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LOGISTICS CAPABILITIES IN ACHIEVING THE FIRM'S COMPETITIVE POSITION AND MARKET SUCCESS

Abstract

Firms are constantly looking for ways to build and strengthen their competitiveness. The most important dimensions of the firm's competitiveness are the firm's competitive position as well as the firm's market success. An important role among the most significant factors affecting the firm's competitiveness is assigned to the firm's capabilities, including logistics capabilities. The aim of the article is to present the possibilities of the influence of the firm's logistics capabilities on the firm's competitive position as well as the firm's achievement of market success. In particular, the following issues are presented in the article: (1) the nature of the firm's capabilities, including dynamic capabilities perceived as its strategic capabilities; (2) the firm's competitiveness and its basic characteristics; (3) the firm's competitive advantage with its main dimensions concerning the competitive position and market success; (4) logistics capabilities perceived as the firm's strategic capabilities affecting the firm's competitive position and achievement of market success in light of the research.

Keywords: logistics, capabilities, competitive position, market success

JEL: L10, L19, M10, M19

Introduction

During last years the growing importance of logistics perceived as a concept of management of the flow of materials, goods and information can be noticed. As a result, the potentials of a firm's success related to the area of logistics, frequently referred to as logistics potentials of success, are one of the most significant factors influencing the firm's success in the broad meaning of the word. The most important symptoms of such success are the expected market outcomes (customer satisfaction,

customer loyalty, market share) and economic outcomes (profit, profitability, return on invested capital) achieved by the firm. In turn, these outcomes are the basis for building and strengthening the firm's long-term competitiveness including: (1) a competitive advantage, (2) a competitive position, and (3) market success, while the last two are the most significant dimensions (symptoms) of the firm's competitive advantage (Blaik et al., 2013; Matwiejczuk, 2014).

One of the most important potentials of success related to the area of logistics are the logistics capabilities. The aim of the article is to present the possibilities of the influence of the firm's logistics capabilities on the competitive position as well as the firm's achievement of market success. Logistics capabilities are one of the key and dynamic capabilities of a firm, affecting the building and upgrading of business models, as well as the formulation and development of the firm's effective and efficient strategies. Such models and strategies determine the building and strengthening of the firm's competitiveness in the broad sense of the word, including creation of its competitive advantage and competitive position, as well as the achievement of the firm's market success.

1. Nature of the capabilities of a firm and their basic characteristics

The process of building the firm's competitiveness is associated with strategic management in the broad sense of the word, in particular, with a most significant – especially in recent years – stream, referred to as “resource-based strategic management”. Within the resource-based strategic management stream the key role in shaping and strengthening the firm's competitiveness is assigned to the so-called potentials of success, including – *inter alia* – the firm's capabilities.

The term “capabilities” was introduced into business management by Ansoff (1965). In general, capabilities are a “bundle” (composition) of various skills and abilities needed for the implementation of activities and/or tasks (Prockl, 2007). The basic feature that is the most important characteristic of the firm's capabilities is their orientation towards achieving the expected outcomes. These outcomes may be reached thanks to purposeful and coordinated methods and ways of active involvement of the firm's resources (composition of resources) in the achieving the set goals.

The firm's capabilities are supposed to have four basic characteristics.

Firstly, the capabilities should enable the firm's quick, effective and efficient response to dynamic changes occurring in the environment, especially in the market and competitive environment, as well as within the firm itself.

Secondly, the capabilities should enable holistic management of the firm and its relations with other firms, taking into account the complexity of the relationships between the firm's individual management subsystems (decision subsystems, components of management concepts, management functions, functional areas, etc.) as well as between the firm and other entities within the entire supply chain (suppliers, distributors, customers, competitors, etc.).

Thirdly, the capabilities should enable achievement of the expected level of performance, assessed both from the market perspective (from the perspective

of the value and benefits for customers), as well as from the economic perspective (from the perspective of the value and benefits for the firm).

Fourthly and finally, the capabilities should include management of the firm's multidimensional (holistic) relations with various stakeholder groups, enabling creation of value for all entities in the supply chain.

2. Dynamic capabilities as strategic capabilities of a firm

A crucial role within the process of building of the firm's competitiveness, including – in particular – achieving the intended competitive position and market success, is assigned to the so-called dynamic capabilities of the firm. The firm's possession of resources is not a sufficient condition for obtaining the desired competitive advantage or taking the intended competitive position on the market. It is also necessary to develop the firm's appropriate capabilities, and in particular, the firm's dynamic capabilities.

