

**JIMMA UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF BUSINESS
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***A Research paper on the assessment of Environmental
influence on competitive position of a firm***

(The Case of Yerer Flour Share Company)

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the assessment of environmental forces and their likely impact on the competitiveness of the case study firm (Yere flour s.c).

The ability of organizations to understand and react to environmental forces is different. Some fail to adapt to changes early enough and others are blind and impervious to change. Hence the objective of this study is geared towards identifying different dynamic environmental forces that put pressure on the operation and competitiveness of the firm and is to disclose the company's reaction to the environment; i.e. whether the firm anticipate and capitalize on the environmental opportunities and use them as a distinctive competency that sets the organization from its competitors.

Primary data were collected through survey (using questionnaires) from concerned officials (General Manager, department heads, and Section\Division heads). An unstructured interview was also used for collecting data. Since population size of the study (officials) is too small census method of data collection was applied. The analysis method is of descriptive type.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Organizations are open systems that interact with their environment in the continual process of transforming resources input into products outputs to finished goods and/or services (R.Daft, 1997). This means that every organization operates in a dynamic environment that can create a variety of opportunities or threats in the firm's existing or potential markets. The awareness (specifically by managers) of the possible impact of environment forces on the markets is important. This is because there is high stake competition between firms.

Although the departmental rivalries and conflicts that present themselves with in the intra-firm environment are often problematic, they are to a certain extent within the control of the organization's management. It is generally the uncontrollable forces in the external macro-environment that pose the most important sources of opportunities and threats to the company. Macro-environment denotes all forces and agencies external to the firm itself. Some of these forces and agencies will be closer to the operation of the firm than others. For example, firm distributors and other distributive intermediaries and competing firms. These closer external factors are often collectively referred to as the firm's proximate macro-environment to distinguish them from wider external forces found; for example in the legal, cultural, economic and technological sub-environments (Reynolds, 1995).

Distribution consists of all major activities of the manufacturing and all of the intervening institutions and operations that move the goods along toward the ultimate consumer or industrial user the basic functions in distribution are buying, selling, transporting and warehousing. Through these activities distribution adds place, time, and possession utility values to goods.

Distribution as part of marketing system is required to give the kinds of goods and services one wants when and where he wants them and at what price he is willing to buy. Also it saves time both for the producer and the consumer for it enables them to have sufficient time for continuous production and to do anything respectively. It includes wholesaling, retailing and physical distribution agents and manufacturers representatives (Agarwal, 1982).

Distribution channels are subject to changes and evolution. Existing channels may decline in popularity over time while new channels may develop.

Laws are ordinarily passed as the result of social pressures and problems and once passed often stay on the books after the socially perceived need for them has disappeared. Political environments -the attitudes and actions of political and government leaders and legislators do change with the ebb and flow of social demands and beliefs.

Government affects virtually every enterprise and every aspect of life. In respect to business it acts in two main roles: it promotes and constrains business. For example, it promotes business by stimulating economic

expansion and development, by subsidizing selected industries, by giving tax advantage in certain situations, by supporting research and development, and even by protecting some business through special tariffs. The other role of government is to constrain and regulate business. A web of laws, regulations and court decisions encircles every business. Some are designed to protect workers, consumers and communities, many are designed to regulate the behavior of managers and their subordinates in business and offer enterprises. There is relatively little that managers can do in any organization that is not in some way concerned with, and often specifically controlled by a law or regulation (hand book on introduction to business, 1992 by wondaywhu).

Thus business organizations must respond to the dynamic political pressures as well as laws that might be passed by the government.

One of the most pervasive factors in the environment is technology. Technology refers to the sum total of knowledge we have of ways to do things. It includes inventions, techniques, and vast store of organized knowledge about every thing. But its main influence is on ways of doing things, on how we design, produce, distribute and sell goods and services. The impact of technology is seen in new products, new machines, new tools, new materials, and new services. Some of the benefits from technology are greater productivity higher living standards, more leisure time and greater variety of products. But the benefits of technology must be weighed against the problems associated with technological developments such as traffic jams, polluted air, and water, shortage of energy etc. what is needed is a

balanced approach that takes advantage of technology and at the same time minimizes some of the undesirable side effects (Douglas, 1997).

