EXPORT BEHAVIOR OF SMALL BUSINESS FIRMS IN DEVELOPING ECONOMIES: EVIDENCE FROM THE INDIAN MARKET

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The internationalization process and behavior of small business firms from developing countries was examined. A sample of small business firms from six different industries in India was taken to examine motivation and choice of markets, approaches used as part of export growth strategies, and attitudes towards international marketing activities. Results indicate that many of the explanations provided by the "stage theory" models for larger multinational enterprises do not fit the behavior of small exporting firms. There is also a bias towards focusing international marketing efforts toward developed countries rather than "psychically close" countries, contrary to the contentions of stage theorists. Findings also suggest that many small exporting firms tend to rely heavily on native ethnic contacts in the developed markets and remain production oriented as opposed to marketing oriented in their approach to international marketing. Policy recommendations and implications for firms from developed countries such as the United States are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Internationalization of smaller business firms in developing economies such as India has generally lagged far behind that of larger firms. The subject of internationalization of business organization itself has received considerable attention in the literature. However, much of the research is focused on firms that are larger and from more developed countries.

The purpose of this study is to review the literature relating to internationalization of business firms and examine the relevance of proposed theoretical models to smaller firms from India. Next, country specific issues will be addressed and investigated further. Policy implications are also identified and discussed.

Internationalization Process

A number of explanations in international business literature have emerged that attempt to describe the internationalization process of business firms. They depict this process as a gradual process beginning with concentration on exporting and leading to an eventual manufacturing involvement in international markets. Bilky and Tesar (1977), for example, identified the process of internationalization in terms of six stages:

Stage 1. Management is not interested in exporting
Stage 2. Management is willing to fulfill unsolicited orders
Stage 3. Management explores the feasibility of active exporting
Stage 4. Experimental exporting begins to psychologically closed countries
Stage 5. The firm is an experienced exporter to these markets, and
Stage 6. The firm looks to export to psychologically distant countries.

Similarly, Johanson and Wiedersheim-Paul (1975) proposed an "establishment chain" to identify two patterns relating to internationalization of business firms. First, a firm's internationalization process

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begins with export via independent representatives. Export continues through a sales subsidiary, and finally, via manufacturing. Firms initially target nearby countries, and subsequently enter foreign markets with increasing "psychic distance," with regards to socio-cultural and geographic similarities between the two markets. The term "psychic distance" has been widely discussed in international business literature. Nordstrom and Valhane (1992) have even proposed a psychic index based on cultural, structural (e.g., legal and administrative systems) and language differences.

The internationalization process explanation based on stage theory approach has received conflicting support at best. Considerable empirical studies of the past support the stage theory's validity in various situations, yet recent reviews raise doubts regarding its appropriateness in developing nations. For example, based on a number of political studies, Bell and Young (1995) maintain that five basic propositions of most stage theories may be questioned.

- Firms develop in their domestic markets before initiating exports.
- There is some initial resistance to becoming involved in export activities.
- Firms begin by exporting to "psychically" similar countries and thereafter move to more distant markets.
- There is a logical sequence in which firms first export, then later consider alternate market entry methods.
- The entire process is uni-directional, and to some extent, inevitable after the initial steps.

In a similar vein, Millington and Bayliss (1990) and Sullivan and Bauerschmidt (1990) have argued that stage theory models are unable to explain internationalization behavior of smaller and medium sized firms. A few empirical studies involving small exporting firms from Brazil (da Rocha et al., 1990), Turkey (Karafakioglu 1986), and Pakistan (Zafarullah, Ali and Young 1998) indicate that the receipt of unsolicited orders from foreign customers is the most frequent and influential factor in stimulating export entry.

Another explanation of internationalization process is provided under the framework of network theory. Accordingly, internationalization of a business firm can be described in terms of interactions, relationships, and networks. Many firms enter the international markets through networks of contacts. Thus, market entry becomes possible through the exchange process (Johanson and Vahlne, 1992). The bases of network theory may be particularly plausible in explaining the internationalization process of smaller firms. This is because smaller firms have little experience in the international arena and as such they are usually unable to carry out the task of marketing research to develop a better understanding of international markets. Network theory is also useful in explaining the internationalization behavior of large MNCs in terms of their strategic alliance partnerships. A lack of experience in a given market economy can generally be overcome with the help of network contacts developed through strategic alliance partnerships.

