DIRECT MARKETING PRODUCT-MARKET STRATEGIES

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Abstract: The article points out the characteristics of planning, options choices and strategies in the area of direct marketing. Thus, it is the marketing plan that sets the tasks and defines the scope of direct marketing. The extent to which direct marketing is affected by a firm's strategic decisions, and in turn affects them, is linked to its importance in the marketing mix. Operational alternatives can be mapped by the conventional product-market matrix. Once a combination is selected, the firm is still left with the question of how to achieve the objective of the strategy; a strategy can fall into three broad groups: undifferentiated, focus, and differentiated. All the producers strive to have customers perceive that their outputs are unique, different, and preferable to competitive products.

Introduction

Formal planning, resulting in a written document, pervades almost every phase of corporate life. Much has been written about it, pro and con. The disagreements, however, concern the degree of planning, not the act of planning itself. Not every company needs formal plans. An individual proprietor can easily keep track of plans and cost figures on separate scraps of paper. Similarly, small companies run by a few individuals can be successful without committing all anticipated action to a formal document. But in large companies, where individuals from different parts of a company are involved in a program, coordination usually requires some sort of written plan.

All plans are futuristic insofar as they expect certain results to ensue from action yet to be undertaken. All plans provide for the use of resources. The principal ones are people, skills, physical assets, and finances. But plans differ markedly from each other with respect to time span, type of action, and the volume of resources effected. These characteristics depend primarily upon where in the corporation the plans are formulated. At one end of the planning spectrum sits the chief executive officer, whose time horizons are long and whose responsibilities encompass all corporate resources. At the other end works the plan foreman, worried about today's outputs and in charge of very limited resources allocated to that particular area.

Where does direct marketing fir? It can be assigned to all three levels of a firm's structure – at corporate level, and at or below the divisional level. At the corporate level, direct marketing might be used as an instrument of public relations. Annual reports and financial literature are occasionally offered to stockholders and members of the financial community through advertisements in magazines and newspapers. Public relations departments also proffer brochures, pamphlets, and special reports dealing with some issue of interest to the corporation. But for the most part, direct marketing is many times removed from the rarified atmosphere of corporate headquarters.

Direct marketing is usually concerned with soliciting response to product offers, made singly or in a group. Even when the primary selling activity of a company is direct marketing, the function is carried out at the operational level, usually within the marketing department. Direct marketing plans are thus subsumed in the broader context

of planning for a product line. In short, it is the marketing plan that sets the tasks and defines the scope of direct marketing [Drayton, 2007].

No matter at what level planning takes place - corporate, divisional, operational - plans can be strategic or tactical. Strategy at the corporate level dictates action at the operational levels. The long-range plan at the corporate level must have short-range achievements. Direct marketing is basically short term and operational. The extent to which direct marketing is affected by a firm's strategic decisions, and affects them, is linked to its importance in the marketing mix. When that is small, so are effects. When direct marketing assumes a large role in a product's flow, the opposite is true.

This proposition is aptly illustrated by the experience of Shopsmith, a home tool manufacturer in Dayton, Ohio. The firm has developed a line of bench top tools, which is begun marketing as a home workshop system through dealers. When this traditional distribution channel failed to move the product, Shopsmith struck out in a new direction. It set up temporary exhibits in shopping malls, to which it drew audiences by direct marketing. Finding the exhibits profitable, Shopsmith began locating them at permanent sites. These stores were supported by a two-step direct marketing program. The first aimed at generating inquiries. The second sought a direct response, with ordering available through mail or from the store. At the beginning there were only three stores were in operation, but the company had already made plans for 90 stores within 3-5 years. The strategy was a change in the distribution system from dealers to exhibits to stores. Direct marketing was a tactic; it was a means of implementing the strategy. But it was also obvious that as investments in retail outlets materialize, direct marketing operations will grow apace. Conversely, a successful direct marketing operation will hasten the increase in the number of stores [Stone, M., 2006].

The relationship between strategy and tactics was similarly illustrated when Sears broadened its assortments. The retail chain began offering in one location a combination of insurance, brokerage, and real estate services, and in some states, banking. Some is done through mail order. If the tactical, day-to-day operations bring a satisfactory response, the program of melding retailing with financial services will roll out to other states. And the expansion of financial services in Sears' stores, in turn, will apparently increase the chain's direct marketing operations [Stone, B., 2004].