Particular attention within concept of dynamic capabilities is paid to the strategic importance of the firm's capabilities as "integrating mechanisms" concerning compositions of various resources at the firm's disposal (Teece et al., 1997; Eisenhardt, Martin, 2000). The integration of resources (compositions of resources) and capabilities (compositions of capabilities) enables the simultaneous use of these two types of success potentials in achieving the expected market and economic outcomes by firms. Such outcomes are the basis for creation of the firm's competitive advantage, as well as achieving the intended competitive position and market success.

Dynamic capabilities primarily concern the integration, shaping and reconfiguration of resources as well as the processes of their acquisition and utilization by firms (Teece et al., 1997; Eisenhardt, Martin, 2000). They enable active adaptation of firms to the market requirements as well as to the changes taking place within the firm's environment, being also the basis for shaping the firm's long-term competitiveness. In this sense the firm's dynamic capabilities can be perceived as the firm's strategic capabilities.

Dynamic capabilities as the firm's strategic capabilities include three groups of the so-called "dynamic sub-capabilities":

- adaptative capabilities;
- absorptive capabilities;
- innovative capabilities (Wang, Ahmed, 2007).

The adaptative capabilities include several individual abilities concerning the firm's adaptation to changes taking place in the environment. They apply – first of all – to the adaptation of resources to the market and customer requirements, as well as to processes and activities performed by competitors. In particular, the adaptative capabilities are related to adaptation of products and services to the changing customer needs, responding to new directions and symptoms of market development, including changes taking place in the competitive environment, as well as recognizing and seizing the emerging market opportunities.

On the other hand, the absorptive capabilities mainly include the abilities that allow assessing the value of knowledge, in particular, the so-called market knowledge

perceived as a key resource of firms and supply chains, as well as the abilities that allow acquiring and using this knowledge, related to the creation of the firm's competitiveness and its competitive advantage. The absorptive capabilities comprise the abilities in the field of identifying the key areas of market knowledge (customers, products, services, competitors, suppliers, distributors, etc.) as well as the abilities to use the market knowledge in the development of new products and services, taking into account the needs of customers.

Finally, the innovative capabilities concern the abilities of the firm and supply chains in the area of development of new: (1) products and services; (2) production methods and techniques; (3) ways of providing services; (4) customer service standards; or (5) organizational forms and markets. Such innovative capabilities are the key factors influencing the creation of the firm's competitive advantage related to the so-called "long-term competitive benefits", both for firms as well as for entire supply chains.

The above dynamic sub-capabilities can be a basis for a "road map" allowing the development of logistics capabilities which play a significant role in achieving the competitive position and market success by a firm. Then, such capabilities may be referred to as the strategic logistics capabilities of a firm.

3. The firm's competitiveness and its basic characteristics

The concept of competitiveness refers to the activities conducted by firms to gain the desired competitive advantage and to achieve the intended market and competitive position, as well as market success. According to Stankiewicz (2002), the competitiveness of a firm may be described as the firm's ability to efficiently and effectively achieve its goals within the so-called "market arena of competition". As Skawińska (2002) points out, the concept of the competitiveness comes from the "general" competition, and therefore, it is an important part of the "competition area". That is why the competitiveness is sometimes interpreted as the organization's ability to compete.

The firm's competitiveness can be presented as a system consisting of four basic components constituting specific subsystems, including:

- the potential of competitiveness, which comprises all the tangible and intangible assets, necessary for the firm's performance on the market arena of competition;
- a competitive advantage, defined as a result of using the firm's competitive potential, taking into account the conditions of the environment, which enables effective and efficient development of an attractive market offer as well as competition tools;
- competition tools, which can be defined as instruments created and developed by the firm in order to acquire contractors for the presented or planned (future) offer;
- the competitive position, understood as the firm's result of competition in a given sector, considered in relation to the results achieved by competitors (Stankiewicz, 2002).

Taking into account the firm's aspirations to achieve the intended market position, and – as a result – the intended competitive position, two major types of the firm's competitiveness can be distinguished:

- basic competitiveness;
- key competitiveness (Faulkner, Bowman, 1996).

The first of the major types of competitiveness, i.e., the basic competitiveness, includes processes and systems that enable the firm to achieve a leader position within the sector. In general, this type of competitiveness is associated with the capabilities of the firm and the supply chains concerning an increase in the value of products and services perceived from the customer's perspective.

The basic competitiveness comprises two detailed types of competitiveness: (1) operational competitiveness and (2) systemic competitiveness. The operational competitiveness is related to the specific capabilities of firms and supply chains, important from the point of view of their market activities and concerning – for example – technology, distribution, logistics, or controlling methods and tools. In turn, the systemic competitiveness refers to the capabilities concerning the creation and providing value added to customers, enriching this value as well as implementing innovative solutions in relation to the market offer.

