U.S. EXPORTERS' COMPETITIVENESS AS PERCEIVED BY TAIWANESE IMPORTERS: STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

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Global marketing is taking on an increasingly critical role in every country's economic development. As a country's economic health is often gauged by the status of its trade balance, the pivotal role of the exporters can no longer be denied. Their contribution to the economic growth, however, depends on meeting both the explicit and implicit needs of the importers. Exporters can best serve these needs by thoroughly understanding the criteria importers perceive as important, and continually monitor importers' perceptions about the performance of exporters from around the world. This allows exporters to continually adapt and reconfigure their export strategies to best serve their own interests and those of their country. This exploratory study is an empirical investigation of the perceptions of Taiwanese importers about their exporters, in the context of their imports from U.S., Japan, and West Europe. Some strategic implications for U. S. exporters are then drawn.

INTRODUCTION

Trade and political relations between the United States of America (U.S.) and the Pacific Rim region has become significant in the past decade and will continue to be in the coming years. Continued relations between the two regions is necessary to correct the current unfavorable balance of trade with the Pacific Rim region as the recent presidential election in the U.S. and the administration's trade policies underscore. As many countries in the Pacific region gain international competitiveness, the situation for the U.S. is somber at best. The trust built between the two regions subsequent to WW-II appears to be giving way to a strained relationship eroding as the volume of a predominantly unidirectional trade continues to grow.

Strong cordial relations between the U.S. and the Pacific Rim region can be expected to re-emerge when trade imbalances between them are ironed out. This, subtly but surely, shifts the burden of improving the present strained relations from diplomats to exporters, for the latter largely bear the challenge of correcting the imbalances in trade. Governments can set policies, sign trade agreements, subsidize exports, and formulate other strategies to correct the imbalances, but traders must finally implement the strategies. At the operational level, the trade flows between countries are facilitated much more by the degree of common understanding and mutual appreciation of needs between exporters and importers than by governmental policies. The former leads to the emergence of bonding and relationships between exporters and their importers. As research studies by the IMP Group (International Marketing and Purchasing Group) and others indicate, building buyer-seller relationships is the key to successful international marketing and trade.

International traders are usually separated by physical as well as cultural distances. Issues therefore arise that adversely affect the trade flows between countries. In particular, writings on problems due to cultural differences between the U.S. and Pacific Rim region business relations are extensive and the associated problems confronted by U.S. exporters and suppliers have been well documented. However, the extensive research literature on the subject indicates a lack of a systematic analysis of the Pacific Rim region importers' needs, their expectations from exporters, and customer-satisfaction levels achieved by U.S. exporters. Current marketing theory emphasizes the need to understand and to satisfy the customers' needs, and it is no different in the context of exporters. U.S. exporters must embrace the business practices that overseas importers

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perceive to be important and strive to achieve their competitive edge through such business practices. While various facets of export marketing have been researched yielding extensive literature on the subject, international marketing research dealing with these dimensions is woefully lacking in the context of U.S. exporters and Pacific Rim overseas importers.

Most research efforts in this area have traditionally focused on marketing issues from exporters' perspectives, their perceptions about importers, and the associated problems. Extant literature covers such issues as internationalization processes of the firm, trade barriers, cartel-like business environment in other countries, export market entry and expansion strategies, adapting domestic marketing practices to the unique needs of specific overseas market needs, and the use of public support programs for effective export marketing (Rosson and Reid, 1987; Seringhaus and Rosson, 1991). More recent research focus has shifted to standardization opportunities in marketing practices so as to exploit globalization trends sweeping the world markets.