The choice of a firm's strategy is determined by how its top executives perceive the market structure in relation to the company's strengths and weaknesses. This process entails analysis of internal resources and environmental variables, so that opportunities can be exploited by matching the two. This capability-opportunity matchmaking goes hand in hand with asset deployment, or sources and applications of funds. To take advantage of an opportunity requires money. Viewed from this perspective, direct marketing can become deeply involved in strategic planning only when it is pivotal to an entire business.

An example of this sort is supplied by Hanover House, which is composed of 12 catalog divisions, each appealing to a different marketing target. In reality, this company may be thought of as running 12 different businesses, with each competing for resources. This is called a portfolio concept. Senior management decides which businesses have good potentials for growth and which have restricted opportunities. Funds are then allocated accordingly. These decisions invariably determine how the company runs its business, and even what businesses it will be in [Nash, 2000].

For the most part, strategies of functional units are concerned with more limited goals. Decisions of these functional units are related to such issues as copy content of a

promotion, media selection, and determination of the product mix. Direct marketing is no exception. It is usually run as a functional operation. Its strategies pertain to action programs which, at best, support higher level decisions.

A. Product-market options

Strategies at the operational level concern themselves with two issues: products and markets; they are as inseparable as Siamese twins. In a market economy sellers can only propose; buyers dispose. Products are corporate outputs. They are entirely controlled by sellers who, attempt to match them to market demand. This does not imply that sellers are passive instruments reacting to market demand; they actively try to influence that demand. But the final decision to buy is not theirs; they must operate in an environment swept by hostile winds of uncertainty.

Though substantial variations exist in both products and markets, operational alternatives can be mapped by the product-market matrix. It is a two-dimensional model, with a product or a product line on one axis and markets on the other. At any time, a company can offer a set of existing products or new ones. It can also propose these offerings to existing markets or to new ones. When these two product options are combined with the two market options, the result is the two-by-two matrix (Figure 1).

	Existing Products	*New Products*
Existing Markets	1	3
New Markets	2	4

Fig. 1: Product-Market Options

The matrix in Figure 1 implies that, given a product, defined by the column, there are two marketing alternatives. The firm can pursue sales among its existing markets or seek opportunities among new groups of potential customers. Given a marketing goal, designated by the row, there are two general types of product options. The firm can offer the same products or new ones. The analysis is to adjust from the general to the specific applying to direct marketing.

A.1. Product Sameness

When a product or product line remains essentially the same, the continuation of business hinges on market development. This activity can concentrate on a firm's traditional markets, or try to enter new ones. The first situation is the more common and is exemplified by such continuous direct marketing programs as insurance, magazines, and catalogs. They aim in two directions: a higher per capita usage and a greater penetration of the existing market. The two approaches are not mutually exclusive and can be pursued simultaneously.

There are many ways of inducing a higher volume per customer. A popular method is to give discounts for ordering more units of a product. A version of this method is to give premiums or gifts at certain dollar volume breaks. For example, garden catalogs sometimes offer free plants for larger order quantities. Another approach is to get customers to order more frequently. Some marketers will send out another catalog soon after the first mailing. The second will contain the same products as the first, but may have a different cover so as to appear different. Hanover House Industries, Inc. does this with its Adam York catalog, once a month for three months. In many instances, however, this is difficult when the product is unchanged [Hatch, 2007].

Similar to a continuity program are insurance policies, the premiums of which must be paid periodically. A company that pays attention to customer service has many

opportunities for increasing customer coverage. Calling attention to rising home values performs a valuable service to policyholders who do not want to be underinsured. Keeping customers informed about trends in awards for auto accident cases permits them to judge whether they are carrying enough protection and raises the premiums at the same time. These methods are similar to retail techniques of "trading up" [Hatch, 2007].

Markets can also decline, and a program to hang on to customers in a declining industry is a survival strategy. As the customer base shrinks, it supports fewer and fewer firms producing the same product. The ability to survive sometimes edges a firm into a market niche neglected by others. But more often than not a holding action in a dying market is only a prelude for eventual retreat.

