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MODELING STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR SUSTAINABLE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE IN SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGEMENT

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Abstract. This paper proposes a knowledge-based customer-centric strategic model to respond to environmental challenges and achieve sustainable competitive advantage (SCA) in the supply chain management (SCM) context. The proposed model strives to leverage knowledge-based distinctive core competencies (DCCs) to improve customer satisfaction and achieve SCA. An exploratory research design has been adopted. The study undertook a systematic literature review approach with 36 articles or books published between 1970 and 2020 to construct the strategic planning model. The paper presents an integrated multi-dimensional model for SCM, including value chain activities, competitiveness strategies, business process re-engineering (BPR), and SCA. The practical result of the article is to develop a theoretical strategic planning model for SCM as a holistic framework for using the company's DCCs and creating an SCA in a highly competitive and dynamic business environment. The proposed model comprehensively covers the supply chain (SC)'s competitive advantage strategy. For businesses that tend to adapt and triumph, the proposed model helps reduce order cycle times, reduce inventory levels, increase accuracy and efficiency, reduce costs, and improve customer service and satisfaction.

Keywords: supply chain, strategic planning, sustainable competitive advantage, business process re-engineering, environmental scanning, competitiveness strategies, distinctive core competencies.

JEL Classification: M10, M11, M15.

Introduction

Business firms are witnessing accelerating environmental change and uncertainty rates, shifting towards a reactive mode of change and customization of products or services. In the Industrial Revolution era, 4IR, or Industry 4.0, business firms faced more competitive environments, advanced information and communication technologies (ICTs), and customer preferences (Bai et al., 2020). The external business value chain (VC) represents a process-based network or activities that add value to customers and partners. The undertaking of an integrative strategic supply chain management (SCM) model requires a complete transformation from a product-centered and hierarchical to a customer-centric and networked organization.

Today's supply chains (SCs) exist and operate in environments full of turbulence and uncertainties. They must adapt to changing settings by strategically developing long-term scenario plans and innovations to position themselves in the marketplace. The unprecedented SC shocks made resilience, risk, and sustainability more essential than ever. Disrupting the SC is costly and can adversely impact enterprises and business networks. The present-day's need for business competitiveness and operational efficiency has made SCM more complex and uncertain. SCs must be prepared to respond creatively and competitively to marketplace dynamics through strategic planning that leads to business actions and the development of an advantage (Swift, 2001).

Strategic positioning is about matching a firm's situation to exploit core competencies to create SCA, such as quick response time, low cost, quality design, or operational flexibility. Strategic planning involves systematically examining opportunities to be used and the dangers to avoid (Johnson et al., 2005). The development of a strategic plan is based on the mission and requires policies, programs, activities, processes, and resources to conduct strategies. SCs respond to environmental changes through activities that seek to diffuse existing pressures, create new opportunities, and exploit existing DCCs, e.g., assets,

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attributes, or abilities that are difficult to duplicate or exceed; and provide a superior or favorable long-term position over competitors.

The literature review showed a lack of a comprehensive conceptual model for SCA in the SCM context. The search results indicated that SCA models in SCM are still in their early stages of research and development, even though the concept is widely recognized and discussed among academics and practitioners. The basic notion of the paper holds that SCs respond to environmental changes through organizational activities that seek to diffuse existing pressures, create new opportunities, and exploit existing DCCs. The undertaking of an integrative SCM requires a complete transformation from product-centered and hierarchical to customer-centric and networked SC organizations. The article is devoted to studying the problems of obtaining an SCA in SCM, which arise in an enterprise functioning and responding to environmental issues.

This article aims to study the problems of obtaining an SCA in SCM, which arise in an enterprise functioning and responding to environmental issues. In particular, it seeks to create a multi-dimensional environmental scanning change model, reconcile business value competitiveness strategies, and develop a multi-dimensional SCA model to leverage knowledge-based customer-centric distinctive core competencies (DCCs) in the SCM context. The study integrates scattered findings into a one-total multi-dimensional strategic planning model for SCA in SCM to face highly competitive and dynamic business environments. The SCA model is rooted in various works of literature (strategic planning, RBV, KBV, BPR, SCM, VC, and SCA) that have been integrated into a unified model to tell a coherent story and advance the cause of the system thinking.

