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CSR as a Source of Competitive Advantage: The Case Study of Polpharma Group

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Abstract

Purpose: The main purpose of this paper is to analyse the relations between CSR activities and competitive advantages. It discusses how companies undertake CSR activities and what benefits can be gained because of these activities.

Methodology/approach: The paper is based on the Polpharma's single case study. The narrative literature review was applied to build up the theoretical foundation for the empirical study.

Findings: CSR activities undertaken by companies can be a source of many benefits, which may translate into gaining competitive advantages. The analysis of the case of Polpharma shows positive outcomes of undertaking CSR activities related to increase in customer trust to the company and its competitive position.

Originality/value: CSR issues are a relatively popular topic of research in the field of management, but they are not often considered from the strategic point of view as presented in this article.

Paper type: case study.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility, CSR, competitive advantage.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is analyse the relations between CSR activities and competitive advantages. Contemporary turbulent business environment causes that business activity is highly risky. Any organisation which wants to compete effectively on the market is forced, consciously or not, to implement a strategy through which it will gain competitive advantage. To put it simply, it is associated with being at least one step ahead of competitors. The foundation of competitive advantage can be almost every tangible or intangible resource that has specific attributes, which will be discussed further. Recently, the sources of competitive advantages have been searched in socially responsible activities. Appropriate and pragmatic implementation of the CSR concept allows for achieving many benefits for companies, including particularly superior performance in a long time span.

Our research problem can be defined in the following way: “Can wide-scaled CSR actions carried out by a company be a source of its competitive advantage?” To answer that question there was used a single case study method concerning one of the biggest pharmaceutical companies operating in Poland – Polpharma. The study of CSR activities of this company was based mostly on its website and CSR reports. The chosen method allows for comparing and contrasting theoretical assumptions with business practice, but a single case study may be an insufficient basis for making generalisations, which should be considered as a limitation of the study. Furthermore, using information provided by the company’s website entails the risk of misinforming.

The paper begins with the theoretical review of issues related to competitive advantage and corporate social responsibility as well as the links between them. Then, the case study of Polpharma is presented. It describes the company’s CSR activities and their effects to Polpharma’s performance. Then, there is shown the connection between the presented theory and practice as well as conclusions

2. Theoretical grounding

2.1. The theory of competitive advantage and the concept of corporate social responsibility

A basic task of strategic management is to build and maintain competitive advantage of an enterprise, which should make it possible to achieve above-average results of its business activities (Cegliński, 2016, p. 10). The concept of competitive advantage is generally accepted in management sciences. Competitive advantage theory explains superior performance of companies on the competitive market. So far, researchers have not proposed in literature any equivalent theory which could effectively replace the concept of competitive advantage. In general, it has to be noticed that competitive advantage reveals in a situation when a company achieves superior performance against the background of competitors. In effect, it is deduced *ex post*.

There is no one commonly accepted definition of competitive advantage in management sciences. Approaches to this issue differ from one another depending on the strategic school their proponents belong to. In this article authors use the resource-based view of the firm (RBV). Company resources are located in the centre of this approach. The notion of resources should be understood widely and in consequence it involves any tangible and intangible resources remaining at firm's disposal. According to the main assumption of RBV, resources may become a source of competitive advantage provided that they are scarce, specialized, appropriable (cf. Amit and Schoemaker, 1993), valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable and have no strategic equivalents (cf. Barney, 1991). Porter claims that competitive advantage grows fundamentally out of the value a firm is able to create for its buyers that exceeds the firm's cost of creating it (Porter, 1985).

The catalogue of sources of competitive advantages is endless. It could be, for example, the location of an enterprise, distribution channel, organisational knowledge and experience. For some time past the importance of organisational values has been rising (Cegliński, 2016, pp. 134–135). The concept of corporate social responsibility is based on these values which can definitely become the firm's competitive advantage. It will be widely discussed in the section dealing with CSR as a source of competitive advantage.

Corporate social responsibility is a broad ideological stream which includes many conceptions about the adoption, *de facto*, of certain obligations which a company should take on towards society, apart from its major objective (Roszkowska, 2011, p. 23) – profit maximization (cf: Sudół, 2006, p. 71; Sierpińska, 1997, p. 35). There is no one generally accepted definition of corporate social responsibility. Some of them are presented in the next part of this paper. The majority of them stress the environmental, social and economic dimensions of the concept.

