

Is any relationship between competitive strategies and CSR? - Implications for retailers strategy

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Is any relationship between competitive strategies and CSR? - Implications for retailers strategy

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Abstract

Buyers expect from retailers to act in accordance with the principles of corporate social responsibility (CSR)- to offer safe products, get involved in charitable activities, support local communities or participate in solving social problems, fairly treat employees and suppliers. On the basis of their own knowledge consumers attribute stores with higher or lower level of social engagement. Therefore, it becomes important for retailers to incorporate their strategy within the scope of CSR. In this context, the question arises whether there is a relationship between retailers' strategies of competition and socially responsible behaviour. Retailers position themselves in the minds of buyers, emphasizing the availability of their facilities, policy of low prices, high quality, wide range of products, intensive promotion or quality of service. The more clear and precise their image is, the more benefits they gain from target markets.

Competition between retailers leads to these those attributes in communicating the image, but their repetition force them to create new criteria of positioning in the market. They should be compatible with existing strategies to successfully compete. But little is known about the relationship between strategies of low prices, diversification or concentration and perception of social commitment of a retailer. Therefore, the study was conducted, which aimed to confront the perception of the buyers of social engagement in the context of retailers' competitive strategies. The study included a representative sample of 1000 Poles. The results indicate that buyers assign different types of competitive strategies different kinds of responsibilities. Also some dimensions of demographic, geographical and economic determinants were tested to learn if they are statistically significant. The consumers' belief has also varied in intensity. As a result, it may encourage retailers who compete on the basis of price or differentiation to invest in specific, the most awaited by buyers CSR activities. The research was a part of a project financed by the National Science Centre, based on the Decision No. DEC-2011/03/B/HS4/03576.

Key words: CSR, competitive strategies, demographic, geographic, economic dimensions of segmentation

Competitive strategies in retailing-theoretical background

Analyzing the relationship between companies' social responsibility and the competitive strategies selected by them, it is worthwhile to pay attention to the sources of competitive advantage, which determine the way companies compete with other businesses on the market.

Literature presents a variety of classifications of competitive advantages. The most frequent criterion of division is the advantage (potential and effective) type and its source. Taking into account this criterion, K. Obłój (2010) lists four basic types of advantage, important also from the point of view of trade companies:

- natural advantage – its source may be the location, access to resources, or legal regulations (patents, certificates),

- advantage resulting from the price – differentiation relation – it appears when a company can sell its products at prices lower than its competitors, or offer a higher quality level,
- advantage in the area of the service system and offered solutions – it results from the network of long-term relations between a company and its customers (the condition is a careful selection of customers, product range and constant monitoring),
- advantage in barriers to entry - it means building more and more effective barriers to entry for competitors.

From the point of view of trade companies, it is increasingly significant to base their competitive advantage on one of the three major processes, taking place in each company (Levitt 1983, p. 92-102): building new offers, shaping relationships with customers and managing supply chains. Trade companies can achieve competitive advantage under three conditions. Firstly, they will have a strong presence in customers' awareness. Secondly, they will offer a value significant for buyers. Finally, they will possess resources and skills difficult to emulate (Śmigielska 2007).

Publications dealing with strategic management present various approaches to differentiating competitive strategies. In this article the assumed criterion of division are the sources of competitive advantage described above. Strategies determined by the market position, or competitive tools are beyond the our scope of interest, although it should be stressed that these aspects cannot be omitted in the characteristics of the selected strategies. According to M. Porter, two types of advantage allowed for distinguishing three strategies, which in M. Sullivan's and D. Adcock's opinion, can be related to trade companies (2003, p 410). They are as follows:

- strategies of retailers offering their products at low prices,
- strategies of retailers caring about high quality of their service and products,
- strategies of retailers focused on proximity to customers

Strategies of retailers offering their goods at low prices are related to the fact that they aim to reduce costs through, among others (Stefańska 2010, p. 104) by means of:

- negotiating lower purchase prices,
- introducing products under own labels, which enables them to generate a higher profit margin,
- lowering the logistic and promotion costs by shifting them to suppliers,
- decreasing the operating costs of shops, e.g. through reducing the employment costs.