Some researchers have described the export behavior of firms located in the small economies as "reactive, unplanned and opportunistic" (Mitchell and Bradley 1986) and that they are not reluctant to export (Leonidou 1995). This is contrary to stage theory suggestions that most firms at the beginning are unwilling to participate in export oriented activities. Leonidou (1995) found that in many cases, smaller business firms are very willing to participate in exporting—especially if the scope of the domestic market is limited. However, they face additional human and financial resource constraints that are needed to initiate exporting.

In a study of Greek exporters and British importers, Katsikeas and Piercy (1990) found that the relative lack of marketing expertise and absence of marketing orientation among many developing country firms may lead to a high level of dependence on agents and foreign distributors. In turn, this may act as a barrier in moving to the sales subsidiary mode of market development. Smaller business firms from developing countries may benefit from contacts and networks abroad. Such a proposal is particularly applicable in turbulent high technology industries where international market entry may be facilitated with the help of international networks of colleagues and acquaintances. As a result, it would appear that in the context of smaller business firms in India, network, rather than stage theory, may be most accurate in explaining the international involvement. To date, few studies have examined the international entry behavior of smaller business firms from developing countries. The purpose of this study is to examine this issue with the help of data collected form smaller business firms in India that were involved in international business operations at different levels.

RESEARCH METHOD

A sample of small business firms in India from which to collect data regarding the internationalization process issues was chosen. Following the guidelines proposed by Zafarullah, Ali and Young (1998), the sample companies were small, active in exporting for at least five years, and representative of a wide range of industry groups. A convenience sample of 42 companies was chosen from the two different industrial cities (Calcutta and Pune) in India. A majority (35) of these companies employed 150 or fewer employees. The remaining business firms were not much larger—the company with the most employees was 360. Most of these companies were well established (in operation for eight or more years). A number of companies were operated exclusively by family members.

A personal interview approach was used to collect data from executive officers of these companies. In most cases, the respondents included owners, presidents, or managing directors of the companies. The firms in the sample marketed the following items.

- Leather products
- Automobile parts
- Textiles (bedsheets, etc.)
- Brass decorative items
- Decorative stitching, and
- Processed food

Subjects covered in these interviews included explanations of business startup and pre-internationalization experience (e.g., events that lead to the internationalization decision), international business decision (mode of entry, international marketing decisions, choice of markets, maintenance of customer relations, etc.), problems encountered in foreign markets, planning for international growth, and the influence of international marketing on the structure, organization and staffing of the firm. An itemized rating format (Very True to Not at All True and Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree) was used to obtain responses for the majority of questions.

The interviews were mainly conducted in English; however, the presence of a Hindi-speaking interviewer enabled proper interpretation and clarification whenever necessary. The College of Business at the University of Delhi provided assistance in selecting and contacting companies. As indicated earlier, the main objectives of the research were to assess the relative appropriateness of stage and network theories in the context of small scale Indian business firms, to identify any issues that merit further investigation, and to suggest any policy implication that may be of help in encouraging such firms to participate in the international market arena.

FINDINGS

Characteristics of the Sample Firms

As indicated earlier, small business firms in our sample were included from six different industries. Most of the firms were relatively young in terms of their commercial existence. The average "age" varied from five years for leather products to eighteen years for decorative stitching. Most firms were comparatively small in terms of number of employees. They averaged a low of 11 employees in the decorative stitching industry to a high of 56 employees in automobile parts industry. In terms of years in the export business, they ranged from an average of four to sixteen years. Thus, the firms in the sample were relatively young in terms of their export experience as well. The number of export markets these firms operated in ranged from a single market to as many as eight markets. The average range varied from two in the automobile industry to six in the processed food industry. Most of the leading export markets were developed countries; the United Kingdom was the most common international market. Thus, contrary to stage theory models, these countries cannot be said to be "psychically close" (Johanson and Wiedersheim-Paul, 1975). A major driving force, in most cases, was the location of the primary buyer and the size of the particular product market. Other major factors included use of English as a business language and the size of the Indian population in these markets. Some of the processed food items were being marketed for Indian consumers settled abroad.

Most companies in the sample showed a significant international involvement in that export sales constituted a major part of their total sales. Only a few firms indicated a sizable domestic market. Of the 48 firms surveyed, more than half of them (26) were exclusively involved in exporting activities only. Invariably, international business was seen mainly in terms of exports only. Partly, this view was held due to the nature of certain products. For example, some of the automobile parts and decorative stitching companies supplied only to one main foreign buyer and did not operate in the domestic market. Many of these companies believed that overseas markets offered greater profit potential (especially developed country markets) and security of sales. A number of respondents indicated that they were not interested in domestic markets because of the red tape involved. Furthermore, many of the export items were completely exempt from income tax.

