

# Market-Led Strategic Change New Interactions in the Paper Supply Chain

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## **Abstract**

In the ever changing market environment it is necessary to plan for customers' needs and continuously research markets so that what is produced reflects the customer wants. In the business to business marketing situation it is also necessary to build different relationships between actors in the supply chain. The process of building relationships is a demanding and complex task, especially if it is done in an international environment. As a result of greater international competition changes on the marketplace are occurring more rapidly and companies need to be able to react to the actual competitive situation.

Due to the competitive situation in different market areas the paper industry is under the pressure of a need for improving the profitability by overhauling its purchasing and marketing activities. This is done in order to reduce costs and improve efficiency and supply chain management has become a new paradigm for the industry. Both mills and suppliers have responded to this paradigm by forging integrated and long-term relationships built on communication, commitment and mutual gain.

Keyword: Competitive Strategy, Relationships, Supply Chain Management.

## **The Changing Market Environment within the Paper Industry**

Traditionally paper companies have chosen their suppliers to a great extent on competitive pricing and service. While pricing and service remain important, the relationships between paper companies and suppliers have changed. Similar to the competition in other industries e.g. the situation in the automobile industry during the late 1980s and the early 1990s, today's business climate in the paper industry brings pressure for improved profitability, cost reductions and efficiency improvements.

At the same time paper companies have integrated forward by mergers and acquisitions in order to build up a market position on different markets and product areas in the local market structure. Due to structural changes and concentration within different industry's the paper companies have also come under the pressure from big buyers, especially from customers selling consumer products e.g. the food industry.

The research issue in this paper can therefore be emphasised by – *How can a paper company adjust its marketing strategy for this new competitive situation?* The intention is to use a qualitative study by interviewing management in a specified number of companies. The data collection will also be completed by secondary data from the same companies.

As a result of greater international competition changes are occurring more rapidly in most industries and companies are forced to be able to react to the current competitive situation either change is taking place in the supplier or customer side. Many factors are also influencing management expectations about the effects on the business goals. Expectations reflect the decision-makers present knowledge as well as the perception of future events.

Attitudes towards the possibilities for future growth in international markets are largely determined by management perceptions regarding the opportunities and barriers to do business in the local marketplace. Knowledge about opportunities and barriers to do business are therefore essential in the process of making decisions.

With improvements in technology and transfer of technology and knowledge it is also easier to imitate products in different markets which make it more difficult to sustain a differential advantage. The major challenge for many companies is therefore to determine customer value since competitors are continuously improving the value given. A paper company can mainly exploit opportunities and defend market positions by quality, service, low cost, innovation and ability to learn from different actors in the supply chain. This will also give the company the ability to build long lasting relationships.

## **Research design**

This paper is based on results from an ongoing research project about the strategic changes taking place in paper producing companies due to the rapidly changing business environment. In order to stay sustainable in the changing business environment a company must be able to not only manage the standard economic factors affecting the core business, but also environmental and social factors as well. In order to follow different changes in the market place as well as the different companies' strategic action a longitudinal approach has been applied, which will make it possible to follow the companies' actions over a longer period of time. At this stage the research has been concentrated to the three big actors in Sweden and the first interviews started in 1997.

The research method is a triangulation based on official documents from the companies involved in the study e.g. annual reports but also internal documents and official material published by the company's e.g. on internet. However, the main information comes from interviews with managers in the companies at Division level in the company. In these interviews an interview guide has been used, but the managers has also been allowed to describe their perception about what they recognise as important factors affecting the business environment for their core business. The managers have also been asked to describe how their company will meet those challenges. At this stage the producers have been interviewed but the intention is to follow the supply chain in order to study how different members in this chain can create value for the end customer. Due to the increased fragmentation by the end consumer e.g. single household, an ageing population and an increased demand for consumption in developing countries this study is also concentrated to products based on paper packaging materials.

## **The aim of the study**

With the points discussed above as a point of departure the aim of the study may be said to be an attempt to describe and analyse aspects of competitive strategy in relation to the different

driving forces in the international market environment. Since most of the Swedish paper industry's products are sold to markets within Europe, the study will primarily consider these markets. The research question can therefore be formulated in the following way – *How can a paper company develop a competitive strategy within the changing environment of the paper industry?*

### **Competitive Advantage in the Changing Market Environment**

By understanding how the industry structure affects competition and profitability it is also possible to identify how a company can influence the structure in order to improve the balance of competitive forces and possibly enhance its profitability. In the pulp and paper industry one of the most intractable structural problems have arisen from excess capacity from time to time. Acquisitions and mergers has represented a direct an effective way eliminating over capacity, but also for getting access to the local market place by taking over existing sales and distribution channels.

