
**COMPETITIVE STRATEGIES AND COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE OF
LOCALLY OWNED BUILDING AND CONSTRUCTION FIRMS IN
KIAMBU COUNTY, KENYA**

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Abstract

The constant changes experienced in the business environment makes it difficult for firms to gain and sustain competitive advantage. Therefore to remain competitive firms are compelled to adopt competitive strategies. The aim of this study was to investigate the influence of competitive strategies on competitive advantage of locally owned building and construction firms in Kiambu County, Kenya. The target population was 175 locally owned building and construction firms registered by the relevant body. The study used proportionate sampling to select a sample size of 58 firms. Respondents were the project managers or senior staff member. Questionnaires were used to collect primary data which were validated through piloting. Data collected was analyzed using both descriptive analysis such as means and standard deviations and regression analysis. The findings of the study indicate that differentiation strategy, product quality strategy, combination strategy and product quality strategy had widely been adopted by the locally owned building and construction firms and they had a positive influence on the competitive advantage of the firms with regression coefficients $r = 0.700$, $r = 0.450$, $r = 0.363$ and $r = 0.119$ respectively. Furthermore the study also established that product quality strategy led to clients to have product satisfaction with most of the products being durable and with minimum complaints recorded. Combination strategy played a key role in ensuring stake holders were involved in key decision makings, lower the costs of products and improve customer loyalty. Further although focus strategy directly influenced competitive advantage, its impact on competitive advantage was lower compared to the other strategies under this study. The study recommend that Locally owned building and construction firms management need to ensure that the firms widely practice differentiation strategy as it provides customers with unique product characteristics leading to high levels of satisfaction. The firms should consider adopting product quality strategy due to its positive influence on competitive advantage as well as consumer satisfaction. However firms should come up with various appropriate methods of controlling costs when developing their products while still maintain the quality.

Keywords: Competitive strategies, Competitive advantage, locally owned building and construction firms.

Introduction

The construction markets in the world are already at a tipping point with 52 percent of major market construction activities found in the emerging markets today (Price water house Coopers, 2016). By the year 2025 it is expected that it will have increased to 63percent, with India and

China being the main contributors to this growth in the emerging markets. In 2010 USA that had been the leading player in the market was overtaken by China to become the leading construction market on the globe and it is projected to multiply its market share from the current 18percent to 26percent by the year 2025, regardless of the expected slowdown. According to EC Harris Research (2013), the United Kingdom (UK) construction industry is turning around to become among the fewest rapidly growing sections with huge impact on the economy. Furthermore, it also concludes that the experience changes in the international economy are developing new opportunities for UK.

The environmental changes have been very dynamic in the 21st Century. Various firms have therefore been compelled to build up and also adopt competitive strategies in order to ensure their success and most importantly their survival. The strategic conflict model and game theory have together or differently been used to explain the firms competitive strategy reiterated in their theoretical propositions. Game theory mainly assists in formulating, structuring, examining and recognizing strategic eventualities which has a very important role to play in regard to organizations' strategic management.

In ensuring survival of the firm, they (firms) have to continuously adapt their operations which at times make them to be exposed to unknown factors or risks which is at times somehow volatile making them to access new challenges and at times opportunities. The firms rivalry game plan has to be made of the plans, tactics, measures and procedures that it mayor use in order to draw customers, enhance its ranking in the industry and resist competitive stress (Thompson & Strickland, 2010).

Pearce and Robinson, (2007) emphasizes that the firms have to be steadfast and proactive when executing their business and also when implementing a sustained strategy in order to maintain its competitive status. Competition is critical in ensuring a renewed business approaches and competitiveness. Despite coming with and adopting the said strategies, a number of companies that have applied competitive strategies still performed below the market targets hence there being a need to establish the impact of competitive strategies and performance of local housing construction firms in order to become more competitive in the industry.

The housing construction industry today also remain a very competitive sector due to the previously launched the big four agenda by the Jubilee government in coming up with cheap and affordable housing to its citizens. This study hence aimed to determine the competitive strategies and performance of locally owned building and construction firms in Kiambu County, Kenya

1.1.1 Competitive Strategies

Hussein (2011) argues that competitive strategies are the approaches and moves that a firm has to put in place in bid to lure buyers survive the pressure of competition and enhance its position in the market. Competitive strategy can hence be viewed as a way of gaining certain form of advantage over the rivals by setting up a favorable, profit making and sustainable position against the competition determining forces in or within the industry.