Economy is of greatest importance to business organizations. The operation of business enterprises is shaped by the general pattern of economic development in which it functions. Some of the significant factors of the economic environment of business organizations as put by (Rochman 1990) are:

Capital- All kinds of operations are dependent on the availability and prices of needed capital items.

Labor – Its availability, quality and price

Prices - change in price levels greatly affect the operations of a business organizations

Tax policy- this has tremendous economic impact on all business enterprises.

As firms operate within complex and dynamic external environment, it is the task of marketing oriented company to link the resources of the organization to the requirements of customers (Gordon, 1995). This is done with in a framework of opportunities and threats present in the environment. We all have to accept change, and the effect of change, and we have to adopt. Sometimes changes occur very slowly; indeed, it is often imperceptible. At another times, changes occur quickly and although it is obvious to us, it can be so rapid that we may find it difficult to react quickly enough.

In order for firms to be in a position to adopt successfully to changing conditions, their management requires an appreciation of the many factors

and forces influencing such changes. Firms would like to be in the position of being able to adapt to changes as they occur.

In an ideal world management would like to be able to adopt in advance of change by anticipating events. By identifying environments, trends soon enough, management should be able to, to some extent, anticipate the likely outcome of such trends.

The ability of firms to understand and react to environment forces is of vital importance. Organizations differ in terms of the speed of response and their ability to react to changing conditions. Some firms fail to adapt to changes early enough to actually become part of the change. Such firms have little opportunity of actually influencing events, but are usually forced to make changes in order to survive. Such changes are always “reactive” rather than planned and are often instigated as part of a defensive crises management program. Some other firms are blind and impervious to change. Such firms can not realize that change has occurred. Even if change is acknowledged by management of such firm they often refuse to adapt to changing circumstances (Reynolds, 1995). Such firms are unlikely to survive in the long terms.

Unless firms are able to identify and react to changes quickly, they run risk of being dictated by circumstances beyond their control. Then firms are forced into being “market followers” rather than playing a part in the changes occurring, influencing events and to some extent “leading” the market (Hutt, Michael D. 1995)

OBJECTIVE

Attention in dealing with challenging environment is increasingly focused on the concept of competitive advantage. This is a distinctive competency that sets an organization apart from its competitors and give it an advantage over them in the market place (Schermerhorn, 1996)

All firms operate within complex and dynamic environment. Environments vary greatly from one country to another; it may be favorable to organization growth or it may be hostile. The ability of firms to understand and react to these dynamic environmental forces is different. Some fail to adapt to change early enough and others are blind and imprevius to change. This paper focuses on the assessment of the environmental forces (both macro and intra-firm environment) and their respective influences on the operation and competitiveness of the case study Company. That is; the study is geared towards identifying different dynamic environmental forces, their likely effect and how the company managed these forces and anticipate them in the future (the company's response towards environment).

It is expected that the findings reveal that these dynamic environmental categories can be used as tools of competitive advantage, and adapting to them strengthen the competitive position. It hence helps the firm to predict and capitalize on environmental opportunities. Similarly it is expected that the firm identify threats and take appropriate defense action quickly.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The research study focuses on the assessment of environmental influence on the operation of the firm. That is how the dynamic government policies, technologies, socio-cultural issues, marketing know how, manufacturing know, and Human resource utilization affect the operation and competitiveness of the firm.

The study is conducted on Yerer flour Share Company. This company is chosen for the fact that it is one of the oldest factories in the country, and hence has passed many environmental changes.

The time coverage for this study is about seven months. That is, it commenced in the first week of November 2001 and ended in May 2002

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

The study was mostly based on the primary sources of information that included the actual information received from management bodies (the General Manager, Department heads, Section\Division heads) of the firm. Employees were also one component of the source of data. Similarly previous related works (research) were reviewed. Primary research was compared with that of secondary research data. Specific data needed were information whether micro and macro environment affect the operation of the firm, the ability of the firm to adapt to change and its pays-off etc.