The paper introduces the high-level strategic planning model for SCA in the SCM context as a systematic change approach that seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How to develop an environmental scanning change model?
2. How to reconcile business value competitiveness strategies?
3. How to create a strategic planning model for SCA to leverage DCCs in SCM?

The paper is divided into six sections. Following the introduction, the article reviews relevant theoretical perspectives and presents the research methodology. Next, the study provides the research results and conclusions.

1. Theoretical framework

1.1. Sustainable competitive advantage

Kotler (2000) defined competitive advantage as the organization's capability to carry out its activity in a way or in different ways that others cannot imitate. By having its competitive advantage, the firm builds its base for a strategy that creates a competitive advantage. According to Papula and Volná (2013), the competitive advantage lies in the resources and capabilities that produce products or services. A firm has an SCA when it performs better than its rivals (Koçoğlu et al., 2009). Firms can achieve competitive advantage through cost leadership or differentiation (Porter, 1980).

Papula and Volná (2013) argued that sources of competitive advantage depend on the organization's internal resources or tangible or intangible assets. Tangible assets comprise financial, physical, and technological resources, while intangible assets are human, innovation, creativity, and reputation. They also emphasized that the source of competitive advantage is an intangible asset comprising human capital, structural capital, relational capital, and customer capital.

An SCA is a difficult-to-imitate feature to maintain its dominance and remain ahead of its competitors over the years. Unlike short-term advantages, such as being the first to market a new type of product, the development of such an advantage often is based on dedicated effort and the ability to innovate (Huang et al., 2015) consistently. How the business treats the customer may help create an SCA that widens customer loyalty and creates profitable consumer relationships. Firms with a stronger market position can only attain a better outcome of temporary competitive advantage. In contrast, firms possessing a superior position in technological resources or capabilities can achieve a better result of SCA. A firm that manages to be different from its competitors and remain outstanding to its consumers would gain SCA (González-Loureiro & Figueroa Dorrego, 2012; Khan, 2014).

1.2. Strategic thinking

The fundamental problem is determining which resources, competencies, or core competencies SCA may originate. Strategic thinking involves three dimensions time sets, substance between the concrete and the abstract, and concurrence of one or more issues. Strategic thinking is needed when faced with hyper-competitive business environments. A strategist thinker may adopt multiple-dimensional dynamic thinking about various topics at higher levels of abstraction and detail over time (Boar, 1994). SCA is born and nourished from strategic thinking that involves profound and far-reaching insights about problems in novel, unanticipated, and creative ways (Swift, 2001).

1.3. Strategic planning

Strategic planning tools, e.g., Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis, are considered crucial to successfully analyzing the DCCs of SC (Andrews, 1971). The study of strengths and weaknesses analyzes the internal environment (i.e., structure, culture, resources, and competencies in marketing, finance, research and development, operations, human resources, and ICTs).

The SWOT analysis identifies strategic options for organizations to meet objectives and maintain sustainable growth. SWOT analysis helps match organizational resources, capabilities, and DCCs to their competitive environment. The SWOT analysis can incorporate additional factors such as performance against competitors, the importance of competitive factors for customers, and probabilities of conditions (Slack et al., 2006). The external audit of opportunities and threats (OT) analyzes macro-environment opportunities and threats (i.e., socio-economical, technological, and market environment). In looking at strengths or weaknesses, one should evaluate their strengths relative to competitors and face any unpleasant truths regarding their flaws.

