



# Strategic marketing in action

## A comparison of higher and lower performing manufacturing firms in the UK

Strategic  
marketing in  
action

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31

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – To contrast the role and practical application of strategic marketing in higher and lower-performing firms.

**Design/methodology/approach** – In-depth personal interviews with senior marketing executives in three matched high/low performing manufacturing firms in the UK were recorded, transcribed and analysed. The interview agenda was derived from the authors' own previous research studies, plus precedents in the literature.

**Findings** – These are structured around four key strategic marketing activities previously found to be characteristic of higher performing firms. They clearly show that such companies implement them with a far greater degree of skill, sophistication and ingenuity than do their lower performing counterparts. Above all, for the higher performers, strategic marketing is a truly cross-functional activity.

**Research limitations/implications** – The methodology of this study indicates a fruitful approach to further research aimed at extending and refining the findings and recommendations, though details requiring methodological attention are identified.

**Originality/value** – As an aid to marketing practitioners and educators alike, these findings and conclusions identify and describes a number of specific, applicable characteristics of successful strategic marketing.

**Keywords** Marketing strategy, Competitive advantage, Business performance, United Kingdom

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

Over the last decade, a good deal of research from around the world has shown the important contribution of a number of “textbook” strategic marketing practices to the achievement of superior competitive performance (Brooksbank *et al.*, 2001). Indeed, Day and Montgomery (1999), Thomas (2002) and others have pointed to the importance of such research, arguing that some of the most fundamental questions marketing academics should be continuously asking themselves relate to the extent to which practitioners actually practise textbook marketing, as well as the degree to which it has a positive influence on organisational performance. Yet one of the key weaknesses of many of the “success studies” reported over recent years (Brooksbank and Taylor, 2002; Lai *et al.*, 1992; Shaw, 1995) is that they serve to answer only the question what? in relation to high performance strategic marketing, and effectively ignore the underlying how to? (Siu and Kirby, 1998). Gautier (2002) and November (2004) lament the fact that most marketing academic research to date tends to provide little by way of practical insights or meaningful instruction for those who have to make the decisions. It is, therefore, with these observations in mind that the research reported has two main aims: first, to make a qualitative assessment of some of the key “textbook”



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determinants of high performance strategic marketing in the specific case of UK medium-sized manufacturing firms; second and most importantly, to identify and describe some applicable characteristics of effective strategic marketing, as an aid to both marketing practitioners and educators.

To meet these twin objectives, key marketing success factors relating to the expected differences between the strategic marketing practices of higher and lower performing firms are explored by means of personal interviews. Specifically, this study builds upon the authors' previous research findings and begins to examine, in greater depth and from a practical perspective, the true nature of high performance strategic marketing.

It is important to note that this paper will report the latest stage of a longitudinal investigation of one group of medium-sized manufacturing firms in the UK, which has spanned almost two decades (Brooksbank *et al.*, 2003). Indeed, it is only by virtue of the detailed information gained from this extended research programme in relation to firm performance in certain product and market situations, that it was possible to identify three matched pairs of higher and lower performers that were competing head to head in specific markets: information which otherwise would have been virtually impossible to elicit from other sources. The findings reported here derive from personal interviews with six senior marketing executives, one from each firm in the sample.

### **Strategic marketing success factors previously identified**

Through a series of mail questionnaires, our earlier research sought to make an assessment of the contribution that "textbook" strategic marketing practices had made to the achievement of both short-run and long-run competitive success within a particular group of manufacturing firms in the UK. Our aim was to test a number of hypotheses about what practices might differentiate the higher from the lower performers. These hypotheses were compiled on the basis of a comprehensive review of the reported empirical research. Although a few were not fully supported by the data and thereby drew into question the general applicability of certain traditional tenets of successful marketing as applied to manufacturing firms, a number of key marketing success factors were found to characterise the high performers over time. (For a full discussion, see Brooksbank *et al.*, 2003.) Four of those "evergreen" key success factors form the basis of this study: that higher performing manufacturing companies:

- (1) do more and better marketing research;
- (2) carry out a more comprehensive strategic situation analysis;
- (3) pursue a strategy based on providing superior value to the customer; and
- (4) make greater use of marketing information systems.

