THE INTERNET

&

THE

EXPORT MARKETING PERFORMANCE

OF

AUSTRALIAN EXPORT MARKET VENTURES


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ABSTRACT

Despite being claimed as one of the strongest economies in the world, being more competitive, open and vibrant than ever before (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2004a), the Australian economy is confronting several issues regarding its export performance. Those include Australia’s international trade balance, its export composition, the nature of Australian exporters, and especially, the emergence and development of the Internet. The purpose of this paper is to justify the significance of the study into the impact of the Internet, firm-specific characteristics, market characteristics, and export marketing strategy on the export marketing performance of Australian export market ventures by highlighting (1) the research objectives and significance of the study (2) the essential background information on the selected issues facing the Australian economy; (3) the gaps in the export marketing literature; (4) the methodology of the study; and (5) anticipated research outcomes.
1. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

1.1. Research Objectives

The research project is expected to:

- Identify the uses of the Internet in export marketing;
- Identify the impact of the Internet on export marketing performance when the Internet is used for those purposes;
- Determine the impact of certain firm-specific characteristics on Australian firms’ export marketing performance;
- Determine the impact of certain market characteristics on Australian firms’ export marketing performance;
- Determine the impact of export marketing strategy on Australian firm’s export marketing performance; and
- Measure Australian firms’ export marketing performance and determine whether or not they are successful or unsuccessful.

1.2. Significance of the Study

As the internationalisation of Australian companies has attracted little attention from researchers (Maitland and Nicholas 2002), this study will make a significant contribution to both the export marketing literature and the management of Australian firms involved in exporting activities. With regards to the literature, this study helps enrich the export marketing literature by highlighting the critical relationships between export marketing performance and its antecedents, namely firm-specific characteristics, market characteristics, and export marketing strategy. The use of a composite measure of export marketing performance also helps enhance the literature by enabling different findings from different studies across different national settings to be compared. Adding to that, the project outcomes would also further validate the findings of the Julian and Holtedahl (2004) study in identifying the uses of the Internet and in predicting the impact of the Internet on the export marketing performance of Australian firms when the Internet is used for those purposes. Furthermore, the management of Australian firms involved in exporting will also gain several useful insights into the possible uses of the Internet and how the Internet may impact their exporting activities when used for those purposes. Finally, more appropriate and informed decision making can be achieved, resulting from the managers’ thorough understanding of the critical factors associated with international success and the relationship between export marketing performance and firm-specific characteristics, market characteristics, and export marketing strategy. The next section will describe the selected current issues within the national economy, including Australia’s international trade balance, Australia’s export composition, and the emergence of the Internet.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

2.1. Australia’s International Trade Balance

Australia has been a net importer since 1978-1979, apart from four financial years ending 1980, 1992, 1997, and 2001, with a record deficit of more than $18.6 billion in 2003 (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) 1994, 2001, 2002, 2003a, 2004b). The international trade balance is the difference between the export and import figures in each financial year. Consequently it is of great interest to investigate the factors associated with the fluctuations in the nation’s international trade balance.
2.2. **Australia’s Export Composition**

Australia’s export composition has also changed over time. Exports of primary products still account for around 60% of our total exports, whilst manufactured products only account for approximately 30% (DFAT 2004b). As such, Australia’s exports are still dominated by primary products. It is believed that such a composition is rather unique when compared to other OECD countries. It is further believed this will have a significant impact on the variables associated with the export marketing strategy of the exporting firms, such as promotion expenditure, product quality, product development, relative pricing, and distribution effectiveness (Julian 1995).

2.3. **The Internet**

The Internet has experienced dramatic growth. The world online population has been estimated to be around 1.5 billion in 2007, an increase of 246% compared to the year 2000, at 418 million people (Marketing News 2003). Adding to that, the number of host computers linked to the Internet is estimated to have risen from 1.3 million in 1993 to 233.1 million in 2004, representing a marked increase (Internet Systems Consortium 2004). The commercial Websites have subsequently proliferated. According to Online Computer Library Centre (2004), the number of websites has increased from 2.8 million in 1998 to more than 9 million in 2002, representing an increase of more than 217% in 4 years.

