

STRATEGIES EMPLOYED IN THE CLEANING INDUSTRY IN AN EFFORT TO ATTAIN SUSTAINABLE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

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Abstract

The service industry worldwide has seen tremendous growth and is one of the fastest growing sectors both in the developed and developing economies. The growth is attributed to growing demand of clean atmosphere both at the workplace and domestic. Similarly, the demand for good health, safe and cleaner environment has made service businesses to start both in small and large magnitude. To successfully attain competitive advantage and boost growth, cleaning service businesses require the right strategies to be put in place. This paper examined strategies used by the cleaning industry in Kenya by focusing on a leading business in the country. The study targeted 112 managers from the target business and used a census sampling method. A questionnaire was used to collect primary data while a documentary analysis was done to collect secondary data. A pre-testing of the questionnaire was also conducted in order to validate the research instrument content. The findings from the study

found that certain competitive strategies, namely professional and efficient service delivery, specialised quality services, cost effectiveness and niching were used to gain competitive advantage while product development, different marketing approaches, innovation and customer relationship managers were used to boost company's growth. The use of these strategies ensured increased profit margin, customer satisfaction, brand position and sustainable growth. It is hoped that this study contributes significantly to the Kenyan cleaning industry both to new entrants and existing companies in terms of strategies to employ in order to excel in the industry.

Keywords: Strategies, competitive edge, performance, marketing leadership, cleaning industry, property maintenance

INTRODUCTION

Service refers to the performance of helpful or professional activity aimed at satisfying a particular need of an individual, group or organisations (Boakes, 2009; Hughes, 2000). Due to increasing awareness of the need for good health, safe and cleaner environment, the cleaning industry has seen tremendous growth and has become one of the fastest growing sectors in both developed and developing economies (Ollek, 2008). With much demand expected in the areas of health care, education, nursing home care and private entities, the cleaning industry is expected to continue its upward growth trend making it to attract both small and large players (Morrow, 2008). The service is consequently segmented into corporate, public, domestic and industrial consumers, all with specific demands and specialised requirements (Morrow, 2008).

To emphasize the role of cleaning in a growing economy, Marrow (2008) has observed that the need for quality and professional cleaning will continue as long as there are commercial buildings, hospitality industries, shopping malls and shopping centres, bank premises, industrial facilities and medical centres. Ollek (2008) added that this is one sector where demand has continues to outstrips the supply hereby opening opportunities and fuelling growth.

A focus on the world cleaning industry indicates that the sector is growing fast with regions like Europe, America and India while in Africa, South Africa remains a leader. The European countries have the most advance cleaning industry in terms of size, players, turnover and technology while United States industry is expected to growth by 5 percent by 2018. The growth is attributed to the healthcare industry's increasing demand attributed to rising number of elderly people requiring specialised care. The Indian economy has also seen increased cleaning services demands arising from desire for more favourable clean environment and products.

Finally, in the African continent, South Africa leads the cleaning sector and has well established structures and legal framework compared to other countries where the industry is mostly at its infancy stage (Hughes, 2000; Morrow, 2008; Ollek, 2008; *Entrepreneur Magazine*, 2012).

A focus on the cleaning industry in developing countries especially African indicates that the industry lacks developed sustainable business strategies (Gitau, 2009). The lack of sustainable strategies is associated with various challenges among them players not giving much attention to marketing, inability to adopt appropriate technology and lack of professional man-power since majority of workers are from lower cadre employees (Gitau, 2009; Morrow, 2008; Rodgers, 2001; Snell & Bohlander, 2010). Likewise, inability to access financial supports and poor customer management skills have hindered business growth (Buttle, 2004; Ollek 2008).

