CHOOSING BETWEEN GLOBALIZATION AND LOCALIZATION AS A STRATEGIC THRUST FOR YOUR INTERNATIONAL MARKETING EFFORT

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In choosing between the bipolar strategic orientations of globalization and localization in the international marketplace, the organization can gain insights by scrutinizing the Place, People, and Product implications of the environment. This article examines critical factors which, taken together, suggest a fit between strategic thrust and target cultural dynamics and offers a model to facilitate selection of the best approach.

INTRODUCTION

As businesses internationalize, they are faced with the critical choice of strategic thrust. Two international marketing philosophies have emerged as the poles of a continuum which offers marketers contrasting approaches to the task of entering and serving foreign markets: globalization and localization. The debate over which philosophy is better suited to the international marketer was sparked by Theodore Levitt"s article, "Globalization of Markets " (1983). Since then, numerous articles have appeared arguing the pros and cons of both approaches, leaving managers with little guidance in choosing among the alternatives. To aid managers, this paper (1) reviews the literature on the globalization/localization debate and (2) offers a perspective which can assist managers in selecting a suitable marketing approach.

Successful development of international products and marketing strategies lies in "being global and acting local" (Wills, Samli, and Jacobs 1991). In order to accomplish this, marketers must understand that, while internal environmental factors play a crucial role, the differing external environments within various world markets, and the strategic decisions offered in response to them, exert a tremendous influence on product adoption and diffusion.

BACKGROUND OF INTERNATIONAL MARKETING

The need to react to the market forces of the host country has fostered the emergence of two international marketing philosophies which represent bipolar orientations to the task (Wills, Samli, and Jacobs 1991). The primary articulator of "globalization," Theodore Levitt (1983), defined the global corporation as one which "...... operates with resolute constancy -- at low relative cost -- as if the entire world (or major regions of it) were a single entity; it sells the same things in the same way everywhere." Levitt also explains that localization is practiced by the multinational company; one "which operates in a number of countries, and adjusts its products and practices in each -- at high relative cost." Levitt argues that, to be meaningfully multinational, a company must have a committed operating presence in the markets of other nations.

Support for Globalization

Localization has not always been appropriate for multinational firms. Some contend that Campbell Soups and Nestle (Wills, Samli, and Jacobs 1991) had major problems in world markets because they employed the localization marketing philosophy.

By contrast some companies, having made the effort to standardize their products, have been successful. For example, Coca-Cola and Levis-Strauss have adopted and carried out the global philosophy successfully (Wills, Samli, and Jacobs 1991). However, Parker Pen's efforts at globalization have led to disaster (Winski and Wentz 1986). Levitt attributes many of the failures of globalization strategy to the companies themselves, arguing that implementation strategies were wrong.

Jain (1989), concurring with Levitt, suggests that globalization is the future of international business, but that we still don't know how to implement global strategy. Huszagh (1986) further speculates that globalization is a natural stage in the evolution of international marketing. According to Levitt (1983), the binding force driving the world today is technology. And because of technology, and the resulting cross-cultural communication and interaction, the needs and wants of people the world over have become homogenized.

The result of appropriate and well-executed globalization strategy can be an upward spiraling of market share, leading to an ability to generate even greater economies of scale. Correspondingly, costs should spiral downward and the savings passed along to the consumer as lower prices, which in turn normally results in an upward spiraling of market share. . . and the cycle continues. Some believe that companies which recognize this new reality can gain enormous economies of scale in all their activities, not just production; this can translate into even lower prices for the consumer (Walters 1986; Yip 1989). This phenomenon occurs when a global corporation focuses on market similarities, in marked contrast with a multi-domestic company which concentrates on market differences.