A new paradigm in marketing has, however, emerged in recent years. This paradigm considers the development, maintenance, and continuation of the buyer-seller relationship as the core of business success (Ford, 1990). Consistent with the marketing concept, this paradigm suggests that effective export marketing is possible only through clear identification and analysis of the needs of overseas customers - the most important of whom are the importers. Yet, seldom has empirical research focused on importers perceptions and their problems. Few studies in recent years have paid attention to overseas importers' perspectives, their responses to export marketing practices, and to the exporter-importer relationship in general. In one of the earlier research efforts in this context Ghymn (1983) identified U.S. importers' perceptions of the relative importance of import decision variables when they import goods from developed and developing countries. Other researchers investigated the nature of the power structure in the exporter-importer dyads involving exporters from a developing country and importers of a developed country (Leonidou, 1989a, 1989b). They concluded that importers generally exercise a higher degree of power over the exporters. Wortzel, Wortzel and Deng (1988) determined that neophyte exporters from a developing country such as the People's Republic of China are influenced by their home country's business environment and culture in their dealings with U.S. importers. Other empirical research confirmed that purchasing firms in developed countries often prefer to engage in long-term relationships with the supplying firms (Hakansson, 1987; Cheng, 1986). In a recent research study Egan and Mody (1992) found that cultivating buyer-seller links is essential for export development. In the few research studies that specifically addressed implications of importers' perspectives on export marketing effectiveness, the major focus has been on exporters from developing countries and importers in developed countries. This stream of research has established the usefulness of identifying and analyzing importers' perspectives for developing effective export marketing strategies. To develop and implement effective export marketing strategies by exporters, however, it is imperative that a cross-country investigation be undertaken that encompasses examination of overseas importers' perceived importance of various business practices and their satisfactions/dissatisfactions with exporter performance on these criteria. Identification of importers' perceptions about competing exporters, country by country, can provide critical information required to formulate appropriate export marketing strategies. This will help initiate and/or strengthen long-term relationships between importers and exporters through improved exporter performance, providing the competitive edge to the exporting country. This perspective forms the basis of this empirical study.

The research reported in this paper focuses on Taiwanese importers and addresses the following questions:

1. What business practices do Taiwanese importers perceive as important and how do these perceptions vary across product categories?

2. To what extent are the Taiwanese importers satisfied with the U.S. exporters' business practices?

3. How do Taiwanese importers' satisfaction levels on these U.S. business practices differ across exporters from other trading blocks such as Japan and Europe?

4. What are the resulting strategic implications to U.S. exporters?

THE COUNTRY CONTEXT - TAIWAN

Three important reasons lead to the choice of Taiwan as the country of interest in this study -- (1) its long dependent relationship with the U.S., (2) its current and future importance to the U.S. as a major trading partner, and (3) its growing international competitiveness. The relations between the U.S. and Taiwan-Republic of China (Taiwan) evolved through several cycles during the past 40 years. From the World War II era, when Taiwan faced the enormous task of rebuilding itself, to its modern day ranking as the thirteenth largest trading nation in the world, Taiwan has gone through an incredible odyssey. The U.S. played a major role in the development of Taiwan. Massive aid campaigns in the 1950s and 1960s enabled Taiwan to grow through an import substitution strategy. In the period 1960 to 1980, its export-expansion strategy helped Taiwan to emerge as one of the world's leading trading nations. Coupling this with an import-substitution strategy lead to a favorable trade balance for the country and a straining of trade relations with the U.S. To make matters worse, as U.S. trade deficit with Taiwan continued to mount, complaints of Taiwanese infringement on U.S. patent and copyright laws increased. U.S. officials responded to the situation with specific requests to the Taiwanese government for greater liberalization in imports, reduction of duties and tariffs, and increased access to a broad range of markets. This could tackle two problems in one stroke: a reduction in the trade deficit through greater exports to Taiwan and rising of barriers to against unlawful use of patents and copyrights protected in the U.S. Taiwan was also placed on the "priority watch list," the so called Super 301, a section of the 1988 Omnibus Trade Act. Due to pressure applied by the U.S. Government, Taiwan reformulated its goals to reduce trade surplus with the U.S. and to increase market diversification. These developments are increasing the access to an ever-growing Taiwan market. In 1989, Taiwan announced a "Trade Action Plan" or eliminating many of Taiwan's trade barriers by 1992. The plan included timetables for tariff reductions, removal of some non-tariff barriers, and improved market access.

But such access to Taiwan markets has also increased competition from other international traders. The following data reflects the competitive situation of the Taiwan international trade in 1990.

