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Marketing simplification as a type of marketing performance in times of crisis

Abstract

Marketing performance in turbulent times (which occur relatively often and are unpredictable and hit companies hard) is an important research issue in contemporary marketing. The main idea in the research dealing with crisis marketing performance is highlighting the crucial role of marketing in times of crisis. Our study shows that this is not always the case. There are different types of situations where the simplification of marketing performance is evident, the system of marketing in a company deteriorates, and marketing is downgraded to a function of mainly sales, and these are obviously not exceptions. The present study is aimed at understanding the reasons for the evident contradiction between crisis marketing theory and some empirical cases. The other objective is to understand the mechanisms of marketing simplification in times of crisis. The paper focuses on the marketing performance of companies operating in Russia during the current (2014-2017) crisis, and takes into account its marketing context and the influences from the system of management on marketing, one of its subsystems.

Key words: Marketing strategies, crisis marketing performance, crisis marketing theory, emerging markets.

1. Introduction and objectives

One of the dominant ideas in marketing throughout its evolution has been that it is an inevitable part of any business activity, with its role even being exaggerated as a “panacea” in all cases. (Badot and Cova, 2008) The assumption of its special significance during times of crisis is a common theme in (almost) all publications on crisis marketing. But how can we explain a number of cases where marketing does not play such a role or its role diminishes and becomes even inferior? And why does this widespread premise among academics on the special role of marketing face a certain degree of mistrust from practitioners? In other words, the general objective of this research is to explore the limits of crisis marketing theory and find solutions that might allow us to make it more comprehensive and more practice-oriented.

In this regard, we conducted a study of the marketing performance of companies working in Russia in the crisis that started in 2014. Some of our results were presented to colleagues at the International Marketing Trends Conference 2017. Discussions and suggestions afterwards encouraged us to continue this study in a cluster with a more mature marketing context. The present study, with a focus on a new cluster, is therefore a continuation of our attempts to understand the real role of marketing during times of crisis, and to identify changes within marketing performance and the factors accounting for it in different contexts. We also tried to understand why some ideas of academics contradict empirical observations, and to explore the frontiers of the existing crisis marketing theory.

2. Methodology of the study

In the first part of the study, we identified a type of marketing performance (we called it “marketing simplification”) which was widespread in a cluster with both a relatively low degree of maturity in terms of marketing context and a low degree of “subjective necessity” in marketing. (Leonow, 2017) We concluded that these two factors explained why companies used the strategy of simplified marketing. The research question was the following: Can the strategy of simplified marketing (further: SSM) or its features be met on markets with a higher marketing maturity and a greater “objective” necessity in it? Our hypothesis was that marketing simplification is a quite widespread characteristic of marketing performance in a crisis and can be met even in a more mature marketing context. Should this hypothesis be accepted, another question then arises: what is “wrong” with the existing crisis marketing theory and why does it not “work” in more than two different contexts in Russia?

Some notions that are used in the study, such as marketing performance, marketing context (i.e. an “objective necessity” in marketing), and “subjective necessity” in marketing have to be described. Marketing context is defined from the position of the factors accounting for success in a market (and the role of marketing factors among them); they represent an “objective” necessity in marketing. At this point, we refer to a similar idea of Hoerschgen and Makarov. (2005) In contrast to this “objective necessity” in marketing, a “subjective necessity” reflects the perception of marketing by a decision maker in a company. As the first part of the study showed, the “subjective necessity” in marketing is one of significant factors that account for the application of simplified marketing during a crisis.

Both studies are related to the current crisis in Russia, although we generalize this experience when it seems appropriate and use the word “crises” or “a crisis” for it. In a number of cases we deliberately use the words “strategy” and “performance” as synonyms. We also decided to omit any discussion on marketing decisions within the marketing mix; not only for the reasons of formal restrictions but mainly because this allows us to oversee some product particularities, which are not significant for our purposes.

