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William R. Bigler, Jr.
Southern Methodist University

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Research and Development
School of Business Administration
Southern Methodist University
Dallas, Texas 75275

MANAGING FOR UNIQUENESS:
SOME DISTINCTIONS FOR STRATEGY

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by

William R. Bigler, Jr.

William R. Bigler, Jr.
Assistant Professor of Strategic Management
Edwin L. Cox School of Business
Southern Methodist University
Dallas, Texas 75275

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MANAGING FOR UNIQUENESS: SOME DISTINCTIONS FOR STRATEGY

The five terms and constructs of comparative advantage, key success criteria, distinctive competence, distinctive image and strategic group axes (Porter, 1980) are some of the foundational concepts in strategy teaching and research. However, there is confusion with respect to these constructs because they tend to be only implicitly defined and have been used interchangeably by different authors. The purpose of this article is to offer some working definitions of these constructs and to show that fine tuning our notions of these concepts can add to analytic power. This added analytical power can give us a clearer level from which to view one top management responsibility of managing for uniqueness.

Why These Distinctions are Important

All of the constructs above purport to get at or describe a firm's uniqueness. Uniqueness, with respect to strategic orientation, is held by one school of thought in the management literature to be a key necessary condition for strategic viability. The argument goes that if a firm cannot somehow develop and demonstrate its uniqueness in some fashion, then it will have to live with either a low rate of profitability (or any other measure of performance) or worse, be forced to exit the industry. On this Andrews writes:

The strategy for each organization -- in our conception of strategic management -- will be in some ways unique, because of distinctiveness of competence and pervasion of values. The uniqueness of a company's strategy, in turn, is the key element in organization design (1980, p. 123).

If Andrews' position is correct, then it is surprising that the field of strategic management has not been more exacting in its definitions and descriptions. By implication, a properly operationalized definition of

uniqueness can spell out the conditions for and perhaps the attributes of uniqueness.

What follows is discussion about what the writer feels the field thinks about each of the five constructs above. Certain weaknesses will be noted, and some operational definitions will be advanced. What is hoped will be gained is an appreciation for making distinctions among these constructs and a synthetic view of how using these distinctions together can add to analytical power. One final caveat needs to be addressed before we continue. The writer, in citing various authors in relation to a particular construct, is not trying to be critical of them. Each of the cited authors certainly knows of the distinctions that will be made. The purpose in citing an author with a given construct is to give some of the notions advanced a grounding in the literature.

Comparative Advantage vs. Distinctive Competence

Comparative advantage is construed in the strategy literature as the functional (marketing, production, etc.) capabilities which the firm in question (hereafter focal firm) does better than the competition. South (1980) has elaborated this construct further. His contention is that those "better than the competition" capabilities have to be played out in enclaves that are relatively insulated from competition. According to South, this is accomplished by judicious market niche selection. Erecting barriers to entry (Porter, 1980) would be another mechanism to insulate the firm from the competition.

The cumulative understanding developed above posits that the successful firm will develop comparative advantage factors which insulate the firm from competition and thereby give it a measure of sustained uniqueness and market

power advantage. At this point, though, the term distinctive competence is sometimes used interchangeably with comparative advantage. Most often the term is defined simply as that which the firm does particularly well (Andrews, 1980). If the notion of comparative advantage developed above has any validity, the weakness of the so defined construct of distinctive competence becomes readily apparent. What the firm does particularly well may be easily matched by competitors (Thompson and Strickland, 1983:260). Andrews (1980) does mention this notion but it is given relatively little emphasis. Or, what the firm does particularly well may not align with what it takes to win in an industry (see key success factors, discussed below). If this occurrence of homogenization happens (competitors matching the capabilities that make for distinctive competence) then these capabilities in effect become only common denominator ways of doing business in a given industry or market. In other words, the functional capabilities and resources needed for these distinctive competences must be maintained just to stay at parity with competitors. However, these capabilities give the focal firm no measure of uniqueness.