Trading Block	*Percentage of Trade in 1990*
U.S.A.	28.2%
Japan	20.0%
Europe	17.9%
Southeast Asia	17.1%
Others	16.8%

Taiwan has now embarked, with a laser-like focus, on a long-term strategy to build a solid infrastructure capable of sustaining growth well into the next century. A key goal for Taiwan is to develop an infrastructure capable of assisting and speeding up the transformation of the current labor-intensive/OEM manufacturing economic base into a high technology economic giant leading to branded marketing. This goal has become more important as per capita incomes and labor costs increase steadily, making it more difficult to compete solely on a low-cost basis.

As one of the world's richest nations (in terms of foreign exchange reserves), Taiwan will self-finance its Six-Year National Development Plan for 1991-1996 at an overall cost of U.S. $300 billion. To the U.S. and other major trading nations, this massive developmental project will provide one of the most significant growth markets of the world. Competition for the various projects outlined in the plan will be fierce, as Japan and Europe also have established strong, long-term trade relationships with Taiwan. As in most world markets, Japan will be an especially tough competitor. In the past, Taiwan authorities claimed to give special consideration to U.S. businesses bidding on government projects. This so-called "Buy-American" policy, however, is ending. Taiwanese importers are increasingly becoming as sophisticated and demanding in their purchases as their counterparts in the developed countries. Future trade between the U.S. and Taiwan will undoubtedly be characterized by free and fierce competition among the triad regions: Americas, Asia, and Europe. The current state of the competitive environment and Achilles heels for U.S. exporters are explored in this study to provide them with some strategic directions for increasing export trade with Taiwan.

DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected from 201 import firms in Taiwan. Responses from two respondents were dropped because of missing values. Informants responded to items eliciting (1) the degree of importance they placed on exporters' business practices, (2) their satisfaction with exporters from the different regions on these practices, and (3) demographic information. The informants were directed to provide data only *in the context of the ONE major product category they imported.* The questionnaire was initially developed in English based on an extensive review of the literature and discussions with a select group of importers in Taiwan. The English version was then translated into Chinese to avoid misunderstanding of the English terms by the key informants. Prior to administering the questionnaire the Chinese version was re-translated back to English to ensure correctness of the original translation. The latter translation was done by a different set of individuals. After satisfying ourselves about the adequacy of the questionnaire in Chinese, the study was executed.

The questionnaires were mailed in 1990 to 500 Taiwanese import-export firms. Responses were received from 201 firms, yielding a response rate of 40%. The instrument initially asked importers about the products they purchased from exporters of the U.S., Japan, and Western Europe. The products were classified into two major categories - consumer products and industrial products. Consumer products consisted largely of four sub-groups: agricultural products, durable consumer goods, processed foods, and clothing. In addition, a catch-all group called 'others' was included only in this category. Industrial products also included four sub-groups: raw materials, semi-finished products, machinery and equipment, and supplies and parts (Table 1). About 70 percent of the respondents were managers. The rest were supervisors, executive assistants, and procurement officers. Somewhat surprisingly, 31 percent of the respondents were general managers, enhancing the trustworthiness of this study.

Informants were then requested to respond to a series of fourteen export practices (Table 2) on 5-point Likert-type scales. They were specifically asked to indicate the importance of various business practices generally engaged in by the exporters from each of the three regions (1-very unimportant, 5-very important) and their (importers') general levels of satisfaction with these practices of their exporters in the context of their major product category imported (1-very unsatisfactory, 5-very satisfactory).

ANALYSES

The focus of the study was to answer the research questions formulated and to infer the strategic significance of the perceptions of Taiwanese importers for U.S. exporters. Initial analyses revealed the expectations held by the importers on each of the fourteen export practices and their perceived satisfaction with exporters from the three regions on these practices. The satisfaction scores provide a measure of export performance by exporters from the three regions. Perceptual maps were then developed to evaluate the strategic importance of the responses. These maps display key underlying dimensions on which importers perceive relative importance of different business practices of exporters. Perceptual maps, which spatially represent aggregated data, were developed using multidimensional scaling techniques to aid in better interpretation of the data. In this study, both objects (business practices) and scales (importance) were positioned on the maps (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, and Black, 1992). This provided a direct means to extract, from the data, the strategic implications for U.S. exporters.