### **Research methodology**

Over many years, a variety of writers such as Mintzberg (1979), Gill and Johnson (1991), and Tapp (2004), have argued that the best way to study business practice is "from the inside" making it possible for the researcher to get "closer to the action" and thereby gain valuable insights into how companies actually go about doing what they do. Accordingly, this paper reports the findings obtained from personal interviews conducted in summer 2003 with senior marketing executives in six UK-based manufacturing companies.

The sample consisted of three matched pairs of competing firms operating within three separate product-market contexts, with one defined as “high performing” and one as “low performing” company in each pair. The use of matched pairs as the basis for a comparative study was developed from a review of reported empirical research in the area (Doyle *et al.*, 1985), and was chosen because it is a model that clearly allows for the sharpest possible contrast to be drawn between the marketing activities of higher and lower performing firms competing with one another in the same market. The six participant companies were selected from a database of information held on a total of 42 that had responded to three previous mail surveys (Brooksbank *et al.*, 2003). The final sample comprised those companies whose senior marketing executives had confirmed immediately before the interviews that the nature of their main products and markets was unchanged and that, over the period 1997-2002, their company had performed either “better” or “worse” than its major competitors. This judgment was made by reference to four specified performance measures used in all our previous analyses (profit, sales volume, market share, and return on investment), which are consistent with the work of other authors (Hooley *et al.*, 1984) and had been shown to be extremely reliable. The respondents were approached by telephone with the promise that all company details and individual responses would be kept confidential. Each interview lasted for approximately 90 min, and was designed to obtain information relating to each of the four key success factors under scrutiny. Responses were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Selected verbatim extracts are included in the body of the paper.

A profile of the participating companies is provided in Table I. All six firms were roughly comparable in terms of such basic criteria as number of employees, volume of annual sales turnover, and product strategy. They might properly be described as “medium-sized” in a UK context (Brooksbank, 1991). Five of the six described themselves as UK-owned, and all six senior marketing executives considered their company to be fully autonomous despite five being in fact part of larger groups of companies. All defined their main activity as “manufacturing” and their main market as “repeat-industrial”.

## Findings

The interviews were focussed around those marketing practices that related to the four key marketing success factors previously identified. The research findings are therefore presented accordingly.

### *High performers do more and better marketing research*

With regard to the use of marketing research, the interviewees were asked a range of questions about its perceived role, the amount and type conducted, how it was conducted, how often, and who conducted it. In addition, all interviewees were asked to tell the story of their latest research project. In discussing these issues, all six executives interviewed claimed that their company carried out a good deal of self-generated marketing research, while none reported having recently used the services of an external marketing research firm. This was explained as being on the grounds that their markets were so specialised that their information requirements were often beyond the scope of such firms. Nonetheless, the interviews clearly indicated that, not only did the high performers carry out their own marketing research

**Table I.**  
Self-reported sample  
characteristics

	Number of employees	Annual sales revenue	Ownership	Autonomy	Product strategy	Main market	Main activity
1st pair of matched firms	90 110	£4.8m £7m	UK = 2	Both fully autonomous	Both single business dominated <sup>a</sup>	Both "repeat industrial"	Both "manufacturing"
2nd pair of matched firms	170 250	£11m £8.5m	UK = 2	Both fully autonomous	Both single business dominated <sup>a</sup>	Both "repeat industrial"	Both "manufacturing"
3rd pair of matched firms	325 340	£17m £19m	UK = 1 Other = 1	Both fully autonomous	Both single business dominated <sup>a</sup>	Both "repeat industrial"	Both "manufacturing"

**Note:** <sup>a</sup> A single business dominated strategy is defined as one that is dependent on one major area of related products/services (similar technology and markets) which accounts for at least 70 per cent of total company sales (developed from Wrigley, 1974)

more often, they also conducted a greater variety of projects and with a higher degree of expertise, know-how, and commitment. For example, when describing their firm's latest marketing research project, respondents from the higher performing firms seemed more knowledgeable about the need and rationale for the research, explaining current research objectives with far greater clarity as well as appearing much more enthusiastic about the value of their research outcomes and its implications for future decision making. This view is aptly illustrated by this comment:

I can assure you our guys really know what they are doing and when MR is done properly like that I'd say it's a strategic weapon and an investment in the future – at least it is for us.