We have focused on retail and some real estate companies using a convenience type of sample involving 19 companies, with the conclusions referring to 13 of them. These were mid-size companies with quite professional management and marketing systems. None of these companies enjoyed a leading role in their markets. The marketing context in the study of this cluster (cluster 2, further: C2) can be evaluated as more mature than was the case in cluster 1 (further: C1, which was described in the first part of the research). From April to June 2017, we conducted a series of in-depth interviews with CMOs, CEOs and / or CFOs. Unfortunately, and in contrast to the first part, interviews with CEOs were possible in a number of cases. For this reason, we considered interviews only with CMOs, and information on issues not related to marketing could be received only from them.

Due to the convenience sample of the limited number of objects investigated we do not see any practical use of applying statistical tools of analysis, which would surely impose strong limitations on the results of the study. We also considered different approaches to deal with this type of data. (Andreani and Conchon, 2005a, 2005b; Cresswell, 1994; Denzin, 1978; Park and Park, 2016)

Our attention was not focused primarily on *some* successful crisis marketing tools, as is the case in many corresponding publications. Rather, we tried to consider changes in a broader range of marketing performances as a chain of points of interaction of a company with its consumers, including marketing budget (its share and structure), planning horizon, marketing positions and changes related to them.

3. Literature survey

The present study is based on the ideas of crisis marketing theory (further: CMT). Under CMT, we can understand the scope of the theoretical and empirical contributions on marketing performance during times of crisis.

For our purposes, we used the criteria “maturity of marketing context” and “type of research” to characterize the main ideas of CMT and considered different groups of publications, as shown in Table 1 (to make the text more reader-friendly we used “L”, which stands for “literature”, in contrast to “C”, which stands for “Cluster”, as already mentioned).

Table 1

Types of CMT papers

Type of contribution	Maturity of marketing context		
	Russian and some CIS markets	Mature markets	Emerging markets
Theoretical contribution	L1.1	L1.2	L1.3
Empirical research	L2.4	L2.5	L2.6

A theoretical platform of CMT is built by publications in L1.2. Their authors assume that marketing plays a crucial role in times of crisis, its role increases in crises, and cuts of marketing budgets in these times is a (strategic) mistake, whereas (additional) investment into marketing during crises times pays off, especially after times of crisis. (Castor, 2008; Correa et al., 2013; Rhodes and Shelter, 2009; Wilkinson, 2010; Hollis, 2008; Shrager, 1991; Ferrell and Hartline, 2002; Ang et al., 2000; Hooley et al., 2008; Roberts, 2003 among many others) It is evident that authors in L1.2 take for granted the premise that marketing context is mature in any situation; therefore, an objective need for marketing is high. This might be true for

mature markets but is not always the case in markets with a lower degree of both marketing maturity and objective necessity.

As a matter of fact, we hardly see any difference between these ideas and those in L1.1 (Russian academics), although they are related to two different marketing contexts. The dominant idea in publications of the sub-group L1.1 is on the leading role of marketing at all times, including during crises. A certain degree of mistrust on the part of Russian practitioners towards academic works, as we showed in the previous study, means that something might be wrong with that academics' approach in which marketing tools from a mature context are suggested to be automatically imported into Russian markets as a remedy and a "panacea". (Badot and Cova, 2008)

The same idea is broadly presented in L1.3; authors of this sub-group work on the same premise as their colleagues in L1.2. Obviously, their suggestions imply a high level of marketing maturity of the context. (Köksal and Özgül, 2007; O'Malley et al., 2011; Mitran and Bebeșelea, 2012; Naidoo, 2010) In some cases, the authors do not pay sufficient attention to the crisis context, which is also not an exception in publications on crisis marketing. (Tomše and Snoj, 2014; Mitran and Bebeșelea, 2012)

Publications of groups L2.4 – L2.6 illustrate and prove some basic ideas and principles of CMT in empirical examples. The problem, however, is that they often consider some tools or fragments of performance only. In this sense, from the point of view of a fragmentary approach, our findings beneath seem to be in line with the ideas of authors in L1.2: in almost all companies in our sample there are successful examples of new creative and inventive crisis marketing tools. However, we believe that the illustration of some tools (only), no matter how successful they might be, cannot be used as evidence of the role marketing really plays in times of crisis: for this purpose, a broader perspective is needed. It seems sometimes that publications in L2.4 and L2.6 were deductively aimed at proving the role of marketing in times of crisis (as well) in full compliance with the ideas in L1.2.