According to the definition proposed by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, CSR is the continuing commitment of business to contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as of the community and society in general (WBSCD, nd). Kwiecińska writes that corporate social responsibility is the concept through which companies at the stage of building their business strategies voluntarily take into consideration welfare and protection of the natural environment, as well as relations with various groups of interest (Kwiecińska, 2015, p. 95).

Werther and Chandler, in turn, propose the term ‘strategic corporate social responsibility’. They define it as an idea which should be integrated with the strategic and operational perspective of a company’s activity, because it is linked with its long-term interests (Werther and Chandler, 2006, pp. 6–13 as quoted in: Roszkowska, 2011). In this meaning, corporate social responsibility, in fact, may bring multiple benefits for an enterprise, which will be analysed in the next section.

2.2. CSR as a source of competitive advantage

Evaluations of the CSR concept differ from one another significantly. Some academics, for example Friedman and Sternberg, claim that it is the wrong economic concept (Friedman, 1963; Sternberg, 1998). Although this kind of stance is not a rarity we assume that such views are not legitimate and may stem from misunderstanding of CSR ideas. On the other hand, the opposite point of view which is excluding profit maximization as the company’s main objective does not seem to be reasonable (cf. Handy, 2002).

Regardless of theoretical approaches, it should be noticed that activities in the field are more and more commonly undertaken by companies. It is enough to show that most of the biggest world companies have been reporting on their social activities for a long time. For example, in

2013, 56 out of 100 biggest Polish companies were reporting (KPMG, 2013). Furthermore, prescindng from the real quality of CSR activities, it is hard to find a company listed on the Warsaw Stock Exchange which does not present prosocial activities on its website. These reasons are enough to give some attention to the concept of corporate social responsibility. The significant question, from the practical point of view, is the way of using CSR for achieving companies' own purposes. The concept of corporate social responsibility should be considered in view of the advantages that can be brought both to the enterprise and society (Ceglińska and Cegliński, 2014). CSR can be much more than a cost, a constraint, or a charitable deed – it can be a source of opportunity, innovation, and competitive advantage (Porter and Kramer, 2006, p. 79).

It should be noticed that social consciousness is progressively changing, which leads to the evolution of people's perception of business activity. Enterprises are more or less formally controlled by their stakeholders, particularly by clients and public authority. As accurately noticed by Kramer and Porter, companies do not function in isolation from communities that surround them. Their ability to compete depends on prevailing conditions in their areas of operation (Porter and Kramer, 2007, p. 39). People and organisations that are highly interested in companies' performance are called 'stakeholders' (Grant, 2004, p. 118). This group mainly consists of clients, suppliers, local communities and public authority. They have significant impact on the firm's prosperity. Contemporarily, in the period of uncertainty and turbulent changes in business environment, the importance of stakeholders for companies is considerable. It is observed in literature that linkage with stakeholders constitutes the necessary component of assets needed to start rivalry and cooperation (Pettigrew, 2009, p. 35).

Referring to relations between CSR and competitive advantages, they have to be deliberated upon benefits which can be derived from socially responsible activities (cf. Marcinkowska, 2010). Many of them are pointed out in literature. Bernacka and Jędrzejowska divided them into three groups, i.e. economic, managerial and social advantages (Bernacka and Jędrzejowska, 2012). The most often mentioned are: the boost of the firm's confidence, the improvement of its reputation on the market and the increase of employees' loyalty. These benefits transfer to the improvement of companies' long-term performance. In effect, the assumptions of competitive advantages theory are realized (in RBV

approach). An interesting framework of relations between CSR and competitive advantage was also presented by Saeed and Arshad. These scholars prove that there is a positive dependence between external and internal CSR activities and organisational performance by creating intangible organisational resources, consisting of the reputational and social capital (Saeed and Arshad, 2012).

A remarkable, congeneric idea, in which CSR is one of key areas is the concept of Positive Organisational Potential (hereinafter: POP) (cf. Glińska-Noweś and Stankiewicz, 2013, p. 31; Skrzypczyńska, 2013, pp. 261–286; Karaszewski and Lis, 2014, pp. 56–57). Simply put, its idea denotes a configuration of tangible and intangible resources which together determine the emergence of positive culture and positive climate, consequently stimulating positive emotions crucial for the pro-developmental employee behaviours (Glińska-Noweś and Stankiewicz, 2013, p. 26). Pro-developmental behaviours are considered to be an undisputed source of an organisation's development (Stankiewicz, 2013, p. 9). It is important to notice that the authors understand CSR as the activity of an organisation aimed at harmonisation of all stakeholders' aims and objectives adequately to their long-term impact on the business portfolio necessary for the sustainment and development of this organisation (Glińska-Noweś and Stankiewicz, 2013, p. 31). They indicate numerous positive effects of CSR activities for companies. For example, Choderek proves that a socially responsible organisation (i.e. the one that supports local communities, makes effort for the natural environment protection or donates to charity) is more attractive from the perspective of talented employees (Choderek, 2013, p. 186). Skrzypczyńska, on the other hand, notices that becoming a socially responsible organisation enables a company to develop its competitive advantage based on product diversification oriented to the customers with high levels of social sensibility. It allows also for reducing the fluctuation of personnel and contributes to the positive image of a company (Skrzypczyńska, 2013, p. 283; cf. Hillman and Keim, 2001; Waddock and Graves, 1997). As a result, it confirms the assumption that corporate social responsibility can be a source of competitive advantage of a company, provided that the activities in this key area are rightly undertaken.