Criticism

Theodore Levitt's "globalization of markets " concept has generated a considerable following, but it has also faced much criticism. A major criticism of global marketing is that it proceeds more from tendencies than facts, and originates more from abstractions than from hard case studies (Thackray 1985; Boddewyn, Soehl, and Picard 1986). Philip Kotler characterized the theory of globalization as "bunk" (Lynch 1984), insisting that a multinational strategy is by far superior and that only a few products, if any, can be safely standardized (Thackray 1985). Responding to Levitt's point that companies like McDonald's, Coke and Pepsi have been successful with the global approach, Kotler counters that each of these companies has had to make variations in its products to succeed (Lynch 1984). (Some critics even see globalization as a ploy by advertising companies to generate more business (Thackray 1985)).

Advocates of the localization strategy point out that, since few markets are exactly alike, some adaptation to local needs is necessary to win buyers and maximize sales (Quelch and Hoff 1986; Wills, Samli, and Jacobs 1991). Wind (1988) has identified three reasons not to become global: (1) standardized products are over-designed for some countries and under-designed for others, (2) company networks that already exist may be undermined, and (3) standardization dampens entrepreneurial spirit.

Review

No doubt much of the controversy surrounding the globalization concept is the result of misunderstanding Levitt's proposition. Localization advocates have often fought the straw man of "absolute standardization" when Levitt readily acknowledges the need for obvious and relatively minor adjustments. (Levitt seems to be equally guilty when he articulated the extreme as a means of highlighting the flaws of a pure and all inclusive localization approach.)

Rather than a radically new perspective, Levitt seems to have proposed a moderation of the radical localization viewpoint. He simply recognized that *some* markets for *some* products were sufficiently similar to permit address with a single approach -- with one face. Whatever minor differences did exist could likely be overcome by the advantages of the high product and service quality and more attractive price that globalization (standardization) permits.

Despite considerable misunderstanding on this point, Levitt never promoted the pursuit of globalization at all costs or in every case. Globalization is simply an option that should be seriously considered *prior* to incurring the expense of radical and unnecessary adaptation in each new foreign market. The key to defining either standardization or localization as a strategic thrust is to identify the overriding orientation; for standardization, maintaining the basic integrity of the marketing mix wherever applied; for localization, maintaining a disposition of reinventing strategy in each new market.

A GLANCE BACKWARD

Chronologically, a form of the globalization approach came first. That is, historically, sellers who entered foreign markets blundered in, using the same approach employed domestically (i.e., a domestic market extension strategy). This approach was hardly a choice, but rather the result of naivete -- assuming foreign markets were essentially the same as domestic ones. Or, to put it another way, marketers often made the assumption that the same demographic segments elsewhere would want to be like Americans.

While marketers no doubt noted the difference in markets, it was not until the 1950s that a clear statement of segmentation strategy was articulated (Smith 1956). The concept of market segmentation seemed ideally suited to a multinational marketing environment which led to its adoption in the form of the localization approach -- devising separate marketing strategies for each new country entered.

The problem with employing localization as a static orientation is that each (product) market is different. Many countries require segmentation because multiple markets exist for that product (e.g., cosmetics) in the geographic region of choice. Conversely, some markets span political boundaries when a supranational influence dictates the attitudes and behaviors of the population, as in the "Moslem world" (El-Sayed 1987).

THREE Ps OF GLOBAL MARKETING

The literature on international marketing strategy and of companies practicing either standardization or localization leads to the identification of factors which can aid a company in deciding to what extent they should standardize or localize. The literature also highlights a common misunderstanding of the concept of "standardization" as employed by Levitt. The less strict definition of standardization will allow for local flexibility, while maintaining a standard product (Sandler and Shani 1991). In order to be successful in the global market, a MNC will inevitably localize some aspect of its marketing strategy, even if only in response to factors like government regulations, electrical requirements, and measurement and product standards (Onkvisit and Shaw 1989). The main question that MNCs face is, "What elements (i.e., adaptation factors) do we need to localize and to what extent."

Search for adaptation factors has led to the identification of what shall be termed the three "Ps" of International Marketing: *Place, People, and Product.* When a company decides to market its product(s) in another country, it should first research the prevalent economic and competitive conditions; next, look at the demographics and cultural factors; finally, assess the status accorded similar products presently available. Figure 1 depicts the relationship of three variables, identifying the factors most pertinent to each.