There are other reasons for the use of multidimensional scaling in this study. Since there is always the danger of drawing misleading conclusions when unidimensional analyses are carried out, developing

TABLE 1
PATTERN OF MAJOR IMPORTS
(Number of importers importing each product category as their major import)

Product Category	# of Importers	Percent of Importers
	Consumer Products (50 Importers)	
Agro based products	9	4.5
Durable Goods	16	8.0
Processed Foods	11	5.5
Clothing	4	2.0
Others	10	5.0
	Industrial Products (149 Importers)	
Raw Materials	48	24.1
Semi-finished	4	2.0
Machinery/Equip.	62	31.2
Supplies & Parts	35	17.6

TABLE 2
EXPORT PRACTICES

Code	Export Practice of the Exporter
EP1	Communications
EP2	Ordering Procedures required
EP3	Method of Payment required
EP4	Price Adjustments
EP5	Product Modifications (size, weight, measurements, labeling)
EP6	Product Quality Levels
EP7	Styling of the Product
EP8	Timely delivery of products
EP9	(Providing) Right type of Sales Literature
EP10	(Providing) Parts Lists and Operating Service Manuals
EP11	Training of Sales Personnel
EP12	Understanding Taiwanese way of doing business
EP13	Willingness to cooperate in the event of unforseen difficulties
EP14	Dependability for long-term supply

multidimentional perceptual maps for a more objective interpretation of the data is imperative. An exploration of the importers' *simultaneous* perceptions of the importance levels of all the fourteen practices will yield more valid conclusions. Furthermore, to avoid drawing erroneous conclusions based on the metric responses of the respondents on the inherently non-metric Likert-type scale, it is essential to rescale the scores. The perceptual map, which rescales the measurement scales used in the questionnaire, will thus reflect the mental re-mapping of the scale by the respondents and thus indicate the relative importance of each export practice, in terms of its position in the importers' mental make-up vis-a-vis the rescaled importance score. This method brings into sharper focus those export practices that best provide the competitive edge to U.S. exporters in capture the mind of the Taiwanese importers and market share from the competition. It allows for a deeper understanding of the role of each practice in providing a competitive advantage in the presence of other business practices. It can help U.S. exporters direct resources to improve those practices that most significantly alter the competitive position.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

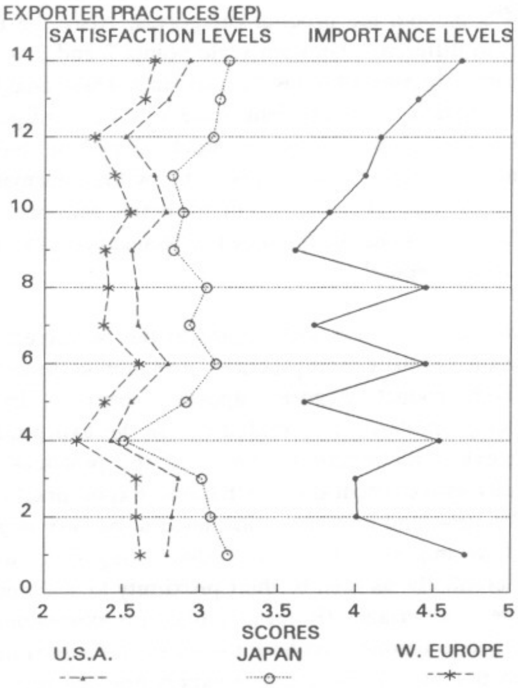
Results indicate that Taiwanese importers are not satisfied with any of the three exporting regions (Figures 1, 2, and 3). Irrespective of the product category, each region scores below the mid-point of the 5-point scale on mean satisfaction scores. One might be inclined to suggest that Taiwanese importers appear to less than satisfied with exporters from any member of the triad. On the other hand, the mean scores on perceived "importance" of all the fourteen practices are high.

An inter-regional comparison on each of the fourteen export practices suggests that Japanese exporters have a slender lead over both U.S. and Western European exporters in satisfying Taiwanese importers. This pattern is consistent across both product categories. It is interesting, however, that this lead is not statistically significant in the context of consumer products. Also, the Japanese lead over the U.S. is not statistically significant in the industrial goods category but their lead over Western European exporters is significant at .05 level with one exception (EP4: Flexibility in Price Adjustments). The results of the analyses also indicate that the U.S. lead over Europe, in satisfying Taiwanese importers on any of the 14 business practices, is not significant in either of the product categories.