1.4. Competitiveness strategies

An SCM strategy must integrate many interrelated SC organizational components, viz. design, people, structure, processes, and technology, and be in alignment or dynamic "equilibrium" with each other Scott-Morton and Allen (1994). A successful SCM strategy offers a unified approach with a balanced emphasis on business and network perspectives. When SCs are transformed into customer-oriented, their legacy pyramid and rigid functional structures need to be given up and adopt a process-centered system. As people, design, processes, and technology dynamically interact with SC strategy and strategy interacts externally with the environment, the challenge is to have more internal and external congruency through innovative and ongoing organizational learning and adjustment activities. Porter (1980) argues that competitors in an industry are based on five forces: intra-industry rivalry, buyers' bargaining power, suppliers' bargaining power, the threat of new entrants, and substitute products or services. Although market requirements are essential, they are usually short-lived and of different importance for customers and performance against competitors.

The RBV of the firm considers the internal capabilities of organizational resources such as people, capital, facilities, and technology as a principal source of creating and sustaining a competitive market position. According to this approach, capabilities are the key source of competitive advantage (Grant, 1991). The organizational capabilities represent a continuum alongside usage level (operational, tactical, and strategic) and expected value. Core competencies commonly represent the organization's VC and relate directly to the value added to external customers and business firms. Core competencies evolve slowly through collective learning and information sharing. They are required to carry out a mission-critical business of the organization (Dalkir, 2005). DCCs represent unique and essential core competencies that enable organizations to understand their customers and deliver value-adding products or services. DCCs allow the creation of an SCA that makes firms better than their rivals and help them win in the marketplace.

The traditional view of strategy sees firms seeking to create or protect their competitive position through external factors such as market control by creating barriers or constraints. By contrast, the resource-based view (RBV) sees companies watching their long-term competitive advantage by developing new capabilities representing imitation, substitution, or transfer barriers. Barriers to automation are created using scarce, imperfectly mobile, imperfectly imitable, or substitutable resources (Slack et al., 2006).

Knowledge-based relationships are becoming a strategic imperative in every industry (Park & Kim, 2003). The salient feature of knowledge assets is that their competitive advantage is inimitable. Several streams of research converged to produce a new theory of the firm, viz., the firm's knowledge-based view (KBV). These streams include the RBV of the firm, epistemology, and organizational learning (Grant, 2002). Today's world economy has shifted its focus from tangible to intellectual resources. Although some academic resources are more visible than others, i.e., patents, intellectual property, etc., most consist of employees' know-how, know-why, experience, and expertise (Stewart, 1997; Klein, 1998). In the KBV of a firm, competitive advantage or positioning is created through knowledge-intensive competencies that maximize value-adding offerings to customers.

SCs need to select the competitive focus of their bases of competition. Examples are product/service and leadership, operational excellence, customer relationships, products, or services, e.g., standardized, customized, or mature/innovative, and the type of knowledge used, i.e., explicit or implicit knowledge. For instance, in facing shrinking business cycles, SCs seek to create and exploit people, processes, and technology-based learning faster and better and maximize their profitability by having product leadership through a shorter time to market and, if possible, a longer product life cycle. Therefore, the product development cycle must shrink by delivering changeable knowledge-based capabilities and features.

2. Methodology

This paper adopts an exploratory research design and uses a descriptive research method to review the relevant scholarly literature. Exploratory research is conducted when a researcher intends to explore something new or clarify ambiguous problems in a specific situation, and a particular issue of interest has not been clearly defined (Hair et al., 2019).

The paper has systematically analyzed thirty-six articles and books published between 1970 and 2020 in Scopus, Web of Science, and other renowned databases using the abovementioned keywords. An exploratory research design has been adopted. The analysis involved identifying, screening, selecting scientific literature, and conducting thematic research to develop an initial theoretical model.

3. Results

3.1. Developing an environmental change scanning model

An environmental scanning model has been created as a first step towards developing the SCA strategic planning for SCM. The model involves a three-dimensional dynamic and creative macro-level analysis of opportunities and threats in business environments. The model includes the following components (Figure 1):

Dynamism (static versus dynamic): This refers to the fact that environmental conditions are vibrant and are subject to constant changes at different degrees of pace, volume, and intensity.

Diversity (similar versus diversified) refers to multiple diverse or identical factors that exist in the environment and challenge business firms to respond.