The matrix in Table 1 suggests how specific conditions of the three variables can affect the choice to pursue a standardized or localized marketing strategy. When determining whether an MNC should take advantage of an international opportunity researching a country for future marketing involvement, the MNC needs to research local economic and competitive conditions and potential partnership arrangements. Certain features of the country may make it easier to penetrate the market without the need for significant adaptation. For international expansion purposes, the most salient aspects of location are: the economy of the country, the availability of local partners, and competition.

PLACE

Economy of the Country

The technology in developing countries like China and India and in less developed countries of the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Latin America etc. lags behind that of the United States. This gap can prove to be an advantage for companies pursuing expansion into these markets. A company, with older technology, can enter a market and still sell products (e.g., razors) that are quite adequate for contemporary application, while offering better quality than those currently sold in those markets (Reingold 1993). If the firm's production equipment is already fully depreciated and if the country's infrastructure is conducive, the cost of setting up business can be extremely low. This lower cost will permit the company to show a profit quickly; an added attraction.

Companies in this position will not need to modify their product because virtually no competition exists. However, the company may have to localize its advertising to promote consumer awareness of its products. An example of a company that was successful in using this strategy is Gillette. Sixty-nine percent of the company's revenues are from its overseas operations. Gillette follows the strategy of employing the company's lowest level technology to enter a market and then upgrading its products over time (Reingold 1993). The company's strategy is standardized in the sense that it sets forth, through is advertising theme, a consistent image globally, but is localized in its packaging and physical dimensions (Advertising Age 1984).

Standardization of products is likely where market infrastructure and environmental conditions are similar (Hill and Still 1983). For example, the U.S., U.K., Canada and