By contrast, their counterparts in the lower performing firms appeared less knowledgeable and less committed to marketing research, in some cases even to the point of being dismissive of research that had been recently undertaken by some members of staff. One respondent typified this attitude when he said:

There's a chap who does a lot of surveys for us but sometimes I wonder why we bother. I mean, it's not like we get much out of it.

Certainly, the interviews suggested a higher degree of personal involvement in marketing research among the senior executives from the more successful firms. Perhaps this finding helps to explain, in part at least, the lack of consensus in the empirical literature regarding the use of marketing research as an essential ingredient of competitive success (Hart and Diamantopoulos, 1992), since it stands to reason that marketing research outputs would be positively related to firm performance only if they were both relevant and actually put to a good use.

The market research method most often mentioned by all interviewees was the use of informal networking, mostly but not always undertaken by salespeople. For example, an executive from a lower performing firm commented:

Probably most of our research is done by using our various (sales) networks to talk to people.

Similarly, an executive from a higher performing firm said:

Our salespeople have a key responsibility for helping us to keep in touch with our marketplace.

However, the executives from the higher performers invariably went on to report the use of a much wider variety of research methods, driven by the desire to use only what would be the most appropriate approach for the particular objectives at hand. In the words of one such respondent:

We use a range of qualitative and quantitative techniques as necessary, and increasingly we're using the internet not only to search for information but also as a delivery device.

As might be expected, some of the methods most frequently mentioned by executives from the higher performers included telephone research, e-mail surveys, and desk research (usually referred to as "surfing the net" rather than visiting a library). It was clear that online market research was being used increasingly often. Two respondents from the high performing firms said that they were using the internet to conduct what they termed "focus group style" research by setting up a private chat-room. This was a form of research that they expected to use extensively in future, because it provided an ideal opportunity to foster links with a much wider community of customers, prospects,

technical specialists, consultants, and others spread over a large geographical area – something that had hitherto been quite difficult for companies operating in specialist markets such as theirs. Also noteworthy was that market research in the higher performing companies was commonly carried out by key staff from across all the functional areas of business, not just by sales and marketing people. For example, it became apparent that, alongside members of their salesforce, R&D or production staff were routinely involved in product development research with customers. One executive from a higher performing firm emphasised this point when he said:

We make use of anyone and everyone as and when we need them!

*High performers carry out a more comprehensive strategic situation analysis*

Under this heading, respondents were asked to discuss the importance of five types of situation analysis and the extent to which their company carried them out: internal (company), competitor, market, customer, and wider business environment. Although all described a number of activities in this arena, those from the lower performing firms clearly viewed the whole process of undertaking a situation analysis on a more simplistic level than did their counterparts in the higher performing firms. Indeed, it appeared that low performing firms were oriented towards analysing information for tactical rather than strategic purposes. For example, an internal analysis would invariably mean simply examining sales and cost information. As one executive explained:

I did our internal analysis only last month. It's not like we haven't got the data – its all on the computer – it's just that it takes a lot of time to actually make sense of it all.

Likewise, for the lower performing firms, the analysis of customers, markets and competitors was typically limited to a discussion surrounding salesforce feedback, and almost exclusively in terms of improving sales. By contrast, executives from the higher performing firms reported a more strategic and comprehensive approach. This was especially notable with respect to the time and effort invested in undertaking an internal analysis. Without exception, these respondents stressed the crucial importance of recognising, maintaining, and enhancing their company's distinctive capabilities and marketing assets, with a view to making the most of them as a source of competitive advantage. As one put it:

Understanding our potential and how we should be developing our skills and abilities is pretty much the focus of our internal analyses.