In Kenya like in most African countries, the cleaning industry is still at its infancy stage of development with the oldest companies being only a decade old. However, like in developed countries, opportunities in the cleaning industry are triggered by mega developments taking place in the last 10 years especially in real estates. The growth and competitiveness among businesses have forced many to focus on their core competencies while directing cleaning services to upcoming professionals and entrepreneurs (Gitau, 2009). The largest player in the industry is Parapet Cleaning Services Cleaning Services which has seen tremendous growth for the last 15 years since inception. The company has spread its cleaning services to multiple businesses and organisations ranging from shopping malls, banking institutions, commercial buildings, universities, non-governmental organizations and medical institutions (Parapet Cleaning Services, 2012). Parapet Cleaning Services is also the market leader with the largest market share in the industry and plans to expand to the rest of Eastern African region. To maintain international standards, Parapet Cleaning Services is a member of the prestigious International Association of Cleaners and Property Maintenance composed of a few members from East and Central Africa regions. The membership is based on a company's ability to offer quality services and distinguished state-of-the-art technological services (Parapet Cleaning Services, 2012). The company is also celebrated as one of Kenya's entrepreneurs and key drivers of the country's economic growth and wealth creation. Due to its outstanding services, the company has received numerous awards the 'star of excellence award', for instance, Daystar University (Parapet Cleaning Services, 2012).

The steady growth of Parapet Cleaning Services is associated with its professional competencies and adoption of the latest technologies. Due to its remarkable growth compared to its competitors, Parapet Cleaning Services was targeted by this study which aimed to establish strategies used to sustain the competitive edge of the company.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The commercial cleaning industry is one of the fastest growing areas of the economy in the world today, both in developing and developed economies. The industry is broadly categorized in terms of corporate, public sector, domestic, and industries services (Morrow, 2008). The cleaning industry is referred to as a guaranteed sector due to its unwavering demand no matter the economic conditions. Its potential is guaranteed as long as economies grow in terms of new buildings completed, new businesses open and consumer tastes favour cleanliness (Morrow, 2008). The industry is estimated to grow even faster as more advance technology and mechanization of service is realized leading to more efficiency and profitability arising from speedy and effective deliveries (Ollek, 2008).

With the growing trend of going green, the cleaning industry is also said to be gearing itself to provide products and services that are environmentally friendly (Nile & Jeffrey, 2004). Like all industries, new environmental regulations are meant to create cleaner environment, a role cleaning industries have been at the forefront. It is an industry that is expected to grow faster creating even more opportunities for new comers and existing players (Ollek, 2008). Such opportunities are expected in sectors such as health and home cares, education, office buildings, shopping malls, automobile, governments, wholesale and retails.

Competitive strategies

To compete effectively thereby attaining the level of desired competitive advantage organizations must employ the right strategies. A strategy is the game plan management put in place in order to stake out a specific market position, operates efficiently, attracts customers and successfully outsmarts competitors and become a leader both in the short-term and in the long term (Barone&Decarlo 2003;Johnson & Scholes, 2002). Barone and Decarlo (2003) add that the tasks of crafting and executing strategies are at the heart of managing business enterprises and winning in the market place. The realisation of such strategies depends on the availability of opportunities, resources, policies and plans, and competencies (Aaker, 2005).According to Nile and Hatch (2004), in order to compete successfully, locally and globally, the cleaning industry must adopt the right strategies. Similarly, achieving a sustainable competitive advantage (measured in terms of increased market share, profitability and customer satisfaction and loyalty) demands appropriate strategies been put in place.

Within the cleaning industry, certain strategies have proved to effectively transform small and large companies attain desired level of competitiveness. For this study, strategies such as cost effectiveness, quality services, specialized service delivery and focusing (niching) are seen

as vital to attaining competitive edge, high profits, customer satisfaction and loyalty, brand position and overall sustainability (Gitau, 2009; Ollek, 2008; Peteraf, 2003; Porter, 2008).

Cost effectiveness: This strategy entails the ability of the cleaning businesses to provide services that are cost effective in terms of unique value sought by customers (Ollek, 2008). From services offered to mode of delivery, cleaning service businesses must not be perceived as exploiting their customers. When there is nothing unique in the services, even low prices may not attract customers. When low price strategy is used alone it has the consequences of lowering of profit margins. This means that cost leadership only makes sense if the whole process of acquiring material to provision of services is efficient.

