methods (e. g., Athanassopoulos, 2003), very few studies have explored identification of strategy types pertaining to export marketing. Most studies have concerned with domestic marketing practices and have focused on marketing tactics, examining the interaction of marketing variables such as product quality, advertising and price (e. g., Hooky, Lynch & Jobber, 1992; Lee, Lim, Tan & Wee, 2001).

In order to find strategy types of export marketing, key underlying dimensions of export marketing strategy need to be identified. There are many definitions and views of marketing strategy and export marketing strategy (Aaby & Slater, 1989;

Rundhl, 2007; Zou & Stan, 1998). It should be noted that export marketing strategy is often considered similar to domestic marketing (e. g., Cooper & Kleinschmidt, 1985; Daniels & Radebaugh, 1986; Stewart & McAuley, 2000). Many studies of export marketing strategy have derived conceptual or operational definitions from those of marketing strategy (e. g., Cooper & Kleinschmidt, 1985). Variety in the definitions indicates existence of many dimensions in marketing and export marketing concepts. Most dimensions, however, can be broadly categorized into the following two components, market selection and marketing mix programs (i. e., price, product, promotion, place and service).

Traditionally, a marketing strategy has been defined in terms of market selection and product strategy (e. g., Cooper & Kleinschmidt, 1985; Corey, 1962). Contemporary marketing has been focusing not only on product strategy but also on integrative marketing activities, i. e., the marketing decision mix. These two key components, i. e., market selection and marketing decision mix, can thus be considered to encompass many major dimensions of marketing strategy.

In the case of export marketing, market selection translates into two factors: the countries exported to and the level of marketing segmentation within these countries. As for countries, export market selection ranges from a “nearest neighbor” approach (exporting to a convenient and proximate country) to a worldwide orientation (exporting to many countries around the world) (Cooper & Kleinschmidt, 1985). The second factor of export market selection, segmentation strategy, portrays the degree of market segmentation that firms employ within their export markets, ranging from selling to essentially one market segment in the foreign markets to selling to a multitude of different segments (Agarwal, 2003; Sweeney, 1970).

Marketing decision mix, for export marketing strategy, involves marketing mix adaptation policy, or the degree to which a firm adapts its marketing mix to foreign markets. Also, a firm needs to make decisions on its marketing mix. The decision mix usually includes four P’s, i. e., product, price, promotion and place (distribution channel), plus services. Though it is usually considered that the decision mixes are integrative, interacting closely with each other, very few studies have examined the nature and effectiveness of interaction among the marketing mix variables.

Strategies, however, represent a network of interactions among the various constituent elements that make up a strategy. The major question this study attempts to address, therefore, is “which of many possible combinations of export

marketing methods are instrumental in providing firms with competitive advantages in export markets, thereby leading to high export performance.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sample

Data for this study were collected through a mail questionnaire. A total of 436 U.S. exporters of manufactured goods was randomly selected from the Journal of Commerce's Directory of United States Exporters. A questionnaire was sent to each export manager or top executive who was in charge of exporting. After one follow-up letter, 121 useable responses were received (about 28 percent response rate). The average firm in the sample had annual sales of \$35.40 million and employed 300-350 people. The average exporter had about 20 years of export experience, and derived about 17 percent of sales from exporting.

Variables and Measures

Export marketing strategy was measured based on 18 questions, representing the two components, i. e., market selection and marketing mix, as discussed in the previous section. In the market selection component, respondents were asked to rate the degree of worldwide orientation, i. e., exporting to nearest neighboring countries (scale = 1), exporting to 2-3 regions (scale = 4), and worldwide (scale = 7), and the degree of market segmentation practiced in export markets, based on a seven-point Likert scale, with 1 being no emphasis at all and with 7 being extreme emphasis. For marketing mix component, they were asked to rate the degree of emphasis relating to: (1) products, i. e., broad range of products, new product introduction, product change rates, speciality products, and technological superiority; (2) promotion, i. e., brand identification development and advertising; (3) price, i. e., low price; (4) place, i. e., supports to foreign dealers and control over distribution channels, and; (5) service, i. e., after-sale services and quick response to service requests, based on a seven-point Likert scale with 1 being no emphasis at all and with 7 being extreme emphasis. In addition, respondents were asked to rate the degree of adaptation of marketing mix, i. e., price, product, place and promotion, to foreign markets based on a seven-point Likert scale, with 1 being no adaptation at all and with 7 being extensive adaptation.