In the process of creating a competitive advantage (Asch & Bowman, 1994) a company needs to understand the key success factors in the particular industry (e.g. end-use of the product) but also have the resources and capabilities to fulfil them. A competitive advantage is the combination of these two components. A competitive strategy will be successful when a company can deploy the resources and capabilities to match the key success factors within the industry environment. As long as a firm adopts a competitive strategy where it utilises these resources and capabilities in a superior way of its competitors it should be possible for it to establish and keep a competitive advantage. The sustainability of the competitive advantage will depend on different factors eroding the advantages within different areas of the company's activities. The sustainability will depend on e.g. *durability (cost of raw material, product innovation, product brand)*, *transferability (transfer of technology or knowledge)* and *replicability (complexity of capabilities)*.

In the traditional Nordic paper producing companies the competitive advantages has been built on a high technical vertical integration supplied by domestic raw materials in the form of wood and electrical power. The vertical integration has also been in the form of a commercial integration by mergers and acquisitions of converting plants or sales or distribution networks in the local market place in Western Europe.

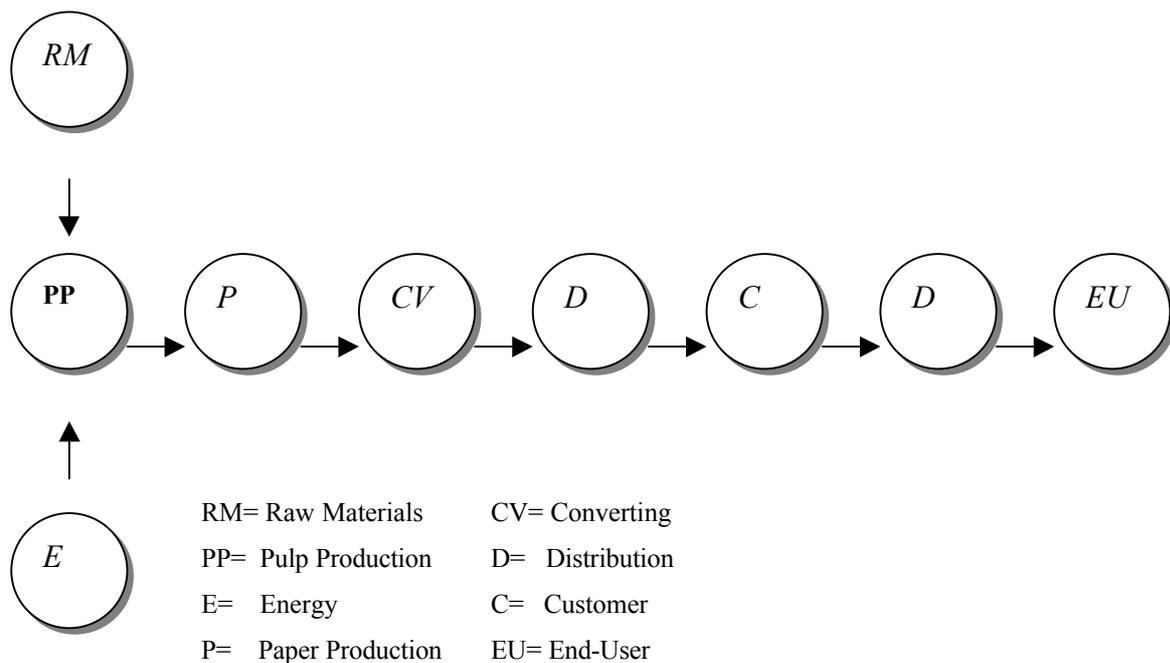


Figure 1: The Paper Supply Chain

Due to different disturbances within the market place (different driving forces) the paper producing companies have also come under pressure from stakeholders since the value of the stocks is below the development of the general index in the stock market place. To some extent the Swedish paper producing companies have chosen to concentrate on the core business by selling out activities which not are fitting to the core business but also in the form of outsourcing e.g. harvesting of wood (e.g. StoraEnso, Korsnäs). The traditional way of doing business will also be in focus due to the increased use of information technology e.g. the strategic challenge (Fraser et.al., 2000) of electronic commerce. In order to stay competitive the paper producing companies need to reconsider their competitive and marketing strategies.