At this point, it is pertinent to highlight one of the key processes that the higher performers described when talking about how they conducted their internal analysis. All three emphasised that the collective knowledge, expertise, and practical experience of many of their long-serving staff provided a form of "accumulated wisdom" (as one interviewee called it), which had been built up over time and which actually represented an invaluable distinctive competence. Consequently, the value of simple but purposeful discussion among various members of staff was often stressed as being an internal analytical method of crucial importance. Such discussion not only facilitated a more insightful, shared understanding of the firm's strengths and weaknesses but also provided the necessary context in which this accumulated wisdom could somehow be transferred to newer members of staff. Unfortunately, the



respondents could not shed further light on the exact process by which this information transfer occurred, other than to suggest that one of the most important roles senior managers were expected to perform was as mentor or “coach” to their lesser experienced colleagues. It would therefore seem reasonable to postulate that the underlying process is akin to what has been termed “guided problem solving” (Leonard and Swap, 2004), in which a senior manager deliberately works alongside his or her protégé in various problem-solving situations with the intention of being able to transfer their knowledge, wisdom and know-how.

Perhaps unsurprisingly in view of our previous findings (Brooksbank *et al.*, 1992; Brooksbank *et al.*, 2003), the higher performers also reported greater familiarity and use with respect to the various formal tools of strategic analysis. Indeed, in keeping with a more recent study by Glaister and Falshaw (1999), those most commonly and apparently quite regularly used included SWOT and PEST analyses, and “what if” spreadsheets, although one executive reported the use of many more when he said:

SWOT charts, perceptual mapping, PEST analysis, “what if” spreadsheets, scenario building ... we use all those and more, in fact we regularly try out all sorts of new-fangled planning tools. They can all be helpful in one way or another.

He spoke in some detail about the development of his company’s SWOT charts being based on as much hard factual information and market research data as possible, as well as being highly focussed on a specific product-market combination as the primary unit of analysis, rather than being conducted at a more generalised and diluted corporate level. By contrast one respondent from a lower performing firm reported:

Yes, my team does draw up SWOT charts but we don’t adopt a very formal approach. I suppose we rely more upon our twenty-odd years of knowledge and experience in this industry.

Further, it became apparent that the higher performers had a better developed set of procedures than their counterparts for ensuring that strategic analysis and planning meetings would be more productive and outcome-rich. By contrast, respondents from the lower performing firms typically described these meetings as amorphous events that produced few tangible decisions. As one put it:

We do have fairly regular meetings ... usually when a particular problem or opportunity crops up that needs to be addressed, but we’ll often end up going round and round in circles.

On the other hand, it was particularly noticeable that the higher performers described their planning meetings as agenda-driven, sharply focussed and highly structured:

Our meetings are always tightly managed and almost always productive.

All six interviewees highlighted the importance of keeping abreast of technological advancements in their industry, with little notable difference between the higher and lower performers in this respect – as was to be expected, since all firms in the sample described their main activity as manufacturing. However, when asked about the degree to which they adopted a more re-active or pro-active posture in their planning activities, the lower performers were more likely to describe an approach which amounted to monitoring events or, at best, seeking to forecast them with a view to adapting their plans accordingly, whereas the higher performers were more inclined to attempt to project future scenarios with a view to planning to make the future happen.

Indeed, it was particularly noticeable that respondents from the higher performing companies would typically speak of “scenario planning” or “scenario building” in describing their company’s approach to strategic analysis and planning. As part of this process, they would regularly consult experts, such as business journalists or industry analysts. As one executive emphasised, it was becoming increasingly important, in view of the rapidly changing business environments of recent years, to be “more future-oriented”:

We certainly believe that preparing for our battles is more important than fighting them!