FIGURE 1
AN EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT ANALYSIS

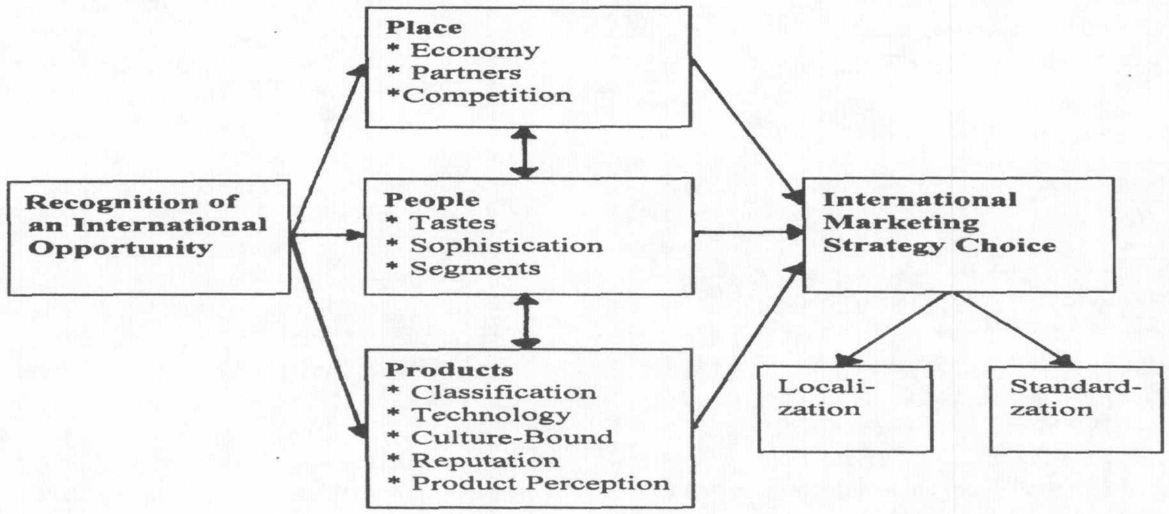

TABLE 1
DEGREE OF FIT BETWEEN MARKETING STRATEGIES AND THE 3 PS

The 3 Ps	Specific Elements	Marketing Strategies	
		Standardization	Localization
PLACE	Economy	Prosperous	Struggling
	Partners	Few	Plentiful
	Competition	Low	Intense
PEOPLE	Tastes	Little Preference	High Preference
	Sophistication	High	Low
	Segments	Few	Many
PRODUCTS	Classification	Industrial/Consumer Durables	Consumer Non-durables
	Technology	High	Low
	Culture-Bound	Low	High
	Reputation	Sterling	Poor or Unknown
	Product Perception	High	Low

Western Europe are politically, culturally and economically similar, which makes adopting a standardized strategy for these markets a smart approach (Szymanski, Bharadwaj, and Varadarajan 1993).

Availability of Local Partners

Finding local partners, or entering into joint ventures with early market entrants, makes it easier to introduce products. Purchasing an established business in the country can offer access to a significant share of the market, through which additional demand can be built (*Advertising Age* 1984; Reingold 1993). However, buying into a local business may require a regional strategy. In cases where the products or names are localized, it may be difficult to standardize established names. It may be wise to start by localizing a product, then switching to standardization as the product gains popularity. Joint ventures are sometimes the best way to enter and deal with such a market (*Journal of Business Strategy* 1988).

Competition

The level of competition one faces can decidedly affect the choice between standardization or localization. A company that has no direct competition in a country can more easily standardize its product. However presence of direct competition tends to orient the company to localization as a basis for competitive advantage (Jain 1989).

PEOPLE

Consumers all over the world differ with respect to income, education, sophistication, values and lifestyles, role models etc.; differences which may support either a standardization or a localization approach. Companies need to thoroughly understand consumer preferences before deciding whether or not to make product changes. Factors directly related to market acceptance are: consumer tastes, consumer sophistication, and predefined market segments.

Consumer Tastes

Consumer taste and preference differs drastically around the world. People are very particular about the types of food they eat and it may be necessary to adapt to these changes. McDonald added beer to its menu to cater to Swedish preferences (Shandler and Shani 1991), while in Japan, people prefer to eat rice with everything and KFC changed its menu accordingly (Okawara 1993). Similarly, the local hit for Coca Cola in Japan is Georgia Coffee, not carbonated drinks (Fields 1992). Foods are not the only product for which consumers have unique preferences. Fragrances, clothing and automobile styles, and entertainment also reflect cultural tastes. However, it may be possible (as in the cases just cited) to maintain a global approach while implementing these relatively minor, but critical, adaptations.

Sophistication of the Consumer

The economy of a country is a significant factor in the degree of sophistication of its consumers. A poor economy may render products like automobiles and appliances nonessential in certain markets. In order to reach such consumers, products may have to be modified to make them more accessible. Sometimes it may not be the economy itself, but simply local practice. In Japan, only 20% of the population have cars and people are used to shopping by bicycle or public transit. Because of this, KFC had to close its drive-ins and relocate in popular pedestrian shopping areas (Okawara 1993).

Low literacy rates may also lead to the need for localization. Written communication may not be of much value if targeted consumers are illiterate. Such situations call for visual and vocal media to convey the message (Hill and Still 1983).

Market Segments

Products that have universal appeal to a specific consumer category lend themselves to standardization. A product whose prime target market is, for example, a single age group, becomes a part of the culture of those countries in which the product is well known (*Journal of Business Strategy* 1988). Companies like Levis and Coca Cola are targeted primarily at a youth market group and so have a common starting point on which to concentrate. *Global teenagers* are those in Western and newly industrialized nations who have experienced intense exposure to television, movies, travel, and global advertisements, causing them to become very much alike, despite their different heritages (Feinberg 1989). One study suggests there exists a *luxury market* composed of conspicuous consumers worldwide (Amine 1992). The existence of these substantial segments can permit a company to standardize its product and advertising to appeal to that particular market group and make only minor adjustments as needed.