The sub-group L2.4 contains some critical approaches towards marketing. As a matter of fact, these publications are very "diffusive" (i.e. quite rare), are not focused primarily on marketing (often they are presented by consultants in management or even related areas) and do not reflect "mainstream" ideas on the crucial role of marketing that are so widespread among Russian marketing academics.

To the group L2.4 we also allocated surveys of a non-academic nature. Among others, we considered contributions made in the framework of the Gaidar Forum-2017 (which is a famous discussion platform for academics, practitioners, and top Russian politicians, annually held at RANEPa, Moscow), a number of secondary studies conducted for commercial purposes (i.e. "Consumer market of Russia and rating of retail chains FMCG" conducted by Infoline research Agency in the Fall of 2016, a representative research of Russian real estate agencies (both construction and sellers)). A difficulty with this group of sources was obtaining permission to use their results in publications.

It seems evident that the existing CMT, both for mature and emerging markets, needs still to be revised in some aspects. We hope that our suggestions would be helpful for this; they concern (1) the idea of the necessity to consider a broader scope of marketing performance (and not only some of its fragments) and (2) relating marketing performance to the criterion of the "objective necessity" in marketing and the maturity of marketing context in which the marketing is being performed. This approach might help to establish more confidence in CMT from practitioners, make CMT's ideas and principles more reliable and avoid phenomena (with reference to our Western colleagues) such as "marketing fundamentalism", "marketing colonialism", "marketing panaceas", "marketing myopia" (Badot and Cova, 2008), and "marketing incrementalism" (Dholakia, 2009). There is a need for a less declarative theoretical platform for marketing in times of crisis. (Bradlow, 2009)

Some essential ideas of general marketing need to be revised for the specifics of times of crisis (Bradlow, 2009; Mitran and Bebeșelea, 2012) and better tailored to the real needs of practitioners (Dholakia, 2009), though they are true for some aspects of marketing applied not only in times of crisis.

4. Findings

The results of the interviews with CMOs show that there are 2 groups (sub-clusters) within the second cluster (C2). All the characteristics of C1 are inherent to the sub-cluster 2.1. Its marketing performance corresponds to the strategy of simplified marketing that was identified earlier. Managerial input created premises under which marketing in C1 was downgraded to a sheer function within short-term sales, with marketing simplification being identified in all companies in this cluster. It should be noted that companies in C1 and C2.1 work in different marketing contexts.

The main characteristics of the C2.2 sub-cluster are the following:

1. Companies' positions in a crisis: Although the same macro-environmental factors have caused significant difficulties for all companies in this cluster, their situation and the perception of it differed from those in C1. Companies of this sub-cluster did not face such severe financial restrictions as was the case in C1 (i.e. they did not have debts in Euro or have access to financial resources). It is important that none of the companies in C2.2 had to struggle for their survival despite a significant drop in income in all cases.

2. Quality of management system and its influence upon marketing: All respondents characterized the criteria of "subjective necessity" in marketing as high; CEOs in all companies of this cluster considered marketing a necessary managerial tool. In general, respondents evaluated management in all companies as "progressive", "quite efficient", "professional" and "result oriented". Several efficient modern managerial tools were successfully introduced and used in these companies.

3. Main goals, tools, priorities of management: A company's behavior and strategic changes in their activity can be identified as an *adjustment* to a new context aimed at the optimization of all business activities, including marketing. All managerial decisions became significantly more cost-conscious. In almost all cases, new mechanisms to control costs and new relations (agile cost management) with partners, suppliers and staff were introduced. Cost management did not equal a sheer cut of ineffective costs in C2.2, in contrast to C1; all respondents of C2.2 evaluated cost cuts in relation to optimization as a part of adjustment to the crisis. Almost all respondents indicated a new focus on managerial activities (and control), which was related to efficiency. All of them emphasized that although commercial and financial KPIs were not explicitly qualified as having an absolute priority in the new context, as a matter of fact, their significance grew immensely; this became an important feature of the new managerial input that was going to change marketing performance in many aspects and presented a new priority for marketing. In both clusters, significantly more attention than before was paid to the operational level, though in C2.2, decisions were made both from a short and a mid-term perspective (which was not the case in C1).