Porter (1985) points out that there are three general strategy types that companies can choose from in order to build competitive advantage. They include; a differentiation strategy, a low cost strategy and a third approach that is constantly employed by the firm is focusing or strategy that

is based on niche (Papulova & Papulova, 2006). A firm choosing the strategy of differentiation implies that it will have to do things in a way different from its rivals. If a firm chooses competitive advantage on low costs it implies that it will produce its products at a reasonably low cost (Kay 2014). The business environment globally has been characterized by dynamism and turbulence of imitations, innovations, customer sophistication, ultra competition and technology (Ndungu, 2017). Most found out that the firms' performance was largely attributed to competitive strategy (Kimani & Douglas, 2014; Eunice & Kepha, 2013; Kelly, 2016).

However, some of these strategies have evolved over time and have become more complicated, rather than being explicit as formulated. Competitive strategy of a firm or organization comprises of all the business initiatives and approaches that it has to undertake in order to draw customers and achieve their goals in order to withstand competition pressures and to make its position stronger in the market. In order to compete successfully and provide superior value to customers, it has to deal with management action plans. Thompson and Strickland (2003) emphasizes that by doing this, the firm is able to differentiate or put itself in a good market position than its competitors. Due to the ever changing competitive conditions facing the firm and the strategy that it chooses, it is a requirement for the firm to explore the capabilities that are necessarily required in achieving competitive advantage.

The sole purpose of competitive strategy is to come up with a system that is deemed to be rewarding financially has a retainable role in opposing unfavorable industry forces and rivalry. Some of the common strategies employed by firms in order to become competitive to the rival firms include; focus strategy cost leadership strategy and differentiation strategy (Zekiri & Nedelea, 2011), a differentiation strategy, a low cost strategy (Papulova & Papulova, 2006). This study focused on differentiation strategy, quality strategy, combination strategy and focus strategy as the strategies that locally owned building and construction firms can rely on in order to regain or even gain their competitive advantage.

1.1.2 Competitive Advantage

Having a product or service that customers in the target market may perceive to be superior or better than that of the competitors is the main cause of a firm's competitive advantage (Dash, 2013). This is mainly evident by the firms new market penetration, retaining the existing markets, creating greater economic value and also the cost of production being low. For the firm to remain competitive among the other firms, it has to ensure that it sustains its impact on competitive advantage since it can also be lost. To achieve this, the firm has to identify rare, inimitable and non-substitutable resources and employ strategies that will protect and care them.

According to Gathoga (2011), there are five major factors that determine whether a company can outperform the competitors or not. These are; being able to utilize the new trends in the market, being able to get hold of and protect unfair market shares, being able to capture premium pricing, being able to prudently create and introduce products that are new in the market. The company's competitive advantage can be measured by the prescribed or standard efficiency indicators, being effective and environmental responsibility among them being productivity, time, regulatory compliance, and reduction of waste. Karanja (2012) suggests that in order to obtain firm's advantage over the rivals within the competitive advantage scope, it is very important for the

firm to consider coming up with very important strategies on how the firm has to shape its competitive strategies. A firm is able to maintain and sustain its competitiveness because of good strategies being applied by the firm.

Bukirwa and Kising'u (2017), highlights competitive advantage in terms of three perspectives: market share, growth and customer retention. The market share perspective identifies the market share the organization controls and also the ability to penetrate into the new market. Maluku (2013) views the competitive advantage of a firm based on the market share, sales growth and employee satisfaction. The common competitive advantage indicators among them increased profits, increased production (Githuku, 2016), retention of existing market, growth in scale and size (Obade, 2018; Abade, 2017; Bukirwa&Kising'u2017; Maluku, 2013) were the measures that this study adopted

1.1.3 Building and Construction firms in Kenya

Building and construction industry in Kenya has been recognized as an important driver to the countries booming economy and also a driver in achieving the countries vision 2030. The 2015/2016 Economic Survey reveals that the building and construction industry in Kenya registered a 13.8percent growth rate compared to the 5.7percent growth rate of the whole economy. This high growth rate is attributed to infrastructural constructions, major institutional buildings construction and expansion of housing constructions. The National Construction Authority (NCA) is the constitutionally formed body with the mandate of regulating the construction industry.

The market Research Preliminary Report of 2017 projected housing construction sector to grow at a very steady rate due to several major projects launched by the government so as to improve its infrastructure and also to improve the population's access to affordable housing which is part of its big 4 agenda. BMI (2018) research projected 8.7percent growth in the construction sector in the year 2018 and this growth is expected to remain steady for the next eight years with an annual growth of around 6.2 percent. This growth is mainly due to the Kenyan government's huge spending on developments in regards to infrastructure, with multi-billion dollar projects such as Lamu Port-South-Sudan-Ethiopia Transport (Lapsset) corridor and the standard gauge railway (SGR) being some of the key drivers of the projected growth in Kenyan economy.

