

STRATEGIZING TO COMPETE: THE BROADER PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

A Marketing Strategist should not take a house to be a town. He needs more than the eyes to scan the competition in full. Competition is violently volatile, and broader and deeper, deeper probing as it emerges to the advantage of the strategist. What is the competition like, will it be the same, is it going to be robust, will there be more entrants in the future, what is the pedigree of those in the competition, are they going to change their competition tactics and armoury, will their strengths decrease or increase. Is the one about to enter match those in there and other issues must be thoroughly pondered over before plunging into the competitive avenue. Strategizing to compete is going to take months if not years based on the competition and the extent to which competitors are ready to allow entrants. It is your strength and your fortitude that will eventually land you into the competition. No military generalissimo takes only a day to launch an 'attack' or enter into a 'battle' with the 'enemy' combatant. Marketing Strategist needs to know more than the enemy before pitching tent to wage a battle, though friendly and not ambivalent.

Keywords: Marketing, strategies, competition, companies' perspective, Ghana

INTRODUCTION

Apart from a few companies which have been mandated by governments to be monopolies, almost every company in business by accident or design, competes. It is incumbent upon them to compete otherwise, they will not obtain the necessary attention and the market space they aspire to attain. It is only a dead dog that does not bark or bite. It is again only dead military generals that do not probe before pitching tent to 'battle'. Competition is therefore a necessary evil and no competitor can compete without prior proper preparation and planning. As a farmer

does not plant maize today and expect to harvest tomorrow, likewise, marketing strategists don't need a day to compete and succeed. Competing and succeeding will take hardwork and in-house searching before reaching out to compete. The giant does not need to prepare for a fight. The giant or warrior is battle-ready everywhere, every time but this does not apply to every company. Even the strongest fears the stronger somewhere who is not even ready for a fight.

HYPOTHETICAL FRAMEWORK

The following are hypothesised:

- a) Companies about to compete having an understanding of their customers and consumers is not enough these days because of the volatile and fluid nature of the micro and macro environment. It is critically imperative they have more than enough understanding of companies they are about to compete with.
- b) Competitors can be comprehended in many ways. Thoroughly scanning, searching, probing, periscoping, dissecting, to have more than enough information is crucial. It takes centuries to fully grasp your competitors.
- c) Who does not leap before he ventures? It is prudent companies are circumspect in their competitive warfare. The company one underestimates may have the lethal weapon for the warfare. Dead lions do not roar.
- d) Having the minutiae about weak and bad competitors is mandatory for competing company.
- e) Coming to term with the strengths and competences of competitors is obligatory for the would-be entrant to the competition.
- f) Appreciating fully the objectives of competitors is essential. It is critically important for the objectives to be put on the radar, since there can be revisions or review of the objectives already set.
- g) Accurately coming to grips with why the competition the way it is, is an excellent prerequisite for future competition.
- h) Strategizing to compete calls for total awareness of reaction patterns of competitors.
- i) Astute marketing strategists fully surveil their future competitors before pitching tent to compete.
- j) Companies not investing in their competitors are courting trouble, if not danger. Ignoring one's competitors is suicidal.
- k) Competing is like warring with an enemy, knowing the battle terrain fully well is a must for a successful battle.
- l) Having all the arsenals one can talk of does not guarantee competitive superiority. It depends on the firepower of one, where and how you fire matters.

THE PREREQUISITES FOR ABOVE AVERAGE COMPETITION

Competitor information helps a company to protect and give its business (Ultimate Business, 2009). To keep one step ahead or at least at roughly the same place as your direct competition, you need to build a detailed profile of them, their strengths, weaknesses and relationships with customers, as well as thinking more deeply about competition for your customers and their spending. To help you to do this, compare the performance of your business with that of your main competitor by measuring factors that are important to quality of service and use the competition as the basis for a programme or performance improvement.

Whether you sell yourself or you have a sales team, competitor information can be obtained from many different sources. Publications, the press, and the internet have information readily available that can help you compile intelligence on competitors, and corporate brochures and annual reports are also excellent sources of published information. Maintain a file of press cuttings on your competitors' activities, using their trade publication or their own website news pages as a source.

According to Hussey and Jenster (1999), published industry surveys can provide a useful insight into purchasing patterns, and competitors' websites can provide valuable information on their resources, plans and capabilities.