The second of the major types of competitiveness, i.e., the key competitiveness, is identified with the capabilities of firms and supply chains, which are the determinants of creating a lasting, long-term competitive advantage. Various potentials of success play an important role in shaping and developing the firm's key competitiveness, including the dynamic capabilities, and also capabilities related to logistics.

4. Competitive advantage within resource-based strategic management stream

The competitive advantage is one of the central issues in strategic management, in particular, within the "sub-area" referred to as the resource-based strategic management stream (Matwiejczuk, 2014).

As Cannon (1996) emphasizes, the firm's striving to acquire and then maintain a competitive advantage is one of the most important determinants of its market activity. As Foss (1996) writes, the central place within the resource-based strategic management stream is occupied by the notion of a competitive advantage. In the process of building and strengthening the competitive advantage, the key role is assigned to the firm's competences, resulting from the integration and coordination of its resources and capabilities.

Godziszewski (2006) emphasizes that the competitive advantage is something that lies inside the firm, and which is also related to what the firm can do and how it can do it. According to the author, the external expression of a competitive advantage is the firm's market offer, thanks to which – if it has a greater value in the eyes of customers than the market offer of the competitors – the firm can achieve a competitive advantage. As a result, such a competitive advantage indicates

its close relationships with the firm's resources as well as the capabilities related to the use of these resources.

In the opinion of Romanowska (2006), the resource-based concept best explains the process of creating competitive advantages. As the author emphasizes, in the context of classic management concepts, the search for ways to create a competitive advantage is mainly related to material resources, i.e. capital, location, access to raw materials. In contrast, in modern management concepts, a greater role is attributed to non-material resources, in particular to people and their knowledge, as well as to the intellectual values contained in patents, documentation and databases.

According to Barney (1991), in the context of a resource-based approach, the competitive advantage of a firm exists when the firm possesses and uses the capabilities to implement a value creation strategy that is not implemented by any competitor at the same time. The condition for the implementation of such a strategy is not only the firm's possession of the resources that are unique compared to the resources of competitors, but also the possession of the appropriate capabilities that enable the effective and efficient use of resources.

As pointed out by Teece et al. (2000), the basis for creating a competitive advantage of a firm in the context of the resource-based strategic management stream are organisational and managerial processes that determine the development of the capabilities and competences affecting the market and the competitive position of a firm. The highest importance is attributed to the development of the firm's strategic capabilities, including – in particular – the most significant features and dimensions of such capabilities, which are particularly difficult to copy by competitors.

The competitive advantage of a firm has two main dimensions: (1) the firm's competitive position and (2) the firm's market success.

5. Competitive position and market success as the main dimensions of the firm's competitive advantage

The competitive position of a firm may be understood – in simplest terms – as the firm's market position compared to its competitor(s). According to Stankiewicz (2002), the firm's competitive position may be perceived from the following three perspectives:

- as a symptom of the firm's competitive potentials seen *ex ante*, which are an important part of the firm's strengths understood as its key success factors;
- as a measure of the competitive advantage achieved by the firm, i.e., as a result of competition occurring as an effect of applying a specific competition strategy;
- as a source, symptom and measure of the firm's competitiveness, i.e., as a result of mutual relations among the potential of the firm's competitiveness, competition processes and competition results.

The notion of the competitive position of a firm should be perceived primarily as the final effect (result) of the competitive advantage possessed by the firm. The firm's competitive advantage resulting from achieving the expected market

and economic outcomes may lead to the achievement of the desired competitive position on the market. In this sense the competitive position is a significant dimension of the firm's competitive advantage.

Apart from the firm's competitive position, a significant dimension of the firm's competitive advantage is its market success. However, the firm's market success factors cannot be perceived as similar or even the same as the key factors of the firm's success. Therefore, the firm's "overall" success should not be identified with its market success. The firm's market success, including the firm's market offer (i.e. products and services) is influenced by the customer preferences and expectations, related to making specific, individual decisions regarding the customer's purchase of products and services (Matwiejczuk, 2014).

The place of the firm's market success among the most important dimensions of the firm's competitive advantage results mainly from the fact that the attitudes and preferences of customers on competitive markets may be of great importance in creating this advantage. One may notice the performance outcomes of firms and businesses for which the most significant criterion of assessment and verification of the market offer are the purchasing decisions of customers. Customers often do not see the firm's intangible assets, so – as a consequence – intangible resources, capabilities and/or competences that are perceived as key success factors from the firm's perspective do not have to be perceived in a similar way from the customer's perspective.