*High performers pursue a strategy based on providing superior value to the customer*

Respondents were asked to describe their current marketing strategy and strategic priorities for their main market, including specific information on target markets and the principal means by which they sought to compete for business in those markets. The strategy literature asserts that a firm can achieve longer term profitability by either increasing sales volume or securing productivity improvements (Doyle, 1998), and our previous research had suggested that the higher performing firms were more likely to prioritise the adoption of an aggressive strategy based on the pursuit of increased sales (Brooksbank *et al.*, 2003). However, somewhat surprisingly, the interviews revealed little difference between the two groups in this respect. Even though most of the marketing executives initially insisted that a major priority was to raise sales volume, almost within the same breath they were quick to point out that in a competitive industrial environment, simultaneous productivity improvements in the factory were of at least equal importance. Upon further questioning, it was evident, however, that the higher performers viewed the pursuit of productivity improvements not so much as a cost-cutting exercise as the ongoing development of a distinctive competence, which would enhance their firm’s ability to compete by being a low-cost producer.

With regard to the firm’s choice of target customers, the direction of discussion surrounding this topic was essentially always the same: whereas the respondents in the higher performers explained that their firms were in the process of narrowing the target, their counterparts in the lower performers were seeking to broaden it. Two remarks illustrate this polarity of approach:

Our strategy has been to concentrate on certain specialist markets with highly specialist products and services that are better than anyone else’s – and it’s working.

compared with:

It’s not so much a strategy as a never ending challenge for us to produce [the product] with higher and higher specifications at lower and lower prices ... and in greater volumes.

Thus, while the higher performers were concentrating their efforts on providing selected large corporate customers with increasingly specialised and customised products and services, and seeking to build deeply embedded long term relationships with these customers, the lower performers were looking to expand their market coverage (in one case through geographic expansion and in two cases by offering a wider product line). Accordingly, the descriptions of target customers given by respondents from the higher performing firms were far more detailed. Indeed, two of



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those were able to refer to written strategy statements that profiled their firm's target customers, and one commented:

We have a clearly written strategy for each of our markets. It specifies the sales and cost targets for the year as well as target customers and the competitive platform upon which we wish to compete. It's our blueprint for all managerial decision making.

Another was even able to provide a document that he called a "hit list" of target businesses with whom his firm was aiming to do business by the end of the year. He remarked that:

There's actually a different strategy for every customer because every customer wants something different. The trick is to target the right customers in the first place.

Further, unlike their counterparts from the lower performing firms, the these respondents emphasised that their competitive advantage was based on the provision of superior customer value, stressing the importance that their target customers attached to high product quality. When asked to define what that meant, the higher performers explained it in terms of what the customer wanted rather than technical excellence alone (although this was considered important). As one put it:

We aim to offer world class solutions for customers in our little pocket of the market, which in turn helps them to offer world class solutions to their customers and so on. It's a kind of virtuous circle from which we all benefit.

In relation to the achievement of high product quality, the impression was that the higher performing companies paid much more attention to the strategic aspects of their R&D and manufacturing capability, all three respondents explaining that their companies had seen fit to re-equip their factories completely over the previous ten years. Indeed, they all alluded to the growing importance of securing new process innovations and manufacturing methods for the explicit purpose of enhancing agility and the ability to adapt and respond to differing target customer requirements. They asserted that their marketing strategies were being facilitated, and to some extent driven, by rapid technological advancements in their manufacturing processes. This is consistent with findings of other studies (Jones-Evans and Kirby, 1995; Kirby and Jones-Evans, 1997).

Further discussion revealed that the development of increasingly customised new ways of doing business was another important component of marketing strategy for the higher performers. Discussion often centred around a number of methods by which they sought to work more closely with their customers, suppliers and distributors, and other influential parties in the channel, such as finance companies, industry experts, consultants and advisors. Many of these initiatives were described as coming about through the deliberate cultivation of personal networks, although one commonly mentioned approach that was said to facilitate this process was what one respondent described as "team selling". He was describing a process in which a particular salesperson is made responsible for overseeing the interface between one or more specific customer accounts, and a hand-picked team of specialist members of the company's staff. The aim is to build interpersonal links with key members of each customer's decision making unit, in order to cross-fertilise relationships, and all for the purpose of customising their products and services in ways that would achieve maximum customer satisfaction. Indeed, the interviews suggested that, among the higher performers, a focus on serving selected large

corporate customers with innovative and highly customised products and services was becoming increasingly important as an “ideas driver” itself. As one respondent observed:

Our main sources of ideas are our customers. If something matters to them, it matters to us . . . but then of course we only find out about these ideas because we’re constantly in a dialogue with them, listening to them and working with them.