Smith and Fletcher (2008) opine competitor intelligence can have a significant impact on a company's plans. If a company is about to launch a new product, or a campaign, competitive activity can limit its effectiveness, so a company needs to know about it. Unless a company monitors activity of competitors and take appropriate action, the business faces an unknown risk.

It is paramount a competitor knows who its competitors are and what they can do to its business. Can they destabilize or cannibalise some of your business? If they can, then they must be watched and this calls for 'ring fencing' your business against encroachers and invaders who may invade without notice. Many small companies already know who their competitors are. Often they have worked with them or encountered them at trade events or shows. It is dangerous for a company to assume it knows all its competitors. It is often urgent (ibid) to think literally about who might be in competition for your customers. Many products and services would be classed as non-essential and so customers may be choosing to spend their discretionary budget between two very different market sectors.

The issue of competitor research must not be down-played. Who is to do the research? Should it be done within or without? It can be carried out if the company has the necessary resources. Much of the same material is in public domain, so you should be able to obtain it yourself and you must never ignore the wealth of information you already have in your company

or you can gain through your own contacts. However, if you wish to research customer attitudes, you may need to use an independent research organization.

It is imperative for the organization about to compete have its own information farm to be used to cultivate and store the information for competitive warfare. It is not to rely only on published information. The information can be out of date or even become stale or even inaccurate. Accuracy of information to be used is critical (Wind and Main, 1999). There is the compelling need to make assumptions about the accuracy and quality of any information that is used for research. However, realistically, you can only use the latest and best information available.

Competitor information helps an organization to identify how an organization can protect its important business, and more positively, how it can strengthen its position with customers in situations in which competitors are currently holding a larger portion of the business. These are the main questions:

1. How many competitors do you have? Are they direct or indirect? This question must be answered for a company must endeavour to accurately know its competitors. Whether direct or indirect, it is essential they are known and studied critically. The question is, after knowing them, will their position and competitive stamina change or remain same. If they remain same, do you have the competitive weaponry to take them on? Are you to leave the competition because they have competitive superiority? Knowing them very well will help you to find an antidote to their competitive clout; or competitive stamina.
2. Who are your major competitors – those that threaten your most important customers. Can you contain them? It is prudent and wise to contain your competitors. For all you know, their strength may lie in superior customer service which can be studied and innovated later on to use as a strategic weapon or tool. A thorough research and some requirement of the information obtained from research can be used to advantage. Are your most important customers threatened by your competitors? If they have high performing brands than you have, what are you to do? You can improve your brands to be able to stand on the same pedestal like them. Company's brands improvement must be a continuous business. Brands must not be allowed to deteriorate or to cede market value to your competitors. It is really unwise, marketing wise.
3. How much of your business do they threaten? Quantifying the threat helps you to prioritise. Do they threaten your whole businesses? Are you to allow your business to be threatened by your competitors? What do they have that you don't have? Accurately estimating their power or potency is very important and then determining a competitive plan that will put you in a position to be able to reach them. Will the threat grow in future

or will it diminish? Strategically tracking the threat is very important, only it will take some time.

4. Where are your main competitors located? How do they compare in size? Are they growing? Map them and track them. The exact location of your competitors must be known. Be it in the city or the rural countryside. At least, if they make noise it must be within your 'hearing range' so that you adequately prepare to meet them. But if they make 'empty boasts', you need not replicate them since it can wear the organization down. The real size of your competitors must be known exactly. Their product line, number of employees, their market share, distribution assets, quality of their products or service, the number of years they have been in business, their expenditures in promotional activities, number of their sale force, their capacity to penetrate the market and their image and goodwill. If competitors are growing, are you in a capacity to grow, and if you can or are growing, for how long can you sustain the growth? Will the growth add to your product line and also the number of agents and the geographical spread. If the growth impacts favourably with yours, that does not mean you should go to sleep. You should still find out how to add to the growth and capitalise on the opportunities that beckon you. Mapping competitors and also tracking them is of utmost importance.
5. Can your products stand on their own? Do they compare with competitive offerings or not? If not, what must be done efforts must go on to improve your product offerings through assembling the engineers and the quality control staff to belt up and be doing. Without competitive offerings, one common property best and therefore everything practically doable must be done to be able to rise above competition. The product prices must match the offerings of competitors to be able to compete efficiently and effectively. Prices must be well engineered to be able to stand to the competition. Is the distribution coverage well or adequate? Are your products only in the towns or cities? If the rural–urban distribution is too wide, it must be bridged for products to be everywhere for consumers and the communities will carry on the spread of the products of the company. This will augur well for huge infrastructure outlay and logistics very well analysed. Is the company image and reputation intact or not? If it has been soiled somewhere, this is the time to rectify the 'malady', it is essential whatever damage has been somewhere is quickly righted or remedied to reduce whatever damage has been done. If nothing at all, a search must be done within, whether no 'error' has been done somewhere which can reduce or aggravate the image and reputation of the company. The damages will take a lot of time to repair, that does not mean it must not be done, it must be still done for the company to have a 'clean bill' when it has the reputation and image. Service quality