Pushing into new markets with an existing product is not the ordinary, run-of-the-mill activity. However, some products can be marketed to various groups of potential customers, and in those situations efforts are intensified for searching and developing markets. For example, many life insurance companies have found new markets in "affinity groups", such as clubs, associations, union members, government employees, teachers, professionals, non-smokers, etc. Airlines and travel agents have also scanned varied markets for possibilities of ongoing tours or of trips to certain destinations.

A.2. New Products

A new product in the context of marketing usually means an output new to the company. It need not be, and most frequently is not, new to the market. In this sense, product modifications and line extensions are considered as new products. The firm had no such output previously. It is therefore hardly surprising that most products are destined for existing markets. In this option, product development becomes the critical element in the desire to grow. Since growth cannot be sustained indefinitely by marketing alone, variety often becomes necessary.

Cost of product revisions and line extensions are usually modest. They are thus often substituted for increases in promotional budgets. A good example of different products going to the same market is the solo promotion directed to a firm’s in-house list. Offering the same product to the same customers time and again would quickly diminish the response level. If the new offering maintains the old level of appeal, promotional costs are held down and contributions to profit are satisfactory. Magazines sell books, records, off prints, and various other items to subscribers.

Another form of new products going to the same customers is a hallmark of book and record clubs. Each succeeding book or record is different from the preceding one, and can be looked upon as a series of line extensions being put out at regular, periodic intervals. Members must constantly be asked whether they wish to receive the upcoming selection, an alternative choice, or none at all. Failure to respond automatically triggers a mailing of the "recommended shipment". Good selection of the merchandise here becomes vital. It has the effect of increasing the number of buying occasions and hence the purchase volume per customer.

These book and record clubs market to the same customers’ new but related products. A variation of the new product-existing customer mode is when a firm attempts to market unrelated products. *National Geographic Magazine* offers its subscribers atlases, records, maps, children’s books. Similarly, *Rider’s Digest* does a profitable record business with people whose names reside in its magazine database. Oil companies have sold apparel, leather goods, and bric-a-brac to their credit card holders, while banks have inundated their depositors with a steady stream of innovative services. When new products lead companies into new markets, the result is diversification.

A.3. New Businesses

There are many reasons why a company should want to diversify, some of which are offensive, some defensive. In the first instance, the firm encounters more opportunities because it operates in more varied situations, and is permitted a more efficient use of financial resources. Funds can be transferred from areas of low opportunity to those of high opportunity. In the second instance, the firm seeks to protect against future adversity or to change present conditions that are unfavorable.

Diversification can move in three directions: horizontally, vertically, or toward a conglomerate form. Horizontally directed diversification refers to expansions in lines highly similar to those in which the company operates. The vertical type entails operating at different levels of production in related industries. Direct marketing is usually associated with forward vertical integration-moving toward the market-rather than backward integration toward raw material. A Sears Roebuck catalog containing products manufactured under the company's label or brand name illustrates vertical integration. The conglomerate form emerges when the new business has nothing in common with any other operating unit of a company, with the possible exception of central financial control.

While diversification implies a new business, the concept of a business is somewhat elastic. For example, Hanover House has added catalogs that feature different products for different, but similar, markets. It might then be said that the company has embarked on a program of horizontal diversification. But Hanover House itself is a division of Horn and Hardart, which regards Hanover as a single business. Then how can the different catalog operations be called separate businesses at the same time? It is a matter of scope, or how large an operation must be to be called a business. A large company at its upper echelons deals with divisions, which are sizeable, self-sustained units. For the CEO to become intricately concerned with the many small parts of each division would be a humanly impossible task. So strategic planning at the corporate level is built around the concept of a strategic business unit, comprised of one or more divisions. At the divisional level, however, strategic planning must deal with its basic parts. Thus, if each catalog, operation of Hanover House is treated as a profit center, a self-contained unit with identified revenue, costs, and assets utilized, they are indeed separate businesses.

B. Operational strategies

The various combinations of products and markets offer firms a range of alternatives. Once a combination is selected, the firm is still left with the question of how to achieve an objective. This is strategy, and on an operational level, there are several ways to classify these choices. A popular method is to regard these choices as falling into three broad groups: undifferentiated, focus, and differentiated [Katzenstein, 1986].