Motivation and Choice of Markets

The mean values in Table 2 indicate that most firms were involved in exporting activities because of encouragement from a family member or friend living abroad. In many cases, these family members or friends wanted to be involved in business operations themselves. In such situations, domestic firms believed that this was an easy way of being able to enter in international markets. Moreover this was seen as the only way to overcome the lack of knowledge within foreign markets. As suggested in the literature, importation was not a precursor or inducement for export involvement.

Table 1
Average Characteristics of the Sample Firms

Type of Products Exported	Years in Business	Number of Employees	Years in Export Business	Number Export Markets	Leading Export Markets
Leather Products	5	45	4	4	U.K. Germany
Auto-mobile Products	7	56	5	2	Korea Malaysia
Textile Products	11	39	10	5	U.K. U.S.
Brass Items	10	12	8	3	U.S. France
Decor-ative Stitching	18	11	16	2	U.K. Canada
Processed Food	7	18	7	6	Kenya Dubai

As indicated in the following table, a number of firms were involved in exporting with encouragement from the National Export Promotion Board. However, most firms indicated that the National Export Promotion Board mainly supplied the addresses of potential buyers and middlemen abroad and was not involved in any systematic export oriented training. Initial steps involved corresponding with potential buyer companies and middlemen in foreign markets. Many companies indicated that they actively pursued exporting as part of their growth strategy. In this instance, they themselves initiated contacts with a list of foreign customers and import/export agents in foreign markets.

With regards to the choice of entry, findings in Table 2 indicate that contacts with acquaintances were used to initially enter the export markets. In many cases, these acquaintances were relatives or family friends that were settled abroad and many of them were involved in their own small businesses in these foreign countries. During initial interviews it was indicated that in many instances a spouse of an employed person in the foreign market decided to get involved in export market activities. Domestic trade shows and exhibits were also used as a choice of entry by many small but progressive firms. Domestic trade shows and exhibits were utilized more frequently as a way of exploring export possibilities than trade shows and exhibits abroad. In many cases, this was most likely due to economic reasons. In other instances, lack of motivation and knowledge resulted in relying mianly on domestic trade shows and exhibits. In some instances, exporting firms indicated that they were contacted by visiting foreign buyers and were impressed by their professionalism and buying power. This favorable impression then led to the initial involvement in the export market activities.

Table 2
Motivations and Choice of Markets

Motivation for Exporting	Mean*	Choice of Entry	Mean*
Unsolicited orders	1.4	Impressed by visiting buyers/reps	1.4
Encouraged by family member/ friend living abroad	3.5	Initial sales to acquaintance as middlemen	3.6
Encouragement from National export Promotion Board	3.1	Trade shows and exhibits domestically	28
Active pursuit as part of a growth Strategy	2.8	Trade shows and exhibits abroad	3.4

*Mean scores are based on a five-point rating scale ranging from "Very True = 5" to "Not at all True = 1."

Export Growth Activities

Export growth strategy is considered one of the major aspects of strategic decision making for many successful multinational corporations. In our sample, however, results indicated that many small exporting firms were content to stay with their original approach (Table 3). Many of these firms were satisfied with maintaining their original market rather than expanding it. As such, they did not contemplate alternative approaches to expand the size of their export markets. A number of companies described their relationship with their current agents as satisfactory and comfortable. This, in turn, reflected a lack of interest and enthusiasm in taking a proactive approach in expanding their export market share.

Participation in trade shows domestically and networking through friends and relatives were used as tools of growth strategy by a number of business firms. This, however, again reflects a low propensity of risk taken by small firms in developing countries. Lack of knowledge of foreign export markets and marketing tactics also contributed to relying heavily on contacts with ethnic Indian population in expanding the export market base. A number of other proactive companies attempted to expand exporting by participating in trade shows abroad and even used original buyers as the source of networking activities. However, these approaches were used by a smaller percentage of exporting firms. In many cases, the exporter will also visit abroad once or twice a year to attend trade shows and exhibits, and, in doing so, try to develop contacts with local distributors and individual buyers.

Table 3
Approaches Used as Part of an Export Growth Strategy

Approach	Mean*
Staying with the Original Approach	3.8
Networking Through the Original Buyer	2.2
Networking Through Friends/Relatives	3.4
Direct Mail Campaign	2.0
Participation in Trade Shows Aborad	2.8
Participation in Trade Shows Domestically	3.6
Creating and Utilizing Internet Web Page	0.9

*Mean Scores are based on a five-point rating scale ranging from "Very True = 5" to "Not at all True = 1"

Direct mail campaigns were also used by a small number of exporting firms. These firms mailed a catalog along with a cover letter to foreign buyers and middlemen, utilizing a list of addresses provided by the National Export Promotion Board. However, such mailings resulted in few positive responses. An approach of creating and utilizing the Internet's World Wide Web still seems to be in its infancy, as can be seen in Table 3. During initial interviews, however, a number of small exporting firms expressed an interest in exploring the possibility of export expansion through creating and utilizing the World Wide Web.