Differentiation through quality: Quality denotes the ability of a product or services to satisfy its customers' needs or requirements (Foster 2004). In the cleaning industry, the need to provide quality service is even more vital given the increasing demand for health living environment. Added to the importance of quality cleaning is the growing demand towards conservation of environment and ensuring health and safety policy development. The cleaning industry is therefore expected to provide services using environmentally friendly materials such as biodegradable detergents while at the same time putting in place health and safety measures.

Specialized service delivery (professionalism): Like in any industry, the need to offer specialized service is essential to meet individual customized needs. To do this, a cleaning company needs to carefully segment its market to identify specific and specialized demands in existence. If done well, specialized delivery leads to high level of satisfaction and increase customer loyalty and brand commitment. It should be emphasized that even in specialized deliveries customers must enjoy their services with minimal inconveniences and other unnecessary expenses.

Focusing: A focus strategy aims at targeting a specific market niche based on either low cost or differentiation. The strategy is driven by a desire to serve a unique market that may be too small for big players. Such markets could be based on market size, geographical location, purchasing power or common characteristics of a market (Peteraf, 2003; Porter, 2008). Since the market targeted is usually small, those serving such markets are able to gain a premium in terms of high profits, market share and customer loyalty.

The use of cost control, effective delivery methods, quality services strategies and focusing are termed as the foundational strategies for competitive edge in the cleaning industry (Aaker, 2005; Gitau, 2009; Ollek (2008). Any attempt to neglect these strategies only leads to failure and lack of competitiveness and loss of market share and profitability.

Growth strategies

In terms of growth strategies which enable an organisation to match its resources and activities with its environment (Johnson & Scholes, 2004), several strategies have been used in the cleaning industry, namely product development strategy, market based approaches and innovation.

Product development strategy: This denotes an organisational ability to develop new products for its market through modification of existing products (Peteraf, 2003). The products could be target to new markets or aimed at penetrating the existing markets (Aaker, 2005)

*Market based approaches (customer driven strategy):*The market based approaches signify giving a market angle to the businesses. The approaches consist of marketing services or products to related customers by adding channels of distribution or using different promotion mechanisms. A major strength is a business to demonstrate how its products or services serve customers better than the competitors. The approaches also enable businesses to identifying new uses for their existing products or services thereby attracting and satisfying different customer groups (Smith &Hitt, 2005).

*Innovativeness:*This refers to the use of new knowledge or skills to transform existing processes or develop viable products and services (Aaker, 2005). Innovation is termed as the ignition that fuels and triggers changes and business growth (Gitau, 2009).It is through innovation that a business is able to develop new ideas, develop new and variety of products and match customers' changing tastes. This however only happens to businesses that look both internally and externally for ways to improve their performances and align their operations accordingly (Aaker, 2005). By being innovative, the cleaning industry is said attain competitive edge through professionalism and efficient operations. The practice results in value addition for customers and eventually boosts customer loyalty and commitment (Gitau, 2009; Pearce & Robinson, 2013).

The use of specific strategies and adoption of various growth strategies have seen growth among leading cleaning services worldwide. It would be critical to find out whether Kenyan cleaning businesses have used similar strategies to become the leading clearing company in the country.

Problem statement

Cleanliness is next to godliness is a popular saying. This fact is true for all progressive and quality providing organisations and a feature most sought by consumers. This means no business can survive without the support of cleaning services. Financial analysts have termed the cleaning industry as recession resistant and highly stable sector with many untapped

potentials (Ollek, 2008). This means that regardless of the economic situation facing a country or region, cleaning remains a basic necessity for business to operate. Besides its seriousness and potential, the cleaning industry is dominated by very small fragmented operators who lack the ability to maximise the potential of the industry (Morrow, 2008). The industry is also plagued with numerous challenges such as lack of market strategies, poor internal structures and lack of financial support. In Kenya, the industry's main challenges include: lack of formal structures and operating procedures, poor human capital development, lack of effective marketing strategies, low level of innovation and unfair competition (Mathis & Jackson, 2007; Morrow, 2008; Rodgers, 2001; Schmenner, 1986). The challenges have been a hindering block to the unexploited cleaning industry in Kenya and the region. To succeed however, players in the industry must adopt the appropriate strategies in order to attain competitive advantage, increase market share and profitability. It is notable that besides all the challenges facing the industry, Parapet Cleaning Services Cleaning Services has thrived and become the market leader in Kenya (Parapet Cleaning Services, 2012). This study focused on strategies employed by Parapet Cleaning Services Cleaning Service to enable it attains competitive advantage thereby making it the industry market leader. It is hope the study will unveil the right strategies which other small industries can use in order to attain competitive advantage and succeed in the cleaning businesses.