The study was carried out mainly in Adama town. It is located in East Showa, Oromia region. It is about 434 Km. from Jimma. This area was chosen for the reason it is the industrial part of the country as well as commercial center. It is also for the fact that Yerer flour Share Company on which the study will mainly be undertaken is found in this town.

For primary data the method employed for data collection was through survey (using questionnaires). Self administered questionnaires were developed and sent out to concerned respondents (officials) to answer as per requirements of the questions included in the questionnaires. To the extent possible the questions included exhaustive responses categories to include all possible responses. In addition unstructured interview was made to division heads as supplementary.

All management bodies of the firm constitute the population of the study. Since this population size is less and does not create difficulty on data analysis census method was preferred. All managers of the firm were chosen for the fact that dealing with environment, identifying opportunities and threats and taking advantage of it is their main activity.

The goal of this research is to provide information out of raw data. After data gathered was compiled, it was processed, organized and interpreted carefully to understand their complete meanings and implications.

Data processing includes editing--checking completeness, consistency and legibility of collected data; coding - identifying and assigning a numerical score or other character symbols to answers as necessary so that responses could be put into a limited number of categories; classification-arranging the raw data into classes on the basis of common characteristics.

The analysis method is of descriptive type. Raw data were transformed into a format that made them easy to understand and interpret. Calculations of average and percentages were made for the purpose of summarizing data. Finally, after proper summary was made out of the data processed the task of interpretation and reporting of the result followed.

CHAPTER TWO

ASSUMPTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

It is assumed that all the respondents completed the survey honestly and genuinely.

It is also assumed that the responses received are solely from the appropriate person.

There are expected constraints on the way of making the research in to practice and limit the research not to provide the perfect information.

Some of these are:

1. Lower time availability to accomplish the research.
2. The amount of cost budget to run the activity is too small
3. Individuals (officials) may not be willing to provide the correct information
4. In adequate facilities to gather the required data which are useful for analysis
5. Low availability of secondary data to make some comparisons and references.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results obtained from completed questionnaire items are shown in different tables and they are grouped under subheadings of distributive environment, promotion, government environment, product /services, technology and human resource utilization.

Distributive Environment: In order to investigate firm's (Yerer Flour S.C) channel of distribution; how it managed changes in this environment; its effect on the firm's competitiveness different questions were asked. The results are shown in table I.

According to the survey 93 percent of the officials (respondents) responded that their firm relies on marketing intermediaries to ensure that their products reach the final consumers. These are wholesalers, retailers, and agents. As it was replied distribution is the most valuable weapon of the company's competition. The intermediaries make the company's product available throughout the country i.e., through their experience, specialization and location in different areas they offer the firm more than it can achieve on its own.

The use of intermediaries largely increase its superior efficiency in making goods widely available and access to the target market-wider market coverage.

In addition the firm supplies its products directly to consumers. To do this the firm has recently bought new cars having different loading capacity that

can meet unique customers requests and added to the previously existing once to avoid delivery delaince.

To explore whether the firm reacts to the changes in the distributive environment question 2 was asked and 63 percent of the officials replied positively. The firm expanded its channels from retailers to wholesalers and direct distribution. This is because the use of retailers alone was unable to cope with the volume of production since it is limited to a specific area. Moreover customers need of product provisioning has changed over time.

The company was able to expand its channel structure with a view to exploiting and capitalizing on change. Generally through the points discussed above distribution enabled the firm to have superiority over its competitors.

Table I. Results concerning distributive environment

	<i>Intermediaries</i>	<i>Direct distribution</i>
Q ₁	93% Yes	63% No
Q ₂	63%	37%
Q ₄	98%	2%

Promotion: - This includes all the activities the company undertakes to communicate and promote its products to the target market. A company must communicate with its present and potential customers, retailers, suppliers and general public (Kotler, 1997).