3. Case study analysis

3.1. Method of study

This section includes a short case study of a Polish pharmaceutical company – Polpharma. The aim of this part of the paper is to present an example of undertaking pragmatic CSR activities by a market leader and show what benefits it can obtain because of this behaviour. The reason for choosing a company from the pharmaceutical industry is its specificity, especially the fact that relations between such firms and their vulnerable customers are based mainly on trust and the superior role of firms' reputation.

To achieve the aim of this study the single case study method was applied. The study is based on Polpharma's CSR reports, its website and the Responsible Business Forum reports. This method allows for confronting scientific theories with day-to-day business practice as well as pointing out causes and effects of actions taken by a unit of analysis (Dańda and Lubecka, 2010). That is why we consider the case study method as an appropriate way to discuss the research problem. We are aware of limitations to generalise the findings from the single case study even if the unit of analysis is a well-known market leader that undertakes wide-scaled CSR activities. The research was focused on the following questions: (1) what CSR activities are taken by Polpharma?; (2) how undertaken CSR actions translate into its performance in Responsible Companies Ranking?; and (3) what are the effects of Polpharma's CSR activity and can they be considered as its competitive advantage? The report presents Polpharma, the character of its CSR activities, their effects and Polpharma's market performance.

3.2. CSR in Polpharma

The Polpharma Group has its origin in Polpharma company that was established in 1935 (Historia, nd). It is the one of the biggest Polish pharmaceutical manufacturers employing over 7,000 people in a few countries in Europe and Asia (Kim jesteśmy, nd). After privatisation in 2000, the company's authorities decided to change their view about the company's role in society, which is the beginning of the CSR-oriented profile of the Polpharma Group (Historia CSR, nd).

After 2000, the Polpharma Group set up the Polpharma Scientific Foundation (then the Foundation for the Development of Polish Pharmacy and Medicine) whose mission is “[t]o support a development of medical and pharmaceutical sciences by subsidizing scientific research in this area” (Jak działamy, nd). By 2016, the Polpharma Scientific Foundation has awarded 65 scientific grants (over 17 m PLN in total), 37 scholarships for PhD candidates (370,000 PLN in total) and 50,000 PLN in total for the awards given in competitions for the best master’s thesis in Pharmacy organised by the Polish Pharmaceutical Society (Naukowa Fundacja Polpharmy, 2016, p. 2). The support for medical and pharmacy students is also provided under the umbrella of the Pharma of Knowledge project that started in 2007. During the project 24 conferences have been held. Their aim is to increase students’ knowledge about practical issues connected with their future work (Współpraca, nd).

As a pharmaceutical company, the Polpharma Group is connected with the issue of public health. This implicates not only responsibility for its products (the Good Manufacturing Practice Certificate) (Odpowiedzialność za produkt, nd), but also conducting projects linked to health education for citizens. The projects launched by Polpharma were related to (Historia CSR, nd):

- sexual health;
- pregnancy;
- age-related memory loss;
- blood pressure;
- anaphylaxis.

As the company’s profile is connected with healthcare its link with sport seems to be a natural area for CSR activities. The Polpharma Group’s CSR initiatives consist in the promotion of sport and team sponsorship. Since 2000, the Polpharma Group has been a title sponsor of the basketball team Polpharma Starogard Gdański. The company uses their contact with players to promote physical activity among kids by organising meetings with the team at schools. The Polpharma Group has been also a partner of the cycling school GK STG Polpharma since 2014. Moreover, the company’s workers are also involved in sport activities. The Association for the Development of Physical Culture and Sports Polpharma, established by employees, organises sports events, such as runs and kayaking (Promocja sportu, nd).