With regards to Australia, the Internet has also undergone a similar trend. Australia ranked fifth amongst OECD countries, behind Denmark, Japan, Finland and Sweden, in relation to the proportion of businesses with ten or more employees using the Internet in 2001 (OECD 2002). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2004) estimated approximately out of 680,000 Australian businesses, 83% are using a computer as at 30 June 2003. The proportion of businesses having access to the Internet is 71%, or 485,000 businesses. Approximately 23% of Australian businesses (or 157,000 businesses) reported having a web presence, either their own website or a presence on another firm’s website. Also found in this report, the proportion of businesses with Internet use that reported placing orders for goods and services over the Internet during 2002-2003 was 39%. For this same period, 19% of businesses with Internet use indicated they had received orders via the Internet or web. This is approximately double the percentage of businesses with Internet use that reported receiving orders via the Internet or web during 2001-2002. As such, Internet income earned by 91,000 Australian businesses has reached approximately $24.3 billion for 2002 – 2003, more than double that of 2001-2002 (ABS 2004). This change is considered to be a good indicator of the increasing practices of Internet commerce. Internet commerce is defined as the use of information technology – the Internet, and its applications to support business activities (Poon 1999; Overby and Min 2001).

### 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The development of the Internet, as well as the current issues in the Australian economy have resulted in the need for a study into the export marketing performance of Australian firms, as well as the effect of the Internet, firm-specific characteristics, market characteristics, and export marketing strategy on Australian firms’ export marketing performance.

3.1. **The Internet and Export Marketing Literature**

In association with the emergence of the Internet, there has been a steadily increasing volume of literature on the role of the Internet in business activities. Approximately 270 journal articles on the applications of the Internet in marketing in general were in the thirteen-year
period between 1987 and 2000 (Ngai 2003). However, there has been very limited empirical research on the extent to which the Internet has an impact on a firm’s export marketing performance, especially from an Australian perspective. Some studies (Samiee 1998; Hamill 1997; Bennett 1997) have attempted to link access to the Internet as a determinant of export marketing performance. However, these studies have been conducted predominantly in the U.S. (Samiee 1998) and Europe (Bennett 1997), and according to (Prashantham 2003), much of the early literature has been based on lessons learnt from trial and failure, rather than robust empirical enquiry. Furthermore, both the size and the importance of the Internet have changed significantly since these studies were undertaken. Such rapid developments lead to a relatively high risk of obsolescence in research findings in this field (Fisher and Reibstein 2001). Adding to that, the Internet-export marketing performance relationship has not been tested on a performance measurement scale that is generally accepted to have cross-cultural validity (Julian and Liesch 2004). In Australia, the potential impact of the Internet in exporting was examined in an exploratory study of Queensland firms by Julian and Holtedahl (2004). The Julian and Holtedahl (2004) study examined the use of the Internet in export marketing and attempted to predict the impact of those uses on a firm’s export marketing performance. However, their findings were inconclusive.

On the other hand, the latest report by the Economist has revealed Australia’s e-readiness ranking has slipped to 12th in 2004, amongst the world’s 60 largest economies (Economist Intelligence Unit 2004). A country’s “e-readiness” is a measure of its e-business environment, a collection of factors that indicate how amenable a market is to Internet-based opportunities. Australia’s position has slipped from 2nd in 2001, just after the US, to 12th in 2004, even after Singapore (7th) and Hong Kong (9th) in the Asia Pacific region (Finnfacts Ireland 2004). Given the change in Australia’s e-business environment and the marked growth of Australian businesses’ online activities, it is now timely to investigate the extent to which the Internet impacts their export marketing performance.

3.2. Firm-Specific Characteristics

Firm-specific characteristics as an antecedent of export marketing performance has been extensively researched in the literature. However, these studies were conducted primarily in North America and Europe. Limited research has been conducted in the Asia Pacific region, yielding contradictory results. The study of Thai firms by Julian (2003) concluded that firm-specific characteristics did not have a significant impact on a firm’s export marketing performance. However, in another study by Julian and O’Cass (2004) on Australian firms, firm-specific characteristics were found to have a significant impact on export marketing performance. As such, the findings are inconclusive, warranting further research to determine whether or not the impact of firm-specific characteristics on export marketing performance is country specific or region specific. Adding to that, the nature of the Australian exporting firms has also changed. In 2002 the number of Australian exporters was estimated to be 31,450 (93% of whom were goods exporters), who sent more than $152b worth of goods and services to offshore customers (ABS 2003). Exports now account for 21% of total GDP, compared with around 17% in 1991-1992 (DFAT 2004c). Therefore, the study into the impact of firm-specific characteristics on the export marketing performance of Australian firms is both timely and important.