Purpose of the Study

The overall objective of this study was to establish strategies employed in the cleaning industry in Kenya in an effort to attain sustainable competitive advantage. The study specifically examined competitive and growth strategies and how they contribute to competitive advantages and performance.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study design used for this study was descriptive in nature. The focus was a case study where Parapet Cleaning Services Cleaning Services was the main target of the study. The population of study was 1,792 employees of Parapet Cleaning Services Cleaning Services (Parapet Cleaning Services, 2012). The study however targeted all 112 managers of the company. Since four of the managers were used for pretesting of the research instrument, remaining 108 respondents participated in the study who comprised of the directors, chief executive officer, departmental heads, department assistants and operational managers. The study used census technique. To collect data, a questionnaire was used as the primary instrument while a documentary analysis was conducted to get secondary data. Four

questionnaires were pretested in the company to determine the reliability of the instrument content. The study was carefully performed to ensure that data collected reflected accuracy and free from error. Finally, data was analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Response Rate

Out of 108 questionnaires distributed for this study, 90 were usable and analysable. This was a response rate of 83% which was considered very adequate and satisfactory for analysis (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003).

Demographic Composition

In terms of demographic composition, the study found out that there were 63(70%) female and 27 (30%) male. The results indicated that more female occupied managerial positions compared to their male counterparts. The findings are in line with typical cleaning firms where women form greater part of the workforce (Gitau, 2009).

The study also sought to establish the level of education for the managers. The findings showed that the respondents were well education with majority having attained tertiary level of learning and held college certificates. That is, 5 (5.6%) were graduates, 65 (72.2%) had college certificate with the remaining 20 (22.2%) having secondary certificate. With 70(77.8%) of the respondents being college or university graduates, the company can be said to value education among its managers (See Table 1).

Table 1: Education level

Qualification	Frequency	Percentage
Graduate degree	5	5.6
College certificate	65	72.2
Secondary school certificate	20	22.2
Total	90	100

Competitive strategies

In an effort to establish strategies used to attain competitive advantage, four strategies were examined, namely cost effectiveness, efficient specialised delivery services, differentiated quality services and focusing. The findings indicated that efficient and timely deliveries of services were supported by a majority of respondents (100%) as giving the company a

competitive edge in the industry. Likewise, specialised quality services based on professionalism was a good source of competitive advantage supported by another 100% of respondents. Cost of service on other hand was supported by 81.1% of the respondents who agreed that is contributed to overall competitiveness. Finally, 68.9% of respondents considered focusing or niching as instrumental to competitive advantage (See Table 2). The results show that efficient timely services and quality products were critical determinants of a business ability to compete effectively and attain competitiveness. While cost is an important ingredient, the respondents did not cite it as critical to attainment of effectiveness and competitive edge.

Table 2: Competitive strategies in the cleaning industry

Competitive strategies in the cleaning industry.		Very high extent	High extent	Indifferent	Low extent	Very Low extent	Total
Price based strategies (Cost of services)	Frequency	(10)	(63)	(12)	(5)	(0)	90
	Percent	11.1%	70%	13.3%	5.6%	0%	100%
Differentiation through efficient service delivery	Frequency	(78)	(12)	(0)	(0)	(0)	90
	Percent	86.7%	13.3%	0%	0%	0%	100%
Differentiated specialized quality services	Frequency	(62)	(28)	(0)	(0)	(0)	90
	Percent	68.9%	31.1%	0%	0%	0%	100%
Client Focusing/Niche targeting	Frequency	(19)	(43)	(28)	(0)	(0)	90
	Percent	21.1%	47.8%	31.1%	0%	0%	100%

