Production Strategy and competitiveness of the Date industry in the United Arab Emirates

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This exploratory research will provide an overview of strategic management in the "Date industry" in the United Arab Emirates. This research provides an overview of strategic management. A practical understanding of the strategic-management process is introduced. In addition, the research initiates discussion of the mission and goals of the strategic management in the Date industry.
Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats, the SWOT analysis will be undertaken and strategies will be proposed that should keep the management going with success.
In this paper the basic activities and terms in strategic management are defined. The benefits of strategic management to the company are presented. Important relationships between business and strategic management are discussed.
The research initiates the discussion on the issues such as: global considerations, and the strategic implications of the natural environment.
The research findings show that the new role of the management in implementing effective strategy(s), is through the integration and provison the guidelines for other employees in the company. These roles must become the thought leaders in their discipline and actively pursued across all the departments and among employees. There is a need for training programs for the employees in order that the customer services, satisfaction and communication with customers should be improved and achieved effectively and efficiently.

1. Introduction

In its broadest sense, strategy is the means by which an individual or and organization achieve their objectives. This definition refers to the plans, policies, and principles that guide and unify a number of specific activities (Smith, 2005). Common to the different definitions of business strategy is the notion that strategy is focused on achieving certain goals, that the critical actions that make up a strategy involve allocation of resources, and that strategy implies some consistency, integration, or cohesiveness (Harris and Blair, 2006).

Enterprises in a particular sector or industry need business strategies to give them direction and purpose, to deploy resources in the most effective and efficient manner, and to coordinate the decisions made by different individuals (Wheelen and Hunger, 2006).

Important aspects of strategy formulation include developing a business mission, performing an external audit, conducting an internal audit, generating alternative strategies, and choosing among alternative strategies (Borgonovo, 2006). Performing an external audit is generally most time consuming. Effective management relies much more on control mechanisms that are personal and proactive. When such issues are identified, the old policy of top-down interference must be replaced by the policy driven by the organization level support (Yip, 2004).

The firm's strategy represents a model or a policy for harvesting profits from its business. In business literature a policy is preliminary to a strategy, and it is only concerned with the viability of the basic business concepts. In any case the firm still needs a strategy that will allow it to survive against competitors that implement the same business model or policy (Bieber, et al, 2002).

Maximizing responsiveness and adaptability requires that strategic planning process typically combine both top-down and bottom-up strategy making top management set guidelines in the form of mission statements, business principles, and performance targets while the individual business units take the lead in formulating strategic plans (Grant,2003).

Strategy is concerned with matching a firm's resources and capabilities to the opportunities that arise in the external environment. For Grant (2008), the firm needs to identify the profit opportunities in its external environment. An increased emphasis on the role of resources and capabilities as the basis for strategy formulating is the result of two factors. Firstly, as firms' industry environment has become more unstable, the internal resources and capabilities, rather than external market focus, are viewed as a more secure basis for strategy formulating. Secondly, it has become increasingly apparent that it is the competitive advantage rather than industry attractiveness that is the primary source of superior profitability (Grant, 2008).

The first section of the research consists of the introduction on the strategic-management techniques, followed by a brief history of the selected company. The second section deals with the mission, goals, and strategies used by the management. Attention is also paid to the Management Implementation of Strategy.

Special attention is paid to developing a successful strategy. The management new strategy is mentioned before the conclusion section.

2. Al-Ain Date Factory

The strategic goal of the ''Al- Ain Date Factory'' management is to produce and market superior quality of Date that meets or exceeds international standards. The ''Date Factory'' is a publicly owned Enterprise in Al-Ain, United Arab Emirates, astablished 13 zears ago, in 1996, within the Food Industry sector. The number of employees is 153; out of these, 53 individuals are engaged in the management.

The management implements a comprehensive approach which establishes quality controls at all levels of date production and processing. Since it is not merely a date processing plant, it stands alone, far ahead of all other Emirates date companies with its unique approach to date production and its commitment to quality.

The United Arab Emirates is one of the largest producers of dates in the world. People in the Emirates are among the largest consumers of this product, and many are connoisseurs. The United Arab Emirates is rich in many types, shapes and colors of dates that are not known nor found anywhere else. In order to be properly appreciated in new and sophisticated markets, it is important that the Emirates' dates be well cared for, well handled and beautifully packaged.