In general, companies using this strategy look for a possibility to reduce costs both inside the organization and in the supply chain. The result is lower prices of the offered goods, which are advantageous for end-user. This strategy can be employed mainly by large organizations with a big bargaining power (e.g. in relations to suppliers or employees), but also with a high internal potential, allowing for the organization's development. Companies using the low price strategy are, among others: WalMart, Aldi, or discount chains Netto, or Biedronka.

An entirely different type of strategy is the one whereby retailers offer high quality of service and products. These strategies are adapted to particular expectations of selected target markets, which are ready to bear the costs of the variety of the offer, its high quality and the benefits related to its purchase. Very often distinguishing an offer in this way is prestigious in nature and connected with special conditions and place of purchase, level of service, etc. It is also related to marketing, technological and organizational innovations used by companies implementing the strategy of high quality of service and products. This strategy requires building a network of long-lasting relations between the retailer and the end-users, as its

implementation entails high costs, and also small price-sensitivity of the target segment. Examples of chains which use this strategy are: Alma delicatessen, Krakowski Kredens, and Organic Farma Zdrowia S.A., the biggest in Poland chain of delicatessen shops with ecological products. Special product range and service is also offered by a jewelry chain Kruk, chains offering leather goods: Witchen and Ochnik, and others.

The last type of strategies used by trade companies are those based on proximity to consumers. These strategies involve focusing on a chosen market segment (or a small number of segments), offering to consumers from this segment not only products, but also comprehensive services aiming to solve particular problems. Companies choosing this strategy often play the role of professional counselors or solution providers. Although this strategy may entail higher costs, with a large scale of operation a company can become a cost leader. Examples of chains implementing such strategies are: IKEA and Decathlon.

The selection of a strategy is to a large degree determined by the possessed or possible to achieve competitive advantage.

CSR in retailing

The concept of Corporate Social Responsibility is arousing interest of both theoreticians and practitioners. Carroll's, Moir's, Visser's, and also Porter's and Kramer's works deal with issues related to it. Trade and consumers' behavior from the perspective of CSR are studied by Bhattacharya, Sen, and also Hillier, Jones and Comfort. What is more, analyses of retailers' strategies also allow for a conclusion that over the past two decades the CSR concept has become indispensable for such companies. Consequently, retailers accept economic, legal and ethical responsibility for the effects of their activity, as well as get involved in charitable actions. In practice it means that in their operation they do not aim at the economic results exclusively, but also take into account the expectations of their stakeholders: customers, suppliers, employees and local communities. Another vital dimension of CSR are actions undertaken with a view to the protection of natural environment, for instance CO₂ reduction, reduction of packaging, investment in infrastructure, or participation in charitable initiatives, such as support for institutions (schools, sports facilities), or individuals (sportspeople, students, people in need), etc. The scale of such activities undertaken by a company is normally shown in the sustained development or CSR reports. The world largest retail chains emphasize the importance of CSR for their relations with stakeholders, broadly reporting the range of undertaken initiatives every year. These are, among others: Walmart, IKEA, Tesco, Auchan, Carrefour, the Metro group, Safeway, Marks and Spencer, the Body Shop and Lidl. However, some of them more scarcely inform about the results of the undertaken actions. Yet, consumers' expectations make retailers undertake initiatives which benefit buyers, suppliers, communities and employees more often than before, as well as inform about them. The degree of involvement in the CSR activities varies for different companies. Disregarding the types of shops in retail chains, the study focuses on identifying the relationship between the perception of competitive strategies and the perceived social involvement of retailers. The following hypotheses were formulated:

1. Perception of retailers' activity within CSR is determined by competitive strategies.
2. Demographic variables, such as: sex, age, education, income or place of living do not significantly differentiate the social perception of socially responsible retailers.

Methodology of research

The research was conducted by means of the CAPI method in May 2013. It had a representative character, with the random sampling method. The seven-point Likert scale was

used for measuring the accordance of attitudes with presented opinions. At the beginning respondents were given the definition of social responsibility in business, in order to avoid misunderstanding of questions asked during the interview. The definition was created by A. Carroll in the model of pyramid. According to him CSR means voluntarily taken responsibility- economic, ethical, legal and philanthropy activity (Carroll 1999, s. 268-295).