(Peters et al; 1995) must not be played with. There are many service offerings and this means your service quality must be excellent to increase your competitive power. Service quality leverages competitive tempo and positioning wise, it is a plus to the company.

6. Are customers' attitudes towards your competitors the best or not? If the attitude is not good, what is the underlying cause? Is it because of their product offerings, then it becomes food for thought. This must be investigated and if the underlying causes or cause are known then the negativity remedied to stop the future 'viral infection' which can easily erode one's marketing gains. But it must be noted that there are new, underlying reasons for customers' negative or unfavourable attitude towards competitors. They are many and therefore time and energy must be expended in the matter. If competitors receive hostile business attitude from competitors, is it the same towards you? If yes, what are you to do? This must be ethically faced. The best marketing practices must be followed and applied to kill the negativity towards you, only it takes time to erode the negativity. It may call for a total organizational haul (Schonberger, 1997).
7. The extent to which you have been able to ring fence your customers is critical. Which of your customers might switch to your competitors and why? Is your service delivery not up to standard or falls below what competitors are offering? If it is so, it must be ameliorated for you to be upstanding. The service or product delivery must be well fortified so that customers switching to your competitors will be insignificant. Why, customers might switch, must be well researched. Is it your product or service packaging or plan, of your products or your promotional organization or the timing of your promotion? Customers will not switch for any tiny reason. There are reasons for switching and this must be well delved into. When the reasons are known, it must be used to prepare an antidote to prevent or 'deter' switching.
8. The relationships between key customers and competitors is very paramount. If there are relationships, how did they come about and who cemented the relationship and what is the significance of the relationship? If the relationship is very cordial, then customers can offer information on product or service delivery and this is an advantage to those competitors. Forming relationships with key customers enures to the advantage of competitors. Ways and means to make the relationship dynamic must be sought to the mutual advantage of the customers and competitors. Some competitors have been in the business for long and have strong relationship with key decision makers or drivers of the business. There must be one or two reasons for the strong relationships, find out why

and pursue some to cement your relationships with key decision makers in future. It is essential you accurately know how long competitors have been in business and find out again if there have been difficulties and how these difficulties are managed for future business. The skills to immediately overcome the competitive threats are not going to be got overnight. It is essential to overcome the threats one dutifully studied and used as a strategic weapon. There are some businesses one needs a lifetime to study the critical skills and these critical or key skills used to do the business. The resources all will not be got at a go. Even the resources needed to be for to be used must also be critically surveyed to be able to get what it really needed. There will not be a single or simple formula to be used to overcome competitive threats. It takes the strong to face the strong and some level of maturity and experience is needed to overcome competitive threats. Competitors may have the cutting-edge technology or production finesse you have not readily got. The company needs the experience curve concept to overcome the threat. It is wise you walk wherever you are to walk and not jump when you are not supposed to be jumping. It pays when we learn slowly and enthusiastically to be able to grasp key concepts and technologies. No competitive threat however huge is insurmountable, it is the patience and the will to overcome that matters. The company's employees and the technology at their disposal are the resources the company can use to overcome the threat.