In the discussion the heads of departments in the company claimed that in the ''United Arab Emirates'', small (fewer than 59 employees) and medium sized (60-199 employees) enterprises - According to the Chamber of Commerce and Industry Classification - to date have not lived up to their potential for a number of reasons.

3. Mission of the ''Date Factory''

The mission is a statement of purpose; what the organization seeks to achieve in the long term, but like the vision, the mission does not provide a distinct statement of strategy but offers guidelines to the overall direction in which the strategy will take the organization (Pfeffer and Sutton,2006). In our case the mission of the management is to fulfill customer needs and desires by producing high quality dates and management is committed to achieving this goal. So a clear mission statement is the most important strategic-management tool.

4. Goals of the ''Date Factory''

Goals are an aspiration view of what the organization will be like in the future. Goals in general are the anticipated image of the company if it succeeds in implementing its potentials and all the human potential (Moeran, 2005) to achieve it. The management strategic goals, like most announcements in the business, can be found on the websites managed by the Government through the ''Chamber of Commerce and Industry'' but tend to be too idealized to offer a clear guidance to the respective industry.

In general, the goals of the management are to keep customers happy, to sell the product while it is fresh, and to create value in everything the management does. Reaching agreement on formal vision and mission statements can greatly facilitate the process of reaching agreement on the organization's strategies, objectives, and policies. Organizational success depends on a reasonable agreement on these issues.

5. The Strategy of the ''Date Factory''

In the case of the startup enterprise, strategy is usually written down in the business plan that was prepared to raise capital. In the case of the established companies, the management strategy is communicated in a number of ways, such as the vision, the mission, through business model, or in terms of a strategic plan, which has been the case in undertaking this research (Nickerson and Zenger, 2004).

The best approach to a strategy is via the analysis of both the external and the internal factors. This strategy is fitted to the commoditizing date market, where there are few advantages from global spread. In other cases, many similar companies have failed to align their strategies to their internal resources and capacities (Nerkar and Roberts, 2004).

Fundamental to this view, a strategy set by Date Factory's management is achieved through the link between the firm and its external environment. The present management strategy is consistent with its external environment, and with its internal environment - its goals and values, resources and capabilities, its structure and system. The management strategy is concerned with the failure of similar enterprises caused by lack of consistency with either the internal or external environment.

The marketing manager expressed his concern that the main problem of the future strategy was its growth – orientation, which emphasized superior performance. This is, however, a problem with nationwide effects. A critical issue for the Date industry in the coming years will be whether it disposes of enough resources (natural or technological) to continue to compete head-to head with other local private companies in the market for a better and higher quality production.

Developing the date sector is critical to the management in our research because much of the slow-down in employment and non-oil growth has stemmed from the decline over time in the government's ability, simply through its own expenditures, to stimulate this sector output and expenditures, whereas the keys to revitalize this sector in the economy are in general through diversification, modernization, and increased competitiveness across the whole spectrum of private and public enterprises in this industry.

This sector is still the second after the oil-sector to dominate the economy in general and the manufacturing sector in particular. This phenomenon can be characterized as a single-track development strategy, with a focus on the modern export-oriented segment of the economy. The other aim is serving the society in terms of jobs creation. Therefore, the diversification strategy is still relatively modest and is adopted with a strong concentration upon improving the quality and the quantitz of date (Chamber of Commerce, 2008).

Since the oil/gas/hydrocarbon sectors are largely capital intensive, they are not a dynamic source of jobs, at least of the magnitude that is currently required. A stronger diversification is needed and should proceed based on the exploitation of comparative advantages such as location and natural resources. Here, the company as a medium-sized enterprise that was often neglected or overlooked in the past, can play an important role in solving, partly, the unemployment problems in the province (Al- Ain and Abu Dhabi).

In the United Arab Emirate's case, the medium-sized enterprises such as our company have the potential to play a variety of important roles: (a) selling their own products, usually finished goods, (b) acting as either subcontractors for or (c) suppliers of raw materials (or semi-products) for larger multinational or local enterprises. There are several great potentialities in creating a large number of jobs at relatively low costs.