At this juncture, another construct is invoked which is not used interchangeably with comparative advantage or distinctive competence but which can cloud the issue: distinctive image. Its operational definition is straightforward: distinctive image is how the firm is viewed in the marketplace such that it is made unique in the eyes of customer groups. The accent here is on how the firm is perceived and, by implication, on the functional capabilities which are used to generate the perception. The question might arise as to what is the difference between comparative advantage and distinctive image and certainly what is the difference between the organizational capabilities used to create the two types of factors. Shirley, Peters and El-Ansary (1980) offer a distinction that may prove to be useful. Comparative advantage factors

are the "hard," tangible objective factors such as favorable location, low cost position, quality of management, etc. that make the firm unique vis a vis competitors and insulate the firm from them, at least for a while. Distinctive image factors would be the subtle, more "soft" image factors that make a firm unique in the eyes of customers with respect to competitors and help to insulate the firm from competitors. IBM's near ubiquitous image of high quality and service would be an example. This distinction may seem trivial, but it is analytically important to separate the two. Different functional capability may be needed to affect related comparative advantage and distinctive image factors as the example above suggests. In other words, product design may give IBM the actual comparative advantage of high quality products (generated by product engineers) but the marketing department could fuel the marketplace perception of high quality to make for a distinctive image factor. This distinction is useful because someone could label IBM's favorable product design/marketing as a distinctive competence and mask the fine differences of actual comparative advantage (here, product design capability that insulates the firm from competition) and actual distinctive image (high quality that also insulates the firm). A homogenized construal as distinctive competence also does not get at the functional capability used to bring the comparative advantage (product design engineers) and distinctive image (marketing) about. More importantly, a more homogenized depiction does not allow the detailed analysis of what strategic and tactical changes can enhance comparative advantage or distinctive image, or both. This more exacting analysis can pinpoint desired outcomes for each of the measures of uniqueness, along with the functional capability needed to generate them.

Key Success Factors

The term and construct of key success factors have been introduced primarily in the marketing strategy literature (Kerin and Peterson, 1982) but they have also been used in the management strategy literature as well (Hambrick, 1983). A consensus operational definition would be that key success factors are the desired or actual strengths of the firm that align with what it takes to win in an industry. These factors are usually couched in functional importance terms such as "one needs to be a low cost producer in this industry" so a good production capability is deemed a key success factor. Implied in the literature is a requirement that a key success factor must be a confluence of what the firm is good at (a distinctive competence) and what is demanded that the firm be good at by its industry and markets for a current time period. Usually, not much emphasis is placed on sustained advantage in insulated enclaves, although Day (1981) has presented a synthesis that attempts to marry the two notions. However, there is a weakness in this straightforward reading of this view of the firm's uniqueness. This kind of analysis is usually phrased for a current time period. That is, key success factors chronicle what successful firms are good at for the present conditions of their industries and markets. There seems too little explicit concern for uniqueness over a longer time frame. We can paint a rather extreme scenario of where this interpretation of uniqueness would lead in terms of strategy and policy prescription. If one were to take this notion prescriptively (that the firm simply monitors what is currently successful and imitates), a firm would simply seek to chase the pockets of growth or opportunity that spring up in industries. They would then simply seek to buy the capability needed to affect the new corresponding key success factor(s). This, in an extreme view, would suggest a constantly shifting definition of the business (Abell, 1980)

and possibly little attempt to develop longer term positions in core areas. For example, in the Chain Saw Industry (Porter, 1978) firms like Beaird-Poulan and Black and Decker "chased" the emerging growth segment of the casual user of chain saws. The key success factors implied for this segment were low cost production and mass distribution. Stihl, on the other hand, stayed in its core business of high quality professional saws and reaped benefits of alienated dealers who saw some of their previous business go to mass merchandisers. There were certainly benefits that accrued to Beaird-Poulan and Black and Decker (Andrews, 1980) but the prescriptive dynamics implied by this example are certainly different. Chasing emerging pockets of opportunity with their attendant changes in key success factors is certainly different than making sure true comparative advantage is had before making strategic moves. Chasing changing key success factors may mean the firm is constantly buying new functional capability. Staying close to core area comparative advantages or making moves only when comparative advantage can be gained means the firm is not "churning" with new functional capability. The author is not making a normative judgment which mode of uniqueness (comparative advantage vs. key success factors) and implied strategic behavior is better. Although the extensive literature on diversification (Rumelt, 1974; Salter and Weinhold, 1979, Bradley and Korn, 1981) suggests that extensions into diverse areas should be based on skills which can easily be transferred, this does not give us guidance on which mode of uniqueness leads to more viable strategic positions. In other words, we can think of logical possibilities where both a comparative advantage and key success factor driven form of uniqueness could lead to viable strategic positions. Research remains to be done on which mode of uniqueness is associated most often with say related or unrelated diversification efforts and which ones give more viable positions under differing

conditions. At this point we can simply say that using these two constructs interchangeably masks important distinctions.