6. Logistics capabilities as strategic capabilities of a firm affecting the firm's competitive position and market success in light of research

The issue of building competitiveness and a competitive advantage, as well as achieving the intended competitive position and market success by a firm is present not only within the contemporary streams of strategic management, but it is also a significant subject of research and analysis regarding individual functional areas of a firm, including – *inter alia* – logistics. The research conducted in relation to these areas is primarily aimed at assessing the contribution that a given area – in this case logistics – can make in the process of shaping the firm's competitiveness in the broad sense of the word, including the firm's achievement of a competitive position and its market success.

The capabilities within logistics, shortly called logistics capabilities, are one of the most typical groups of the firm's capabilities perceived from the functional perspective. Apart from logistics capabilities, the firm's capabilities can also include other types of functional capabilities, e.g. marketing capabilities or capabilities related to quality management.

Logistics capabilities can be developed both in the "real sphere" and in the "regulatory sphere". The "real sphere" capabilities are associated in particular with such logistics processes as transport, warehousing, storage, handling, packaging, etc. On the other hand, the "regulatory sphere" capabilities mainly concern

information and decision processes related to coordinating the flows of materials, goods and information as well as management of these flows within both the firm and the entire supply chain.

An interesting concept of “embedding” logistics capabilities within the structure of the potentials and determinants of success conditioning the building of long-term competitiveness has been proposed by Mentzer et al. (2004). This concept is based on the assumption that the basis for achieving multidimensional outcomes by firms is the active involvement and use of their logistics resources and logistics capabilities in building competitiveness in the broad sense of the word, including creation of a lasting, long-term competitive advantage. The use of these resources and capabilities translates into changes in the system and subsystems of business management, and leads to the achievement of the expected market outcomes (customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, market share) and economic outcomes (profit, profitability, return on invested capital) of a firm.

Mentzer et al. (2004) indicate three groups of logistics capabilities that can be perceived as the strategic capabilities of a firm:

- capabilities concerning creation of the firm’s competitive advantage based on customer needs and preferences, referred to as demand-oriented capabilities;
- capabilities concerning creation of the firm’s competitive advantage based on costs, referred to as supply-oriented capabilities;
- capabilities concerning information flow management.

The first group of logistics capabilities, i.e., the “demand-oriented capabilities” are primarily related to customer orientation. These capabilities are also referred to as customer-centric capabilities, the capabilities for customer value adding, or customer integration. This group of capabilities allows acquiring customers and satisfying or even exceeding their expectations by offering them a unique value. Apart from the customer orientation, these logistics capabilities are characterized by multidimensionality (e.g., customer service capabilities or logistics quality shaping capabilities) and long-term perspective (e.g., pre-sales, sales and after-sales service capabilities), significantly affecting the building of the firm’s long-term competitiveness (including its competitive advantage, competitive position and market success) based on customer needs and preferences.

The second group of logistics capabilities, i.e. “supply-oriented capabilities” involve the total cost minimization, which is a premise for an increase in logistics systems, processes and performance of activities. These capabilities enable defining methods for solving specific customer problems by implementing such solutions as just-in-time (JiT) deliveries, quick response (QR) to customer needs, or vendor managed inventories (VMI). These logistics capabilities relate to the optimization of all activities that make up the logistics processes implemented within the supply chains, leading to minimization of total costs, and – as a consequence – building the firm’s long-term competitiveness based on costs.

Finally, the third group of logistics capabilities, i.e. “capabilities concerning information flow management” include capabilities within the area of information technology, as well as the exchange and sharing of information. These capabilities can contribute primarily to the “balancing” between demand and supply within the following supply chain nodes, and thus to improvement of goods exchange

processes. Information technology, often playing a key role in the development of logistics capabilities, determines to a large extent the effectiveness and efficiency of information flows, both within the firm as well as the entire supply chain. The information flow management capabilities are usually performed together with the capabilities concerning the management of flows of goods and materials.

Interesting research related to the assessment of the possibility of using the logistics capabilities in achieving the firm's success and competitive advantage was also carried out by Morash et al. (1996)¹.

The results of their research have indicated, *inter alia*, that the analysis of the firm's logistics capabilities may lead to recognition of such capabilities that have strategic importance in achieving the expected market and economic outcomes. One of the fundamental tasks of the firm within highly competitive markets may concern the development of the so-called strategic capabilities of a firm, conditioning the achievement of a competitive advantage, a competitive position and market success. On the one hand, such strategic capabilities allow the formulation of a strategy for an active and effective use of the firm's resources, and on the other hand, these capabilities are the basis for the development of competences that enable the firm to gain a competitive advantage on the market.