PRODUCT

Standardization varies according to the nature of the product. Products can differ in a variety of ways, affecting the level of standardization possible and prudent in a particular country. Some of the more critical product aspects include: product classification, culturally sensitivity, the state of product technology, reputation of the brand among local consumers, and product perception.

Product Classification

Products can be classified as industrial goods or consumer goods (durables and non-durables). In general, industrial goods are better suited for globalization than consumer goods since they are designed more for function than aesthetic appeal (Whitelock 1987; Jain 1989; Sandler and Shani 1992). Also, products which meet universal needs require little adaptation for different markets and so standardization is facilitated (Bartlett 1979; Levitt 1988). Industrial products require significant capital investment and so are usually confined to a few manufacturing facilities producing larger quantities of products. This fact also offers a rationale for a standardization approach (Samiee and Roth 1992).

Among consumer goods, durables lend themselves more to standardization than non-durables. This tendency holds because consumer non-durables tend to reflect local tastes unique to each market (Douglas and Urban 1977; Hovell and Walters 1972; Jain 1989).

Technology of the Product

Products with short technological life (i.e., high technology) are more conductive to standardization (Samiee and Roth 1992) because high-tech firms have less time to plan and implement a localized approach. The cost of making even a small design change is significant, so these firms tend to have fewer manufacturing facilities, which encourages standardization (Samiee and Roth 1992). Low-tech products are generally more stable and experience more competition, so they tend to localize.

The stage of the product in the PLC also has a bearing on standardization. Firms with products in the early stages of the PLC are likely candidates for standardization In the later stages of the PLC, there is more competition and firms need to emphasize localization. Later PLC stages exhibit slower technological change, leading to greater concentration on product differentiation (Samiee and Roth 1992).

Culturally Sensitive Products

The role of culture in influencing product modification is significant. The older the consumption pattern in a society, the less likely that a foreign product will be successful there (van Mesdag 1985). Products that are highly culture-bound (usually consumer non-durables) are difficult to market globally (Quelch and Hoff 1986). Cultural factors strongly affect consumer non-durables like cosmetics, food, drinks and pharmaceuticals (Hill and Still 1983). Consumer products used in the home, like coffee, are more culture-bound than products used outside the home (Quelch and Hoff 1986). So, products that are culturally sensitive generally need to be treated in a localized fashion.

Product Reputation

A company which wants to succeed with a globalization strategy needs a product which is recognized the world over and lends itself to standardization (Goizueta 1989). The company need make few changes to gain consumer acceptance. As consumers become more globally aware, there is a greater demand for global products which are capable of satisfying rather exacting requirements. Hence, a global brand is a valuable asset in today's market (Geiser 1986).

Perception of Products

Products perceived similarly throughout the world can be standardized (Advertising Age 1984). Products like cigarettes or pens may be viewed as homogeneous and therefore have a higher likelihood of being successfully standardized. Another aspect of perception is the psychological meaning of the product in different markets (Friedman 1986). In some markets, all foreign products may be viewed as superior, making it is easy to standardize (Jain 1989). When the products of a country are considered as being inferior, the best strategy may be to position them against other products originating in that country (Jain 1989).

In the end, the decision to standardize or localize should be based on the preceding variables and the extent to which they are relevant to a company's products.

DISCUSSION

Our attention has been limited thus far to the various factors that determine whether a company should follow a standardized or globalized strategy taken individually. But this treatment is not meant to imply that the factors should be considered separately in the evaluation of country conditions, for they are interactive. Interdependence between these factors must be taken into consideration. Following is an explanation of how some factors tell different parts of the same story.

The economy of a country is related to a number of variables. The more developed a country, the greater the sophistication of its inhabitants. As a result of this sophistication, there may be more demand for high technology products, a condition which lends itself to standardization. Competition in such situations will tend to be intense.