The questionnaire items concerning export marketing were derived from

extensive literature review. Many of the export marketing methods were extracted from international marketing textbooks and strategic management literature (Aaby & Slater, 1989; Cateora & Graham, 2004; Dess & Davis, 1984; Hambrick, 1983; Kotha & Vadlamani, 1995; Lassar & Kerr, 1996; Miller, 1986; Porter, 1980; Robinson and Pearce, 1988; Terpstra & Sarathy, 1999; Zou & Stan, 1998). Questionnaire items used by previous export marketing researchers (e.g., Bilkey, 1982; Bilkey, 1987; Cavusgil, Chan & Zhang, 2003; Cavusgil & Zou, 1994; Cooper & Kleinschmidt, 1985; Morgan, Kaleka & Katsikeas, 2004) served as a second source.

Three measures of export performance, i.e., export intensity (export sales as a percent of total corporate sales), export growth, and export profitability, were assessed in this study. Export performance has traditionally been measured by a single variable, i.e., export intensity. This measure, however, has often been criticized in the past (e.g., Katsikeas, Leonidou & Morgan, 2000; Shoham, 1998). A firm's export intensity is usually considered a measure of its propensity to export. This research study measured not only export intensity but also export growth and profitability, as gauges of export performance. Cooper and Kleinschmidt (1985) used export growth as a "dynamic" measure of export performance. Also, export growth measure is similar to that of sales growth, which reflects how well an organization relates to its environment (Hofer & Schendel, 1978: 4) by successfully expanding its "product-market scope" (Ansoff, 1965).

In addition, export profitability was measured by a self-report subjective instrument. Each respondent was asked to rate his/her firm's export profitability, compared to selling in the U.S., based on a five-point scale, with 5 being much more profitable and 1 being much less profitable. It should be noted that perceived export profitability may not be a totally accurate measure of actual profitability. Many issues, including accounting systems (Banhardt, 1968), influence managers' profit perceptions. Notwithstanding, usefulness of subjective performance measures in the absence of objective performance measures has been supported by Dess and Robinson's (1984) study. Also, similar subjective export performance measures have been used in past studies (e.g., Bilkey, 1982; Lages, Lages & Lages, 2005; Shoham, 1998; Zou & Stan, 1998). These tend to confirm that the perceived performance measure is a reasonably accurate yardstick of export profitability. The questionnaire was tested prior to mailing to the sample firms.

Approaches to Data Analysis

Data were analyzed in three steps. First, factor analysis on 18 export marketing methods was used to identify the key underlying dimensions of export marketing strategy. Factor analysis has the ability to produce a descriptive summary of data matrices, which aids in detecting the presence of meaningful patterns among a set of variables. Second, the factor scores produced by factor analysis for each sample were used as input to a clustering algorithm, in order to classify them into strategy types. This procedure has often been used in several classic marketing studies (e. g., Frank and Green, 1968) and in a number of “generic” competitive strategy studies (e. g., Dess & Davis, 1984; Robinson & Pearce, 1988). Although it results in some loss of information, it has the advantage of generating orthogonal (i. e., unrelated) dimensions for subsequent analysis. This reduces potential problems of “noise” due to interdependence among export marketing variables.

Third, a one way analysis of variance test was used to determine whether the different strategy types were associated with different levels of performance. Since this study was exploratory in nature and its findings were based on a relatively small sample, significance levels of up to .10 were considered acceptable (Labovitz, 1970).

RESULTS

Export Marketing Dimensions

The principle factor solution with the varimax rotation for the 18 export marketing methods is shown in Table 1. Five significant factors (i. e., eigenvalue > 1) emerged from the analysis, explaining about 60 percent of variance. Appropriateness of this five factor solution was also supported by a scree test (Cattell, 1965).

17 of the 18 export marketing methods exhibited factor loadings greater than or equal to $\pm .50$ on at least one factor. These loadings may be considered a conservative criterion: factor loadings of .30 are often considered a cutoff for significance (Nunnally, 1978).

