

AGILE MARKETING FOR ORGANIZATIONAL RESILIENCE IN A DYNAMIC BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT: A THEORETICAL REFLECTION

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Abstract

To survive. To thrive. To endure. These are cardinal objectives of firms; and all business firms strive to accomplish them. However, it is observed that whereas some organizations spring up and remain in the business landscape for several years, others come up and die away after a very short period of time. The aim of this paper is to advance agile marketing as a requirement for organizational resilience in the dynamic business environment. The paper, through an extensive review of literature found that, indeed, most proactive firms adopt agile marketing practices and processes to better their lot under the rapidly changing business conditions and also that agile principles are needed if firms must understand and respond to the demands of the environment speedily and seamlessly. The paper thus concluded that agile marketing enables firms to react promptly to changes in environmental conditions and enhances their competitiveness; and recommends that contemporary business firms should invest more in their environmental scanning efforts in order to be continually updated on the changes occurring in their environment so that they will be better placed to respond to them.

Keywords: *Agile marketing, dynamic business environment, competition, organizational resilience*

Introduction

Consumers are fickle; they are prone to switch their loyalty from one brand to another within a very short period of time. Also, the products that caught their admiration yesterday no longer appeal to them today; and it is very likely that the products they patronize today, tomorrow they will shun. The demands of today's market are many; and they are dynamic. The challenges firms faced in the last decade are not exactly the same as the ones being encountered today. There are marked changes; and it is possible that the next decade will present even newer challenges. Hence, businesses are expected to adjust and adapt or wither and die.

They must grow or go. Does the Nokia story come to mind? The unwillingness or inability of Nokia to embrace drastic change when it was required most was the biggest reason that brought down the mobile phone giant. It is therefore preeminent that firms must be flexible and adaptive. They must always bend to the dictates of the consumers, the demands of the market and the nudges of the competition. Indeed, it is a reality that firms in present day markets must shape up or ship out (Ateke & Iruka, 2015).

Firms must be agile in their marketing programmes and activities. Not only are they expected to scan the environment to gather useful information, they are also expected to respond to such information timeously. Agile marketing is the term used to describe the efforts of firms to study the business environment and respond to the demands it presents in good time. It is the capability required of firms to survive and thrive in a dynamic business environment by responding quickly and effectively to challenging market conditions, induced by competitive pressures and customer requirements (Gunasekaran & Yusuf, 2002; Cho et al, 1996). Following from these, this paper proposes agile marketing as a requirement for organizational resilience in the dynamic business environment.

The paper adopts the notion that resilience of business firms in the contemporary environment depends largely on their strategic sensitivity, their strategic response and their collective capabilities. Strategic sensitivity is the ability to extract useable information from the environment (Overby et al, 2006), strategic response is the ability of an organization to configure or reconfigure its resources and processes to respond to the demands of the environment (Dove, 2001), while collective capabilities refers to the ability of an organization to take advantage of the synthesis of its resources (Mavengere, 2014). It depends on how well the companies understand and relate to the dynamic and increasingly complex business environment (Mavengere, 2014). This is because firms must be agile in their operations if they must endure; and as Tallom and Pinsonneault (2011) suggests, marketing agility involves tactfully sensing and responding to changing business conditions with ease, speed and dexterity. Advances in technology, globalization of markets and shortened product lifecycle have contributed copiously to changes in business conditions. However, business firms can take several measures to relate to the environment in order to remain competitive; agile marketing is one of such measure.

Literature Review

Agile Marketing

The term “agility” is conceived differently by different scholars who seem to apply it in different fields of study; it is thus not surprising that there is no universally accepted definition of the concept (Abuzaid, 2015; Kettunen, 2008); since definitions of the concept have been laced with biased colorations, depending on the leaning of the definer. For example, Gunasekeran (1998) define it as the ability of an organization to respond quickly and effectively to the continuous and unexpected changes in the market so as to survive and prosper. It describes the speed with which a firm can observe and react quickly to threats and opportunities in the environment (Sambamurthy et al, 2003).