The economy of a country will also help in identifying facets of its culture. Though we normally think of the economy and its infrastructure as a direct consequence of the ideological superstructure, the relationship is clearly recursive. The welfare of the economy can, in many subtle ways, shape the manifest culture, as when economic prosperity leads to a materialistic outlook and lifestyle. Also, a highly sophisticated economy is more receptive to change which results in the formation of cross-cultural market segments, making it easier to stimulate a market for a global product. If a country is already exposed to a diversity of foreign goods, it tends to be more receptive to new products, creating less need for adaptation (localization).

The stage of the product life cycle suggests the level of competition and, hence, influences strategy. A product in the latter part of its life cycle will be faced with more competition, forcing a tighter focus on product differentiation in order to achieve positional advantage. Also, by this time, the product tends to be globally known and can make regional changes without significantly affecting its cost structure (Samiee and Roth 1992).

The starting point in linking the variables together is by looking at the economy of the country. While this is not an all inclusive list of how each of the variables can be integrated, this discussion suggests that a company should not look at a single variable to decide on its strategy, but rather should look at the combination of variables, and their interactive effects, to select a strategy that will work best.

Obviously a company needs to know everything it can about a country and also be prepared to effectively implement a coherent strategy. Reasons for company failure need to be thoroughly investigated before attributing its failure to any single strategy.

IMPLEMENTATION

To operationalize the consideration of these multiple factors, one could employ a linear averaging approach. Under this technique, each criterion would be weighted according to its value for the firm based upon the cooperative judgment of the critical players in the decision-making process. Each country under consideration would be rated on each of these attributes and the summed weighted ratings would result in a global index. The rating assigned to each attribute (say, from 0 to 10) could be awarded based upon the extent to which it tends toward the extreme characteristics of *standardization* (10) or *localization* (0). These characteristics can be understood in light of those compared in Table 1, with 5 representing the mid-point. The more a country tended toward a high score, the more it would be best suited to a standardization approach, and the more it tended toward a low score, the more it would be suited to a localization approach.

Consider, as an example, Seiko Corporation's contemplation of the Latin American market. Table 2 suggests how Seiko might approach consideration of two countries: Brasil and Paraguay. (These choices are separate and apart from the those concerning the economic wisdom of entering the market.) The basic steps in the linear averaging approach include:

- Establish relevant criteria. This can be most easily and accurately accomplished by involving all those who play a direct role in the decision process. Have them outline the most critical decision criteria, then negotiate the differences.
- Establish weights. Involving the same decision influencers, employ the Delphi method through enough iterations to arrive at consensus.
- Conduct rating along each criterion. The same participants will need to estimate the value attributable to each country under consideration for each criterion.
- Multiply rates by weights and sum for each country. This will yield a global index by which the countries may be evaluated.
- Evaluate weighted ratings. The higher the index (above 5) the greater the case for *globalization*. The lower the index (below 5) the greater the case for *localization*.

CONCLUSION

With the tremendously increased involvement in international marketing on the part of firms of all sizes and types, and given the current state of perplexity over how one goes about choosing an appropriate orientation to strategic thrust in this environment, the 3 Ps of international strategic marketing planning can offer some assistance. An understanding of *place*, *people*, and *product*, and their interrelationships, can add significantly to the firm's ability to astutely choose the best fit between cultural factors and strategic marketing orientation.

TABLE 2
LINEAR AVERAGING OF RELEVANT COUNTRY CHARACTERISTICS

Characteristics	Components	Weight	Brazil	Paraguay
Place	Economy of the Country	0.2	8	2
	Availability of Local Partners	0.1	7	3
	Level of Competition	0.1	5	7
People	Consumer Tastes	0.05	4	5
	Consumer Sophistication	0.05	7	4
	Market Segments	0.15	8	3
Product	Product Classification (Local)	0.05	3	7
	State of Technology	0.1	3	3
	Culturally Sensitive	0.05	5	2
	Product/Corporate Reputation	0.1	9	4
	Perception of Product	0.05	7	3
Total		1.00	6.5	3.6

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