The first factor links responses to the questions of the emphasis on advertising, adaptation of advertising and distribution channels to export markets' conditions, brand identification development, supports to distributors, and control over distribution channels. This factor includes all the variables concerning promotion and place, and thus can be interpreted as a manifestation of a promotion/place dimension of export marketing strategy. The second factor connects the relative importance of

TABLE 1 Factor Loadings and Communalities of the Five Revealed Factors

Variables	Factor One	Factor Two	Factor Three	Factor Four	Factor Five	Communality
Advertising	.80905	.09199	.00810	.02233	.08630	.671040
Promotion adaptation	.79858	.03749	.07429	.04839	.05539	.650059
Brand identification	.61460	.25456	.12536	.27365	.03778	.534559
Adaptation of distribution channels	.66079	.06114	.41962	.08126	.00998	.623156
Dealer supports	.66647	.03879	.20026	.22803	.09685	.547171
Control over dealers	.59598	.00888	.39442	.13820	.00579	.529964
Product adaptation	.17229	.70508	.09389	.34490	.04504	.656626
Market segmentation	.41863	.57371	.14752	.39178	.13489	.698632
Speciality products	.13997	.72707	.06590	.35224	.11459	.689767
Broad range of products	.37173	.51765	.06545	.17026	.03661	.440760
Worldwide orientation	.11172	.11155	.65916	.10908	.11795	.485230
Technological superiority	.03831	.07494	.73807	.05900	.03268	.556384
New product introduction	.29037	.07563	.57936	.02342	.44059	.620353
After-sale service	.38927	.12175	.21079	.63512	.22720	.665780
Quick response to service requests	.19662	.11690	.03877	.78686	.10381	.683754
Price adaptation	.14358	.12887	.16604	.13386	.75072	.646296
Lower price	.11074	.11824	.08258	.10797	.81080	.702121
Product change	.04770	.47972	.33082	.04815	.12241	.359148
Eigenvalue	4.4267	2.0544	1.5573	1.4943	1.2281	

product adaptation, market segmentation, and speciality products. It also associates somewhat closely with emphasis on broad range of products. Almost all the variables included in this factor indicate the importance of catering products to segmented markets. It shows that adaptation of products is closely associated with segmentation of export markets. Therefore, this factor is labeled as a “product adaptation” dimension of export marketing strategy.

The third factor can be interpreted as a new product dimension of export marketing strategy because of its emphasis on new product introduction and technologically superior products. This factor also associates with worldwide orientation. The fourth factor connects the relative importance of after-sale services and quick response to service requests, which can be interpreted as a manifestation of a service dimension of export marketing strategy. The fifth factor links responses to

questions of emphasis on lower price relative to competitors and catering price to markets' conditions, leading to the interpretation of this factor as a manifestation of a low pricing dimension of export marketing strategy.

It should be noted that the reliability and validity of the factor analytic results can be threatened due to the possible instability of the factor loadings. Stability or robustness of the factor loadings in this study, however, can be supported by a relatively high ratio of sample ($n = 121$) to measures ($n = 18$). This ratio of 6.72 exceeds the desirable ratio of four or five to one recommended by Hair, Anderson, Tatham and Grablovsky (1979).

Export Marketing Strategy Types and Export Performance

The factor scores generated for each executive were used as input to a hierarchical clustering algorithm (FASTCLUS procedure in SAS). The executives were switched from one cluster to another until the optimal cluster configuration, which maximizes between and minimizes within cluster variances, was obtained (See Table 2). The appropriate cluster solution (six clusters) was selected by applying the criterion, i. e., drop in mean squared error (Schlaifer, 1978). Also, a discriminant analysis of the six clusters using the five factor scores as independent variables correctly classified over 95 percent of the observations, suggesting that the clusters formed distinct groups.

Cluster one, consisting of 19 firms, emphasized low pricing of products and strongly deemphasized product adaptation and market segmentation. It should be noted that, in order to interpret the cluster analysis results, means in each cluster were compared with those for entire sample through multiple t-tests. This approach was taken to minimize impressionistic interpretation of the results (Hambrick, 1983).

Companies in cluster two (8 firms) had highest centroid scores on both low pricing of products and product adaptation, and strongly deemphasized activities relating to promotion and distribution channels. Cluster three, including 31 companies, emphasized promotion and place related activities, and product adaptation.