B.1. Undifferentiated Strategy

Undifferentiated marketing is a volume-seeking strategy. Since it defines market boundaries in the broadest of terms, its market scope is wide. But its product scope is narrow, since it proposes to penetrate that market with a single product or a product line having few variations. Product standardization and volume production give practitioners lower costs, which are then passed on to customers. In turn, the lower prices help expand sales, which further reduces costs. The limits to this cost-price cycle are reached when the market approaches saturation or equilibrium. To take advantage of mass production, markets must be stable at relatively high levels or be virtually ensured

of a steady, unfaltering growth. Under these conditions, the successful firm will enjoy higher margins through efficiency. The cost reduction is brought about in two ways: through learning, and through economies of scales.

The first effect is the result of repetitive behavior. People learn to do things better or faster when tasks are repeated. This tendency became dramatically evident in aircraft production during World War II. Every time accumulated production doubled, costs declined by a fixed percentage. The Boston Consulting Group expanded the study of cost relationships to functions other than those of labor and productive inputs. The results of these studies were later generalized by the concept called the experience curve. This doctrine insists that costs of value added, as measured in constant dollars, usually decline 20 to 30 percent every time physical output doubles.

The experience curve includes not only the effects of learning, but of economies of scale. In reality, both variables are difficult to separate. Economies of scale suggest that lower costs are occasioned by the enlarged size of an operation. Certain economies might be achieved in variable costs such as purchasing in larger quantities. Other explanations see fixed costs spread over a larger number of units. These may apply to both production and other functions, such as distribution, investment in fixed facilities, and administration.

Why, for example, are people willing to wait and get their best sellers when they appear as the selection of the Book-of-the Month Club? An obvious explanation is lower price. Because of volume sales, the Book-of-the-Month Club can negotiate with publishers for printing rights, including plates. This obvious the necessity of duplicating composition costs. Publishing under its own imprimatur, the Club can choose from options in printing and materials to satisfy demand of its bargain-hunting customers. With less variation in its demand, distribution costs are lower than in traditional publishers' channels [Stone, M., 2006].

It thus seems that economies of scale are mainly associated, not with bigger clones of smaller units, but with shifts in factor proportions. Specifically, volume increases find economies arising from more specialized functions of production, distribution, and management. Firms that mass produce goods are practically forced to adopt more specialized equipment with successively higher levels of scale. *The Reader's Digest*, with a circulation of more million copies per issue, must use high speed printing which is wholly unsuited to small production runs.

The pursuit of profit through greater volume works best when the product is volume-sensitive. The characteristics of such products are as follows: period expenses are high in relation to sales; direct variable costs are low in relation to sales; operations yield a high profit-to-volume ratio; the product has a high value-added component.

Volume leaders, like the ancient dinosaurs, fear no predator. Given a level of quality, no competitor can make the same product cheaper. Rather, their greatest danger is inherent in their own inflexibility, which makes them vulnerable to changes in the marketing environment. They cannot readily adjust to product diversity and customization. Assets may become obsolete before they are entirely amortized, and undifferentiated marketing is threatened with extinction.

B.2. Focus Strategy

By turning its energies toward a narrow market, the focus strategy gains two possible advantages. It may take the firm into a less competitive environment or it may permit a better fit of the firm's capabilities to a particular environment. The latter results in a better match of product and market.

Competition may be lessened because a small market niche may yield such a meager return that large producers would not deem it worthwhile to expend their efforts. This is all the more compelling if demand in that segment deviates in some way from that of the general market. This implies a special effort and loss of efficiency. If customers are more satisfied, however, there is a gain in effectiveness.

But the degree of competition also depends upon the size of the segment and the number of firms operating in it. For example, large companies avoid certain areas if they are served by many small firms resorting to cutthroat pricing. Focusing on such a segment may be worse than operating under the umbrella of a benign oligopoly dedicated to the civilized attitude of live and let live. Even a little discounting now and then would probably bring less retribution from big brother than it would from a host of small firms groveling for the last dollar. The ideal segment is one in which customers place the highest value on product benefits other than price. These may include level of service, quality, and product attributes and features.