Differentiation (old versus new): relates to the evolving and renewable nature of diverse and dynamic environmental conditions. For instance, new socio-economic or technological conditions could emerge while old ones are subject to decline or even demise.

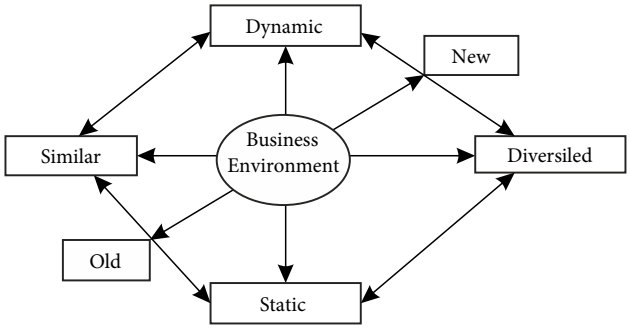

Figure 1. A 3D environmental scanning change model

3.2. Reconciling business value competitiveness strategies

The business competitiveness views represent two sides of a strategic equation that must be reconciled. The MBV is an externally focused (outside-in) approach to competitiveness, whereas the RBV is an internally focused (inside-out) approach (Aragon-Correa & Sharma, 2003; Greasley, 2006). Competitive strategies must continue to develop internal capabilities that allow SCs to create unique value for customers through their VC activities.

Kim and Mauborgne (2004) consider market-based competition a second-best, zero-sum strategy because it does not create sustainable long-term wealth. On the other hand, a knowledge-based value-innovation strategy is a first-best strategy that stimulates demand by expanding existing markets and creating new ones. Value-innovation approach is based on knowledge-rich infinite intangible resources, i.e., knowledge, learning, and skills, rather than finite resources such as physical and financial assets. The key to innovation will be a new style of leadership, cross-functional teams, and empowerment of employees, all leading to customized products (Boyett & Boyett, 1995).

The ability to reconcile dichotomy among different views of competitiveness helps SCs leverage all means to achieve an SCA. SCs try to create SCA in dynamic and turbulent environments by creating knowledge-based value-adding customer relationships. Many are migrating towards knowledge-intensive, customer-focused, competitive SCs. Knowledge-based SWOT analysis (K-SWOT) of external environmental conditions and internal strengths and opportunities (Zack, 2002) should be necessary for building a knowledge-based strategy. Instead of basing competition on traditional factors, such as price or location, firms may start with general knowledge domains for competitive positioning.

The delineation of a competitive priority is not always an "either-or" decision. An SC organization operating in dynamic, complex, and fast-changing environments needs to take a balanced focus on its competitiveness bases to avoid failure in its pursuit of SCA. Based on strategic analysis and positioning decisions, companies may develop a particular ground for competitiveness (core base) but other supporting bases. For example, one company can simultaneously emphasize cost, time, and volume flexibility in formulating its strategy or quality and design flexibility. Table 1 demonstrates a business value competitiveness matrix for SCM.

Table 1. Business value competitiveness strategies matrix

	Structure	Technology	Processes	People
Customer				
Cost				
Product				
Environment				
Driver				
Enabler				
Time Horizon				
Risk				
Deliverable				
Critical Success Factors (CSFs)				
Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)				

3.3. Creating a strategic planning model for SCA in SCM

Strategic planning aims to identify what SCs can do best and choose between competing priorities. Strategic planning commonly ends with developing a set of performance targets and measures of success, i.e., key performance indicators (KPIs) and critical success factors (CSFs), tracking and learning from progress in performance, and striving for a significant improvement in outcomes. Figure 2 depicts a proposed strategic planning model for SCA in SCM.

A compelling SC for competing in a particular industry is embedded in a more significant stream of

knowledge-based market activities, the external VC that includes suppliers and distribution channels. Achieving SCA requires that SC synergies be leveraged as a system rather than as a collection of separate parts. SCM seeks to improve value-added inter-organizational processes of manufacturing and service enterprises. Companies traditionally use ERP systems to support the management of an enterprise. However, major ERP companies offer SCM solutions as a significant extended feature of their ERP packages.