4. (New) position (and perception) of marketing within a company / Attitude towards marketing. For all C2.2 companies, changes in this regard were not so severe as they were for their C1 counterparts. On the one hand, control became more detailed and focused at the operational level. On the other hand, CMOs continued to be free in their decisions. Marketing did not lose its position; what is more, it was perceived as a very important tool despite some negative managerial tools and procedures in certain cases that were evaluated as a managerial obstacle. Moreover, expectations (in many cases perceived as emotional pressure) were

noticed: “new” marketing was expected, some of these expectations were hard to fulfil; similar to the situation in C1, some CMOs in C2.2 had the impression that a “miraculous” solution was also expected from them.

We also noticed signs of a “soft patronage” (which was so common in its much harder form in C1) in this cluster (C2.2). In all cases investigated, its symptoms were always present during budget discussions. In many cases, respondents underlined a new necessity to justify some marketing budget positions, as was the case in all companies of C1 and C2.1. In some cases, respondents in C2.2 registered a new obligation to report directly to owners (sometimes with too much attention to detail).

5. Characteristics of marketing performance: Marketing performance was mainly influenced by the following factors (“input”): dominance of a shorter term perspective, lack of clarity about longer perspectives, necessity to adjust marketing performance and tools to a new reality that became less predictable and more turbulent; budget cuts and personnel “optimization”; and absolute priority of sales activities, implicit dominance of commercial KPIs. As a matter of fact, sales creation and promotion became the main priority of marketing. All respondents underlined a much stronger orientation at (sometimes too extensive) lead generation and the use of more aggressive marketing tools. Several tools were described as being not always appropriate (but imposed on marketing) and even tricky. Some of the new tools are illustrated below.

Aggressive sales training was introduced in companies that had not employed it previously or (in most cases) used it only occasionally (sometimes, CMOs were charged with this new function). In some cases, the share of training expenditures within a marketing budget became even bigger, though (aggressive) sales training replaced other forms of training (i.e. service, product, motivational, etc.) in some cases.

With respect to sales which became the most important area of marketing activities, the majority of companies used new creative and innovative tools. Usually, they included new trade marketing mechanics, new forms of collaboration with suppliers and partners in trade marketing and closer relations with consumers at the pre-sales stage.

Changes in loyalty programs in all companies could be described by an evident shift towards a significantly more pragmatic evaluation of their results (commercial KPIs dominated in all cases). Generally, cost cuts of some projects with commercially “inevident” / deferred results were widespread.

With regard to marketing evaluation, management became more pragmatic and more short-term oriented.

5. Discussion

We suppose that the primary reason for *the selection and use* of a marketing strategy is not the marketing context but internal factors, i.e. managerial “input”. Moreover, – it is the marketing context (including reaction of consumers, competitors’ performance etc.) that mostly influences *the effectiveness* of a marketing strategy. A successful marketing performance requires, therefore, a corresponding type of interaction between marketing and the system of management of a company. –

In both C1 and C2.1 clusters, we identified similar types of marketing performance conducted in marketing contexts with a different degree of marketing maturity.

As was the case in C1, these few companies in C2.1 had to struggle for their survival; we earlier characterized this type of corporate behavior as a “survival strategy”. Companies’ behavior in C2.2 differed from this. As already pointed out, all respondents used the word “optimization” with regard to new corporate strategies. Some managerial decisions were

made from a short term perspective, and in some cases equaled a cut in commercially “not obvious” costs. Nevertheless, there are sufficient examples of optimization (especially in marketing, concerning marketing mix tools). Consequently, it is appropriate to classify this type of behavior as an adjustment rather than an optimization. In other words, marketing in C1, C2.1 and C2.2 was performed in the framework of and related to different corporate strategies. In contrast to C1, marketing in C2.2 did not lose its position and authority in companies to the same extent as was the case in C1. Management did not impose new rules directly although it did indirectly in some cases, thus emphasizing new management priorities.