Products can be sold only if the target market is aware of it. Table II summarizes the results gathered from the company (Yerer Flour S.C) regarding promotion.

Question 5 was asked to identify the promotion strategies the company uses to create and stimulate demand. The responses were varied. The company to bring general awareness of its products uses personal selling, specialized sales promotion and advertisement the organization relaying more on the latter. In addition the company prepares vouchers to describe the quality of its products, its service reliability etc and distributes to attract new customers. Further more the company used to sale its products on different bazaars at different parts of the country (Ethiopia) where many different customers can see/know the product. As was observed the company also has a group that moves to different towns of the country offering free sample to institutions, hotels, cafeteria etc and collect feedback too.

This is just to build good public image and attract new customers. For instance this group has assessed different customers in Jimma, Nekemte, Ambo and some other towns in the southeastern part of the country in the year 1993 E.C.

Of the officials surveyed 67 percent responded that the firm could benefit enormously from a more professional approach to sales and marketing. This include the manner to approach customers, the way to convince customer and how to handles grievance in case it happens etc. Hence the company gives training to its sales persons on how to deal with customers and different courses related to sales.

According to the interview survey it is a well established idea of the company that; a good product, an efficient distribution system and appropriate price are insufficient to provide overall success without the aid of promotion. Such an incomplete mix would appear dull when compared to competitive effort and render the strategy highly vulnerable to competition. The company believing that could benefit it largely has allocated a large budget for promotion. Generally promotion has a great influence on the company's competitiveness; therefore, a great deal of attention is given to it.

Table II. Promotion results

	Advertising	Personal selling	Sales promotion	All
Q5	48% Enormously	30% To some extent.	30% Net benefit	41% At all
Q6	67%	33%	-	-

Government environment: Federal, state and local governments all set laws and regulations that business must obey. These laws remain pretty much intact through generation of political turnover, eventhough their interpretation, guidelines and enforcement do depend heavily on the governmental officials of the time. The government environment is some times referred so as the political and legal environment (Rue, 1998)

To assess the government activities influencing Yerer Flour S.C question 14 and 14a were asked. Question 14 asked whether the government provides special incentives to the firm.

98% of the officials responded to this question that there was no special incentives; Table III. In addition they replied that there are some restrictions that government imposed on them. Government passed laws influencing the hiring and firing of employees, compensation, working hours and working conditions. The government limited the payment level which does not attract a capable and creative employee that the company want to hire. The prices of the products sold by the company are also determined by the government limiting its flexibility. Moreover the government has influenced the level of the company's competition through the use of imports. The respondents also gave the information that there is a threat of privatization. The government is changing the public owned companies to private whose effect is minimizing the number of employees. According to officials sayings, Yarer Flour S.C was announced three times on Ethiopian herald for sale. But no one was interested to buy at that time; and its is clear that it will be sold in the future. Another discouraging factor is that government has reevaluated the company which led to higher depreciation and as a result lower profit. Lower profit inturn have an impact on employees bonus.

Question 14a asked to list what government does to encourage the operation of the company. The question was open-ended and as such there was no standard answer. While the responses varied they were grouped in to three categories for simplification. These are:

- Customer function:- the government buys large amount of the company's product to inhance its defense force.
- Supplier function:- The government supplies the main raw material (wheat)
- Governmental loans and subsidies have also played great role.

This shows all the government actions are not restrictive in nature, some affected the company positively. In summary government created both threats and opportunities for the firm.

Table III. Government activities

	Yes	No	
Q14	2%	98%	
	Customer	Supplier	Creditor
Q14a	78%	59%	48%

Product/service:- customers and clients are putting organizations to a very stiff test. They demand high quality good and services; anything less is unacceptable. And in an increasingly competitive economy organizations that can not meet quality standards are suffering greatly. It is undesirable in marketing that no amount of promotion will help to sell a product that is not acceptable to market.