The Polpharma Group has been promoting corporate volunteering since 2013. Twenty interesting projects tendered by employees can be granted. The projects should be connected with (Wolontariat pracowniczy, nd):

- health and prevention;
- quality-of-life improvement;
- education and equal opportunities;
- humanitarian aid;
- local development;
- or ecology.

Employees are encouraged to use bikes instead of cars in day-to-day travel to and from work. The Polpharma Group's impact on the environment is minimized as demonstrated by the certified Integrated Environmental Management System (Odpowiedzialność za środowisko, nd). The company provides training courses for workers and enables them to consociate in labour organisations (Odpowiedzialność wobec pracowników, nd). The efficient and undisturbed communication between employees and the company's authorities is mentioned in the Ethical Code of the Polpharma Group. The Ethical Code is in force among all employees (Polpharma, 2015a, p. 13). The strict ethic rules for suppliers are regulated by the Suppliers' Behavior Code and are an implication of the Sustainable Supply Chain Strategy (Zrównoważony łańcuch dostaw, nd).

The Polpharma Group is a member of the Ethics Proponents Coalition that "associates companies and organisations which are involved in activities related to implementation and dissemination of ethical values" (Koalicja Rzeczników Etyki, nd). Since 2013, the company has also been a member of the London Benchmarking Group in Poland, which means that the Polpharma Group applies the LBG model for measuring the effectiveness of its social activities. That allows for confronting the company's results with other companies in the pharmaceutical industry (Inicjatywy CSR, nd). Another step to systemize the Polpharma Group's wide corporate social responsibility activity was to prepare the CSR Strategy for the years 2015–2018 which provides three main areas of CSR activity (Polpharma, 2015b, p. 1) i.e.:

- conducting business activity in an ethical way;
- innovation and knowledge development;
- service to patients and society.

The Responsible Business Forum is a non-governmental organisation that “promotes a responsible approach to business in a way which takes account of the environmental and social impacts” (Odpowiedzialny Biznes, nd). Since 2007, the organisation has been conducting a survey among companies in Poland about their CSR activities. Results are presented in the Responsible Companies Ranking and published on the website and in the *Gazeta Prawna* (a newspaper). The ranking checks five aspects of Corporate Social Responsibility activity (Forum Odpowiedzialnego Biznesu, 2015, p. 2) i.e.:

- responsible leadership;
- social activity;
- communication with stakeholders;
- social innovation;
- responsible management.

Table 1 shows the Polpharma Group performance in the Responsible Companies Ranking in 2009–2016. Rankings in 2007–2008 were excluded because of no participation of the Polpharma Group in the research conducted by the Responsible Business Forum.

Table 1. The Polpharma Group’s position in the Responsible Companies Ranking in 2009–2016

Year	Ranking position	Direction of changes
2009	29	–
2010	15	↑
2011	6	↑
2012	13	↓
2013	19	↓
2014	7	↑
2015	3	↑
2016	2	↑

Source: own study based on the Responsible Business Forum reports.

It is visible that the preparation and implementation of the Ethic Code and CSR strategy as well as joining the London Benchmarking Group improved Polpharma’s ranking position from the 19th in 2013 to the 2nd in 2016. The downturn in 2012 could be caused by a low result in communication with stakeholders (2012–48/100 points, 2013–58/100 points, 2016–100/100 points). In 2015–2016, the Polpharma Group

was the leader in the Responsible Companies Ranking among pharmaceutical and medical companies (Forum Odpowiedzialnego Biznesu, 2015, p. 6; Forum Odpowiedzialnego Biznesu, 2016, p. 3). It should be noticed that the Polpharma Group is also one of the Responsible Business Forum's strategic partners, whose idea is to share CSR experience with other companies. The Polpharma Group was the only one among considered companies in the pharmaceutical and medical industry which tackled all 10 issues taken into account in the report of CSR activities of the biggest Polish companies. The report was provided by the CENTRUMCSR.PL Foundation in 2015. The research focused on such issues as (Piskalski, 2015, p. 88):

- a CSR-dedicated subpage on the website;
- a CSR responsible employee;
- a CSR policy;
- an Ethical Code;
- a social report;
- a Global Reporting Initiative standard;
- ecology;
- a supply chain;
- human rights;
- corruption.