6. Management Implementation of Strategy

Although the implementation of the business strategy may seem the most obvious of tasks for the management, it is by no means the easiest. The first challenge for the strategic management stems from the multiplicity and diversity of constituents whose demands and pressure compete for the manager's attention (Grant, 2008). Being part of the local industry and involved in international marketing seems to earn a special status among many national organizations and be subject to a different and a more intense type of pressure than that put on other local companies.

In this respect the Government (as the owner of the company) should not be suspicious of the management's motives but should support the management efforts fully, and customers should understand the way the management operate, and therefore fully appreciate the significance of these demands and pressures.

In the business literature, strategy implementation is often considered to be the most difficult stage in strategic management because it requires discipline, sacrifice, commitment, and hard work from all employees and managers. It is always more difficult to do something than to say you're going to do it (Rosenkopf and Almeida, 2003).

In addition, the management's strategic implementation task is complicated by the management's expectation that managers take the broad company's goals and strategies and translate them into specific actions that are responsive to the needs of the working environment.

The six steps defined by Robbins and Coulter (2005), are regarded as the means by which the strategic process is accomplished. Distinguishing between the external and the internal environment of the firm is common to most approaches to the strategy analysis. The best known and most widely used of these approaches is the SWOT framework, which classifies the various influences on a firm's strategy into four categories: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats.

The first two categories, strengths and weaknesses, are related to the internal environment, while the other two categories, opportunities and threats, are related to the external environment. The SWOT analysis can be especially useful when trying to decide whether or not to embark on a certain strategy by determining if the pros outweigh the cons (Santos and Eisenhardt, 2005).

The aim of the SWOT analysis involves specifying the objective of the management as well as identifying the internal and external factors that may be favorable or unfavorable to achieving goals. Strengths, in the SWOT analysis, are a company's capabilities and resources that allow it to engage in activities to generate economic value and perhaps competitive advantage. In our case the company's strengths may be in its ability to create unique products and derive a high-level customer satisfaction. The company's weaknesses are caused by the lack of resources or capabilities, which can prevent it from generating economic value or gaining a competitive advantage to enact the company's strategy (Dane and Pratt, 2007).

For the company in our case, there are many examples of organizational weaknesses. For example, the management has a large, bureaucratic structure that limits its ability to compete with other similar companies. Another weakness of the present management is that the company has higher labor costs than a competitor who can achieve similar performance at a lower labor cost, and the absence from the different retail markets.

Opportunities provide the organization with a chance to improve its performance and its competitive advantage. The convenient opportunities for the management as a strategy may arise when products and services can be offered at different times and in different locations. For instance, the increased use of the Internet has offered numerous opportunities for companies to expand their product sales (Aaker, 2004).

Threats can include an individual, group, or organization outside the company that aim to reduce the level of the company's performance. The company's management faces threats in its environment. The main threat for the present management may come from new products or services from other companies whose aim is to minimize our company's competitive advantage.

Which is better, a two-way distinction between internal and external influences or the four- way SWOT taxonomy? The answer is that if the SWOT is sensible or worth while, the internal factors should be regarded as strengths and weaknesses while the external factors should be viewed as opportunities and threats. In practice, such distinctions are difficult. According to Robbins and Coulter, each firm is constrained by the resources and capabilities it has available (Robbins, and Coulter, 2005).

Pressured from without and constrained from within, the strategic management needs keen administrative sense to plot the correct behavior in which they can operate. The action decided upon must be sensitive enough to respect the limits of the diverse local constituencies, as well as pragmatic enough to achieve the expected strategy outcome, and creative enough to balance the diverse internal and external demands of constraints. As if this were not enough, the task is made even more difficult by the fact that the management does not act solely as the implementor of company's strategy. Therefore it is important that the management is required also to play a key role in the strategy formulation (Ottesen and Gronhaug, 2002).

Thus, the strategic management will often reflect some decisions against which it is lobbied hard. Governmental or Ministerial intervention in the decision making process is an important aspect to consider. Once the final decision is taken, however, management must be able to convince the authority to implement it with commitment and enthusiasm.