Taiwanese importers, in general, seem to be marginally more satisfied with Japanese exporters followed by satisfaction with exporters from the U.S. and Europe. It is also interesting to note that the importers of industrial products seem to hold U.S. exporters in higher regard vis-a-vis their European exporters.

U.S. exporters, and the U.S. government, need to know more than just the perceived satisfaction levels of the importers. The crucial issue that must be addressed is

FIGURE 1
PERCEPTIONS OF TAIWANESE IMPORTERS OF BOTH
CONSUMER AND INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTS



which of the business practices, if changed, could result in a substantial improvement in the current position held by U.S. exporters. As is evident from Figures 1 through 3, importers perceive every business practice to be important regardless of the product imported. The pattern of perceived importance in the two product contexts are, in fact, remarkably similar. The responses of Taiwanese importers on the perceived importance of various business practices indicate a strong upward bias, regardless of the product category (Figures 1-3). This makes it very difficult to identify practices that may significantly make an impact on the importers. Two perceptual maps were therefore developed to better understand these perceptions of importance, one for each product category. In both the cases, the export practices and the scale points were plotted on the same map. Each map projects the importers' two-dimensional mental picture, positioning each business practice and the scale points relative to each other. Two-dimensional maps were generated for ease of visualization and interpretation (Figures 4 and 5).

As will shortly be discussed, the perceptual maps provide a better indication of the relative importance of the export practices as perceived by the importers. The ordinality of the scale points in both the perceptual maps are roughly the same as in the instrument. This