The Kenya Economic Survey Report (April, 2017) highlights that there is a deficit of housing units by almost 2 million in the country with more than 60percent of the urban residents living in informal settlements. The fundamental constraints on both the supply and demand sides continues to increase this deficit and it is further made worse by urbanization rate which currently stands at 4.4percent, equaling five hundred thousand new city dwellers every year. There has also been an immense growth in the real estate market and building and construction industry for the last ten years. Due to a steady growth of the middle class, there has been increasing demand for housing in urban centers.

Kiambu County has both local and foreign contractor who operate several projects in the county. These foreign companies have since dominated the local companies ever since they entered the list of contractors. According to Herbling (2016), the Chinese firms have been dominating the

Kenya's list of 50 top tier foreign owned contractors that are under category 1 classification. Chinese firms' dominance in Kenya's construction industry has of recent years locked out local contractors out of mega deals. Other dominant foreign contractors in Kenya are largely from India, Japan, Dubai and some from European countries.

The growth in building and construction sector in Kiambu County has been improving significantly as the call for better infrastructure and better housing increases. Kiambu County is a home to about 246 construction related manufacturing companies set mostly in Ruiru, Thika and Juja towns (Business Daily, 2016). The major challenges to local building and construction companies in Kiambu County include stiff competition from foreign firms, turbulence business environment and inadequate investors.

2.0 Empirical Literature Review

This section summarizes the literature on competitive strategies and competitive advantage of locally owned building and construction firms. Specifically it focuses on studies that link differentiation, product quality, focus strategy and combination strategies to competitive advantage.

Gakumo (2006) argues that the reputation on the quality of service and making use of the corporate image were the most applied differentiation aspects by most of the commercial banks in Kenya as their selling points which significantly improved their competitive advantage. Abonda (2017) argues that competitive strategy may have an influence on the firms' competitive advantage. The study concurred with a previous study which established that differentiation strategy is what most firms need to apply so as to become more dominant in a particular market (David, 2000). Abonda (2017) further identifies features such as packaging same service or products in different kinds targeting particular markets, branding the company so as to make it very different from and also its products to be different from the rest of the competitors, emphasizing on quality improvement and coming up with high end products hence improving the firm's competitive advantage. Bukirwa and Kising'u (2017) establishes that in relation to statistics, differentiation strategy has a significance influence on the organizations competitive advantage.

Nyambane and Bett (2018) points out that the quality of products and services in the firms contributes to competitive advantage. They further argue that personnel skills contributes significantly to competitive advantage and that most firms have improved the quality of their products by training their staff on how to make their services and products better. Quality products and services have a positive and significant effect on competitive advantage in heavy construction equipment suppliers. Similar views are expressed by Migle and Jurgita (2015) who agree that customer satisfaction can be improved by concentrating on the quality of the products and services which in turn make the organizations more competitive the rival firms. Iyambo and Otubanjo, (2013) establishes that item quality is among the key components in constructing mark initiative so as to increase competitive advantage. The research also shows that item quality is one of the key situating apparatuses that have critical impact on buy choice

Isaboke (2018) argues that application of the combination strategy in firms helps them gain competitive advantage. She further points out that when customer service is improved, there is a significant gain in customer loyalty in the competitive environment. Diversification of products and services, involving the stakeholders in management and decision making process may help the firms to remain profitable hence gain more competitive advantage over the rival firms in the market. Prakash (2017) establishes that by applying combination strategy, firms were able to gain the oncoming opportunity without having to change the customer requirements which are same for the equipment that is alike and against the same competitor with the same offered product hence increasing the firms competitive advantage over the rival firms. Kabutia (2014) established that combination strategy plays a unique role in gaining competitive advantage.

Dulo (2016) clarified that the focus strategy is different from the other two strategies since it is geared to giving services or products to the particular market group. It is further revealed that there might be a positive relation between the focus strategy and the firm's competitiveness since it aims at providing opportunities for entrepreneurs to establish and make use of any gap in the market through coming up with innovative products or product that customers may find it hard to do without. Achoki (2013) recommends applying focus strategy to a great extent so as to increase the competitive advantage. Njoroge (2006) argued that the focus strategy is geared towards making the market segment narrow and concentrating on particular category of products or certain buyers. Focusing enables the firms to focus their operations to a particular market and thus being able to obtain competitive advantage

Problem Statement and Study Objectives

Despite the latest global economic slowdown, Kenya's building and construction industry has been remaining resilient and exhibiting positive growth as evidenced by the growth of investment in both residential and commercial building projects in the past few years. According to the Economic Survey (2015), Kenya has been experiencing a growth in construction industry which has mainly been supported by the booming real estate projects and also governments investments and is directly depicted by the improvement in rate of cement consumption in the country which went up by 21.9percent (KNBS, 2015).