Electronic value-added SC may be achieved when customers and suppliers successfully link to the business' external VC system. SCM is based on connected, planned-source-make-deliver-and-return processes (Fawcett et al., 2007) that promote inter-and intra-enterprise integration and collaboration, including business partners and end customers. SCM systems seek to improve the visibility of what is happening upstream and downstream through process automation and collaboration between trading partners.

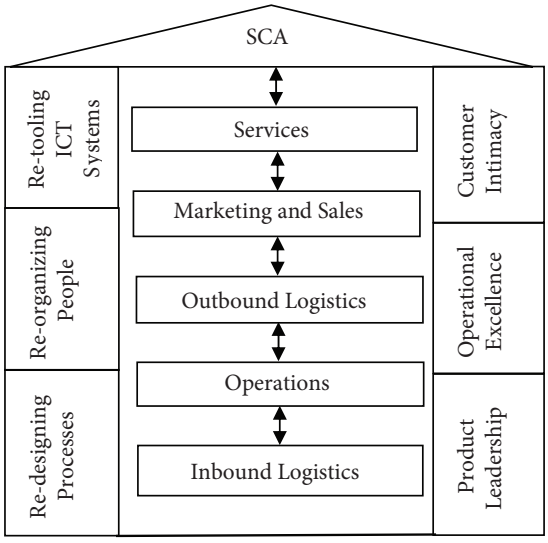

Figure 2. A strategic planning model for SCA in SCM

SCM helps organizations know where they can add value to their customers or suppliers. The e-SCM integrates front-office with back-office transactions and improves the efficiency of processing purchase orders by cutting down on product/process cycle time and enabling retailers to check on an available sock before placing orders. The e-SCM also gives manufacturers a competitive advantage as customers are electronically linked to the order entry system and find it easier to place orders through the networked system of the specific manufacturer than with others.

SCM could be compared to a well-balanced and well-practiced relay race team. Optimizing the performance of individual links within an SC is of limited value if these links have little or no visibility or integration with what is happening upstream and downstream, as the strength of the SC is judged by its weakest link. Therefore, information and ICT systems are essential for decision-makers to respond to unexpected deviations and secure higher organizational performance (Cooper & Ellram, 1993; Gravier & Farris, 2008; Adida & Deminguel, 2011).

The SCM strategic planning model seeks to bring organizations together and produce synergies and shared values over their capacity. The strategy, once applied to an SC, can be operationalized as follows (Al-Shammari, 2008, 2009)

- Formulate a customer-centric SC strategy.
- Adopt a knowledge-intensive process-based inter-organizational orientation.
- SC networked structure development.
- Networked ICT infrastructure development to enable reconfiguration of knowledge-based customer-centric SC processes.
- Create a knowledge-sharing spirit across the SC network.

4. Discussion

SCM is a systemic approach to managing the flow of information, materials, money, and services from upstream suppliers through internal transformations of factories/service providers and downstream intermediaries to the end customer. Traditionally, marketing, distribution, planning, manufacturing, and purchasing organizations along the SC operated independently, and as a result, no single integrated plan exists for the organization. A knowledge-based customer-centric SCM strategy model provides the company with SCA, such as quick response time, low cost, quality design, or operational flexibility.

Porter was the pioneer that introduced the VC concept that includes core and support business activities. The VC consists of primary activities: inbound logistics, operations, outbound logistics, marketing and sales, and service. The VC activities allow a firm to create value exceeding the cost of providing its goods or services to customers. Maximizing any of the five primary activities gives a company a competitive advantage over competitors in its industry. The VC also requires these support activities to streamline the five primary activities: infrastructure, human resources management, technology development, and procurement (Porter, 1985).