3.3. Market Characteristics

The impact of export market characteristics on a firm’s export marketing performance has received limited research attention in the export marketing literature. A study into the direct impact of market characteristics on Australian firm’s export marketing performance is justified from a number of different perspectives. In the past few decades, Australian firms have diversified their export destinations. Developing countries now represent around 50% of
Australia’s principal export markets (DFAT 2003a). At the same time, Australia has created strong ties with the dynamic economies in the Asia Pacific region, whilst successfully maintaining the traditional links with the OECD countries. Each of these markets would impose different threats and opportunities for Australian firms. Adding to that, the recent bilateral free trade agreements between Australia and other countries such as Singapore and Thailand, and especially the progress towards the agreement with the U.S., will provide a totally different market environment subsequently impacting on Australian firms’ export marketing performance.

3.4. Export Marketing Strategy

The debate on whether to standardise or adapt a firm’s export marketing strategy has been an ongoing issue in the export marketing literature, and today remains largely unresolved. O’Cass and Julian (2003) found that the effects of adaptation or standardisation strategies did not have a significant direct impact on Australian firms’ export marketing performance. Similarly, export marketing strategy was not a significant predictor of export marketing performance for Thai firms by Julian (2003), whose sample was cross-sectional in nature. These findings are, in fact, contrary to the findings of the Cavusgil and Zou (1994) study on U.S. exporting firms, which concluded that export marketing strategy was one of the key determinants of export marketing performance. This indicates that research on a firm’s export marketing strategy is far from complete, and requires further investigation.

As far as Australian exports are concerned, its export composition is still dominated by primary products. It is believed that the strategy adopted for exporting primary products will vary significantly from that of manufactured products (Julian 1995). Adding to that, Australia now ranks 26th in world exports, compared to the 12th position it occupied some 30 years ago (DFAT 1994, 2003b). Furthermore, Australian exporting firms are confronted with a difficult global trading environment. This is represented by the decline in the export figures for the last two consecutive years. These factors indicate several important implications with regards to foreign market characteristics and a firm’s adopted export marketing strategy, making the proposed study both timely and important.

3.5. Export Marketing Performance

Another crucial weakness in the export marketing literature is the lack of a uniform measure of export marketing performance that has cross-cultural validity. Export marketing performance has been measured, principally, by three different ways. First, the most commonly used measure of export marketing performance in the literature is via economic indicators, such as export sales (Cavusgil 1984a), export sales growth (Kirpalani and MacIntosh 1980) export profit (Madsen 1989), and export intensity (McGuinness and Little 1981). Second, export marketing performance has been measured via the strategic indicators in terms of gains in market share, strategic presence in the export market or attainment of a competitive position in the export market (Cavusgil and Zou 1994). Third, export marketing performance has been measured via perceptual or attitudinal measures of performance such as perceived export success and satisfaction with the export ventures’ performance (Christensen, Da Rocha and Gertner 1987), or indirectly, such as propensity to export (Denis and Depleteau 1985), attitude towards exporting (Brady and Bearden 1979), and attitude toward overcoming the barriers to exporting (Rosson and Ford 1982).

Without a unified performance measure, findings of different export studies are difficult to compare, leaving considerable room for inconsistency and confusion. This weakness of the literature will, no doubt, hamper theory development in the export marketing literature. As such, the proposed study will use a composite measure that incorporates the three measures used in previous studies, namely financial/economic measures, strategic measures, and
attitudinal/perceptual measures, thereby helping to integrate the existing literature. Once this composite measure is applied across different national settings, it will enable future studies’ findings to be compared in different countries thereby enhancing theory development.

4. HYPOTHESES

The hypotheses that will be tested are as follows:

H₁: The Internet when used for the purposes detailed below has a significant positive impact on Australian firms’ export marketing performance:
   a. Communication
   b. Market Research
   c. Sales
   d. Image Enhancement
   e. Cost Reduction
   f. Competitive Advantage

H₂: Firm-specific characteristics have a significant positive impact on Australian firms’ export marketing performance.

H₃: Market characteristics have a significant negative impact on Australian firms’ export marketing performance.

H₄: Export marketing strategy has a significant positive impact on Australian firm’s export marketing performance.

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1. Research Design

The major steps undertaken to accomplish the research objectives are outlined as follows:

First, an extensive review of the existing export marketing and Internet literature was conducted to identify a wide range of potentially important variables that were likely to influence the export marketing performance of Australian firms.

Second, based on the review of the literature, an instrument was developed to measure the export marketing performance of Australian firms, together with variables that were likely to impact Australian firms’ export marketing performance, including the Internet and how it is used in export marketing, firm-specific and market characteristics, and export marketing strategy. In order to obtain valid and reliable measures of the variables, previously validated scales from previous studies were used for all of the constructs in this study. These scales had been tested in different industries and different national settings (Julian and Holtedahl 2004; Bennett 1997; Julian 2003; Zou et al. 1998; Cavusgil and Zou 1994; Styles 1998).