However, this highly customer specific approach to innovation was not spoken of as “customer partnering” or forming “strategic alliances” in any strict or formalised sense. In fact, the higher performing firms viewed their independence and consequent “strategic flexibility” as being of paramount importance.

*High performers make greater use of marketing information systems*

Under this heading, the six respondents were asked to detail the nature and extent of their use of marketing information systems as well as their marketing intelligence-gathering and marketing control activities. Their responses suggested that by far the most important mechanism for marketing intelligence-gathering was sales force reporting, recalling the discussions of the role of market research.

In this respect, however, the higher performing companies once again differed from the others both in terms of the range of information covered and its detail. Their salespeople collected feedback information in all key areas (customers, competitors, markets and the wider business environment) typically via daily and/or weekly report forms, or other similar formalised procedures. Feedback information was generally compiled customer-by-customer and prospect-by-prospect. In fact, it became apparent that, for the higher performers, the role of the sales executive was broadly defined. One respondent emphasised that, just like all other members of staff, his company’s salespeople were expected to participate fully in all aspects of ongoing marketing planning and decision-making, and all played a pivotal role in ensuring that the firm’s marketing operations were always conducted as efficiently and as effectively as possible:

I can’t think of any member of staff who doesn’t have a responsibility to provide us with accurate and timely feedback information about some aspect of what’s going on out there.

By way of contrast, a respondent from a lower performing firm commented:

It’s the sole responsibility of our salespeople. After all, they’re the ones with their fingers on the pulse of the marketplace.

Besides the extensive use of salesforce reporting, another marketing intelligence-gathering activity mentioned more frequently by the higher performers was the use of customer satisfaction surveys. These were not necessarily the formal investigations that the term implies, but often took the form of relatively informal personal interviews with the firm’s key customers, and tended to be conducted by a senior marketing executive. Apart from the quality of feedback information obtained, this was seen as an important way of signalling the firm’s depth of commitment to servicing their customers to the very best of their ability, as well as a means of fostering important relationships among senior executives at boardroom level. Unlike their lower performing counterparts, these respondents were also keen to highlight a raft of other, quite specific, intelligence-gathering activities. One described the systematic follow-up analysis of both won and lost new business negotiations, taking

the simple form of a standardised fact-finding telephone call to one or more buyers who, over the previous month, had decided to proceed or not to proceed with a new piece of business. The same respondent also mentioned the extensive use of a “customer advisory panel” administered via the internet, as a means of accessing vital feedback information for the purposes of monitoring their key customers’ acceptance of the company’s offerings. Perhaps most significantly, all executives from the higher performers emphasised that many of their staff members, in one case all of them, had a clear remit to collect marketing intelligence, and that systems were in place to ensure this information could be stored, accessed, and if necessary, acted upon. As one put it:

It’s actually quite a formal procedure . . . we cross-check our performance against the plan on a regular basis and at boardroom level.

In a similar vein, another respondent from a higher performing firm described an annual “marketing intelligence gathering competition”. For a period of one month every year, all staff would be encouraged to submit any specific piece of new information they might have come across relating to the firm’s marketplace, together with a recommendation about what should be done about it, and those judged potentially the most useful would be rewarded.

## Conclusions

We conclude by detailing the extent to which our four “evergreen success factors” were found to differentiate the high performers, before discussing their implementation in practice: the answers to the how to? question invoked in the Introduction.

With regard to the first objective of this study, the overall findings should be a source of some comfort to those involved in the marketing training and educational professions. On the whole, they strongly suggest that many of the basic strategic marketing practices typically advocated in the mainstream academic and prescriptive literature (the what? answers) can indeed be considered to be among the most important determinants of higher competitive performance, at least in the case of UK-based repeat-industrial manufacturing companies.