### **The Strategic Challenge - An Industry in Change**

Due to the increased globalisation there are many factors influencing the pulp and paper industry. The main emphasis in this paper is to discuss how external changes and different driving forces will challenge the strategic management within the pulp and paper industry. For Nordic companies Western Europe is still the home market in competition with local producers and an intensive competition from companies in North America and Canada. New actors from South Africa and Asia are also adding to that competition. At the same time Nordic companies are interested to expand their business into evolving market areas in Asia and into Latin America. The increased competition will focus the strategic issues in this business sector and require a higher market orientation.

### **External Changes**

There are many changes in a business environment that will effect the future business. For the pulp and paper industry some of them are more important than others. For some core business areas such as packaging and hygiene products the final customer must be in focus due to

changes in demography. However, the demographic situation can be analysed with a certain degree of certainty while other trends might be more difficult to anticipate.

There are many factors that will have an influence on previous rather homogenous national markets within Western Europe. At the same time companies are struggling for new market areas in Asia and Latin America. Evolving markets in Eastern Europe are also of interest and all of them with different consumption patterns and culture background. According to this situation there are many factors that will increase the fragmentation within national markets into a number of smaller markets segments. New culture influences will shape different life styles and form the future market base for different paper and packaging products. Each segment will require more specific demands on products and services consumed. The fragmentation will also be affected by declining household sizes and an ageing population within the European Community. Even within the family there are individual consumption patterns due to favourite brands and consumption at different times to fit work and leisure time. Young people have also been in the focus for marketers for many products and services for several years. Young people have often a great influence on buying decisions in a family. They are also big consumers of certain products such as clothing, fast food, soft drinks and services like entertainment, travelling e t c.

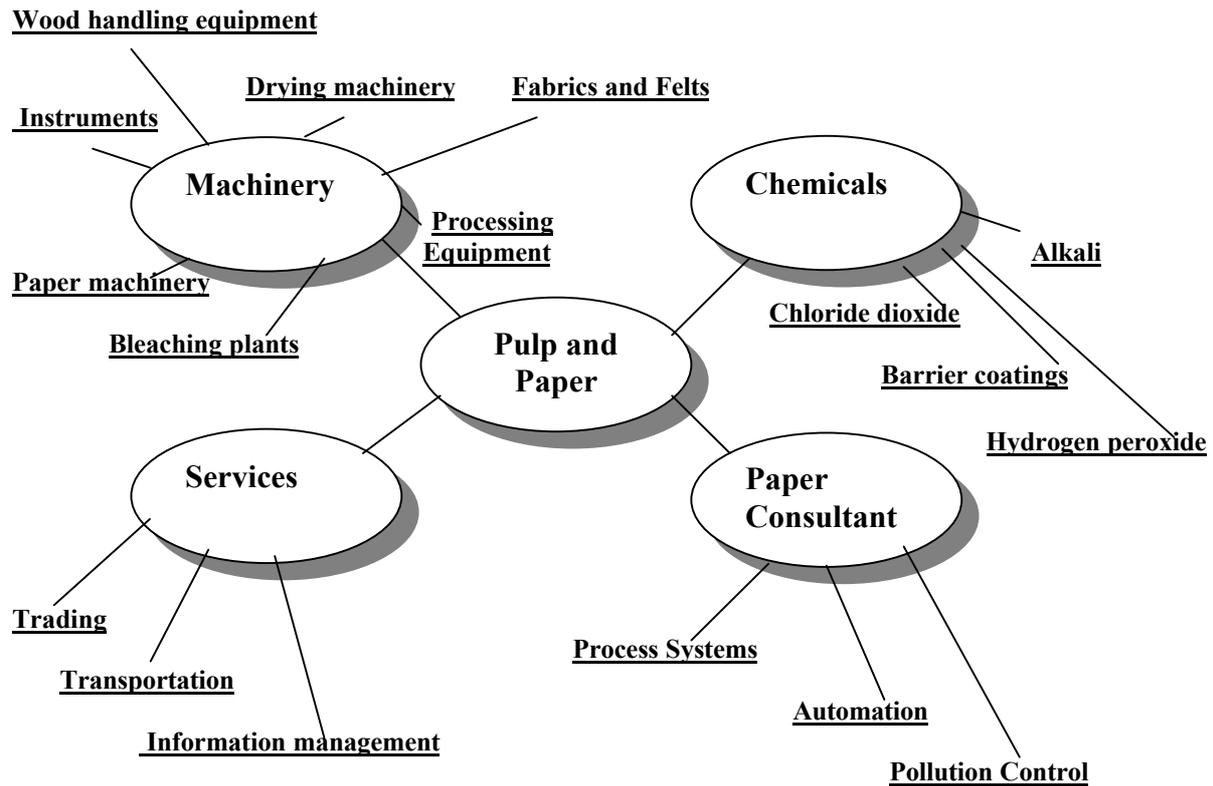
An increased environmental awareness among the consumers is also affecting the distribution of products and packaging material used by the manufacturers within certain industries. The demand for ecologically manufactured products is growing. At the same time consumers make demands on packaging relating to ecology and product safety. Taking such trends into account the market will demand a growing variety of products and services. Those manufacturers who can produce customised products and brands and can meet specific market segment needs will win the future business. This will also be a challenge for the packing industry.