In the view Junni et al (2015) and Lin et al (2006), agility is the ability of the firm to continuously adapt to the changing and uncertain business environment, wherein competitive

edge is short-lived and constant strategic maneuvers are essential (Chen et al, 2010). It is the ability of the firm to make fast decisions while considering several possible alternatives simultaneously (Judge & Miller, 1991; Junni et al, 2015). Agility requires the firm to undertake prompt and seamless transformations in its configuration, programmes and activities (Brannen & Doz, 2012; Dyer & Ericksen, 2005), including leadership, strategy, innovation, knowledge sharing, organization etc. (Brueller et al, 2014; Lewis et al, 2014; Morgan & Page, 2008).

Marketing is eclectic. New ideas emerge with speed and replace old ones (Alzoubi et al, 2011). The concept of agility is one such concept that has gained prominence in marketing. With roots in software development, and then applied in the manufacturing units of firms, with the intent of moving manufacturing from a rigid and mass production schedule, to a flexible and customization oriented schedule with a view to meeting changing market demands and competitive moves (Lewis et al, 2014). It was developed as a strategic competitive tool aimed at enhancing product development (Alzoubi et al, 2011). Agility thus, confers on firms, the ability to adjust to emerging values; the ability to re-invent in order to cope with change; and represents an essential for organizational success in private and public sectors; as well as for profit and non-profit oriented institutions.

In marketing parlance, agility is a term used to describe the ability of firms to adjust, reposition or redirect their marketing programmes and activities smartly, in reaction to variations in customer requirements, conditions in the market and pressures from competitors in order to improve marketing performance. It is a set of concepts that informs a flexible approach to serving changing and uncertain customer demands, a market or respond to competitors by breaking larger projects into smaller tasks (Stocking, 2012). It is a marketing process whose catch phrase is: do, learn, adapt (Stocking, 2012). Proactive firms adopt agile marketing to address issues in the business environment. Experian (2010) suggests that agile marketing is about being flexible and responsive in the firm's marketing programmes. Business firms often experience poor performance in terms of low customer patronage, shrinking market share, low profits, etc. (Amah et al, 2013); owing to changes in consumer preferences, regulatory frameworks and activities of competitors. Agile marketing allows firms to cope with such marketplace shifts and position them for prosperity, against all odds.

Basically, agile marketing is tactical in approach, and requires marketing teams to focus their efforts on high profile projects, complete these project, measure their impact and then strive to improve the result continually and incrementally. Agile marketing is an abstract concept; yet there are observable indices that will inform whether or not a firm practices agile marketing or is tending towards agile marketing. Alzoubi et al (2011) identifies employee empowerment, customer oriented culture, information technology, organic structure and learning organization as such indicators of agile marketing; while Lin et al (2006), Weber (2002), Sharifi and Zhang (1999) and Yusuf et al (1999) identified collaborative relationship, process integration, information integration and customer/marketing sensitivity as the major indicators of marketing agility.

To be successful, agile marketing must be transparent (account for every marketing expenditure and measure how they impact on performance), interactive (streamlined to reduce

processing time and eliminate approval bottlenecks that costs time and money; must be cooperative and collaborative), iterative (must focus on customers and their evolving expectations in order to deliver great experience to them), responsive (must respond to customers promptly), and real-time (should be able to adapt to emerging trends in the environment as soon as they occur). When successfully instituted, agile marketing enable firms to respond quickly to changes in the market, produce rapid campaigns that can be optimized over time, try several things and repeat the ones that are successful, stay close to their customers across multiple channels and use resources from other units to augment marketing efforts.

Organizational Resilience

The resilience of a business organization is measured in terms of how it is able to adapt, cope, survive and prosper, in the face of abrupt and sometimes hostile variations in the business environment. Organizational resilience is thus the ability of an organization to anticipate, prepare for, respond and adapt to incremental change and sudden disruptions in order to endure and flourish (BSI, 2015). A resilient organization adapts to changing environmental conditions in order to remain fit for purpose over the long term. It learns from its own experiences and also from the experiences of others (Zhang & Liu, 2012). It is focused more on business improvement; and is a futuristic strategic enabler (Lengnick-Hall & Beck, 2005) because resilient firms are flexible, proactive, anticipatory and creative; they exploit new opportunity through calculated risk taking. Furthermore, BSI (2015) suggests that organizational resilience involves the adoption of best practices to deliver continual business improvement, embedding competence and capability across all units of an organization. A resilient organization is adaptive, robust and competitive; it does not only survive for a long time, it also prospers (BSI, 2015).