Extensive surveys carried out by the Council of Al-Ain Chambers of Commerce and Industry through the years 2006-2007 defined that the main concerns of businessmen are:

1. Lack of credit/finance/capital: The effective cost of capital is often quite high because regular lending institutions have a hard time evaluating new businesses, especially those production areas with which they are not familiar. Most similar Enterprises in Emirates are not satisfied with the existing banks/financial institutions. They find loan procedures to be very complicated.

2. Access to technology: On the other hand, the digital divide is a significant problem for many medium-sized enterprises in The United Arab Emirates. Improving access to technological networks of international standards can be very expensive and beyond the reach for many of them including the ''Date Factory''.

In a survey of 60 existing enterprises in the Eastern Province of the United Arab Emirates by ''Chamber of Commerce and Industry Council, (CCIC)'', in the year 2005, over 75 percent of the enterprises reported problems in marketing. While, in The UAE, many of these obstacles are more perceived than actual, they have had the effect to stifle the growth of enterprises. Bureaucratic hindrances still prevail, while some progress has been made in cutting bureaucratic red tape, as late as 2007.

3. Limited information on possible markets and clients: Many managers/operators in Emirates have little experience in exporting to foreign markets. Similarly, they have difficulty identifying and attracting foreign investors. As a result, their firms are often under-sized and cannot expand in line with growing markets.

These problems are additionally made complex by the fact that, because of their lack of access to credit, Emirates' enterprises are usually the most vulnerable in times of economic recession. The resulting business failures often add to the severity of the recession. This problem will only be further complicated as the economy moves to a freer price system with the country's ascension to the WTO in 2005.

After a long discussion with the management, the conclusion is that the strategic policy faces three important challenges in guiding the delegating of responsibilities and differentiating Date Factory's tasks. The first is setting the strategic direction for the company by identifying its mission and its business objectives. The second is building the differentiated enterprise, not only by designing the diverse roles and distributing the assignments but also by making the managers of departments responsible for granting them the legitimacy and power to do so. The final challenge is in directing the process to ensure that several roles are coordinated and that the delegated responsibilities are controlled.

7. Leveraging "Date Factory" Performance

Although aligning the management's resources, capabilities, and commitment to achieve common long-term objectives is vital, the top management must also achieve results in the short term to remain viable among other similar competitors and credible with the community and stakeholders. The top management role is to provide the controls, and coordination to leverage resources and capabilities to their highest level of performance (Hopp et.al, 2004).

In doing so, and in order to be properly appreciated in new and sophisticated markets, date must be well cared for, well handled and beautifully packaged, and attract the choosy consumer. To accomplish this, the strategic management uses a new approach. The management focuses first on better farming and cultural practices in the growing of dates. The management implements new and better methods in date handling and processing, managing to preserve the natural freshness of the fruit and maintain consistent quality. In short, the management as a strategy developed an integrated approach that includes quality controls at both the farming and processing levels, as well as appropriate product packaging. Figure (1) is a framework between the company's environment and its Strategy.

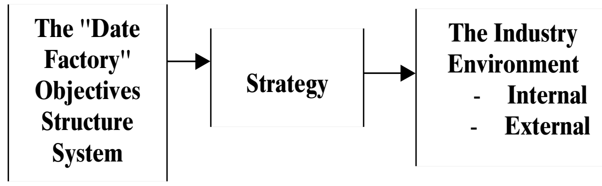

Figure (1): Framework between Company Environment and Strategy

The purpose of this renewal strategy for the management is to stabilize operations, utilization of resources and capabilities to improve the level of competition in the market.

In an environment of uncertainty and change, a clear sense of direction is essential in the pursuit of objectives. As Michael Porter has emphasized, strategy is not about doing things better – this is the concern of operational effectiveness - strategy is about doing things differently, hence the essence of strategy is making choices (Porter, 1996). Strategic choices can be expressed by two basic questions:

- What to compete?
- How to compete?

Neither intuition nor analysis alone is sufficient for making good strategic decisions. Intuition, based on one's past experiences, judgment, and "gut" feelings, does not include the use of analytical strategic-management concepts that have been developed and successfully tested in the business world (Demeter, 2003).