On the other hand the basic characteristics of many products from different manufacturers are becoming more equal e g in the car industry. The importance for future success is therefore the ability to add value to the basic product by features, services, branding and packaging. The marketing concept must then be communicated through the distribution system to the end customers in the actual market segment. The success in the market place will rely on a competitive strategy and the positioning of the product and the added value it can bring to the end customer. Packaging can be an important contribution in this process and work as a marketing tool.

### **Driving Forces from Technology**

Papermaking is the art of balancing many different technologies. Change one aspect of the papermaking process and others will have to change too (Rooks 2000, pp.18).

Technology has been one of the most important driving forces within the pulp and paper industry. Cost disadvantages for raw materials have pressured pulp and paper companies to develop more sophisticated equipment, machinery and processes in close relation with different companies in related industries. Due to competition there has also been an interest to go into areas with higher added value products such as hygiene and products suited for e.g.. packaging purposes.



**Figure 2: Technology influences from related industries**

The strategic interest from the paper industry to go into product areas with a higher added value e.g. hygiene products, packaging materials and other products are supposed to give better possibilities for price differentiation and creation of value in the relationships with different customer groups. This emphasis has made it necessary to take different external changes into consideration before investing into new heavy capital intensive equipment. Pressure from environment groups has also driven the research and development within the industry for a better pollution control and the usage of recycled materials. The R & D has also resulted in different new products such as TMP, CTMP pulp, hygiene and packaging materials, but even new processes in the production and drying techniques. However, the transfer of technology is rather high within the pulp and paper industry and for the particular company it is necessary to continue the search for market factors which will give the company a better opportunity for creation of a competitive and market strategy which will create a higher value in relation with its different customers.

### Machinery

There are many factors affecting the technology development within the pulp and paper industry, but innovations within pulp and paper machinery is of utmost importance. Cost disadvantages for raw materials in comparison with other parts of the world have put an pressure on pulp and paper companies to develop sophisticated machinery in close relation with suppliers from related industries (Kvaener, Valmet). The intention to reach cost reduction within the industry has driven e.g. the forest sector to a high degree of

mechanisation (tractors, forwarders, processing machines, log harvesters) for the supply of raw material which also has created an industry in itself.

The expansion and international market development within the pulp industry has also resulted in a number of international manufacturers of pulp machinery (boilers, digesters, bleaching plants) and other industries linked to pulp production (e.g. process automation). The technology development has also been of great importance within manufacturing of paper and board machines and within areas of drying machines and fabrics and felts used in paper machinery. The pulp and paper industry are also in favour of development of other equipment in association with this production such as control and drive systems (ABB) and various instruments to control and monitor the production process.

### Chemicals

On the speciality supply side (Akzo Nobel) the pulp and paper industry are major users of different chemicals such as chemicals for boiling and bleaching of pulp, but even pigments and different kinds of coatings are used in the production of paper. Many of these chemicals are important ingredients for adding value to the paper production.