FIGURE 2
PERCEPTIONS OF TAIWANESE IMPORTERS OF *CONSUMER PRODUCTS*

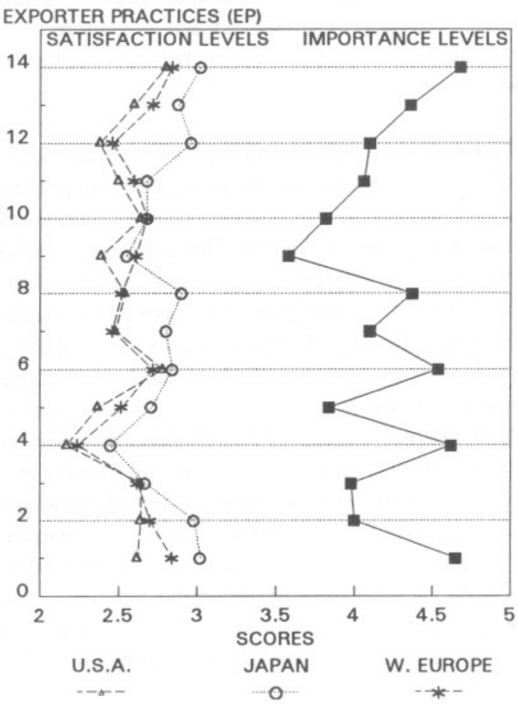


FIGURE 3
PERCEPTIONS OF TAIWANESE IMPORTERS OF *INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTS*

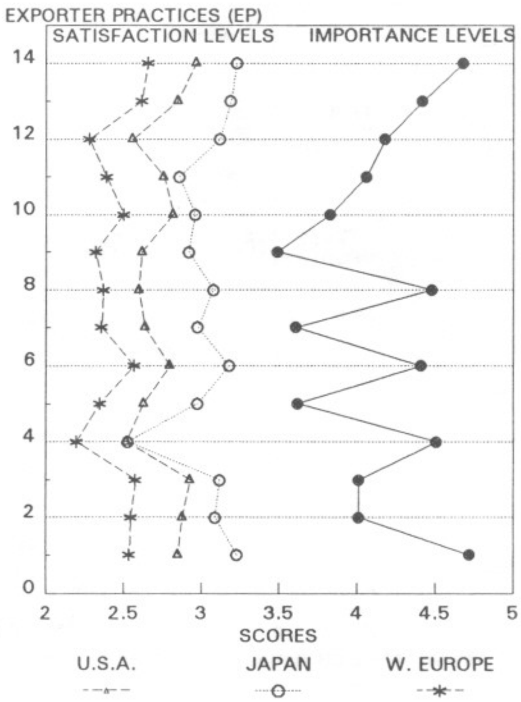


FIGURE 4

MEAN IMPORTANCE RATINGS PERCEPTIONS OF TAIWANESE IMPORTERS OF *CONSUMER PRODUCTS*

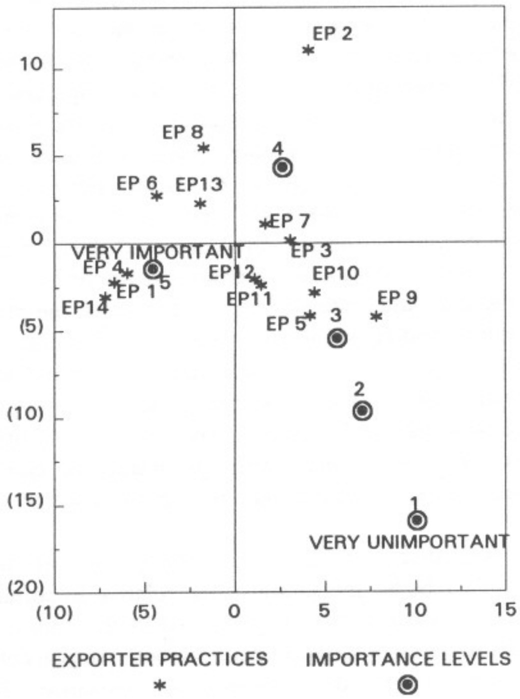
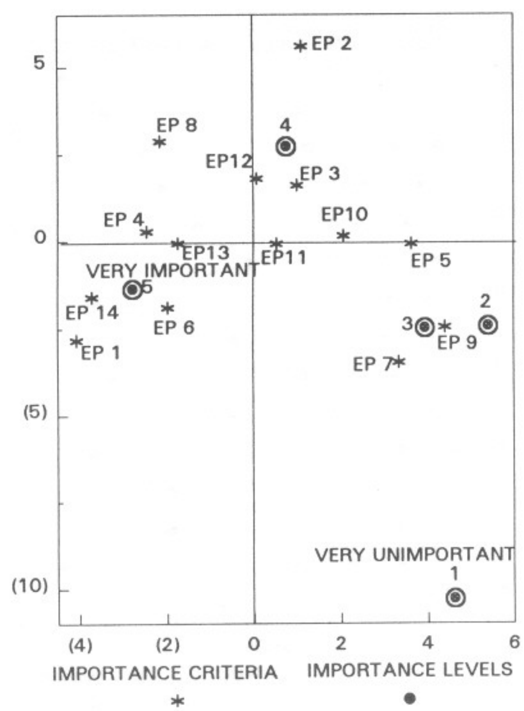


FIGURE 5

MEAN IMPORTANCE RATINGS PERCEPTIONS OF TAIWANESE IMPORTERS OF *INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTS*



is apparent if one were to visualize the scale points as positioned on a band going from bottom right to top left. This highlights an important characteristic of the importers' perceived scaling. The respondents, in general, perceived little difference between scale points 4 and 5 in both the product categories. Also, the perceived difference between scale points 2 and 3 is low among importers of industrial products. These analyses indicate that the respondents have subtly reconfigured the scale points without too much loss of ordinality. The understanding of this rescaling by the informants, in both product contexts, helps better interpret the relative positions occupied by fourteen export practices in the perceptual maps.

Two characteristics with regard to the perceived importance of the export practices, common to importers of both product categories, appear to emerge. First, a striking similarity is revealed across the two product contexts with regard to which of the practices are relatively important and which is not. Export practicess EP1, EP4, and EP14 are considered to be very important by importers of both product categories, albeit differentially, as seen by their proximity to scale-point 5 (very important). (Refer to Table 2 for expansions of the abbreviations used here to denote the export business practices.) The closer a export practice is to the scale point 5 on the perceptual map the more important it is. Similarly EP9 (Providing the right type of literature) is perceived to be relatively unimportant in both product contexts. Some differences in ranking across the two import categories is also evident. In addition, practices EP2 (Ordering Procedures required) and EP8 (Timely delivery of products) are considered to be fairly important by importers of both product categories.