To ignore these techniques that are based on historical learning is like trying to reinvent the wheel. However, no analytical tools can capture all aspects of a given organization's culture and situation. Nor can analytical tools assimilate all the subjective information that must be considered in strategic management, such as personalities, emotions, values, beliefs, customs, and ethical factors (Yang, et.al, 2003). Thus, it is very important to integrate intuition and analysis into strategic management.

8. Building a Successful Strategy

Elementary for the company to develop a successful strategy is to make it simple and understandable to its employees (probably by allowing some managers to participate and shaping its future policy and strategy, and setting long-term goals, the profound understanding of the competitive environment as there are many local producers and foreign products from abroad particularly from other Gulf States like the Saudi Arabia and Oman.

To achieve success the company tried to utilise its resources - this is called the objective appraisal of resources. These three elements contribute to the fourth element of success (i.e., effective implementation). In general, these are the four elements for this company to implement the strategy successfully and to achieve its objectives. Figure (2), shows the elements of a successful strategy for an enterprise.

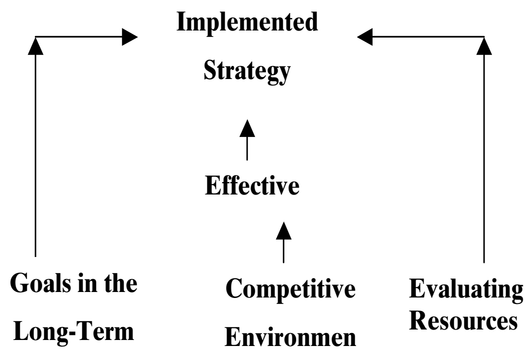

Figure (2): Elements of success for a Strategy

One of the Mangers said that, unfortunately, the government policy towards the medium-sized enterprises has not been as extensive or as effective as it should and could be.

The Marketing Manager in the factory noticed that "despite the importance of such enterprises in the economy, these are unable to benefit from the incentives provided by the government and, due to their small or medium size"; commercial banks view them as high risk borrowers and refrain from funding their needs. The areas of special emphasis should include:

1. Training/human resource development
2. Funding for research and development
3. Addressing weaknesses in transportation and infrastructure
4. Encouragement and creation of alternative financial sources
5. Improving knowledge of the legal environment for these enterprises.

In the above discussion, the issue of management reliance on control mechanisms is mentioned in the introduction section of this case study. The management group ensures that their particular responsibilities are understood in relation to the overall goal and that strategic and operational priorities are clearly identified and agreed upon. They demand standards and use frequent informal visits to discuss operations and identify new problems or opportunities quickly.

The undertaking of a major new infrastructure expansion program should, by reducing production costs, provide a very significant stimulus to the private sector investment. To assure that this incentive is not neutralized by insufficient consumer demand, the Saudi authorities should seriously consider establishing a "Dual Track" development model focused on achieving a more balanced economy (Stanley, 2003).

The management of the company, in its efforts as a strategy promoter, can ensure a renewal of thoughts and policies by defining the company's mission and value statements so that they provide some stretch and maneuverability for effective managers, and also legitimize new initiatives. More than this, those at the top levels must monitor closely the process of dynamic imbalance they create and strongly support some of the more entrepreneurial experimentation or imaginative challenges to the status quo that emerge from such a situation.

What emerges from the above discussion is that strategy making is not someone's abstract analysis for devising the optimal strategy for the firm. Strategy making is part of an ongoing management process. The reason that strategic management has displaced the terms long-term planning and corporate planning is partly to disassociate strategy from planning, but also to emphasize that strategy making is a central component of what managers do.

Viewing strategy making as part of the management process helps us see that strategy plays multiple roles within organizations. Some chief executive officers, strategists, and organizations have been successful, to date, without using strategic-management concepts and techniques. However, success today is no guarantee for success tomorrow (Harris and Kimberley, 2003).

The business world is becoming global in scope; technology is changing the nature of competition in all industries. Strategic management enables organizations to recognize and adapt to change more readily; successfully adapting to change is the key to survival and prosperity. There is no good alternative approach to strategic management. Strategists can best assure that strategies formulated will be effectively implemented by involving as many managers as possible in the strategy formulation process. Also, it is important to communicate effectively why changes are needed (Dudley, 2000).