Locally owned building and construction firms in the country struggle to operate manage and deliver their quality products to their clients. This has been attributed to turbulent market environment which is mostly dominated by well-established foreign firms in the country. It has also been attributed to time consuming and expensive application of business strategies by several firms (Bukirwa & Kising'u, 2017; Abonda, 2017) This has brought a very withering negative effect on the firm's survival which has resulted to increased internal inefficiencies, poor service delivery and negative bottom line; and most importantly reduced contribution to GDP and loss of job opportunities.

The following were the study's specific objectives:

- i. To investigate the influence of differentiation strategy on competitive advantage of locally owned building and construction firms in Kiambu County, Kenya.

- ii. To establish the role of product quality strategy on competitive advantage of locally owned building and construction firms in Kiambu County, Kenya.
- iii. To evaluate the influence of combination strategy on competitive advantage of locally owned building and construction firms in Kiambu County, Kenya.
- iv. To investigate the influence of focus strategy on competitive advantage of locally owned building and construction firms in Kiambu County, Kenya

3.0 Discussion of Findings

3.1 Descriptive Result

The findings of this study in line with the study objectives are discussed below. Table 1 shows the average means for the study variables under this study

Table 1: Descriptives

Variable	Average Mean	Std. Deviation
Differentiation Strategy	4.09	.830
Product Quality	3.79	1.044
Combination Strategy	3.94	.979
Focus Strategy	3.80	1.193

Source: Research Data (2020)

Differentiation strategy had an average mean and standard deviation ($M= 4.09$; $SD=0.830$) indicating that majority of the locally owned building and construction firms had adopted differentiation strategy through offering wide range of product choices to their customers, having unique design images from which their clients were able to select from, offering attractive and distinguished services to their clients and also being able to develop new designs that were very unique in the market. This agrees with Isaboke(2018) who notes that becoming unique in market environment and adapting new technologies that are yet to be adopted by market competitors make firms to be more competitive.

Product quality strategy had an average mean and standard deviation was ($M= 3.79$; $SD= 1.044$), indication that product quality strategy was widely used by the locally owned building and construction companies so as to lure buyers to buy their products and remain competitive in construction industry. The findings agree with Nyambane and Bett (2018) who concluded that quality of products plays a very key role in ensuring competitive advantage of the firms. The locally owned building and construction firms were able to get clients outside their target markets mainly because of the quality of the products they offered. This is in line with Migle and Jurgita who agree that concentrating on the quality of the product improves the customer satisfaction and hence more customers will be willing to purchase your products.

Combination strategy had an average mean and standard deviation ($M=3.94$; $SD=.979$). This implies that combination strategy was applied in locally owned building and construction firms to a great extent which was important to ensuring that the firms were able to offer relatively

lower costs of products compared to other market players. Focusing strategy had a mean and standard deviation (M=3.80; SD=1.193) and firms were able to achieve focus strategy through targeting a specific market segment, developing uniquely differentiated product for a particular segment, offering products to suit specific customer needs and drawing customers from neighboring counties.

3.2 Regression Results

Regression analysis was undertaken to determine the extent to which competitive strategies influence competitive advantage. The results are provided in Table 2,3 and 4

Table 2: Model Summary

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.965 ^a	.961	.960	.106	.961	1027.549	4	39	.000

a. Predictors: (Constant), Focus, Product Quality, Differentiation, Combination

Source: Research Data (2020)

The finding illustrate that there was a significant relationship between the competitive strategies and competitive advantage as indicated by the correlation coefficient ($r = 0.965$; $p < 0.05$). The R square, $R^2 = 0.961$ shows that 96.1% of the change in competitive advantage is described model variables namely; focus strategy, product quality strategy, differentiation strategy and combination strategy. The remaining 3.9% can be attributed to other strategies and factors not in this study. This study concurs with the study done by Bukirwa and Kising'u (2017) and also Prakash (2017) who established that adoption of competitive strategies significantly influences growth in scale, retention of existing market and new market penetration hence gaining competitive advantage over the rival firms.