In connection with the survival type of corporate strategies, we discussed the strategy of simplified marketing (SSM); as we assumed, in some marketing contexts, and under restrictions in internal environments, this type of behavior can be justified, although it contradicts with the ideas of CMT. On the other hand, with regard to the corporate strategy of adjustment, we deal with the strategy of adjusted (modified) marketing – SMM, strategy of modified marketing.

The context in which SMM is used can be described with the following characteristics: (1) budget restrictions, (2) priorities of a company with a focus on short to mid-term sales, (3) lack of clarity about long-term market perspectives, and (4) risk to take some marketing decisions which are true from the point of view of CMO but do not correspond with some new corporate priorities. As a matter of fact, all of these characteristics were used to describe the internal marketing environment in C1. In this sense, both types of marketing performance are similar in many ways. Obviously, we deal with some quite universal characteristics and features inherent to crisis marketing performance (in general), and they are common to both clusters with different degrees of marketing maturity. As a matter of fact and despite the different viewpoints of some of our respondents, in both cases (but to a different extent) positions of marketing within a company became more subordinate than before the crisis. At the same time, although there are proofs and examples of some creative and inventive solutions, they are related only to *some* areas of marketing performance; their connection with sales (and in some cases with the acquisition of new clients only (sic!)) is evident; they are often made with the costs of other areas and activities (much less attention is paid to them during a crisis); these successful solutions are connected with some fragments only and not with the entire scope of marketing performance.

SMM or marketing adjustment to new market realities (but via new managerial priorities and in strong connection with them) has to be interpreted as a variant of marketing simplification. Usually, symptoms of simplification are presented in SMM, although not so strongly as in C1, and even despite some proofs of marketing inventiveness, creativeness and efficiency. Although marketing might really have become more creative, inventive and efficient than before the crisis, this may be true only in some aspects. Other aspects that were in focus before the crisis were paid much less attention or were neglected in times of crisis. In this sense, SMM is also a step back in marketing evolution. We would like to underline here the following: if we consider only *some* “pieces” / fragments of marketing performance, as the authors in the groups L2.4 – L2.6 do, at first glance, SMM seems to demonstrate and to prove some of the main suggestions of CMT. However, this is not true for the entire marketing performance. Despite some positive features, we are inclined to evaluate SMM in terms of deterioration, simplification, regression; all this proves our hypothesis that marketing simplification as a type of marketing performance can be met in a (more) mature marketing context and that probably marketing simplification, to a certain extent, is an inherent feature of marketing performance in a crisis context.

6. Conclusions

There are variances of marketing performances during a crisis. In the same marketing context, there are two different types of marketing performance (C2.1 and C2.2). At the same time, marketing performance has evident similarities in different contexts. Apart from companies struggling for their existence due to some severe financial situation (C1, C2.1), other companies (C2.2) pursued variants of an adjustment strategy which is similar to corporate strategies of optimization. Marketing performance within this type of corporate strategy is similar to marketing adjustment (“modified marketing strategy”, as we called it).

Although all of our respondents underlined the importance of marketing in these turbulent times, some features of, and tendencies towards, a deterioration of the system of marketing were evident. They concerned mainly marketing’s focus on a shorter term perspective, a much closer connection to short-term sales and a loss of freedom in budget decisions (e.g., cost cuts, over-control of marketing budgets by CFOs, etc.); all this reflected new (explicit or implicit) priorities of management. In other words, from the point of view of features that characterize positions of marketing in a company, there were signs of a downgrading / reduction of marketing to primarily serve sales needs, as was the case in C1 (although to a significantly stronger extent). In other words, SMM as a type of marketing performance appropriate within a management adjustment strategy is a type of marketing simplification. A simplification of marketing performance in times of crisis seems to be a more widespread phenomenon than earlier assumed. In the cluster with higher degrees of “objective” and “subjective” necessity in marketing there are symptoms of marketing simplification.