Table 1. The demographic and socio-economic structure of respondents

Sex	No. of responses	Percentage
Man	476	48
Woman	524	52
Total	1,000	100
Age	No. of responses	Percentage
Up to 29	263	26
From 30 to 39	179	18
From 40 to 49	147	15
From 50 to 59	179	18
60 and over	232	23
Total	1,000	100
Education	No. of responses	Percentage
Elementary/lower secondary	182	18
Vocational	271	27
Secondary	394	39
University	153	15
Total	1,000	100
Family's monthly income in zloties	No. of responses	Percentage
Up to 1,500	135	14
From 1,501 to 2,500	240	24
From 2,501 to 4,000	261	26
Over 4,000	133	13
Responses given	769	77
No responses	231	23
Total	1,000	100
Place of living	No. of responses	Percentage
Village	380	38
Town up to 19,999 inhabitants	130	13
Town up to 49,999 inhabitants	115	12
Town up to 200,000 inhabitants	160	16
Town over 200,000 inhabitants	215	22
Total	1,000	100
Children in household	No. of responses	Percentage
Yes	300	30
No	700	70
Total	1,000	100

Source: own elaboration based on surveys

Results of research

Social responsibility is a multidimensional concept denoting a specific kind of attitude and conduct of a company towards both its stakeholders and the natural environment. As research made by Stefańska (2014), the level of consumers' knowledge about CSR is low – only 6.5%

of respondents recognize the idea of CSR. According to another research conducted on a representative sample of Poles, commissioned by Employers of the Republic of Poland (2012, p. 10), the result is even lower - only 3.5% of Poles are familiar with the CSR concept, although in younger age groups this proportion is higher – 16%. In consequence, the assessment of perception is done on the basis of an imagined way in which socially responsible entities may act. While shopping, buyers use specific heuristics (e.g. a low-standard shop will have lower prices, a high-standard one – higher). Nevertheless, we do not know how they interpret CSR in terms of a competitive strategy – e.g. whether or not the low prices strategy means a low level of the socially perceived retailer’s social involvement and, as a result, how retailers should form their strategies.

These doubts are the subject of our study. Consumers were asked to express their opinion about a number of issues related to CSR, with reference to different types of competitive strategies. Retail outlets were described in the following way:

- shops which sell their goods cheaply,
- shops which offer high-quality products, with a high level of customer service,
- small, local shops, operating in your neighborhood.

Outlets were assigned some key attributes, which enabled consumers to quickly identify their types of competitive strategies. At the same time consumers assessed retailers activities related to charity, relationships with employees, suppliers and local communities, as well as protection of environment. These belong to the second dimension of the assessment – social responsibility. Buyers were asked if retailers:

- have good social responsibility programs, e.g. charity actions for children, ecological actions, such as recycling of used batteries or packaging,
- have good programs for their workers (e.g. above-standard health care, extra training courses),
- are engaged in the protection of environment (e.g. reduce energy consumption, reduce packaging, offer “eco” products),
- sell Fair Trade products, i.e. those produced without the use of child labor and workers employed in their production are decently paid,
- sell products from local suppliers (producers),
- finance local communities (e.g. sponsor play grounds, school equipment, co-finance construction of roads and sidewalks),
- their employees are paid fairly and on time,
- research consumers’ needs,
- have employees who are helpful for their customers,
- offer safe products,
- honestly inform about the quality of their offer,
- employ contract workers, not freelancers,
- are sufficiently equipped with tools or devices which facilitate their employees’ work.

For their assessment, consumers used the seven-point Likert scale, where 1 meant: I disagree entirely, 2 – I disagree to a large extent, 3 - I rather disagree, 4 – I neither agree, nor disagree, 5 – I rather agree, 6 – I agree to a large extent, 7 – I entirely agree. The obtained results are presented in table 2 as mean values. The evaluated indexes in the form of mean values showed statistically valid differences (test Chi sq., $p < 0.001$). Their analysis allows for drawing interesting conclusions. Firstly, the mean does not take extreme values. It fluctuates around 4, which is a neutral value. Secondly, the strategy of differentiation is the most highly assessed one in terms of CSR. The strategy of low prices received the lowest note, which means that this strategy is to the smallest degree associated with a retailer’s attitude of social involvement.