Cluster four consisted of only 8 firms. These companies emphasized promotion and place related activities, and strongly deemphasized product adaptation, new product introduction and service. Seventeen companies were classified into cluster five. They placed strong emphasis on high pricing of products and little emphasis on promotion and place related activities, new product introduction, and service. Cluster

TABLE 2 Cluster Analysis Results

A. Means Score

Cluster	Coordinate Centroids					Export Performance ^d		
	Promo- tion/ Place	Product Adap- tation	New Prod- ucts	Service	Low Price	Inten- sity	Growth	Profit
1 (n = 19)	.165 (.72)	1.100 ^a (.80)	.1382 (.81)	.4562 (.89)	1.1359 ^a (.77)	16.3	.24	3.32
2 (n = 8)	1.254 ^a (.50)	.897 ^b (.78)	.3803 (1.0354)	.4367 (1.18)	1.3261 ^a (.77)	9.5	.35	2.88
3 (n = 31)	.812 ^a (.75)	.821 ^b (.58)	.2085 (.80)	.2759 (.87)	.2303 (.65)	20.3	.18	3.94
4 (n = 8)	.914 ^b (1.03)	1.205 ^a (.66)	1.091 ^a (1.10)	1.003 ^b (1.15)	.377 (.79)	5.8	.16	3.25
5 (n = 17)	.712 ^a (.70)	.351 (.69)	.853 ^b (.83)	.513 ^b (.92)	.725 ^a (.69)	8.1	.18	3.18
6 (n = 38)	.190 (.84)	.214 (.69)	.591 ^a (.81)	.530 ^a (.73)	.631 ^a (.64)	22.5	.22	3.63
Grand Means	.0	.0	.0	.0	.0			

B. Means Squares

Between Groups	10.04	13.12	7.60	6.20	13.09
Within Groups	.607	.473	.713	.774	.474
d.f.	6,114	6,114	6,114	6,114	6,114
F-Ratio	16.55	27.71	10.67	8.02	27.59
P-Value	.0001	.0001	.0001	.0001	.0001

NOTES:

Significance of difference from mean of entire sample: a, $p < .01$; b, $p < .05$; c, $p < .1$.

Standard deviations are in parentheses.

^d Analysis of variance results for the six clusters: Export intensity, F-value = 3.25, $p < .009$; Export growth, F-value = .48, not significant; Export profitability, F-value = 2.01, $p < .08$

six, consisting of 38 companies, had high centroid scores on new product and service dimensions of export marketing strategy, and a negative score on low pricing of products.

A one way analysis of variance test was used to test the effects of export marketing strategy on the three measures of export performance (see Table 2). There was a weak, non-significant relationship between export marketing strategy types and export growth measure of performance. For export intensity, a measure of firms' propensity to export, a significant difference existed among the six clusters of

companies. Companies in clusters 2, 4 and 5 were much less export oriented than those in other clusters.

There was a significant difference in export profitability among the six groups of companies employing different export marketing strategy types. Companies emphasizing promotion and place related activities, and product adaptation (cluster 3), and those emphasizing new product introduction (cluster 6) exhibited higher export profitability, compared with those in clusters 1, 2, 4 and 5.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Five distinct dimensions of export marketing strategy were identified by factor analysis in this study. Two export marketing mixes, i. e., pricing and service, were found to be quite independent of each other, as well as from other strategy dimensions, e. g., market selection, promotion, and product. Also, it was interesting to find the close relationship between two export marketing mixes, i. e., promotion and place. More important finding was the interrelationship between market selection and product dimensions. One of market selection dimensions, market segmentation, relates closely with product adaptation approach. Another market selection dimension, worldwide orientation, is associated closely with new product introduction and technologically superior products. Traditionally, marketing and export marketing strategies have been defined in terms of market selection and product dimensions, with the assumption that these dimensions are distinct (e. g. Cooper & Kleinschmidt, 1985). Findings of this study, however, indicated more complicated, interdependent relationships between these dimensions of export marketing strategy.

There were six distinct groups of exporters employing different combinations of export marketing strategy dimensions. Multiplicity in strategy orientation in export markets was found in this study. The product adaptation dimension tended to relate closely with the promotion/place dimension (cluster 3), or with the low pricing dimension (cluster 2). Also, firms that export new and technologically superior products were likely to be service oriented (cluster 6). Only two of the six groups of exporters (clusters 1 and 4), however, had singular emphasis on one dimension of export marketing strategy.

Notice that these strategies can largely be categorized into three major, separate types: (1) low pricing (clusters 1 and 2); (2) differentiation through

marketing (clusters 3 and 4), and; differentiation through innovative products (cluster 6). Interestingly, these strategies are very similar to those developed by Porter (1980) and Miller (1986), i. e., low cost leadership and differentiation. Low cost leadership strategy emphasizes creating competitive advantages through generating and maintaining low cost positions relative to competitors, and thus competes mainly through lower product prices. A differentiation strategy requires firms to create something, either products or services, that are recognized industrywide as unique. Porter's typology, as discussed in the theoretical background section, deals with overall competitive strategy a firm adopts in a given industry, and seems applicable to its export marketing strategy.