Differences across the two groups of importers are also evident. Ensuring quality (EP6), while being perceived as important, occupies a much more important position in consumer products import. This is probably because quality can be objectively assessed in the case of industrial products using various established standards such as ASTM, AISI, Germany's DIN, U.K.'s BSI etc. and therefore can be closely monitored. In the case of consumer goods, however, quality is a matter of perception among the end-users. Hence importers may perceive product quality as more important in the context of consumer goods than in the industrial goods context. Similarly EP13 (Willingness to cooperate in the event of unforseen difficulties) is viewed as more important by importers of industrial products, as are EP12 (Understanding Taiwanese way of doing business), EP3 (Method of payment required), EP10

(Providing parts list and operating service manuals), and EP11 (Training of Sales Personnel). This is not surprising given the criticality of relational marketing in the industrial sector where service to individual customers is a over-riding consideration.

On the other hand, EP7 (Styling of products) is perceived as more important in the consumer goods context. Again this may so since in industrial products often the styling of the product is less important than its functionality.

STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

These findings have many implications for formulating general export strategies for exporters to Taiwan and the Pacific Rim. Further, these strategies can be fine-tuned by exporters, factoring in their aggregate relative position vis-a-vis the exporters from other regions.

General

With regard to exporting products to Taiwan, some general conclusions may be drawn based on the results of this empirical study. Exporters must strive to excel in communicating with their importers (EP1), be price sensitive (EP4), and ensure dependability (EP14). The greater level of competition faced by importers drives them to create and hold on to any competitive advantage they find feasible. Undoubtedly having reliable suppliers is one such competitive edge they can use to maintain their customer base. Also, for most importers, switching costs are high and therefore their concern with maintaining long-term relationships. This is more critical in the industrial goods category where there are fewer options in switching exporters. Most customers of industrial products demand well-defined specific products, and substitutes are generally not acceptable, thereby curtailing importers' ability to switch suppliers. To compound the problem manufacturers-exporters of industrial goods most often exist in a monopolistic environment, effectively making switching exporters close to impossible. Focusing on these practices can help exporters gain competitive advantage, leading to better marketing performance, regardless of the type of importer being catered to. Less critical, though may still be important, is providing of sales literature. Exporters must therefore provide an adequate level of this service to facilitate importers to make their sales.

Given the nature of industrial products, exporters of goods in this category must further strive to develop relationships with their importers. The ability to communicate, willingness to cooperate, creating competitive advantages for the importers, getting encultured into Taiwanese culture, can greatly facilitate U.S. exporters. Making ordering procedures as easy and convenient as possible can also help in satisfying the importer-customer. Major difficulty that can be envisioned in this regard are language barriers, standardization of formats and procedures, and disparate legal requirements. Exporters need to invest some time and energy to smooth out these issues.

CONCLUSIONS

Exporters' competitive advantage must come from the practices deemed critical by the importers for the products they import. It therefore follows that exporters need to allocate their scarce marketing resources to improvement of such practices. Providing better service on the half-dozen major practices mentioned above can help U.S. exporters take the lead in satisfying Taiwanese importers. Additionally, the U.S. exporters may consider lobbying with government to provide support necessary to enhance their service to Taiwanese importers on the relevant business practices vis-a-vis the other members of the triad.

It is somewhat encouraging from the U.S. exporters' perspective that the Japanese exporters' lead is quite small in terms of satisfying the Taiwanese importers while the European exporters either lag or are dead-even. The Japanese exporters do not as yet have an unassailable edge in the Taiwanese markets. The last chapter in the battle for the Taiwanese market is not yet written.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTION

The international trade environment in Taiwan described above is likely typical of the entire Pacific Rim region. Progressive trade liberalization is taking place in other countries such as Korea. But at the same time, intense competition from other triad nations is developing. Although research findings reported in this paper are limited to the perceptions of the Taiwanese importers' they can to a some extent be generalized to the entire Pacific Rim region. Additional research in the area is, however, needed. Specifically, more research is necessary to understand the core dimensions that lead to satisfied importers. Such studies provide the pivotal information needed by U.S. businesses to create and sustain competitive advantages.

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