Creative and dynamic strategic planning requires a continuous, responsive, and intuitive learning process that articulates the vision and devises solutions to adapt to changing business requirements resulting from highly turbulent, uncertain, and competitive future environments. Creativity in strategic planning requires offering new products and services and learning how, when, and for whom to create new customer value-adding offerings. Such learning comes by integrating soft insights and experiences of people and complex data from the environment. It then synthesizes that learning experience into a creative vision of the firm. Furthermore, flexibility, responsiveness, and dynamism in central organizational pillars of people, processes, structure, and technology are needed to meet discontinuous environmental changes.

SCs may identify competitive knowledge positioning in line with the three "Value Discipline Triad" strategic models that Treacy and Wiersema (1993) proposed. Product differentiation or innovation is based on product/technology knowledge (an internal RBV of competition) and operational excellence (an internal RBV of competition). SC is becoming based on operations knowledge, and the level of trust and intimacy in customer relationships (external MBV of competitiveness) is evolving based on customer/market knowledge (Zack, 2002).

Contemporary SCs are experiencing growing dynamics that cause significant changes that they cannot meet with traditional competitive strategies. In the face of increased competition and rapidly changing environmental conditions, it isn't easy to effectively manage an enterprise or an SC. Price or product, for example, has traditionally been a base of competition for businesses. Still, today's business environment has shifted towards a customer-centric knowledge-based approach. The traditional market-based view of SC's competitive strategy is based on the external business environment and the threats of competition. Resource-based models of the firm would argue that a firm could only achieve an SCA when its resources are rare and inimitable. In the knowledge-based view of a firm, an SCA or positioning is created through knowledge-intensive competencies that maximize value-adding offerings to customers.

Conclusions

The long purpose of designing a knowledge-based SCM strategic model is to nurture a long-lasting SCA for the SC network members. The ability of SCs to successfully compete in dynamic business environments relates to their capacity to leverage DCCs that cannot be easily emulated, e.g., customer, supplier, process, or product knowledge. Dynamic and complex SC environments have forced companies to create DCCs that secure SCA, i.e., enduring relationships with customers or suppliers to maximize profitability.

This exploratory research introduced a holistic strategic planning model for SCM to leverage the firm's DCCs and create SCA. The proposed model provides comprehensive coverage of the SC strategy. Adoption of SC strategic change demands changes in processes and the social, structural, and technical elements. Therefore, SC networks that want to create and sustain success in the 21st century must act in a way that continues to provide value for customers and profit to themselves through DCCs, i.e., the knowledge that is inimitable, non-transferable, and immobile. SCs may need to shift their orientation from internal focus (products) to external focus (customers), from conventional to creative, strategic planning, technology to "tech-knowledge" emphasis, and from single to dual control company-customer relationships.

In facing shrinking business cycles, SCs could apply the proposed model to achieve SCA by leveraging knowledge-based DCCs faster and better to maximize their profitability. The practical result of the article is to develop a theoretical strategic planning model for SCM as a holistic framework for using the company's DCC and creating an SCA in a highly competitive and dynamic business environment. The proposed model provides comprehensive coverage of SC's competitive advantage strategy. For businesses that tend to adapt and triumph, the proposed model helps reduce order cycle times, reduce inventory levels, increase accuracy and efficiency, reduce costs, and improve customer service and satisfaction.

The study integrates scattered empirical findings into a one-total multi-dimensional strategic model for SCM to face highly competitive and dynamic business environments and achieve SCA. The developed model sets the ground for scholars to conduct empirical studies within multiple dimensions and across interrelationships among the parameters of the proposed model. For SCs that tend to be adaptive and triumphant, the proposed model helps to SCs reduce order cycle times, lower inventory levels, improve accuracy and efficiency, lower costs, and improve customer service and satisfaction.

The proposed SCM strategy model has not developed nor validated any scales for its variables. The undertaking of an integrative SCM requires an empirical study of the shift from hierarchical and product-centered to customer-centric and networked SCs. The developed model sets the ground for scholars to conduct empirical studies within multiple dimensions and across interrelationships among the parameters of the proposed model. Hence, practical tests need to be undertaken to validate the constructs of the model and their interrelations and credibly test the theory in practice. Areas of future work include validating the existing industry practices using case studies or cross-sectional surveys of SCs.

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