Businesses operate in challenging environments, but the challenges of the environment also present opportunities for proactive firms. Cultivating a resilient organizational culture therefore better positions a firm to prosper where others fail. Some of the principles that resilient firms employ to remain competitive according to Everly (2011) are (1) they invest in their client base (2) they are innovative in times of adversity (3) they invest in their leaders; and (4) they invest in all levels of their workforce. Zhang and Liu (2012) and Chakravarthy (1982) suggest that the essence of management is coping with change, overcoming adversity and functioning adaptively. It thus behooves on managers to incorporate the perspective of resilience into their programmes; since organizational resilience is fundamental if firms must respond effectively to change or crisis that disrupts the established or expected trend of events without getting devastated for an extended period of time (Horne & Orr, 1998).

Organizational resilience is neither a chance happening nor a one off exercise; it is continually achieved through ongoing relationships and interaction with all stakeholders.

Thus achieving organizational resilience requires commitment from the whole firm in a top-down direction and bottom-up engagement, through clear communication. In essence, resilience is what an organization does with what happen to it, and not what happens to the organization. It however requires product excellence, process reliability and people behavior to

be effective (BSI, 2015). BSI (2015) also states that a firm should be resilient in its operations, supply chain and information domains; while strategic adaptability, agile leadership and robust governance are identified as the key benefits of organizational resilience.

Resilience ethos, situation awareness, management of keystone vulnerabilities, and adaptive capacity are the four major factors in organizational resilience according to Lee et al (2013).

The Dynamic Business Environment

The environment of organizations consists of internal and external forces that influence a company's operation by presenting opportunities and threats to the organization. It is a set of controllable and uncontrollable forces that impinge on the organization's operation and affect its fortunes (Kennerley et al, 2003). The environment of firms affects their present and future activities. It is situational and is unique to each firm (Kew & Stredwick, 2005). Whereas the forces internal to a firm are relatively stable and largely controllable; the external forces tend to be complex, turbulent and highly dynamic. Some changes in the external environment are so dramatic; they are easily noticed, but others may be subtle and may creep up on an industry over an extended period of time. These changes take many forms and create new challenges and opportunities. Firms therefore pay close attention to the external forces with a view to identifying the threats and opportunities in it. Thus, the structure and decision making in an organization is influenced by environmental complexity and volatility (May et al, 2000).

The forces of the business environment help or hinder the development of businesses because businesses do not have absolute control over these forces. But to thrive and flourish, firms require healthy business environment. There is common agreement among scholars and business practitioners that firms operate in a dynamic, unstable and ambiguous environment where only firms that pursue market oriented values are able to develop capabilities necessary to compete survive and grow (Doole & Lowe, 2005).

The business environment is changing constantly and rapidly too, due to changing customer requirements, decreasing product life cycle, globalization and technological advancement; indeed, firms operate in a constantly evolving business environment (Dodd, 2014; Banyte & Salickaite, 2008); also, competing firms that aspire for a greater share of the consumers' mind and wallet (Ateke & Ishmael, 2013) have continually mounted pressure on one another. Thus, general areas of environmental change that affect businesses as found in literature include changing customer requirements, changing market conditions, intensity of competition, technology, social factors (Lin et al, 2006; Christopher, 2000), global business trends and marketing channel structure.

Agile Marketing as a Requirement for Organizational Resilience

Marketing agility is the extent to which a firm is able to configure or reconfigure its marketing programmes and efforts, both proactively and /or reactively, with a view to effectively meeting the challenges of rapidly changing customer and environmental demands (Shalender et al, 2015). Marketing agility is a product of organizational learning. The learning and growth process of businesses may be emergent or controlled (Poolton et al, 2006). Nonetheless, this learning and growing contributes significantly to the firm's resilience.

Marketing agility requires sustained and astute management of innovation to enable the firm cope with variations in markets, technology and competition.

Change is a prominent feature of the competitive business environment. Change defies accurate prediction; yet, firms must induce change; or be forced to respond it.