9. The Management New Strategy:

Based upon the company's mission, and the discussions with managers in the company, the assessment of strengths and weaknesses is part of organizational analysis, and aimed at suggesting management strategies in the future.

The primary focus of the field of strategic management is to figure out how companies can create value for shareholders and achieve strong financial performance (Hoegl and Gemuenden, 2001). Each of the following three views of strategy provides a different answer to the question – how can companies acquire and leverage competitive advantage and sustain that advantage over time?

- A Corporate strategy-based view – degree of competitiveness in an industry determines firm performance. According to this perspective, a local firm's success in other country industry, or success in competing local or foreign firms or enterprises depends on the unique attributes of the industry – its knowledge-intensive nature and non-location based boundaries.

From different strategies available the most important ones probably are the following:
1- Quality: The new strategies for the management to follow require a commitment to quality that would support its products and its goodwill in the local markets and abroad. The application of modern techniques in irrigation, fertilization, pollination, fruit covering, thinning, harvest, and transportation enable the farms to provide the processing plant with the highest quality possible of fresh product.
2- Production and labor: highly trained labor carry on the production operation to provide the market with fine packages of fresh dates. These two strategies are to determine what the "Factory" should be in or wants to be in.
- A Business Strategy-based view – firm-specific differences in capabilities create performance differences among firms. For example, successful date industry firms tend to have capabilities that are valuable, unique and hard for rivals to imitate or match. In this respect the following two strategies may be suitable to the company in the long-run, to open new markets abroad, and therefore increase its market share.
3- Management roles and thinking in constantly questioning, challenging, stirring up, and changing things in a way that forces adaptation and learning.
4- Going International in the future through opening foreign markets, and diversifying the product portfolio. The aim of such a strategy is to protect the company share of the bulk in the specific industry, but concentrate on branded sale for growth. The aims of the above two strategies are to enhance the management competition in its businesses.
- A Functional Strategy-based view – institutional forces, such as economic reforms and government policy, contribute to differences in the firm performance. For example, the pro-market reforms in a county may open the door for similar companies to win foreign markets. Examples of two strategies to follow by the management are:
5- Meet customer short-haul needs at competitive price and cost. The notion of fostering strategic adaptation through establishing a few broad principles and directives to guide decentralized decision making is consistent with the tenets of complexity theory (Gadiesh and Gilbert, 2001).
6- Placing greater emphasis on research and development. The purpose of these two strategies is to enhance the previous two strategies (i.e., business strategies-based view).

The author concludes that all three perspectives provide an insight into the forces that determine the firm performance. The complexity of local competition leads managers all over the world to struggle to find the best ways to achieve successful performance. Generalizations based on stereotypes might lead to false conclusions – such as the Western assumption that Asian managers are willing to sacrifice short-term profits for long-term market gains.

10. Summary

In general, any enterprise needs a strong unifying sense of direction and this is the case with the strategic management in this research. But that need is particularly strong in an organization in which tasks are differentiated and responsibilities delegated. Without these, the decentralized management process in the company will quickly degenerate into strategic anarchy.

In this research the level of analysis is shifted down to the executive's management levels. Rather than think in terms of the changing nature of business environment or conflicting strategic imperatives facing the management strategy, highlighted is the examination of the new roles of the management and managers. The management's new roles in setting an effective strategy(s), are through the integration and provision of directions for other employees in the company. These roles involve familiar tasks as well as several new ones< they must become thought leaders in their discipline and be active across the different departments and among employees.

The training programs for the employees are needed to improve customer services and satisfaction as well as to improve communication with customers effectively and efficiently.

These new thoughts and strategic responsibilities require managers to rethink many of their traditional assumptions about the nature of their work. This is ultimately the biggest challenge facing the management in a new era of effective and efficient performance. Such new thinking needs skills and a sense of perspective needed to operate in the local and the multifunctional environments.

The management appears aware of many of the issues confronting its enterprise and is beginning to respond with effective programs. A major advantage of pursuing a strategy favouring this enterprise is that its development would most likely provide a much better balance in incomes.

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