Table 3: Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

ANOVA^a

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 Regression	46.108	4	11.527	1027.549	.000 ^b
Residual	.438	39	.011		
Total	46.545	43			

a. Dependent Variable: Competitive_advantage

b. Predictors: (Constant), Focus_strategy, Product_Quality, differentiation_strategy, Combination_strategy

Source: Research Data (2020)

Since the regression model significance level was less than 0.05, it was considered to be fit in predicting how competitive strategies influence the competitive advantage of the locally owned building and construction companies in Kiambu County, Kenya.

Table 4: Coefficients of Regression

Coefficients^a

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	.013	.066		.191	.043
Differentiation strategy	.700	.120	.874	7.511	.000
¹ Product Quality	.450	.080	.460	5.655	.000
Combination strategy	.363	.135	.456	3.431	.001
Focus strategy	.119	.053	.126	2.250	.030

a. Dependent Variable: Competitive advantage

Source: Research Data (2020)

The coefficient of regressions from Table 7 narrows down to the equation $Y = 0.13 + 0.700X_1 + 0.450X_2 + 0.363X_3 + 0.119X_4 + \epsilon$. The findings can be interpreted to mean that increasing differentiation strategy by one unit would lead to an increase in competitive advantage by 0.700. These findings are in line with Abonda (2017) who explain that most firms adopt differentiation strategy so as to remain dominant in the market. When the construction firms develop unique differentiated products for their clients, they find it easier to lure potential clients into buying products. Bukirwa and Kising'u (2017) also agree with this study since they point out that differentiation strategy has a huge contribution to competitive advantage and hence the need to adopt it in firms so as to ensure they improve their competitive advantage in the unpredictable business environment.

Increasing product quality strategy by one unit would lead to an increase in competitive advantage by 0.450. The findings agree with Nyambane and Bett (2018) who note that quality of products have a significant contribution towards the competitive advantage of the firms. Migle and Jurgita (2015) also agree that customer satisfaction can be improved by concentrating on the quality of the products and services which in turn make the organizations more competitive the rival firms.

Combination strategy had β value of 0.363 and was the third mostly influential strategy. The model implies that unit increase in combination strategy would lead to an increase in competitive advantage by 0.363. The findings are in line with Prakash (2017) who established that by applying combination strategy, firms were able to gain the oncoming opportunity without having to change the customer requirements which are same for the equipment that is alike and against the same competitor with the same offered product hence increasing the firms competitive advantage over the rival firms. Focus strategy was the least most influential strategy on

competitive advantage with β value 0.119. The study concurs with Achoki (2013) who found out that focus strategy and competitive advantage are positively correlated.

4.0. Conclusions and Recommendations

The firms had therefore to find ways of luring the clients to purchase their products by ensuring that their products met a set quality standards. The building and construction firms had to diversify their products, frequently involve the stake holders in decision making process and also improve customer service so as to gain customer loyalty. By gaining customer loyalty, the firms are able to increase their sales and also profits hence enabling them to become more competitive against the rival firms. Although the focus strategy had a positive influence on the competitive advantage of building and construction firms, its influence on competitive advantage was relatively small compared to the other three competitive strategies, hence the reason why most of the firms did not prefer widely adopting the focus strategy. Firms that were able to widely adopt focusing strategy were able to focus on a particular market segment and increase their competitive advantage.

The study recommends that Firms management should therefore ensure that appropriate differentiation strategies are formulated so as to contribute to ever needed competitive advantage of the locally owned building and construction firms. The firms should consider adopting product quality strategy due to its positive influence on competitive advantage, but should ensure that they come up with various appropriate methods of not incurring huge costs when developing their products. The firms management should consider coming up with various strategies such as cost cutting strategies making the production costs to go down especially for the products that may hardly find market in the targeted market segment and also ensure that they diversify their firms operations to other business ventures so that they don't incur huge costs of operations especially when the construction industry is not performing.

5.0 Acknowledgements

I start by thanking the Almighty God for guidance throughout my academic life and for the wisdom and the grace to press on and reach this far. Secondly, I appreciate my supervisor Dr Jane Njuguna for her commitment and support at the time of research project development. I also wish to acknowledge my family especially my parents who supported me financially morally and emotionally. My sincere gratitude also goes to my lovely husband David Munoru and my sons Fabian Munoru and Alvin Munoru for their patience, moral support and their prayers to see me move this far. To my classmates, especially Collins thanks for your support, motivation and guidance whenever I consulted you. Finally I appreciate my wonderful sisters and brothers for encouraging me and believing in me. I am much grateful.

May the Almighty God bless you and reward you all.

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