In either case, firms are required to be on the alert always. Literature suggests that change is driven by several factors, chief of which are customers' and vendors' expectations, new products and technology (American Management Association, 2006); however, coping with or managing change in the business environment requires agility on the part of the firm. Also, marketing performance is not a static goal that firms can achieve once and for all; it is a moving target that requires sustained effort in a journey that never ends (Sanchez & Nagi, 2001); thus Richards (1996) suggests that, in present day markets where continuous and unanticipated changes are rampant, marketing agility enables firms to thrive.

Contemporary firms grow and survive in direct proportion to how well they understand and respond to the dynamic and increasingly complex business environment Mavengere (2014). Agile marketing practices have thus continued to rise in prominence and have become preferred methods of conducting marketing activities the world over. Relying on agile marketing, firms can react faster to changes in the market, deliver superior quality products, and also get ahead of the competition (Atlassian n.d). As competition intensifies, marketing programmes of firms increasingly gets more customer-focused. Hence timely response to customer requirement has become an essential in business. Firms are therefore giving close attention to customers' ideas and suggestions, since they must deliver the exact products the customers need in good time, or lose them to the competitors. Thus, agile marketing must necessarily be an initiative led by the top-echelon of the firm if it must succeed, and must include a thorough strategic and tactical plan that would inform fundamental change across the firm.

In view of the dynamism that has characterized the business environment and the desire of firms to remain in business; marketers have recognized marketing agility as a critical attribute of successful marketing programmes.

Conclusion

The role of marketing in organizations have grown bigger and more tasking over the years, and more especially, in today's digital reality (Visser et al, 2015); such that marketers now require greater scientific and technical abilities to engender agility for adaptation to rapidly and constantly changing conditions. Many proactive marketing organizations therefore use agile techniques to keep up with emerging conditions. The era of conducting marketing activities with emphasis on making sales and profit has gone; we are now in an era of building, maintaining and expanding relationship with customers. Customers whose behaviour cannot be predicted with any measure of precision, but who must be served satisfactorily.

Agile marketing enhances a firm's ability to sense changing customer requirements and empowers the firm to adapt itself to always create and deliver value to the customers in line with their changing tastes and preferences. It is also very helpful in equipping the firm to respond to competitors' moves in good time. It will therefore be congruent to propound that

agile marketing is indeed a needful capability that firm must enshrine as a culture in their business operations.

There is no gainsaying the fact that the business environment will continue to change. Firms must therefore continue to be flexible and adapt to the changing conditions. Agile marketing enables organizations to react promptly to changes in environmental conditions and also enhance their competitiveness. Firm must therefore necessarily embrace principles and practices that promote marketing agility and be adaptive in order to resilient in the business landscape. The fluidity of the present day environmental conditions has denied marketers the luxury of planning and designing marketing programmes that are intended to run for a long period of time. Marketers are rather challenged to contrive programmes on the go, and continuously adapt these programmes to changing customer, market and competitive demands in order to enhance the competitiveness of the firm.

Ever-changing environmental conditions require firms to be adaptive and seek growth through flexible marketing practices. Pundits in marketing have thus espoused the need for firms to respond promptly to the earliest signs of change in the business environment. This is in view of the reality that changes in the environment present not only threats to firms, but opportunities too. Thus marketers need proactive, rather than reactive marketing initiatives to exploit the opportunities that come with changing environmental conditions. Agile marketing practices and approaches make it easier to identify and respond to change; whether a firm sees a need to guard against a threat or to exploit an opportunity. It is thus the considered view of this treatise that marketing agility is a sorely needed organizational capability for firm that seeks to thrive in the fast-paced and constantly changing modern day business environment.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusion reached above, this paper recommends that firms should adopt flexible marketing practices that enhance their adaptive and resilient capacity. The paper also recommends that firms invest in education and capacity building of their management staff because education according to King and McGrath (2002) positively impacts growth of a business firm. Additionally, firms with large stock of human capital in terms of education, vocational training and industry experience can adapt their enterprises to changing environmental conditions more prudently (King & McGrath, 1998). The paper further recommends that firms in the contemporary business environment should as a matter strategic necessity; invest more on their environmental scanning efforts in order to be continually updated on the changes occurring in their environment and the dimensions such changes are taking; so that they will be better placed to respond to them effectively.

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