### Services

The pulp and paper industry is also dependent on different services e.g. the transportation of timber and paper products by heavy trucks (Volvo, Scania) and special cargoes for shipment of pulp and paper products to different markets. Trading houses is also playing an important role for selling products in overseas markets. An issue of growing importance is also information management supported by different specialists within the information technology sector.

### Consultants

Consultants within different areas have played important roles in the development of pulp and paper technology especially within areas of processes, systems and automation. A particular area has also been market and strategy studies (Jaakko Pöyry) before investing into new plants.

## **Driving Forces in the Marketplace**

In the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s many business markets are or will be global markets. This change from national-regional markets to global markets is just one of many profound changes that have been occurring within the business environment. Within the past 10-15 years the language of business marketing has also changed irreversibly. Samsung of South Korea, electronic mail, computerised manufacturing, relationship marketing and internet management are some of the new vocabulary. This new vocabulary is symptomatic of the dramatic changes that are occurring within the business environment throughout the world. In the following section some of these business changes or driving forces will be discussed for the pulp and paper industry. One important question for a producer is - what impact these business environment changes have upon the business firm. Specifically, how should a producer respond to these new technological opportunities and to an intensive domestic and foreign competition?

### Customer drivers

A strategic market orientation (Abell, 1978; Aaker 1998) requires that the business firm focuses all of its resources on serving customers and market needs. From the discussion

above it is obvious that there are several factors affecting the customer base and some of them will be stronger than others. A choice of target markets segments determines where a company will compete. Other firms will also be seeking to compete in these segments and the customer will choose whom to support. A key task of management in competitive markets is to create a (Day & Wensley, 1988; Slater, 1996) *sustainable differential advantage* to attract customers to these choices. At the same time it is important to build such relationships that customers can be kept since (Reicheld, 1994) *loyal customers* are assets and winning new customers is costly. At the same time it is important for the producer to focus on the key customer in an added-value chain. A few years ago an important business strategy was forward integration into different kinds of converting. At the moment some of the big actors in the packaging

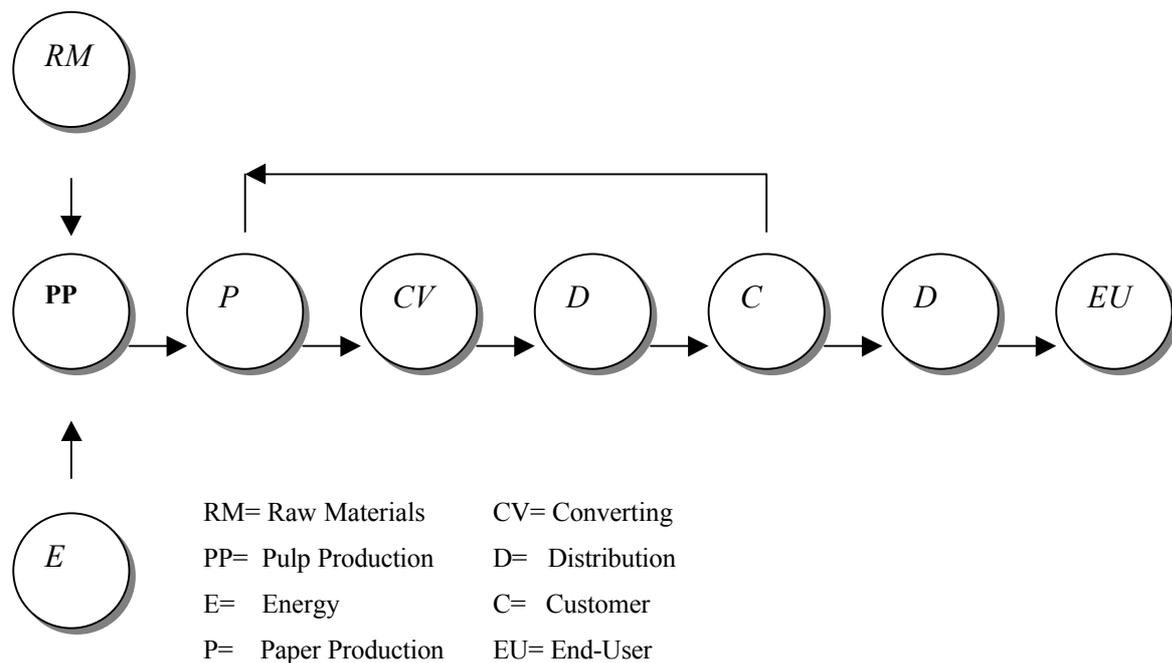


Figure 3: New Interactions within the Paper Supply Chain

industry are withdrawing from converting and are going back to the basic product. Due to concentration within certain business sectors the pressure is also put forward from big customers or customer groups creating a new market structure.