Companies in cluster five did not have any strategy orientation in export markets. Strong deemphasis on low pricing, worldwide orientation, new product introduction, service, and promotion/place indicated that firms in this group exported higher priced products to only a few export markets. These firms also had low export intensity. Therefore, they were not so export oriented, and exported when overseas customers were willing to pay higher prices for the products. Almost the same export profitability with that of domestic operations also showed that higher export prices reflected higher costs of exporting, e. g., transportation costs and tariffs.

Effectiveness of export marketing strategy types differed considerably in terms of export profitability and intensity measures of performance. For both export intensity and profitability measures of export performance, two groups of exporters excelled others. One was cluster three, emphasizing product adaptation, and promotion/place related activities. The other was cluster six, emphasizing new product introduction and service, and deemphasizing low pricing of products. Both groups followed a differentiation strategy, i. e., marketing or innovative differentiation. The major difference between the two higher performing groups seemed to lie in the product strategy (i. e., new product introduction) which may relate to the stage of product life cycle. Cluster six firms appeared to stay in an early stage of product life cycle and export primarily new, high-priced products to wide ranges of export markets. On the other hand, cluster three companies appeared to stay in a maturity stage of product life cycle, and export established products with extensive promotion and distribution channel supports. When the latter strategy was followed, some emphases on product adaptation, new product introduction and service seemed to be essential for export success. Cluster four companies which were similar to cluster

three firms in emphasis on promotional activities did not emphasize product adaptation, new product introduction and service at all and had low export intensity.

Two groups of firms emphasizing low pricing of products (clusters 1 and 2) had different export performance. Exporters that strongly deemphasized product adaptation (cluster 1) showed higher export intensity and profitability than did those emphasized product adaptation and deemphasized promotion related activities (cluster 2). This finding appeared to indicate that firms with strong emphasis on low pricing of products should market standardized products without too much deemphasis on promotion related activities in export markets.

Interestingly, export marketing strategy had a very weak relationship with export growth measure of performance. Export growth is similar to sales growth (or market share growth), a measure of match between an organization and its environment. Effectiveness of marketing strategies (for domestic operations) has usually been measured in terms of sales growth and profitability. In other words, marketing strategies are implemented in order to achieve higher market share, higher profits, or both. Export marketing strategies are found in this study to have little impact on export growth. Possible explanations are higher environmental volatility in export markets and uncertain foreign governments' intervention on trade. The relationship between export marketing strategy and export growth might also be influenced by the country origin or the degree of reliance on export markets. Firms in countries with limited domestic markets, e.g., Japan and Canada, may pursue export growth more aggressively than U.S. companies with vast domestic markets.

Some limitations of the present study should be noted. First, since this study included firms in one country, i.e., the U.S.A., the generalizability of the study may be limited. Second, the use of privately owned firms as a sample precluded the independent verification of the respondents' statements pertaining to export performance. Third, the sample size in this study was considered adequate, but a somewhat larger sample would obviously permit firmer conclusions to be drawn from the results of the statistical analysis. Fourth, export marketing strategy may include other essential methods not covered in this study. However, given the exploratory nature of the study and resource constraints, the limitation is not considered a major barrier in interpreting the results. Fifth, since the data are cross-sectional in nature, only associations between variables can be established.

Future research should investigate export marketing strategies employed by

exporters in other countries. In addition, future research should explore the existence of intervening variables, e. g., firm size, top management's commitment to export and organizational structure, and their impacts on strategy-performance relationships.

Moreover, research should examine the effects of environmental factors, e. g., product or industry life cycle, degree of competition in export markets, and governmental restrictions on trade, on export marketing strategy-performance relationship. Findings of this study showed some indications for the need of development of a contingency theory in export marketing.

This study explored the export marketing strategies firms adopt to compete in export markets. Existence of export marketing strategy types, and their significant impact on export performance, were supported by this study. In export markets, differentiation strategy based on either extensive marketing or innovative products was found to be essential in achieving high export performance. More study is needed to further understanding of export marketing strategy, with attempts to provide export managers with theoretical and empirical guidelines for ascertaining which export marketing strategies are most appropriate and thus most profitable for their firms.

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