Strategies associated with growth

As discussed earlier, the study aimed also at establishing strategies associated with business growth within the cleaning industry. To this end, respondents were asked to rank the strategies they felt Parapet Cleaning Services used in its management. From the findings, different responses were given. The ability to be innovative and automating cleaning service was seen as a leading strategy for growth and was supported by 100% of managers. Similarly, the fact that the company operates a service business may explain why product development geared toward different segments was seen as a major strategy to boost growth (98.9%). This was

followed by need to have different market approaches (86.7%) and customer management (84%). The result of the data analysis from the respondents is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Growth Strategies in the cleaning industry

Attributes that boost growth in cleaning industry		Very high extent	High extent	Indifferent	Low extent	Very Low extent	Total
Product development through segmentation	Frequency	(52)	(37)	(1)	(0)	(0)	90
	Percent	57.8%	41.1%	1.1%	0%	0%	100%
Exploring various marketing avenues	Frequency	(10)	(68)	(12)	(0)	(0)	90
	Percent	11.1%	75.6%	13.3%	0%	0%	100%
Innovation & automation of machinery.	Frequency	(72)	(18)	(0)	(0)	(0)	90
	Percent	80%	20%	0%	0%	0%	100%
Customer relations management	Frequency	(76)	(0)	(14)	(0)	(0)	90
	Percent	84.4%	0%	15.6%	0%	0%	100%

The findings indicated that innovation is very important for cleaning companies to survive and attain competitive advantage. Similarly, product development, marketing avenues and customer management are seen as sources of business growth. The findings agree with scholarly and literature works that single out these strategies as essential for companies to attain required growth (Aaker, 2005; Johnson & Scholes, 2004; Kotler, 2000; Peteraf, 2003).

Parapet Cleaning Services Cleaning Services market leadership

Since Parapet Cleaning Services is considered a market leader in the Kenyan cleaning industry, there was need to explore factors contributing to such a growth in the last decade. From the findings it was noted that professionalism (100%) was the number one factor making the company to attract and retain customers and dominate its market. Efficient and timely deliveries of services were also cited by all respondents (100%) as giving the

company an edge in the industry. It is however notable that 47.8% of the respondents saw cost of services as contributing to market leadership while the rest 52.2% remained in indifferent. The findings as shown in Table 4 indicate that the company greatly value professionalism and timely delivery of services as prime to its market leadership.

Table 4: Factors contributing to Parapet Cleaning Service's Competitive performance in the cleaning industry

Factors contributing to Parapet Cleaning Service's competitive performance in the cleaning industry.		Highly agree	Agree	Indifferent	Disagree	Highly disagree	Total
Professionalism	Frequency	(81)	(9)	(0)	(0)	(0)	90
	Percent	90%	10%	0%	0%	0%	100%
Efficiency & Timeliness of service delivery	Frequency	(86)	(4)	(0)	(0)	(0)	90
	Percent	95.6%	4.4%	0%	0%	0%	100%
Cost of services to the client	Frequency	(0)	(43)	(47)	(0)	(0)	90
	Percent	0%	47.8%	52.2%	0%	0%	100%

Business strategies and Performance

The various strategies discussed so far were expected to lead to certain performance indicators. As derived from literature, successful strategy implementation would results to improved business profitability, customer loyalty, brand positioning, sustainable growth and customer satisfaction and loyalty (Aaker, 2005; Gitau, 2009; Ollek, 2008; Peteraf, 2003; Porter, 2008). From the current study, the applied strategies led to different outcomes notably, increased profits (84.5%), brand positioning (88.9%), sustainable growth (84.5%) and customer satisfaction (100%).

The results indicated that the strategies adopted resulted to improved performance in terms of growth, profitability, sustainability and customer satisfaction (Table 5).