Attitudes Toward International Marketing Activities

A number of Likert statements were used in order to examine attitudes toward specific aspects of exporting activities (Table 4). A more notable finding is that the firms studied have no preference for countries with greater geographical, cultural, and linguistic similarities to their own. This is again in contrast with the stage theory's prediction that such firms will have a greater preference for businesses in countries with similar socio-cultural and geographic similarities to their own. The majority of smaller firms clearly indicated their strong preference to export products to more developed countries. Similar to some earlier findings, many smaller firms seemed to be satisfied with their current export sales levels and were not actively involved in export growth oriented marketing strategies.

Some more troubling findings were that many smaller firms did not believe that government sponsored export growth strategies were very helpful in promoting export sales. This is consistent with the findings of initial exploratory interviews which indicated that many firms believed that government role in encouraging smaller firms to export was only minimal. The Indian government, therefore, should play a more active role in educating, training, and providing incentives for small business firms to participate in the international market. The findings of Table 4 also indicate that small firms do not believe that additional marketing expenditures are worth the additional sales generated. They also felt marketing expenditures tended to be too high in promoting sales in foreign markets. As was discussed earlier, many small exporters did not participate in any marketing or sales promotion activities abroad. For example, none of them maintained any show rooms abroad. Many firms also downplayed the role of the Internet revolution in helping export growth. This could be due to the lack of familiarity with this new tool. Many international firms such as AT&T, however, are aggressively marketing the Internet and E-commerce as new business tools with powerful potential to help change existing attitudes of small business firms about the usefulness of the Internet in international marketing.

Table 4
Attitudes Toward
International Marketing Activities

Attitudes	Mean*
Additional marketing expenditures are not worth the additional sales generated	2.2
Additional Marketing Efforts become too expensive for my firm	4.1
Competition in developed countries is too intense for promotional efforts to be effective	4.2
Middlemen in foreign countries are not very approachable	3.1
Internet revolution will make it easy to grow exports in international markets	1.1
It is helpful to have a network of family members and friends aborad for growing export sales	3.4
Government sponsored export growth strategies are very helpful in promoting the export sales	1.9
Our preference is to export our products to neighboring countries	1.0
Our preference is to export our products to countries with the same/similar language and culture	0.4
Our preference is to export our product to developed countries	4.4
We are satisfied with our current export sales level and not actively involved in a export growth marketing strategy	3.8
We will be more actively involved if government were to assist in promotion activities abroad	4.7
Marketing and promotion strategies play a key role in expanding exports in foreign markets	4.0
Middlemen (e.g., retailers and wholesalers) are more reliable in developed countries than in developing countries	4.5

*Mean Scores are based on a five-point rating scale ranging from "Strongly Agree = 5" to "Strongly Disagree = 1"

There were also more encouraging findings based on attitudinal data. Most business firms indicated that they would be more actively involved in international marketing if the government would aid in promoting their products abroad. Coupled with the earlier findings that the government was not as proactive as possible in helping small business firms, these findings highlight the importance of the role that the government can play in stimulating export growth for small exporters. A majority of the responses further reinforced the earlier contention that smaller business firms utilize a network of family members and friends abroad in promoting export sales. Thus, it would seem that networking theories would be more appropriate than stage theory models in explaining the exporting behavior of smaller firms.

These firms also believed that the competition in developing countries is too intense for their limited promotional efforts to be effective. However, they found middlemen in foreign countries to be quite approachable in business dealings. Here, again, the governments of developing nations can play a crucial role in assisting small business firms in promoting their products internationally.

CONCLUSIONS

The main objective of this article was to examine the attitudes, motivations, and export choice behaviors of smaller business firms in India. A secondary objective was to evaluate the applicability of stage theory models in explaining the behavior of small international firms. Based on the findings from our sample, applicability of almost all of the tenets of stage theory models in this context can be challenged.

First, stage theory models maintain that domestic market development activity precedes export development. Our results indicated that exporting in many cases either preceded or developed alongside domestic sales. Many of the firms in our sample started out as exporting businesses and had little or no intention of selling in domestic markets. For some small businesses (e.g., brass product firms) the product items were so specialized that they had little domestic appeal.