### Product drivers

The essence of good marketing (Hooley et.al., 1998) is to be aware of the customers' needs. This is most apparent when dealing with the product-service mix. Searching for a differential advantage begins with an understanding of customers' value. The difference may be based upon a product which is perceived superior (quality, performance, features, reliability), has a better support or offers a lower total price (operating costs for the customer). Due to different changes within the marketplace the focus must be on the need from the key customer in the added-value chain. This is especially important where changes are occurring in the supply chain between the producer-converter-customer. Besides offering superior value to the customer the differential advantage must also be profitable for the company.

### Service drivers

Due to local market requirements it might be necessary to supply different kinds of services in the form of local based sales people, converting facilities or technical support by the end customer. In a competitive market situation company personnel have also become a valuable source for differential advantage within many industries. Services (professional, reliable, positive, responsive, and initiative) might also be difficult to copy for competitors since it is based on management skill in empowering and motivating front-line staff.

### Cost drivers

It is of great importance for management to look for ways of lowering costs without lowering utility for important customers. Due to the concentration within certain industries like the food and beverage industry the bargaining power (Porter, 1979) of the buyers is increasing. At the same time new suppliers are emerging with products based on lower costs for raw material. The demand for recycled material is also another factor to be considered and the supplier can also meet different switching costs by an end-customer. A low cost permits the company to create a differential advantage either by a competitive price or by offering an improved product-service mix to the customer. The cost drivers within the pulp and paper industry are many (economies of scale, experience, capacity utilisation, integration, interrelationships, location, raw material costs) and will continue to play an important role for the competition between different producers within Europe and other parts of the world.

### Logistic drivers

International trade and transportation have been in constant change during recent years. The removal of trade barriers within the European Community is expected to increase trade and free movement of goods and people, even if we have a recession at the moment. The industrial infrastructure has also been developed in a direction, which increases the demand for transportation and packaging. Products with a higher added value will also require different packaging solutions. Electronic shopping by internet will create (Fraser, et.al., 2000) new logistic functions. Recovery of products and packing materials is another growing area. For certain complex products the trend is toward reuse of components rather than material recycling. In other industrial sectors like the automotive industry the customers are depending on JIT and the impact of packaging for bulky products and transportation is substantial.

### Other Market drivers

The consumption of paper and packaging materials (Mautssek, ed., 2000) is varying between different countries around the world. There are several reasons for the wide spread in consumption due to standard of living, industrial structure, cultural differences and exchange rates to mention some of them. These differences also create the bases for different market dynamics and evolutionary processes within every country. There is however some driving forces which are more important than others are. One of them concerns the concentration within certain industries such as the food industry and creates important buying power among companies working in that sector. Other forces can be recognised as environmental due to Directives on Packaging and Packaging Waste (CEN TC 261). This will also lead to changed consumption due to prevention by source reduction. Packaging has also been in focus as the main symbol for environmental responsibility. At the same time some multinational brands are advertised on a global scale in combination with a packaging product which is easy to recognise. This leads to an increased demand for integrated development of packaging and product, which will affect the need for, customised solutions.

## The Strategic Challenge

The business environment of the company consists of all the external influences that have an impact of the company's decisions and performance. The problem facing the management is tracking and analysing the vast number and range of external influences. The starting point is some kind of system or framework for organising and analysing different kinds of market information.