Table 2. Indexes of social responsibility vs. competitive strategies in consumers' opinion

Opinions	Retailers offering their goods at low prices		Retailers offering high quality of products and service		Retailers focusing on proximity to buyers	
	mean	standard deviation.	mean	standard deviation	mean	standard deviation
Have good social responsibility programs	4,05	1,05	4,14	0,98	4,02	1,04
Have good programs for employees	3,99	1,07	4,26	0,99	4,06	1,02
Are engaged in the protection of environment	3,99	1,02	4,24	0,97	4,05	1,02
Sell Fair Trade products	4,00	0,99	4,16	0,97	4,13	0,98
Sell products from local suppliers	4,43	1,03	4,42	0,99	4,66	1,05
Finance the needs of local communities	3,88	1,07	4,15	1,00	3,91	1,10
Pay their employees decently and on time	4,12	1,06	4,35	1,00	4,34	0,99
Research consumers' needs	4,28	1,05	4,52	0,97	4,37	1,07
Have workers who are helpful for customers	4,54	1,04	4,67	1,01	4,68	1,02
Offer safe products	4,43	0,95	4,59	0,94	4,60	0,96
Honestly inform about the quality of their offer	4,32	1,03	4,43	0,99	4,52	0,98
Employ contract workers, not freelancers	4,09	1,04	4,28	0,96	4,21	1,02
Are sufficiently equipped with tools and devices to facilitate their employees' work	4,34	1,01	4,51	0,98	4,39	1,00
Perceived CSR index	4,19	-	4,36	-	4,30	-

Source:Stefańska 2014, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego w Poznaniu, Poznań, p. 211-212

The presented research results confirm that the types of a retailers' competitive strategies are of considerable significance for the perception of their social involvement. What is more, these are the differentiation strategies based on determinants other than price that result in a higher assessment of a retailers' CSR. Consumers are more convinced that retailers implementing differentiation strategies are socially involved than it is the case with retailers implementing low price strategy.

Demographic, geographical and economic variables conditioning CSR assessments in the context of competitive strategies

Another issue dealt with in our study is the identification a relationship between demographic variables characterizing respondents and the way in which they perceive socially responsible retailers. It has turned out that this perception is different for different types of consumers. Taking into account such demographic variables as: sex, age, education, income and place of living, along with the familiarity with the CSR concept, assessments of retailers in terms of competitive strategies are varied (table 3). It should be noted that these are the variables which have been traditionally used for market segmentation.

Table 3. Assessment of retailers' social involvement from the point of view of demographic variables – mean values

	Retailers offering goods at low prices	Retailer offering high quality of products and service	Retailers focused on the proximity to consumers
Sex			
Woman	3,87	4,68	4,30
Man	3,85	4,71	4,31
Age			
Up to 29	4,20	4,36	4,30
From 30 to 39	4,22	4,43	4,28
From 40 to 49	4,27	4,44	4,41
From 50 to 59	4,15	4,31	4,24
60 and over	4,14	4,30	4,31
Education			
Elementary/lower secondary	4,14	3,91	4,61
Vocational	4,24	4,02	4,63
Secondary	4,23	4,09	4,74
University	4,04	3,93	4,50
Family's income (gross in zloties)			
Up to 1500	4,31	4,43	4,46
From 1501 to 2500	4,12	4,33	4,29
From 2501 to 4000	4,28	4,39	4,33
Over 4000	4,17	4,48	4,38
Place of living			
Village	4,14	4,36	4,32
Town up to 19,999 inhab.	4,41	4,49	4,42
Town up to 49,999 inhab.	4,11	4,20	4,15
Town up to 200,000 inhab.	4,29	4,57	4,46
Town over 200,000 inhab.	4,12	4,22	4,16

Source: Own elaboration based on a survey.

1 – I entirely disagree, 2 – I disagree to a large extent, 3 – I rather disagree, 4 – I neither agree nor disagree, 5 – I rather agree, 6 – I agree to a large extent, 7 – I agree entirely.

When we compare means, only some means demographic and geographic variable are statistically significant. The analysis shows that sex is a variable irrelevant for the assessment of social involvement in the context of a competitive strategy. Also earlier research indicated this feature's irrelevance for the evaluation of the CSR activity. As far as

age is concerned, the only statistically valid difference appeared between consumers over forty and over fifty in the response to the question about the honest information about the offer quality (test Chi sq., $p < 0,05$). The remaining age groups do not reveal any particular differences in their evaluation of the CSR activities.