To understand how Yerer Flour S.C. managed this situation questions were asked whose results are summarized in table IV.

As it is revealed in the survey 85% of respondents replied the market for their products is increasing. This is because of good quality of product and services provided by the company. The data collected revealed that the company to gain competitive advantage through improved customer service and product, provides every customer with quality goods and services, low cost and services, shorter waiting times for goods and services and goods and services meeting unique individual needs. For instance the company to

meet different individual need, produces flour with different grades (1st grade, 2nd grade and 3rd grade) whose quality and prices vary with respect to grade; the best quality and highest price being the first grade flour. It uses also different sized packaging that ranges from 25kg to 50kg and 100kg. The type of packaging also vary from fiber bag to sacks according to the request of customers.

To meet the quality challenge the company looks to find out what customers expect and give it to them. It collects feedback from customers regarding the product quality relative to other competitors', collects sample from other competitors' compare for quality in its laboratory and make necessary improvements. The company gives emphasis to continuous improvement-attempting to maintain the quality momentum over time by always looking for new ways of incrementally improve up on current performance. This is ensured starting from the purchase of raw materials through the way of operation. For instance the company imports quality wheat from Australia and mix with the domestic once to improve quality.

In short, the basic idea is that one can never be satisfied and, something always and should be improved.

Table IV. Product/Service

	Increasing	Decreasing	
Q7	85%	15%	
	Very good	Good	Fair
Q8	48%	44%	41%
Q9	48%	52%	4%

The company offers products on credit to customers in response to change in social attitudes towards credit and to strengthen its public perception. For many people today it is the availability and terms of credit offered that are the major factors in deciding to purchase a particular product. It also gives attention towards the safety of employees. The management of the company also respects alternative cultures and values diversity in managing people so as to achieve the cultures and values diversity in managing people so as to achieve the highest level of task performance and job satisfaction for example during holidays (both for Christians and Muslims) the company offers 50 kg flour free of charge to its employees and allow them not to work on these days.

Technological Environment: As the results in table V shows 15 percent of respondents replied that there is no introduction of technological change whereas 85 percent of them replied they introduce new technologies for they pose great payoffs in competitive advantage. The firm believes change in the technological environment can affect the product and services that it produce and the way in which it carryout its business operation.

The company is gradually replacing some of its machine parts with newly invented parts that are most efficient. For instance the company has imported a part called filter jet from Italy that is very important in improving quality of the product. The answer for question # 16 was that the firm uses computers in production automation, data store, data process and writing etc. This saves time, cost and shorten product lead-time. This is ways it helped the company to operate more efficiently and effectively.

Table V. Technological environment

	Yes	No
Q15	85%	15%

Human resource utilization: People are viewed as the key to the organization's performance success. According to the findings (Table VI), of all the total respondents 93 percent of them feel human resource utilization, creativity, and responsibility can substantially raise performance. As the survey revealed human resource remains an irreplaceable part of the productivity-quality-competitive advantage chain. 56 percent of them belief that training does help and said it is a key element of a quality program. The firm believes in the theory that hiring capable people training and developing these people so they stay the way and providing them with a supportive and motivating work environment are indispensable keys to good management (Themosen, 1995). Eventhough because of the restrictions raised in government environment the company is not in a position to hire most capable employees, it provides training to the existing once, make the working environment conducive and provide motivating factors (mainly bonus) to fully utilize human resources.

Table VI. Human Resources

	Yes	NO	
Q16a	93%	7%	Not improve -
	Very beneficial	Helps to some extent	
Q17	44%	56%	
	Yes	No	
Q17a	63%	37%	
Q18	52%	48%	

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Yere Flour Share Company is for profit organization created to produce a product and/or service for customers. It is a public enterprise that is practicing production line manufacturing technique to achieve its objectives. This firm makes demand on the society, and the society makes demand on the firm. The sum of these interrelationships between the firm and the community comprises the firm's environment. This environment is divided into two: internal and external

Internal environment includes the factors that affect its performance within its boundaries, such as product quality, promotion, human resource etc. External environment includes the factors that affect its performance from outside its boundaries such as technology, legal and political etc.