Third, the instrument was then incorporated into a preliminary questionnaire and pre-tested through a medium of personal interviews with the Managing Directors of 5 firms involved in export marketing that were located in Adelaide, South Australia. The pre-test of the questionnaire was conducted to see how the questionnaire would perform under actual conditions of data collection. The Managing Directors of the 5 firms involved in export marketing located in Adelaide, South Australia, were interviewed to see if they were able to provide the information requested, to see if any of the questions asked seemed confusing, and to see if any of the questions produced respondent resistance for one reason or another. On the
basis of the pre-test, a final, more specific list of variables was identified to measure the impact of the Internet, firm-specific characteristics, market characteristics and export marketing strategy on the export marketing performance of Australian firms located in South Australia.

Fourth, the potential participants in the study were contacted via telephone. They were asked if they would participate in the survey. The incentives for completing the survey would be the provision of a summarised report of the findings from the study upon the respondents’ request.

Finally, the questionnaires together with a covering letter were mailed to the Managing Director of the firms who had previously agreed to participate in the study. It was expected that for small to medium sized firms the Managing Director would be the person responsible for most of the marketing functions and therefore, the most knowledgeable person about the organisation’s marketing performance. For larger firms, where the Managing Director was not directly responsible for the company’s marketing functions, it was expected that the Managing Director would pass the questionnaire on to the appropriate executive to complete the questionnaire (see Julian 1998).

5.2. Data Collection

The survey was designed as a cross-sectional self-administered mail survey that included both scaled response and open-ended questions. The self-administered mail survey consisted of a questionnaire with a covering letter and was mailed to the respondent together with a return envelope for the completed survey to be sent to the researcher at the School of Commerce at the University of Adelaide.

Based on information provided by Churchill (1991), Kinnear, Taylor, Johnson and Amstrong (1993), Neuman (2003), and Quester, McGuiggan, McCarthy and Perrealt (2001), the self-administered mail survey was considered the most appropriate data collection method for the following reasons:

- It was flexible in its application,
- It kept the costs associated with data collection to a minimum when dealing with a large sample,
- It enabled a large amount of data to be collected in a reasonably short period of time,
- It provided quality data, and
- It ensured an adequate response rate was achieved.

5.3. The Sample

In this study, the sampling frame was the list of exporting firms in South Australia provided by the International Trade Association of South Australia (ITASA). It was a recent publication, named “South Australian International Trade Directory”, and was published in October 2003 by ITASA in conjunction with the South Australian Employers’ Chamber of Commerce and Industry (trading as Business SA), and the South Australian State Government. This directory of exporting firms in South Australia is produced in hard copy every two years for worldwide distribution. It should be considered a reliable source, as it was sponsored by the South Australian Government Department for Business, Manufacturing and Trade and highly recommended by the Australian Trade Commission (ITASA 2003). The sampling frame included exporting firms operating in a wide cross-section of industries, ranging from agriculture and livestock to manufacturing, mining, and wine and beverages industry.
The researcher personally contacted all of the firms listed in the directory. Out of a total of 315 firms in the sampling frame, 230 firms were identified as current exporters and of the list of current exporters 185 firms confirmed their willingness to participate in the data collection component of this study by completing the questionnaires, and thereby acted as the sample for this project. Having identified the sample size of 185 exporting firms in South Australia, the research instrument (self-administered mail survey) was then mailed to all the potential respondents. The balance of companies in the sampling frame that did not participate in the study were either not involved in exporting or refused to participate in the survey for a number of different reasons, such as company policy or time constraints. As at 06 August 2004, 120 useable questionnaires had been returned to the researcher, representing a response rate of 64.9%. This is considered to be adequate to run the statistical programs and produce statistically significant results in order to achieve the stated research objectives (Churchill 1991; Groves 1989).

5.4. Scale Development

On the basis of the pre-tests, the researcher pre-coded the final list of questions that asked the respondent to complete two sets of Likert-like scales, one for each of the dimensions of the research, which included the key variables influencing the export marketing performance of Australian firms, namely the Internet, firm-specific characteristics, market characteristics, and export marketing strategy; and the actual measure of export marketing performance of the same firms. The senior executives’ attitudes to the key constructs, in the study, that were likely to impact the export marketing performance of Australian firms, would be obtained via the use of Likert scales. Their responses were given a numerical score that consistently reflected the direction of the person’s attitude on each statement. More specifically, the senior executives indicated their level of agreement or disagreement with the set of statements designed to identify the most salient factors influencing the export marketing performance of Australian export market ventures. These factors included the Internet, firm-specific characteristics, market characteristics, and export marketing strategy. The responses for these statements were scored from 1 to 5 – strongly disagree to strongly agree. Adding to that, the senior executives also indicated their level of dissatisfaction and satisfaction with the set of statements designed to measure the export marketing performance of the same Australian export market ventures. The responses for these statements were scored from 1 to 10 – extremely dissatisfied to extremely satisfied. The use of Likert scales has the advantage of eliminating the subjectivity associated with open-ended questions and forces the respondents to select one of the alternatives available, that alternative being the closest correct response to the statement being measured. This type of scale has the added advantage of consistency across respondents by standardising the available responses.