Nevertheless, focus is a relative concept. For example, *Sports Illustrated* is classified as a major source of magazine information, as a newsweekly. The news reported by *Sports Illustrated* relates wholly to sporting events. In relation to the other newsweeklies, *Sports Illustrated* can then be thought of as employing a focus strategy.

But there are publications dealing with sports that are more narrowly specialized. *Golf Digest*, for example, caters only to golf enthusiasts; its average circulation is three times lower than *Sports Illustrated.* Ski and Tennis, also concentrate on single sports, with circulations averaging five, respective six lower. From the perspective of these magazines, *Sports Illustrated* is undifferentiated – offering one publication to many different sports segments – while they are decidedly specialized [Nash, 2000].

A focus approach is a low volume strategy. But this does not preclude efficiency, if the firm's capabilities are adroitly fitted to the particular market segment. It is not at all uncommon for a local company to supply its surrounding geographic area at lower prices than larger, supposedly more efficient producers operating at a distance. Low costs can also be achieved by concentrating on a narrow line of specialized products. But by and large, the key to a focus strategy is effectiveness rather than efficiency. The segment, probably because the product is customized, prefers the specialty item over products developed for the mainstream of a market, even though prices may be higher.

Firms gravitating towards a particular market niche usually find their profits insensitive to volume. Their products will have characteristics contrary to those associated with products made for undifferentiated markets. The greatest disadvantage of a focus strategy is that a business puts, so to speak, all its eggs in one basket. If the safety of that basket is threatened in any way, there is no other place in which to shelter resources. A threat to the business can come from many sources. Since segments are not clearly distinct and mutually exclusive classes of customers, competitive incursions can easily come from other market segments, no matter how carefully a niche is chosen.

B.3. Differentiated Strategy

Differentiated marketing is essentially a response to an affluent society. Higher real incomes tend to enlarge markets for products far beyond those necessary for mere survival. At the same time, elements of mass culture reduce regional and social differences. People wear the same clothes, eat the same foods, and share the same values. The popular goods that roll off our production lines are well within the reach of all Americans, except the lowest economic rung of our population. Yet, paradoxically, the enormous output of our productive capacity has been characterized not by a

standardized sameness but by a rich diversity. Product choices have been increasing at an almost exponential rate. To exploit a heterogeneous demand, marketers have adopted differentiated marketing.

This strategy sees a market as an aggregation of different submarkets. These are sets of customers, each with a somewhat different product preference from the other. To success is then conceived as the creation of a unique product version for each segment-brewed coffee for one group, instant coffee for those have no time to brew, caffeinated for strong coffee lovers, decaffeinated for drinkers concerned with health.

An example of this approach in direct marketing is the customer program of American Airlines. Although many millions of people fly American each year, as much as 65 percent of its business comes from a relatively small number of individuals. American airlines divided all passengers into three groups. The first is the high-volume customers, called VITs, an acronym for "very important travelers". The second group, called American Travelers, produce a significant amount of revenue but less that of the VITs. The last segment is made up of the remaining passengers, those faceless, nameless individuals who once in a while book a flight on American, with which the company communicates through mass media. With the VITs and American Travelers, the company communicates on a more personal basis. Their names have been entered into a computer. Each active member to the program receives a statement of accumulated credit miles, awards for reaching certain levels, and bonuses from other travel companies, including rental cars, hotels, airlines for ocean cruises. To its best customers American makes good its boast of doing what it does best.

Other airlines have similar programs, offering different products to different groups of customers. The WorldPass club of Pan American rewards its pampered travelers, including a one-month itinerary anywhere with a companion for 175,000 accumulated air miles [Hatch, 2007].

In the down-to-earth world of direct marketing, illustrative of market differentiation is the approach of Fingerhut Corporation, a purveyor of household and consumer goods to middle- and low-income families. Fingerhut is a mail-order house which, unlike most others, aims specific products at specific groups of consumers. After the first order is placed for one of some 1,000 or more items the company offers, to customer receives a questionnaire. Thereafter, Fingerhut sends out different catalogs and flyers to people on its mailing list. The choice of promotion is determined by responses to the questionnaire. The company's marketing experts, after analyzing the questionnaire, choose the catalog that in their opinion offers goods a particular customer is most likely to buy [Stone M., 2006].