Another variable is education. In this area differences between means are statistically significant (test Chi sq., $p < 0,01$). However, it has not been confirmed that there is a tendency in the evaluation of retailers which would correspond to the growing education level. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that respondents with secondary education the most highly assess retailers in terms of CSR. People with the university education are more critical about retailers using low price and concentration strategies, compared to respondents with lower education, which is indicted by lower means.

Income is a variable irrelevant for the perception of CSR in the context of competitive strategy. It means that it is not the financial status that determines the CSR perception, though it does determine consumers' buying behavior and influence their behavior, especially in the time of crisis. Likewise, the familiarity with the CSR concept is not significant in the analyzed context.

It is an interesting fact that a place of living is a factor affecting the assessment of socially responsible retailers with various strategies. Retailers' evaluations depended on whether consumers lived in small or big towns. Moreover, retailers known on the local markets tend to obtain slightly higher notes.

Discussion of results

Research conducted by Devinney et al. (2006, pp. 30-37) and Roberts (1996, pp. 79-85) showed that demographic variables are not good determinants of socially responsible consumers. Roberts noticed, among others, that sex, level of income and age are weak predictors of socially responsible behavior. At the same time he proved that education and profession do not belong to factors differentiating socially responsible behavior, which contradicts a claim that socially responsible consumers belong to higher social classes. However, results of other research show that an ethical consumer is the one with higher income, higher social class and higher education (De Pelsmacker, Janssens and Mielants 2005, p. 51).

This study aims at verifying the significance of demographic variables for the perception of social involvement of retailers implementing various competitive strategies. It proves that there is a relationship between retailers' competitive strategies and the socially responsible attitude assigned to them by consumers. Retailers implementing low price strategies are perceived as less socially involved.

The next step was to find out if geographic, demographic and economic variables are of significance for this evaluation. The conducted analyses indicate that in the case of low price competitive strategy the place of living is a statistically valid factor. For the differentiating strategy not only the place of living is relevant, but also education. As for the concentration strategy, solely education is of significance.

In conclusion, some variables, such as sex or income, turned out to be irrelevant for the perception of a competitive strategy, whereas others, such as a place of living or education are weak predictors of the evaluation of retailers' perceived CSR activity. It can be a consequence of changes in retailers' strategies. Until recently, they implemented relatively pure competitive strategies, but as a result of both the 2008 crisis and the increasingly fierce competition, retailers are looking for new ways of attracting customers, by adapting to consumer trends who seek for better shopping opportunities. Buyers seeking low price offers are not only those with low income, but also consumers with higher income who follow the so-called smart shopper trend (Reformat 2014, p. 611-624).

Managerial implications

The presented research results are of a high significance for practitioners. Firstly, consumers do perceive CSR in the context of a competitive strategy. Consequently, there is a need to more precisely combine a competitive strategy with the CSR activity. Moreover, it is important to find out which particular CSR activities strengthen the image of a retailer implementing the low price, differentiation, or concentration strategy. What is more, it seems necessary to identify consumers in a context broader than through the prism of demographic and economic variables, which are not of a key significance for the evaluation of the perceived CSR of retailers implementing particular competitive strategies. Variables which seem to have the highest relevance are the place of living and partly education, which would imply the need for focusing on local conditions and the needs of local communities.

To sum up, managers should pay more attention to the mere mechanism and conditions of the perception of CSR and develop ways of incorporating CSR activities in their strategies of building competitive advantage – both at the level of marketing tools, e.g. product range, or promotional activities, and at the level of the general image, which would entail a bigger interest in such activities as charity, or sponsorship.

Conclusion

At present the CSR concept is an essential element of retailers' strategy of action. However, its scope and the way of its implementation depend on the selected competitive advantage. The conducted research shows that there is a relationship between competitive strategies and CSR. It also revealed the type of CSR activities which generate a stronger association with CSR. In the light of the research results it can also be noticed that the assessment of the image of a socially responsible retailer is weakly correlated with the demographic variables characterizing consumers. Therefore, it is necessary to prepare a more in-depth profile of consumers, on the basis of different variables, especially behavioral and psychographic.

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