Strategic logistics capabilities related to the research conducted by Morash et al. (1996) have been divided into two main groups:

- logistics capabilities related to demand (demand-oriented/customer-oriented logistics capabilities), i.e. capabilities perceived through the customer's lens, concerning customer needs, wants, preferences, expectations, etc.;
- logistics capabilities related to supply (supply-oriented/operations-oriented logistics capabilities), i.e. capabilities perceived through the firm's lens, concerning products and services offered by the firm.

Logistics capabilities perceived from the perspective of demand enable offering the required level of logistics service, primarily by recognizing customer preferences and expectations, ensuring the speed and reliability of deliveries, and – as a consequence – creating solutions for an efficient and effective response to customer needs (solving customer problems). The firm's focus on the development of this group of logistics capabilities may contribute not only to a more transparent presentation of the logistics offer to customers (who can then become familiar with it and thus make a more informed choice), but also to building long-term customer relations based on mutual trust and loyalty.

The condition for ensuring the required level of logistics service is the development of the firm's adequate logistics capabilities perceived from the perspective of supply. These capabilities are mainly related to designing and ensuring

¹ The research was conducted using the telephone interview method, based on questionnaires previously sent by e-mail. The research was attended by 65 managers employed at the highest levels of business management in furniture industry firms with annual gross sales amounting to more than USD 10 million. The modified (extended) Likert scale, covering grades ranging from 1 (the smallest importance of a given capability in achieving the firm's success) to 7 (the biggest importance of a given capability in achieving the firm's success), was used to assess the importance of individual logistics capabilities in achieving success by the firm. The basic symptoms of success adopted the authors of the research were ROA, ROI and ROE, taking into account both their absolute values and trends of changes in the values of these indicators (Morash et al., 1996).

the efficient and effective functioning of distribution systems, adjusted to market (customer) expectations and taking into account the solutions implemented by competitors. It requires, *inter alia*, choosing a proper distribution strategy, which may not only lead to meeting the needs and expectations of customers, but also to obtaining measurable benefits by the firm.

The most significant results of the research carried out by Morash et al. (1996) are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The importance of strategic logistics capabilities in reaching market success by the firm

Strategic logistics capabilities	Importance of logistics capabilities in reaching the market success by the firm (1–7 point scale)*
Demand-oriented logistics capabilities	
Delivery reliability	6.34
Post-sales customer service	6.13
Responsiveness to target market	6.02
Delivery speed	5.88
Pre-sales customer service	5.62
Supply-oriented logistics capabilities	
Widespread distribution coverage	5.47
Selective distribution coverage	4.87
Low total cost distribution	4.61

* Mean based on the importance of logistics capabilities rated from 1 – least important to 7 – most important with a mid-point of 4.

Source: (own elaboration based on: Morash et al., 1996, pp. 7–9)

The results of the research conducted by Morash et al. (1996) indicate that strategic logistics capabilities can significantly influence the firm's success and competitive advantage. It applies in particular to the demand-oriented logistics capabilities where the most important capability – according to the surveyed managers – is the reliability of deliveries (average rating – 6.34), followed by post-sales customer service (6.13), effective response to customer needs (target market) (6.02), delivery speed (5.88) and pre-sales customer service (5.62). The surveyed managers assigned less importance in achieving success by the firm to supply-oriented logistics capabilities: widespread distribution coverage (average rating 5.47), selective distribution coverage (4.87) and low total cost distribution (4.61) (Morash et al., 1996). The above studies also confirmed that proper identification of the logistics capabilities and the possibility of their impact on achieving success and a competitive advantage by a firm may significantly contribute to the perception of such logistics capabilities as the strategic firm's (business) capabilities, affecting the firm's competitive position and market success.

Conclusion and further research

Shaping and strengthening the competitiveness of a firm is one of the most important issues of contemporary strategic management, including in particular its stream referred to as the resource-based strategic management. The key importance within this stream is assigned to the so-called potentials of the firm's success, comprising resources, capabilities and competences. These potentials may concern various functional areas of a firm, including logistics. Within this area they are called "logistics potentials of success", which – *inter alia* – include logistics capabilities.

Logistics capabilities play an important role in the process of building the firm's competitiveness. In particular, these capabilities are important factors influencing the firm's achievement of expected market and economic outcomes, which are the basis for creating the firm's lasting, long-term competitive advantage. The basic dimensions of such an advantage are the competitive position and market success.

The article presented the possibilities of the influence of the firm's logistics capabilities on achieving the intended competitive position and market success. The directions of further research should focus first and foremost on identification of detailed logistics capabilities that can play a significant role in building and strengthening the firm's competitiveness in the broad sense of the word as well as the competitiveness of entire supply chains.

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