In theory, market differentiation is always accompanied by multiple product offerings. But a multiple-brand strategy does not necessarily imply market differentiation. The latter takes place when there is a high correlation between the product variations and the market segments. For example, suppose one part of the market drank only regular coffee while another used only instant. As long as each product is related to each group, market differentiation would in fact be obtained.

But what if coffee drinkers used both instant and regular brands? Further, suppose that consumers interchanged regular, instant, caffeinated, and decaffeinated – or used various combinations of the four possibilities. That is, one household can buy both regular-caffeinated and instant-decaffeinated. Another might be purchasing regular-decaffeinated and instant-caffeinated brands. For that matter, any other combination or permutation of the four choices is possible. In instances of multiple usage and product

switching, four variations of coffee are being offered not to specific segments but to the same market. Each variation is clearly substitutable for another, though in unequal degrees. The market does indeed become fragmented, but not in the sense of unique, self-contained segments. Customers move fluidly from one product to another, coming together at certain junctures like a confluence of water, and just as easily separating from the main stream.

The realities of the marketplace often fail to conform to the faithful niceties of theory. In practice, matching products to specific segments may be anything but precise.

C. Product differentiation

No matter which strategy is employed – undifferentiated, focus, or market differentiation – most companies try to differentiate their products. There are two ways of differentiating a product. One is by making changes in its physical form. The other is by promotion. Both methods are frequently used together, but in varying proportions.

The first method of differentiation is sometimes referred to as *quality competition.* The term *quality* is defined in a broad context that encompasses color, shape, materials, design, and level of service. Men's designer jeans by Jordache are thought to be better quality than those of Lee or Wranglers. Glassware by Waterford is regarded as qualitatively superior to glassware sold at Woolworth. Kitchen utensils made of sterling silver are seen by almost everyone of better quality than knives and forks made with stainless steel. When such quality differences are easily distinguishable, it is called *vertical quality competition.* Differentiating a product along vertical lines depends on the characteristics of the product [Stone, B., 2004].

Although a product may be set apart from others in the same category by its physical attributes, promotion is still used to inform consumers to reinforce this impression. Vertical quality competition involves a cost differential. Though promotion is used, it is not the primary means for establishing a favorable reputation for quality. In fact, the task of promotion is made easier when there is something of superior quality to promote. Under these conditions, promotion is subordinate to a product policy.

When quality is not easily distinguishable, or difficult to assess, promotion is responsible for product differentiation. For example, the Strategic Planning Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts, found that firms that out advertised their competitors received higher prices for their wares, regardless of quality. Prices of superior-quality products, for example, approached the market average when advertising was relatively low. But products of inferior quality obtained better-than-average prices when they were supported by heavier-than-average advertising [Nash, 2000].

Differentiating a product through promotion is referred as *horizontal quality competition.* The critical difference in quality between products lies not in their obvious characteristics but in the eyes of their beholders. It is not so much the entity that is important, but the perception of the entity. In this respect, the horizontal approach is a form of horizontal differentiation.

Whether a company differentiates its products vertically, horizontally, or not at all, depends upon many things. The most important are the type of product, company resources, and market response. There is a cost for product differentiation, whether emphasis rests on the state of the physical product or of the consumer mind. Firms will pursue this option only if the returns from these activities exceed the costs of doing so.

Conclusion

Direct marketing seldom if ever becomes involved in strategic planning at the corporate level. But the latter has a marked impact on direct marketing. In the main,

direct marketing concerns itself with offers of products. Direct marketing strategy is therefore operational, and is carried out primarily within the marketing department of a firm.

The two main issues of an operational strategy refer to products and markets. Both can be kept as is or can be sought after in new directions. The combination of products and markets – both existing ones and new ones – yields four options. These can be described by the conventional product-market matrix.

From a marketing standpoint, strategies can be classified as undifferentiated, focus, and differentiated. The first is a volume-seeking approach, driven by efficiency. This strategy works best with volume-sensitive products. The focus approach has as its objective a narrow market, to which it fits products and distributive policies. The key to focus is effectiveness rather than efficiency. A differentiated strategy attempts to compete for the whole market, but with special products aimed at particular segments.

Irrespective of the strategy adopted, most companies seek to differentiate their wares and to make their demand curves more inelastic. There are two methods for differentiating a product: by changing its physical form and by promotion.

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