Second stage theory contention is that at the initial stages, firms are reluctant to be involved in export markets. This can also be contested. The findings of this study indicate that many of the firms are highly committed to their export markets even at the early stages of export involvement.

Third, the stage theory's assertion that at the initial stages, firms tend to export their products to "psychically close" countries is also contested. The small firms surveyed in this study overwhelmingly showed preference for markets in more developed countries. The main factors for the choice of the export market included the greater perceived market potential of these countries, the use of English as a standard business language, and the presence of a sizable ethnic Indian population.

Finally, the argument that internationalization is a systematic and step-by-step process also did not gain concrete support. Results indicated that internationalization is highly situation-specific. For example, some small firms start out as exporters to a limited number of foreign buyers and remain that way on a long-term basis and never move beyond the exporting stage of international marketing. Given the high degree of dependence on the networking of ethnic population as a way to facilitate international trading, it would logically follow to test the applicability of networking theory to explain the internationalization process of small business firms in the developing economy of India.

Consistent with the study of Bell and Young (1995), it may also be more useful to look at the concept of "states of internationalization" as opposed to the stages of internationalization. This is because, in many cases, the initial export decisions may be simply "unplanned, reactive, and opportunistic," instead of being systematic, as is suggested by stage theory models. There is also a need to investigate the ways in which the internationalization behavior of larger firms differ from that of smaller ones.

This study also attempted to examine specific internationalization issues that relate specifically to smaller business companies from developing countries. In this regard, it was clear that smaller firms tended to follow a production orientation rather than a marketing orientation. A closer examination of the issues in this area indicated that smaller firms considered international marketing expenditures to be too expensive and not worth the additional sales they may generate. However, many felt that the government could play a crucial role in promoting the export activities of small firms.

As has been discussed before, smaller firms tended to rely more on the network of the ethnic population abroad. This indicates that most small firms tend to be risk aversive. This is a negative mode that negatively impacts their international trade and thus, their opportunities for growth. They should explore alternative methods of obtaining new buyers and new markets. In this regard, government export promotion programs, with careful training, can be very valuable to small exporting firms. Internet and e-commerce are other low cost, but possibly effective tools that could be utilized to foster export growth. However, results indicate that smaller firms from the developing economies have not started to appreciate the potential of this new electronic medium. Carefully designed training programs to encourage e-commerce orientation could be a powerful economic catalyst for smaller business firms.

Implications and Future Directions

It is clear from the findings of this study that smaller exporting firms in developing countries remain predominantly production oriented. There is a need for them to understand the value of market orientation in expanding their export markets. In this initial exploratory survey, it was found that many small exporters tended to be rather naive about marketing practices. It is in this area that government and private trade groups can play an important role in providing training to small firms. Financial assistance for small business executives to travel abroad and come in face-to-face contact with distributors and potential buyers can go a long way in understanding the needs of the international markets.

As suggested by Zafarullah, Ali, and Young (1998), the Export Promotion Bureaus can also help internationally oriented firms by recruiting "overseas marketing liaison officers" who could be natives residing in the major foreign markets. Their role would be to act as a marketing interface between the exporter and the distributor, providing support, clearing up misunderstandings, specifying customer requirements, and perhaps undertaking some limited marketing research. In general, exploiting the services of a native ethnic base in export markets may work to the advantage of small business firms.

Business firms in developed countries can also play an important role in introducing smaller business firms in developing countries to the local markets. Since smaller firms from developing nations tend to be low cost producers (due to a low labor cost component), such partnerships can be mutually beneficial to firms in both the developing and developed economies. As smaller firms from developing countries tend to rely more on networking as a way to find buyers in foreign markets, business firms in countries such as the United States can help firms from developing countries become part of a buyers network through, for example, a trade association. Additionally, organizations such as Chambers of Commerce in major commercial centers can help create trade associations or groups specifically designed to associate smaller firms of developing nations with local buyers. Such trade associations can also be created in developing countries where organizational buyers from developed countries can use them as a forum to exchange ideas and information about their purchasing needs, and become more acquainted with smaller business firms. As the world approaches a true global economy, market efficiencies will only be obtained when even smaller players are encouraged to freely participate in the international market.

There is also a need to develop theories and conduct empirical testing to understand the behavior of small international business firms. Though there are a number of important studies conducted to examine the international marketing involvement of larger, multinational firms, there is a paucity of studies that focus on the issues specifically related to small business firms. Empirical studies with larger samples to represent various industries and countries will add to the limited knowledge base that is currently available.

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