However, the findings did not entirely match expectations derived from our own previous, more quantitative investigations. For example, although the higher performers clearly did more and better market research, it is noteworthy that all six respondents described the research that was being undertaken as entirely self-generated. None reported the use of commissioned research, commenting that their markets were so specialised as to be beyond the expertise of marketing research firms. Another example relates to the choice of a strategic focus. Rather than setting a clear strategic priority to grow company profit by selling more, respondents from both higher and lower achieving companies emphasised a twin-edged focus. This involved aiming to increase sales volume (albeit in different ways), whilst simultaneously, and with an equal measure of effort, seeking to secure ongoing productivity improvements through operational efficiencies in the factory. Also, and perhaps not surprisingly, our findings serve as a reminder that effective strategic marketing is much more a result of the combination of our four success factors (no doubt with other factors too) than of excellent execution in any one of these areas in isolation. Without exception, our discussions demonstrated that higher performers saw strategic marketing as an ongoing, iterative process. In essence, their strategic marketing approach can be characterised as follows:

- they compete by offering superior value, top quality, highly-customised products aimed at selected customers;
- they are then able to provide an exceptionally high level of on-going service and support by working with these customers as “informal partners”;
- in turn, these close customer relationships provide the impetus for innovation: not just new product innovation but also new ways of doing business and improvements in manufacturing methods; and
- these elements combine to further enhance their competitive edge.

With regard to the second objective of this study, not only did the higher performing firms demonstrate a better knowledge and understanding of strategic marketing, but they were far more proficient in its application. Clearly, they are differentiated from their lower performing counterparts by the level of sophistication and ingenuity with which their marketing activities are carried out. They could describe a far wider range of marketing initiatives and a more detailed set of prescriptions to answer the how to? question.

The list below summarises such activities found to be unique to the high performers:

- The routine involvement of senior managers in marketing research activities.
- The routine involvement of general staff in marketing research and other tasks traditionally carried out by marketing people.
- The extensive use of on-line approaches to marketing research.
- The use of well managed, inter-disciplinary strategic analysis and planning meetings held on a regular basis.
- The use of a wide range of strategic analysis and planning tools.
- The use of experienced marketing strategists as mentors to those who are less experienced.
- The regular consultation of a number of outside “industry experts” as an aid to decision-making.
- The use of a concisely written “strategy statement” as a blueprint for all subsequent decision-making and resource allocation over a specific time period.
- The development of various informal “partnering” initiatives with customers, suppliers and other external parties.
- The setting up of cross-functional “selling teams” for the specific purpose of communicating with various members of a prospective customer’s decision-making unit.
- The systematic use of comprehensive sales force reporting procedures.
- The systematic use of new business “win” and “lose” reviews/follow-ups.
- The setting up of “customer advisory panels” as a source of feedback information and ideas.
- The occasional use of short term, company wide, marketing intelligence gathering competitions.

Notably, it shows that what may be the most fundamental ingredient setting the higher performers apart can be summed up in one phrase: staff involvement. Without question, for the higher performers, strategic marketing is a truly cross-functional activity, to the point that traditional inter-departmental boundary lines become somewhat blurred.

Beyond its two specific objectives, this research has served a number of purposes. Besides providing further validation for the general applicability of the basic textbook principles of successful strategic marketing previously identified, it has offered practical guidelines and insights into the how to of effective strategic marketing in manufacturing firms, which it is hoped will be of value to both marketing practitioners and educators alike. In the process, it has shown that there remains much scope for further and more detailed studies.

While it is recommended that such research would do well to employ our approach of seeking to compare and contrast the marketing activities of matched pairs of higher and lower performing firms operating in the same market, hindsight shows that it could be refined. First, in order to be more confident that findings are truly indicative of the differences between the marketing practices of higher and lower performing medium sized firms, it would be necessary to increase the sample size. Secondly, insights could be enriched by more “involving” qualitative research methods, such as phenomenology and ethnography.

Such approaches would certainly necessitate a considerable additional investment of time, effort, and commitment. However, if we are serious about bridging what has been called the “gap” or “divide” between marketing academe and marketing practice (Hunt, 2002), the time has come, as suggested by Tapp (2004), for strategic marketing “success” researchers to meet the challenge head-on.

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