The statements examining the factors impacting the firms’ export marketing performance were categorised into four groups, namely: the uses of the Internet, firm-specific characteristics, market characteristics, and export marketing strategy. All statements were defined and measured at the export market venture level. An export market venture was defined as a product or group of products being marketed to one specific export market, such as wheat to China.

With regards to export marketing performance, it was measured via a composite measure. From the literature and the pre-test of the research instrument, seven strategic objectives were identified and then incorporated into the research instrument. The respondents were asked to indicate the relative importance of each objective by allocating a constant-sum (100 points) to the individual objectives proportional to their importance. In the next section of the questionnaire, the respondents were also asked to indicate the extent to which these objectives were met. The extent to which the initial strategic objectives were achieved was computed as the weighted-sum of the importance of the initial strategic objectives. The respondents then
indicated their perceived success of the export market venture on a 10-point bipolar scale (1 = Unsuccessful, 10 = Successful), representing the attitudinal or perceptual measure of export marketing performance. The economic or financial measure of export marketing performance was obtained by the respondents’ indicating their level of satisfaction with three economic indicators, namely, sales, return on investment, and profitability of the export market venture.

All export marketing performance measures were then summed into a composite scale for measuring the export marketing performance of Australian export market ventures (Cavusgil and Zou 1994).

Adding to that, some demographics variables were also used to obtain background information on the export market ventures. These included the number of full-time employees, the firm’s sales volume, the number of years involved in international business, the number of foreign markets the firms are operating in, the type of the product, the name of the industry, as well as the identity of the export market to which their response related.

5.5. Data Analysis Techniques

Following are the data analysis techniques to be used:

- **Reliability checks:** checking the internal consistency of the scales. That is, the data would be checked to see whether Squared Multiple Correlation Coefficient (SMC) value is more than 0.7, as suggested by Tabachnick and Fidell (2001).
- **Confirmatory factor analysis:** grouping the factors into major components, renaming them as variables and then running multiple regression analysis.
- **Multiple regression analysis:** to determine which independent variables have the strongest impact on the dependent variable, also looking at the coefficient of determination to see how much variation in the dependent variable is explained by the variation in the independent variables.
- **Discriminant analysis:** analysing the predictive value of a set of independent variables: ranking the performance of the variables as high or low. Similar to regression, but it predicts the characteristics that best define differences across groups. It is used to determine which variables discriminate between two or more naturally occurring groups.

6. RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

All precautions have been and will be made to minimise the effects of any limitations in this project. Some of the limitations are:

- **Self-reporting issue:** the researcher is not present to explain the questions. As such the questions suffer from the limitations of all items being self-reported. However, a major benefit from the absence of the researcher is that the respondents’ answers would be free from any interviewer bias.
- **Convenience sample:** this is a convenience sample. Currently 315 firms register as exporting members of the International Trade Association of South Australia, while the ABS estimated there were approximately 2,970 exporting firms in the state (ABS 2003).
- **Sample:** the sample size is small. However, an adequate response rate is expected, because the respondents will be pre-qualified during the data collection process. That is, the researcher will personally contact the firms to ask if they are willing to participate in the study.
- **Cross sectional:** the nature of the data collected will be cross sectional.
- **Resources:** the researcher has limited time and financial resources.
7. **RESEARCH OUTCOMES**

7.1. **Tasks to Complete**

- Data Entry
- Data Analysis
- Thesis Write up

7.2. **Expected Research Outcomes**

7.2.1. The Internet when used for the purposes detailed below has a significant positive impact on Australian firms’ export marketing performance:
   
   - Communication
   - Market Research
   - Sales
   - Image Enhancement
   - Cost Reduction
   - Competitive Advantage

7.2.2. Firm-specific characteristics have a significant positive impact on Australian firms’ export marketing performance.

7.2.3. Market characteristics have a significant negative impact on Australian firms’ export marketing performance.

7.2.4. Export marketing strategy has a significant positive impact on Australian firm’s export marketing performance.
REFERENCE LIST