9. If a company is not the sole supplier of an item, other competitors will try to make inroads into your businesses. Finding measures to be put in place so that their making inroads into your business becomes impossible or expensive. It is essential your business secrets are not leaked out anyhow. Find ways and means to strictly keep all business information and seriously do your 'gatekeeping' so that essential information does not leave your company premises. As much as possible, prevent any form of espionage on your business by even 'friendly' competitors as whatever information they get from you can be used to compete against you. Those making inroads into the business which you are the current dominant supplier must be 'technically' stopped from invading your territory by finding means to deliver at a less price or enhancing your product quality to be above others and again finding innovative techniques to deliver your product or service. Continuous product innovation is the answer. As the company needs to have the par excellence to drive intruders away or even to make their entrance impossible by blocking the possible routes on which they can walk to invade your market space.

10. Kotler (1999) writes on how competitors can wrest a sizeable portion of their competitors' market share by snatching customers through improved products and economical way by products and services distribution. They can also reduce their operations costs to be able to price below the going market price and also offering cheaper products and giving price discounts and having in place a very good after sales service and also using aggressive advertising promotion. Proper engineering of costs is a critical key or ingredient. Search and arrive at who your competitors main customers are and gradually study their needs and what your competitors have been doing to retain them. How did they become their main customers and what have been done to maintain or captivate them. There is a reason. And the reason must be sought for and used to change their hegemonic position of your competitors. Every market scenario has a reason or a cause. The cause must be studied and replicated to advantage. The reason or causes cannot be comprehensively studied from the outside; you need inner connection for a breakthrough and it is essential one is prepared to pay for what one needs to do a successful business. If it is important to have it, go on and have it and use to make gains or increase your market share or to be able to drive their main customers to your 'circle of customers' and profitably manage them. Though it takes years to convert customers, but based on your techniques, the time needed can be shortened.
11. As an organisation, how well invested in links with customers that would make it difficult for other suppliers to make inroads? Organisations in business to meet customers' needs need to make every effort such that rival competitors will not have the opportunity to snatch them. It is expensive adequately 'covering' customers. It is mandatory companies go to every extent to know what exactly their customers need. The need, when identified, must be seriously met so as to tighten all the links the company has with its customers. It must be continuously done to ward off 'predators'. A customer relationship management system is therefore needed to be put in place. The CRMS must be tightly screwed.
12. Are the weaknesses in your competitors easily identifiable? What can you do to exploit the identified weaknesses? Will the weaknesses be there for long? What are the implications for you as an organisation? Do your customers identify the weaknesses in your competitors? Can you take any advantage by enticing these customers to your fold by remedying the weaknesses identified by you and by your customers? It would be in the area of poor packaging or the sluggishness your competitors display when it comes to meeting customers' needs or responding to customers' demands. Having the finesse to quickly adjust when competitors show any apathy or lethargy is a plus that must be

accentuated. Having the radar that will enable an organisation to spot weaknesses in your competitors is a very nice recipe for competition.

13. There are many clusters of customers and which of the clusters of customers of your competitors can you win? After winning them, can you maintain them? What do you need to have to maintain them? Do you have the resources it takes to retain the customers that you have won? It takes a lot of time to leave for profitable customers. The research team can be assigned this and the research team must have the pedigree to spot customers of your competitors who are profitable and design the strategy to be used to draw these customers to your fold (Ultimate Business Resource, 2002).

KEY COMPETITIVE FACTORS THAT ARE IMPORTANT TO MEETING CUSTOMER NEEDS

Ultimate Business Resource (2002) lists ten competitive factors that are important to meeting customer needs. They are;

1. Evidence of an excellent service culture, for example, problems quickly resolved by frontline staff rather than reference to higher managers. Frontline staff must therefore be adequately resourced or equipped to be able to do this.
2. Providing consistently high–levels of after–sales service and support offered. There must be an infrastructure in place to provide after–sales service to customers.
3. Product adopted readily to meet customer expectation specifications. This prevents customers from making adsfadf further for products.
4. Evidence of commitment to quality measurements such as ISO 9002, Investors in People, or similar industry schemes.
5. Promises made to customers, for example in sales literature offering money–back guarantees or precise delivery schedules.
6. Evidence of feedback encouraged, for example, e–mail addresses, comment forms or telephone number made widely available.
7. Flexible approach to pricing such as the use of price incentives or finance schemes to appeal to different types of customers. Willingness to negotiate prices for important customers.
8. Staff knowledgeable about the product and willing to share this knowledge and give advice to customers.
9. Good reputation with agents, distributors, or other intermediaries.
10. Overall reputation of the company, is the company rated excellent, more than excellent, good, very good, above average or what? Overall rating of the company is very critical.