Table 5: Performance of Parapet Cleaning Services Cleaning Services

Parapet Cleaning Services' performance		Very High extent	High extent	Indifferent	Low extent	Very low extent	Total
High profit margin	Frequency	(7)	(69)	(14)	(0)	(0)	90
	Percent	7.8%	76.7%	15.6%	0%	0%	100%
Brand positioning	Frequency	(12)	(68)	(10)	(0)	(0)	90
	Percent	13.3%	75.6%	11.1%	0%	(10%	100%
Sustainable growth	Frequency	(15)	(61)	(14)	(0)	(0)	90
	Percent	16.7%	67.8%	15.6%	0%	0%	100%
Customer satisfaction	Frequency	(16)	(74)	(0)	(0)	(0)	90
	Percent	17.8%	82.2%	0%	0%	0%	100%

Discussion of key findings

The study aimed at establishing strategies employed within the Kenyan cleaning industry, a case of the market leader. There were two parts to the study, first was to establish competitive strategies adopted and secondly, the growth strategies and how they contributed to competitive edge of Parapet Cleaning Services Cleaning Services. This was based on the fact that businesses or organisations main objective is attaining success amidst competition (Peteraf, 2003).

In relation to strategies used to attain competitive edges within the industry, the findings indicated that efficient specialised delivery services, differentiated quality services, cost effectiveness and focusing and focusing strategies were used. From the study, efficient and timely delivery and professional quality services were rated by respondents as the main causes of companies attaining competitiveness. Similarly, both cost effectiveness and focusing or niching were also considered important with 81.1% and 68.9% support respectively. This means that a company must devote time and resources to ensure these strategies are put in place if they have to succeed in the cleaning industry. At the top of the list was professionalism in terms of quality and timely services. To achieve this level of performance demands employees who

are able to perform exemplary well. This calls for highly competent and skilful employees willing to devote themselves to the welfare of the organisation and customers (Kyengo, 2007). The level of quality must also reflect employees' ability to handle tools and detergents in professional while at the same time ensuring hygiene and good environmental management of waste. The attainment of such level of performance must be a strategic decision taken by management and based on what the competitors are doing and costs involved (Wright, 1999). It is also notable that when services are inefficient and unsatisfactory to customers, a business incurs huge losses arising from wastage of materials, time, increase wages and overall poor performance and loss of competitiveness (Wright, 1999). Although cost effectiveness is cited as one of the generic strategies developed by Porter (2008), it appears to be the least concern within the industry. This is supported by Schmenner (1986) who argue that the alternative to price competition is to develop a differentiated offer, delivery or image, something that Parapet Cleaning Services Cleaning Services seemed to have perfected. Upcoming cleaning businesses in Kenya are highly recommended to take strategic decision in terms of maintaining professional, quality, efficient and timely performance.

Another focus of the study was to examine strategies that have been adopted by Parapet Cleaning Services Cleaning Services to boost its growth. The finding have shown that being innovative (100%), good product development strategy (98.9%), using different market approaches (86.7%) and customer management (84%) remained key strategies for growth. How these strategies are aligned determines whether a business will grow or not. According to Kotler (2000) excellently-managed service companies make strategic actions which call for top management commitment to service and customer satisfaction. The companies also put in place good systems to monitor performance and take correction actions. It is when the right mechanisms are put in place are the right products developed, right marketing approaches used and innovative practices and behaviour are encouraged.

Finally, when the right competitive growth strategies are put in place, a business whether cleaning or not will see significant changes in its performance. The result is increased profit margins, customer satisfaction and sustainable growth all aimed at attaining to competitive edge and leadership within a given industry.

CONCLUSION

The cleaning industry is growing tremendously all over the world. With growth come opportunities for new ventures and existing businesses. However, opportunities also means threats if businesses are not prepared with the appropriate strategies to manage competition and growth. This study has identified vital strategies necessary to attain high level of

competitiveness and achieve growth within the cleaning industry in Kenya. It is expected that a careful understanding of the strategies arising from the findings will enhance the players' performance in terms of competitive advantage and growth. The study recommends more research be conducted in the cleaning industry especially among small businesses in order to understand the industry innovativeness in the midst of changing competition dynamics and how to strategically position the players.

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