Strategic Group Axes

Porter (1980) presents an analysis, the end result of which suggests certain orthogonal (uncorrelated) axes along which to classify firms into strategic groups. The axes are generated from an industry analysis using five forces that drive industry competition (1980, Chapter I). In the course of industry evolution, certain key features emerge that either retard or increase competition or may even have a hand in shaping the future course of the industry.¹ For example, in the Chain Saw Industry, key features were High vs. Low Quality and Exclusive vs. Private Label distribution strategy. A certain position on the grid formed by these two axes placed a firm into one strategic group over another. This position, for example High Quality and Exclusive Dealerships for Stihl, made for mobility barriers and thus decreased competition. The question though is how these strategic group axes relate to the previous constructs discussed above. One answer is that the functional capabilities needed to actually place a firm on the strategic group axes are really key success factors as defined above. The difference is that these axes are dictated by the aggregate action of the firms competing in an industry which go to form the industry structure.² As such, they are environmental context factors which are really imposed on the top management team. All of the other constructs as discussed and defined above — comparative advantage, distinctive competence, distinctive image and key success factors — have a good amount of managerial discretion and choice associated with them.

Discussion

The distinctions drawn above were not meant to be critical of the authors cited. Their purpose was to highlight the disparity of views held about constructs which purport to describe a firm's uniqueness vis a vis competitors. Each of the constructs in their own right contributes to our understanding of the requirement of uniqueness, according to this one theory of strategy. If one does subscribe to the premise that uniqueness is a necessary component of strategy, then we should make the distinctions sketched out above (or ones like them, given further refinement) part of our lexicon.

If one will grant that the comparative advantage, key success criteria and strategic group axes constructs are relatively discreet, they can be depicted as axes on a three dimensional figure. We can use this depiction to show how we might gain analytic power from making the above distinctions. Before the figure is discussed, however, it will be useful to review the differences among these three constructs. The distinguishing features are as follows:

1. Comparative Advantage Factors -- "Hard," objective factors (location, low cost manufacturing skill, etc.) that are firm specific relative to a n-way comparison with competitors. If these capabilities are developed "where the competition is not" then the firm is relatively insulated from competition, at least for a while. There is an implicit time dimension suggested by this analysis of comparative advantage so that the functional capability needed to affect these factors will probably be relatively enduring and could be supported by the dominant culture in the organization.
2. Key Success Criteria -- Usually objective factors that are firm specific which are current time period strengths but which align with what is demanded in the market and industry. Comparative advantage factors certainly align with what is demanded, but key success factors are presented usually as the strengths which align with what it takes to win. Often, a direct concern for uniqueness in insulated enclaves is not considered (which one gets when considering comparative advantage). Key success factors are usually presented as being relatively more ephemeral or transitory than comparative advantage factors.

3. Strategic Group Axes Factors — These factors are objective features of the industry that become salient and important once the underlying structure of the industry is known and its implications become manifest. These factors form the basis for key tactical decisions that must be made by the firms in an industry. However, unlike comparative advantage and key success factors where managerial discretion can choose from alternatives, strategic group axes factors tend to be imposed on management by the interacting behavior of players in the particular industry.

Figure 1 shows the three axes which emerged as relatively discreet from the analysis above. Distinctive competence factors are not shown because they are mostly subsumed in the key success factors. Distinctive image factors can be thought to be substantively different than the more objective factors shown in Figure 1 and are not included in the figure. An analysis could proceed as follows which can show the analytical power of distinguishing among these constructs:

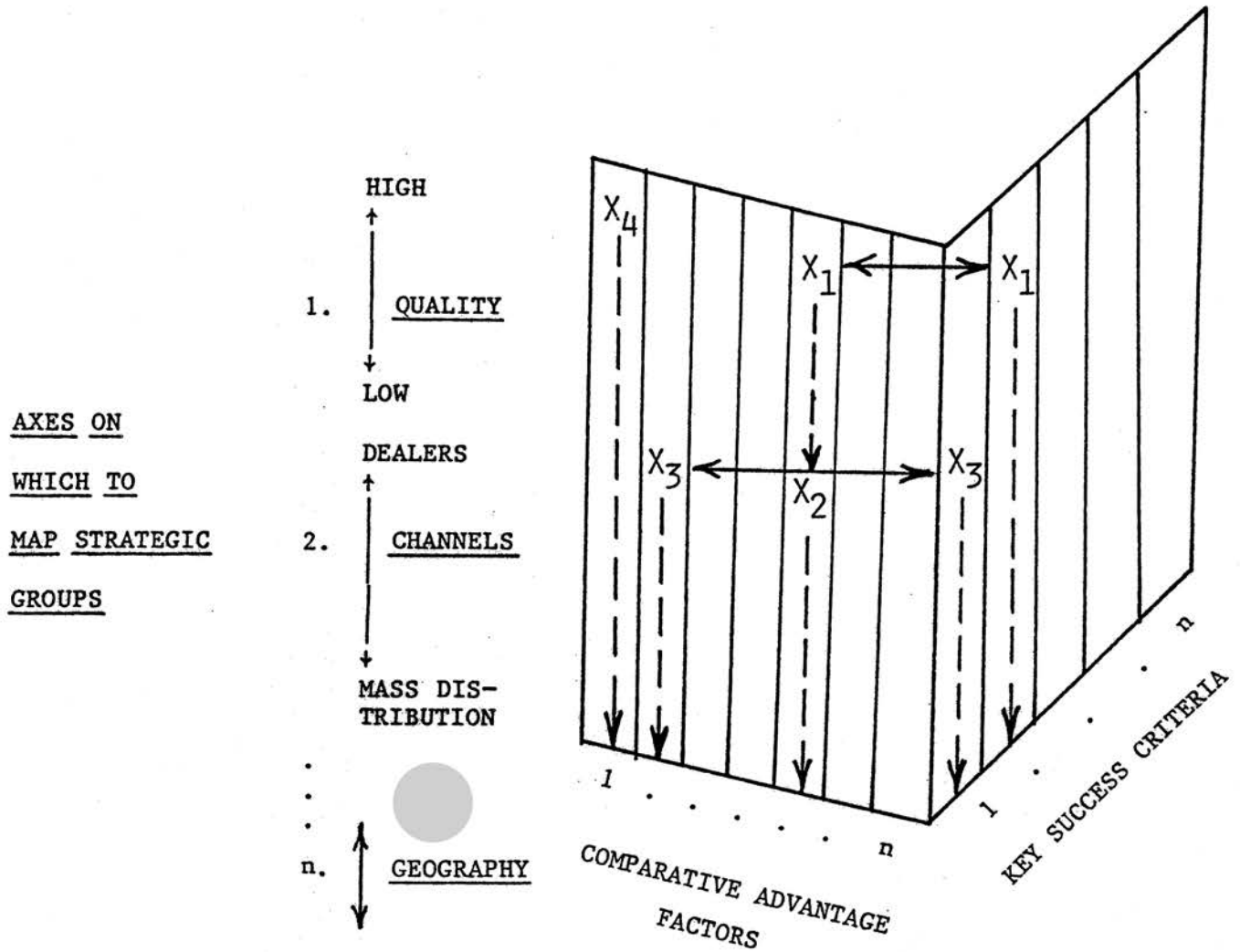
1. List those factors that are important in an industry.
2. List the functional capability needed to respond to these factors.
3. Assess on how many of the axes this particular functional capability falls. If it is associated with all three axes — that is, it is a comparative advantage factor, a key success factor and respects at least two of the strategic group axes — then we can conclude that:
 - a. The foundation on which a strategy is based is relatively enduring (comparative advantage), it respects the current "hot spots" in the industry (key success factor) and it puts the strategy in a defensible position with respect to industry structure (strategic group axes). Clearly, if all of these conditions are met (though this would be rare), then the firm has increased its probability of a correctly formulated strategy. Since slack resources would probably exist in such a setting due to protected niches (Porter, 1980; Bourgeois, 1980), the implementation of the strategy could probably be enhanced also.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to draw some distinctions among constructs which are thought to describe a firm's uniqueness. A simple illustration was

FIGURE 1

THREE WAYS TO DEPICT UNIQUENESS



Xs Denote A Particular Functional Capability

Arrows Indicate Relationships Between Functional Capability and Point to the Germane Axis

Source: Primary

given to highlight some added analytical power that drawing these distinctions would provide.