The literature (Ultimate Resource, 2002) goes on to list. The use of the sales force. If the company has a sales force, the sales force can obtain a lot of competitor information from many different sources. By talking to customers, sales people can find out about competitors' direct sales calls, marketing campaign, special offers, and new developments. They can also obtain similar information from retailers or distributors.

Analysing published information is crucial. Information is relatively available from publication, the press and the internet that can help an organisation to compile intelligence on different aspects of competitors' business, including: main markets, customers, resources and financial performance, product range, new products and plans for growth.

Obtaining competitor literature from corporate brochures and annual reports that are made available. Companies can obtain copies from exhibitions and customers or as downloads from competitor websites. Often by just visiting competitors' offices one can pick up brochures and leaflets.

Monitoring the press by maintaining a file of press cuttings on your competitors' activities, using their trade publications or their own website news pages, as a source, or depending on your budget, a company might consider a press cuttings agency to gather material for it. Smaller companies can give a member of staff, or a sales person, responsibility for gathering and keeping data on a particular competitor.

Analysing industry reports can provide a useful insight into purchasing patterns in different market sectors. One can obtain information on competitors, market share, and industry trends. Checking the internet can provide valuable information on their resources, plans, and capabilities. Visiting exhibitions stands can be valuable sources of information. Most organisations only participate in exhibitions that are important to their current or future business plans. Monitoring competitors' promotional activities. Analysing competitors' promotional activities will help an organisation to respond to their plan. By monitoring their advertising, promotion, exhibition presence, press activities, and internet information, one can assess possible strategies. An organisation can appoint a research company to monitor competitive activity. The research company can also be asked to explore customers' attitudes to competitors. Customers may be more willing to provide this information to an independent organisation.

It is expedient to consider benchmarking by companies in competition. This is going to compare your performance with similar companies. Competently done, it will give one's company a baseline assessment of a company's efficiency and some insight into where competitors may be gaining competitive advantage over you. Overloading the obvious sources

of competitor information, ignoring competitor information, acting on incomplete information and using out-of-date information are mistakes companies must stringently avoid.

SUSTAINING THE COMPETITOR TEMPO AND DOING WELL AT THE SAME TIME

Competition is warfare and how does one cope with the tide of the competition? It is by putting on the swimming suit and properly swimming very well and complying with all the rules of the swimming event. There is an ombudsman watching to find out who breaks and does not break the rules. The rules must be meticulously obeyed to avoid any legal suit. How does one prepare adequately to start with the swimming? It begins with internal home searching and overall 'audit' or bill internal and external situation to ascertain your competitive readiness level and the resources and capacities in place for the competition. It is imperative and mandatory one has all the wherewithal to compete effectively and efficiently. The antecedents to competitive sustenance must be mentioned briefly. In the first place, it concerns every team player and this makes it the collective responsibility of everyone to swim along by firmly supporting all policies, procedures, processes, plans, mileposts, projections, programmes, ploys, put in place by top management to ensure that the company copes with the competitive tempo. This calls for everybody making sure that he does not rock the 'boat'. It is expedient whatever the company does to maintain its customers is assiduously done to prevent any switching by its customers. Customers are to be excessively attended to. At least, if new customers cannot be courted, the customers with the company must not be allowed to leave. Whatever gap exists in the service and the delivery must be firmly closed. There should be no 'leakage' when it comes to service delivery. If complaints come, they must be speedily redressed. The workforce must be made to know what they are to do. Orientation and re-orientation of the workforce is a 'sine qua non' for satisfactory competitiveness. The organisation must by all means subscribe to the tenets of the industry in which it finds itself. The ethic to succeed must occupy the thinking of every workforce. The camaraderie and the spirit de corp of every worker must be pursued. Workers are to be given every encouragement to succeed both in-house and out-house and also given all the zeal to pursue whatever is right in the eyes and mind of their following. Being customer-eccentric is therefore paramount.