3.3. Effects of Polpharma's CSR activities

In 2011, On Board PR published a report about trust in pharmaceutical companies among the Poles. According to the report, over 90% of respondents who declared trust in Polpharma pointed out long-term market presence and product quality as key factors of trust. CSR actions such as pro-health education and publishing information about diseases and preventive healthcare were indicated by 55% and 58% of respondents respectively. Reputation and patients' trust are important for pharmaceutical companies because they might be perceived as firms which make enormous profits on people who suffer (On Board PR, 2011, pp. 8–10). CSR actions carried out by those firms help to change people's view on pharmaceutical companies to the view that these companies do care about people's health. Patients' (or wider – customers') trust might be a source of competitive advantage of such companies like Polpharma and the method to gain it can be appropriate CSR activities.

In the first half of 2013, Polpharma informed that it was the leader of the Polish pharmaceutical market with 11.28% volume market share and 6.61% value market share. The company operates in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, but 58% of its profit in 2013 was made in Poland (Polpharma, 2013). According to the research conducted by MarketLine Polpharma took the second place in terms of value market share behind Sanofi with the score of 5.1% in 2011 and 2013. However, among 4 top pharmaceutical manufacturers in Poland it is the only one that kept its value market share unlike the others, whose value market share dropped by several tens of basis points (MarketLine, 2012, 2014). Polpharma held the 65th position in the ranking of 200 the biggest Polish companies in terms of sales profit in 2015. It is worth noticing that Polpharma was the leader among pharmaceutical manufacturers (Wprost, 2015). In general, although Polpharma may not be the leader on the market among all pharmaceutical manufacturers operating in Poland, it is for sure the top company among the Polish pharmaceutical manufacturers that can vie with big international players.

Summing up, it has to be noted that CSR activities are one of the sources of competitive advantages. Polpharma seems to be aware of it and uses CSR in a deliberate and pragmatic way.

4. Discussion

The above presented case study of Polpharma indicates that corporate social responsibility can be a source of strong and sustainable competitive advantages. However, activities in this field have to be undertaken in a pragmatic way and they should be a part of business strategy. Additionally, it has to be noticed that there are two categories related with the CSR concept that are of fundamental importance. These are trust and firm's reputation. Generally, it is assumed that they are the result of socially responsible activities. Their value is visible especially in such a specific branch as the pharmaceutical industry. The results of the research conducted are coincident with foregoing findings presented in the literature.

The meaning of trust for businesses is invaluable, which is visible in the multiplicity of research and publications on the subject (Józefowicz, 2013, p. 161). Trust is a fundamental asset in every business and non-business relationship (Perrini, Pogutz and Tencati, 2006,

p. 77). It is generally defined as an expectation referred to the trustee's willingness to keep promises and to fulfil obligations (Perrini et al., 2006, p. 77). Some researchers even prove that the first result of CSR activities is the creation of trust among stakeholders (cf. Pivato, Misani and Tencati, 2008). As noticed by Calnan and Rowe, trust appears to be necessary where there is uncertainty and an element of risk (Calnan and Rowe, 2007, p. 284). Consumers make conscious choices and often select a product or service guided by trust in a business, its image and perception of the environment (Wolak-Tuzimek, 2013, p. 67).

Moving on to the firm's reputation, there is no need to prove its significance in the field of management sciences. It is commonly accepted as one of the elements determining any company's success. This category consists of, *inter alia*, responsibility and trust (Adamczyk, 2009, p. 116). This view is shared by Miles and Covin, who believe that corporate reputation is an indicator of trust and responsibility (cf. Miles and Covin, 2000). Managers of companies today understand that CSR forms an indestructible part of their reputation (Militaru and Ionescu, 2006, p. 91).

To sum up this part of the article, it has to be noted that relations between indicated categories are complex and thereupon difficult to analyse. Therefore, it is recommended to develop empirical research in this area.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, it has to be pointed out that wide-scale CSR actions conducted by a company can be a source of its competitive advantage. Competitive advantage should be treated as a key category of contemporary strategic management. Thereupon, that for majority of companies competitive advantages are castles in Spain, it is the basic determinant of superior business performance (Cegliński, 2016, p. 168). CSR activities have to be undertaken in a pragmatic way. They should be an integral part of the company's business strategy.

On the grounds of the theory and the case study presented in this article, authors attempted to analyse relations between CSR activities and competitive advantages. These issues are complex and a strength of these relations is not altogether clear, but for sure they are positive

and contribute to the improvement of the company's competitiveness. All in all, these issues require more scientific attention.

In the course of writing this paper there have emerged issues of relations between corporate social responsibility, trust and firm's reputation. It is therefore appropriate to focus further empirical research on exploration of the nature of these relationships. In our opinion they are not sufficiently explained. In particular there is a need for further research on factors that have impact on mentioned relations. It would be of pivotal practical significance and for sure could be valuable for contemporary managers.

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