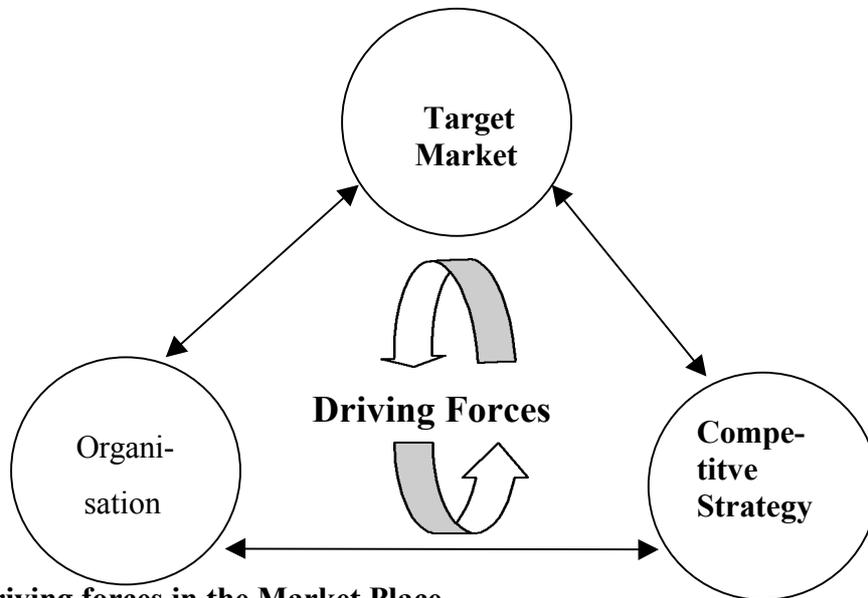


Figure 4: Driving forces in the Market Place

When sudden environmental changes occur they can trigger major developments in the marketplace. Some of the driving forces affecting the pulp and paper industry evolution have been discussed above. The strategic challenge for the management is the creation of a competitive and marketing strategy coping with those forces in the actual marketplace. Success in business is achieved when management develops a strategy and an organisation, which fit the environment within which the company operates

Strategy (de Wit & Meyer, 1999) is concerned with matching a company's resources and capabilities to the opportunities that arise in an ever-changing external environment. The distinction between corporate level and business level strategy is relevant here. Corporate strategy (Grant, 1998) is concerned with deciding which industries the company should be engaged in and with the allocation of resources among them. The business or competitive strategy is concerned with establishing competitive advantage. Identifying the basis of and opportunities for competitive advantage requires an understanding of the competition within the industry. It also requires that management understand customer needs and the means by which these needs are satisfied. A competitive or differential advantage can be created out of the company's strengths or distinctive competencies relative to the competition. The essential factors in choosing to create the advantage are that it must be on the basis of value to the customer (e.g. lower prices, superior quality and better service) and should be using a skill of the company that competitors will find hard to copy. However, markets are dynamic and virtually all products have a limited life, which expires, or are eroded when a new or better way of satisfying the underlying need is found or created by new technology or substitution.

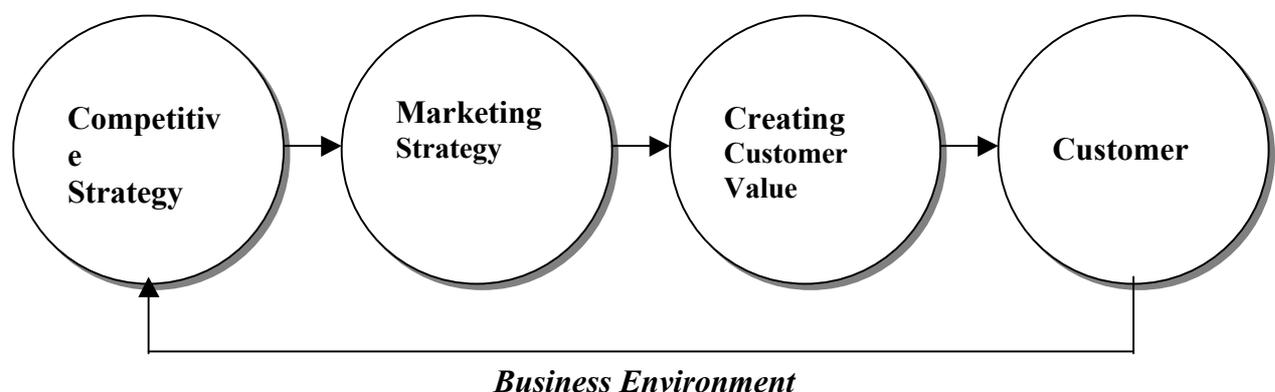


Figure: 5 The Marketing Strategy in a Changing Business Environment

### **Competitive strategy**

Developing an effective competitive strategy is vital for the company. According to the work of Porter (1980, 1985) there are three fundamental ways of achieving a sustainable competitive advantage for a company. This can be done by cost leadership, differentiation or focus. By cost leadership the company sets out to be the low cost producer within the industry. This assumes that cost can be reduced e.g. through economies of scale and that this is vital to the customer. The risks are that cost leadership cannot be sustained, competitors might imitate and technology changes or any other basis for the cost leadership might be eroded. With differentiation the firm sets out to be unique in the industry along some of the dimensions that are widely valued by customers. The risks associated with this are that the differentiation cannot be sustained as competitors imitate or the unique selling proposition