It is one thing saying I am competing and it is another competing. Walking the talk is not an easy thing to do but it is incumbent on the part of the organisation to ensure that the necessary resources are garnered to execute the agenda it has set for itself to attain. Periodically monitoring all markets the company does business in is very crucial. Is the market growing or shrinking? Is the company matching players, boot for boot or it is lagging behind? What must be done if it is lagging behind? This will call for marketing reengineering which

warrants and mandates that all team players display commitment and the ethic to be at par with the competition. Tom Peters and Harriman (1995) amply describe how Fortune 500 companies were able to cope with the competition. A lot of things were done by these companies, including sending Xmas cards to every customer and rewarding loyal customers who have been with them for many years.

Auditing and benchmarking competitive performance is necessary. Are you competing such that the marks awarded by independent marketing auditors are excellent or satisfactory. It is expedient an independent marketing consultant does this for objectivity. Competing is an activity, as an activity, there are rules to be complied with and these are executions and implementations and these must be done satisfactorily. (Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons, 1997).

Regularly finding out whether equal attention is given to all your market segments and filling segments with the required product or service. If segments are growing or expanding in size, products or services that fit these segments must be thought of and produced to fill the new 'gap' that has been created. It is ideal you find out what your competitors are doing and compare what they do to yours and find out whether you are up to the standard or below and remedy the situation to avoid being a laggard. Competing with competitors is a serious business and wherever seriousness is demanded, must be provided. Products are the centre piece of every competition. Every attention must be devoted to the product organogram in place and see to the perpetual requirement and improvement of your products. Those that are due to be eliminated and substitutes found to replace them. This means that research and development must be up to their task of searching and developing new products to fill the product/service gap created as a result of developments in the market. Price and pricing cannot be left out. Promotion must also be aggressive. Distribution must be pushed with all zealousness, ensuring that products or services get to every market.

ARE COMPANIES TO ALWAYS RE-STRATEGIZE OR NOT?

Thompson and Strickland (1996) stress the volatile nature of the marketing environment and mention the fact that companies to be in a safe pedestal are to always revise their competitive armada which may either synchronise with the prevailing marketing environment or not. This therefore compels organisation in competition to be very mindful of their competitive strategy or strategies. To strategize or to re-strategize depends essentially on the 'whole marketing environment'. Excellent companies per Jain (2005) who advises that the market is a moving target, never stable and therefore strategists are to be very mindful of that and then programme their marketing and competitive strategies accordingly. A good strategist is the one who is always inspecting to find out how his troops are faring in the competitive warfare and therefore

re-align, re-structure, re-organise or re-programme his 'competitive infrastructure' accordingly. Since the environment has never been stable, it is compulsory marketing strategists change their strategic arsenals accordingly.

THE WAY FORWARD

Companies in business to serve markets must come to the realisation that it pays to strategize. Strategizing to compete is difficult. For strategizing entails doing a lot of internal self-assessment to figure out your competitive standing, pointing out the loopholes in competitive organogram and finding solutions so as to be able to compete very well. Strategizing does not start anyhow. A lot of 'company thinking' gives into it and the message given to every team player to be ready and be prepared to work hard to be able to achieve the target the company has set for itself. Profiling all your competitor and gathering all the intelligence one needs to be able to compete. If a company enters the competition, it is no time to be sleeping, it is time to be wide awake and monitor what your competitors are doing and do same by sustaining the competitive tempo. Competing is a serious business and therefore every reasonable thing that must be done to be able to compete effectively, must be done. Management must set the agenda and the objective and all players advised to collectively play the 'competitive ball' for the organization to achieve what it has set for itself. But there are rules and regulations to be complied with in the course of the competition and there must be no room for complacency.

CONCLUSION

Competing in business as a company to meet the aspirations of buyers and customers is a very serious business and only companies which work to meet the varied expectations of buyers and customers must be in the competitive arena. But it takes two or ore to compete. It takes superior marketing to compete. Those competing try to win the attention of buyers and customers, court them and try to win them for them to become repeat buyers and also tell others to also buy from the company. Companies competing must always up their competitive game to win more buyers. Strategizing to compete is a never. Finished business because of the volatility of the microcosmic and macrocosmic marketing environment. Companies are not to be myopic in their competition. They need excellent marketing infrastructure and technology to remain in the competition and this must be settled before plunging into the competition. It always takes a serious company to enter the competition bandwagon.

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