It seems that marketing performance in the cluster with a higher “objective” necessity in marketing illustrates some basic ideas of CMT. Within SMM, in each company there are examples showing how creative, inventive and efficient marketing can be in times of crisis. However, and as a matter of fact, this conclusion is true only for some fragments and not for the entire scope of marketing activities (most of the authors in L2.4 – L2.6 do the same). Taking into account a broader scope of marketing performance, it becomes evident that, at the same time, these innovations are financed on costs of other tools or activities that are neglected or even refused. Moreover, all these examples are related to different sales tools only.

We believe that the marketing context is a highly important factor of consideration for the purposes of explanation (and evaluation) of the use of different marketing strategies and tools. This new dimension accounts for the “objective” necessity and partly explains “how much” marketing is needed to be successful in a particular context. Consequently, this group of factors needs to be considered as the main criterion for it.

A hierarchical link between functional (e.g. marketing) and corporate strategy needs to also be emphasized. SSM and SMM are marketing strategies within survival and adjustment types of corporate strategies as a response to new and turbulent times. SSM is related to the survival type of corporate strategy, whereas SMM is a part of the adjustment strategies of a company. In other words, the system of management is the main factor that determines the selection and use of a marketing strategy. Marketing effectiveness, therefore, is related to the effectiveness and adequacy of the corporate level in a company; a corresponding quality level of internal environment determines the quality of marketing performance in many aspects.

It seems that some crucial characteristics of CMT are not applicable in C1 and are only partly applicable in C2.2. We believe that the problem is not about whether these ideas are true or false; the problem is related to some preliminary premises that need to be available, which in our case are connected to the maturity of the marketing context. (Some specifics of this particular market also need to be considered.)

In relation to these two clusters, CMT does not apparently pay enough attention to some of the factors which serve as premises for the implementation of its principles and suggestions. We believe that internal factors – or a broader, more resource (not only cost) oriented perspective – as a new dimension would allow us to see different variants of crisis contexts in which marketing is being performed, as well as the results of its performance. This conclusion has a more *general* importance for us: there are some premises that have to be available in order to implement (some) marketing principles and ideas (in any context); there are markets with different degrees of marketing maturity where some of these premises might simply not be available (which, not rarely, can be true for emerging markets).

In terms of managerial implications, and in addition to our former conclusions, it is worthwhile underlining that the system of management of a company is a highly important factor accounting for marketing's success. The quality of the system of management is able to influence marketing performance directly and indirectly in many ways; a successful marketing performance can barely be possible with inadequate management. The orientation of the system of management in a market goes in line with its orientation regarding the needs of the system of marketing (and begins by its orientation on the system of marketing in a company).

As indicated in the first part of this study, we see the main limitation of the present study in the method used. A qualitative method allowed us to explore the factors and mechanisms accounting for the use of different types of marketing strategy in times of crisis but a range of related questions is beyond our consideration.

Another important point is related to the question of how far the contemporary Russian context is “typical” or representative allowing more universal conclusions to be drawn. On the one hand, we believe that our study reflects the specifics of emerging markets. The possibilities of comparing our results with those on mature markets (in terms of not only some fragments of marketing performance) are of a special interest for us. With regard to it, further research ideas include, first of all, a study of marketing performance in a cluster with the highest degree of marketing maturity and / or leading companies. The objective of this study would be related to the question of whether marketing simplification was inherent to marketing performance of companies of this cluster. It would also be interesting to pursue the marketing strategies of companies in the same product market but in marketing contexts with different maturities, as suggested earlier. Consideration of the performance results of different types of crisis marketing strategies in relation to their evaluation would allow us, doubtlessly, to have more precise knowledge of marketing performance in times of crisis, although we are conscious of the organizational difficulties of this kind of a research.

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