This analysis was obviously in service of a larger theory of strategy that posits that uniqueness is the cornerstone of strategy formulation. In a world though of increased parity across technological, productive and managerial fronts, this theory could no longer be useful. The distinctions drawn here would simply become trivial. However, it is evident in much recent strategy research and thinking that we have not abandoned the notion that uniqueness is foundational to at least one theory of strategy. Perhaps then the distinctions drawn here can be of use to researchers and certainly teachers of strategy.

If one will grant that the field is not yet ready to give up the preeminence that we have given to the notion of uniqueness, then some interesting suggestions for future research emerge. First, the most basic question is how can uniqueness be formed and sustained. If the above analysis is valid, we need to know how we can ascertain not only the protected enclaves or niches (which good market research can help to do) but which comparative advantage and distinctive image factors are most salient for those enclaves. Note that we need to discern the actual comparative advantage and distinctive image factors (for example, low cost but high quality manufacturing as a comparative advantage and the image of high quality and being a first mover as a distinctive image) and the range of functional capability needed to supply it. Figure 2 shows this scheme. Here we see that a given functional capability could affect both comparative advantage and distinctive image or that a string of different functional capability is needed to affect a given comparative advantage or distinctive image outcome. The three dimensional figure used by Abell (1980) to depict the definition of the business along with judicious

Figure 2

COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGE AND FUNCTIONAL CAPABILITY

	<u>COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGE OUTCOME</u> 1 . . . n	<u>DISTINCTIVE IMAGE OUTCOME</u> 1 . . . n
<u>FUNCTIONAL CAPABILITY NEEDED TO DRIVE THIS FACTOR</u> 1		
.		
.		
.		
.		
.		
n		

Source: Primary

market research can help to locate enclaves where the competition is not located. But what is often not included directly in such an analysis is what functional capability is needed to develop and secure these niches. The composite picture of protected niches, desired comparative advantage and or distinctive image, the functional capability needed to drive them and the expectation that this package of competitive weapons respects key success criteria and corresponds to important strategic group axes, is what a full description of uniqueness for a firm should look like. This kind of analysis is certainly done in well run firms, but usually under different mandates and for different reasons. At the very least, what this extended analysis gives is a heightened sensitivity to the notion of uniqueness.

The second research issue is concerned with what the conditions are that allow for uniqueness, by its full description above, to be sustained. Probably industry evolutionary processes (Porter, 1980; Chapter 8), broad industry life cycle dynamics and consumer behavior trends would be one side of the problem. We can also posit that internal firm processes such as management surveillance systems and the range of "structuring" mechanisms (Mintzberg, 1979) such as task forces, committees, and macro structure, to name a few, could help to sustain uniqueness by allowing the firm to be flexible when information from the environment needs to be acted on. It is not farfetched to say that all of the components of the strategic management model (Schendel and Hofer, 1979:15) could have a hand in helping to sustain uniqueness. However, further research needs to isolate the key factors which can help top management leverage the management of uniqueness.

In the final analysis then, the management of uniqueness may really be another lense with which to view the general strategic management problem. What this article may have succeeded in doing then is to elevate that concern

for uniqueness. However, if our field's affinity for the concept of uniqueness is well placed, the analysis presented here may give rise to the top management question "Are we managing our firm for uniqueness?" The depiction of uniqueness and knowledge of the forces and conditions that are crucial in sustaining it await further research.

NOTES

¹I use the term features to distinguish strategic group axes from the five forces that drive competition. The features (High vs. Low Quality, for example) are really the concrete operationalization of the five forces and around which tactical decisions have to be made by all firms in the strategic group and industry.

²Even though there is a relative degree of choice within a given axis. For example, even though the axis High vs. Low Quality is a feature of the industry structure dictated by the interacting behavior of the firms in an industry, the firm still has choice where on this continuum it will reside. So it goes for all other axes dictated by the industry structure.

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