As it is revealed in the findings the environment varies greatly from time to time i.e., the environment is a significant source of change. The relationships, events and conditions that make up the environment of the organization are not static. Customers needs and tastes change, technological and marketing mixes change. As also put in the discussion part, this environmental changes are also fundamental that they affect the long-term survival of the organization.

Some of the forces identified are distributive environment, promotion, government, human resource utilization and technology. These environmental forces are very dynamic tempting the company.

The dynamic nature of the environment means that environmental Assessment must be continuous. The firm under discussion is also not helpless in the face of environmental forces. It is very alert in understanding the effect of these forces on its operation and competitiveness. It reacts quickly to changes and manages to convert them to its advantages. The firm works to shape part of its environment and also alters its strategy when faced with insurmountable environmental obstacles.

Generally the firm through its analysis of environment and responding quickly to changes has benefited. As to my observation and information, the firm is the dominant in flour industry (perhaps in Ethiopia) even though I was not provided with its exact market share. But the data showing the company's increasing market can be evidence.

Finally, the company in order to obtain accurate information concerning current events and reasonable assessment of future trends, an intelligent function must be in place. This may be informal or a part of sophisticated information system. In addition the organization should maintain important sources of information through contacts with customers, suppliers and competitors. This information gleaned must reach the place in the organization where its significance can be evaluated.

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ANNEX

This questionnaire is designed to collect data and information regarding the influences macro & microenvironments have on competitive position of a firm.

It is to write thesis paper on the partial fulfillment of the course research in Management to acquire Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree award in Business management.

Procedures for answering (filling) the questions

1. Read the statements carefully and try to be objective to the extent possible
2. For yes,/or no questions, make “✓” mark
3. For description questions try to be clear as possible

THANK YOU!

Company Name _____

Address _____

No of Employees _____

- Professionals _____
- Semi professionals _____
- 9-12 grade complete _____

Year of establishment _____

1. By whom your products are being sold? retailers _____,
wholesalers _____, others (specify) _____
2. Are the channels of distribution for your products changed over the post
10 years? Yes No
3. If yes what developments did you see over the last ten years?

4. Do you feel a channel systems create advantage?
Yes No
5. Which promotion strategies do you use?
Advertising Personal selling sales promotion All
6. How much do you think your business could benefit from a more
professional approach to sales and marketing?
Benefit enormously
Benefit to some extent
Not benefit at all
7. Are the markets for your products increasing or decreasing.
Increasing Decreasing

8. How is your total quality operation?

Very good Good Fair

9. How is your record for services?

Very good Good Fair

10. How does the public perceive your company?

Very good Good Fair

11. Do you sell your products on credit to customers? Yes No

12. Does your organization encourage the participation of women?

Yes No

13. Do you respect “ alternative cultures and “value diversity” in managing employees? Yes No

14. Are there any incentives from government side made only to your organization? Yes No If yes _____

14A. What is the government doing specifically to encourage or discourage the Operation? Please write on the space provided.

15. Does your organization progress with development in technologies?

Yes No

If no how much do you think your business would benefit if it introduces new technologies?

Enormously To some extent No at all

16. For what purposes do you use computers and related technologies in your Organization?

16A. DO you feel human resource utilization; creativity and responsibility can substantially raise performance ceilings.

Yes

No

17. Do you think that training has a useful role to play in improving the performance of Your business?

Very beneficial

helps to some extent

Not improve performance

17A. Have you as an individual ever attend any training courses on sales, marketing, and Manufacturing? Yes No

18. To your knowledge has any body from your company attended a course on sales, Marketing, manufacturing within the last two years?

Yes

No

⇒ Thank you for your cooperation and patience in filling this questionnaire.

I Value your Views and opinions very much indeed.

Please go back through your completed questionnaire and see if there is any answer that you have inadvertently left out.

Thank you again for your valuable assistance.



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