becomes less important to customers. By a focus strategy the company focuses on a narrow target market segment combined with either of the other strategies. The risks are that it can be imitated, the segment become unattractive, smaller segments start to appear or the basis for the segmentation disappears as the differences between segments disappears. It is therefore vital that the management understands the basis for its competitive advantage and that it is eroded over time by different driving forces in the market place.

## Marketing Strategy

The marketing concept requires more than being able to meet customer needs - it requires meeting them better than competitors. Customers choose those suppliers, which offer the best value. If a company does not have a competitive advantage it will lose market share or have to cut prices to retain the market share. Strategic market planning is concerned with adapting the organisation to a changing environment. Organisations succeed when they meet the need of customers more effectively than competitors. According to Greenley (1993) the framework for developing marketing strategy can be explained by the stages of strategic planning at three different levels (1) corporate mission, (2) corporate strategy and (3) the actual marketing strategy. The actual marketing strategy (Greenley, 1993; Sudharasam, 1995; Hooley, 1998) can be formulated in different ways, but usually it include the following dimensions (1) the product or service market where the company compete (2) the level of investment to maintain or grow the business (3) the product line, positioning, pricing and distribution strategies needed to compete in the selected market segments (4) the assets or skills to provide a sustainable competitive advantage.

## Creating Customer Value

Creating superior value necessitates at least two different kinds of knowledge (1) first about what customers will value and (2) second about the skills necessary to provide such values. The core competencies of the company are the unique bundle of skills it possesses which

| <b>Product Driven</b>  | <b>Market Driven</b>  | <b>Market Driving</b>   |
|--|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economies of integration</li> <li>• Technological leadership</li> <li>• Cost position</li> <li>• Standardised products</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specialisation</li> <li>• Channel selection</li> <li>• Brand identification</li> <li>• Price differentiation</li> <li>• Product quality</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ancillary services</li> <li>• EDI (less importance on middlemen)</li> <li>• Focus on interaction with local customers</li> <li>• Increased use of IT</li> <li>• Specialisation on key customers</li> </ul> |

Figure 6: The Characteristics of a Market Driving Company

permit it to offer a sustainable competitive advantage in the market place. In the long run success depends upon creating core competencies in the areas in which the company operates.

In the pulp and paper business the customer value must also be built on a long-term relationship. By increasing the efforts to interact with the key customers it might also be

possible for the company to go from product driven to be a leading and market driving company.

## **Conclusion**

Due to the ever changing market environment (e.g. the crisis in Asia) it is necessary that a company is trying to build an early market warning system to be able to change its marketing strategy. The impact of change in the market place is great due to different driving forces, which have been discussed in this paper. (1) In many industries the days of growth are gone forever and entrepreneurs create new ones. (2) Change creates opportunities for innovative companies and possibilities for substitute products delivered by others e.g. plastics. (3) The speed of change is different but will lead to a greater complexity and added turbulence or discontinuity within certain industries. (4) Successful strategies erode over time and the company needs to continually evaluate its marketing strategy.

Even if the world paper consumption is expected to increase by 2.8 per year up to 2010 (Jaakko Pöyry) the focus of new paper capacity is expected to shift to regions of fast paper consumption growth such as Asia and Latin America. For companies within the capital intensive pulp and paper industry it is therefore necessary to find out competitive and marketing strategies that can match the competition from different actors in a particular market area. For some companies this can lead to a further specialisation in niche products (a focus strategy). For others it can mean becoming the biggest producer within a certain product area. Mergers and acquisitions has been one strategy to become a global player (cost leadership strategy) within a particular product area such as fine paper, packaging board and packaging materials by StoraEnso, SCA and for UPM-Kymmene. In other fields a merger within a particular product area (MoDo and SCA merged their fine paper units) between the companies can create a competitive company (a differentiation strategy). For other companies it might be necessary to create a strategy which will give even better possibilities for differentiation and driving the market situation by using services and a higher interaction with the customers.

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