Brand management of small and medium-sized enterprises in Japan

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Abstract

We analyzed the capability of small- and medium-sized enterprises in the Japanese food manufacturing industry, through a review of public documents and a case study of a tofu shop. Specifically, we analyzed the strategy and capabilities of traditional tofu production. We selected managers’ comments, strategy, and philosophy from newspaper and magazine articles, trade journals, published books, trademarks, designs, patents, and company web pages. The results from our case study of Otokomae Tofu Shop are as follows. The enterprise has been successful at building its brand and it has excellent managerial decision-making, strategy planning, and execution from management. Specifically, the company has a commitment to quality. Moreover, its unique distribution strategies avoid advertising costs but target buyers in well-known shops. Initially, the company president built the brand alone, indicating the company’s capability of integration. The results of our research indicate the need for management to have capabilities in building capacity from scratch and forging collaboration capability. Furthermore, management should be able to integrate capability, construct capability, and relocate capability.

Keywords: capability, management, small and medium-sized enterprises, food enterprise

1. Introduction

Japan’s white paper on small and medium-sized enterprises in 2015 outlined various management problems [1,2]. In particular, although small and medium-sized enterprises have a high level of awareness about their sales channel development, it is difficult to pioneer their sales and achieve earnings. In particular, new market development is more difficult than existing market development. Furthermore, human resources are precious management resources for small and medium-sized enterprises. However, human resources are limited. Mainly, there is a lack of managers and salespeople for new market development. Small and medium-sized enterprises hope eventually to leave reliance on large company’s subcontracts and establish their own private brands. However, a lack of resources, human resources, and sales channel development are challenging issues. On the other hand, some small and medium-sized enterprises are succeeding in building their own private brands and adding value. Although there is much research about large companies’ brand management, there is limited research about that of small and medium-sized enterprise’s brand management. In this study, we collected information about Japanese food manufacturing small and medium-sized enterprises that have succeeded in building their own private brands. We analyzed brand building and capabilities through newspaper articles, the literature, official company publications, trademarks, designs, patent information, and financial data. We considered the capabilities of managers. The purpose of this study is to consider the capabilities of management for building a small and medium-sized enterprise’s brand. As small and medium-sized enterprises move from subcontracting to self-reliant management, it is important for them to establish their own brand. However, small and medium-sized enterprises have poor resources and their management capabilities are more strongly influenced than are those of large companies.

2. Definition of Terms

2.1 Brand building

Brand building involves promoting the brand of any product that is under a company name and its associated launch and production sales in the market [3]. In addition, it includes publication in a newspaper or trade journal of a company or product name.

2.2 Small and medium-sized enterprises

Small and medium-sized enterprises are defined in Japanese law in the Small and Medium Enterprises Basic Act’s second clause of Article 1.

2.3 Innovation

This subsection discusses the proposition of innovation. Schumpeter claims that the proposition of innovation is the execution of a “new combination of production factors” [4]. Innovation has also been described as (1) production of new goods, (2) introduction of new production methods, (3) development of new markets, (4) acquisition of raw materials or new sources of semi-finished products, and (5) a new organizational achievement. In addition, Christensen defined innovation as “The lifeblood of our global economy and a strategic priority for virtually every CEO around the world” [5]. Creativity is the most important quality required of future leaders of excellence. Furthermore the ability to produce innovative ideas is determined not only by intelligence but also by behavior. Based on these

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considerations, in this research, we analyze a new manufacturing method of small Japanese tofu makers and the development of new markets with emphasis on managers’ capabilities. Therefore, in this study, we define innovation as the improvement of creativity and added value to satisfy customers’ needs.

3. Review of Existing Research

Most research analyzing brand strategies has targeted such areas as mass production and traditional brands. There is limited research about brand-building for small and medium-sized enterprises. However, there is some research on brand strategies for specialized small and medium-sized enterprises [6]. One study suggests that companies with good products have competitive strategies on brand value [7]. Establishing a brand for small and medium-sized enterprises that do not have enough resources makes brand building somewhat complex. There is limited research on strategic management for brand building. Lately, the focus has been on “dynamic capabilities” which are managers’ capabilities. Dynamic capabilities include the integration, construction, and relocation of capabilities both inside and outside the organization [8]. In this research, we analyze the capabilities of managers of small and medium-sized enterprises that have established brands.

We use newspaper articles to analyze the strategies for how managers construct their own brands [9]. In particular, we researched managers of traditional food manufacturing companies. For our hypothesis, we referred to Teece [10], Sakai [11], and Kanama [12] researched the technological capability of Japanese local food manufacturers. Forsman [13] consolidated innovation capability into six capabilities (entrepreneurial capabilities, networking capabilities, utilization of knowledge risk management capabilities, change management capabilities, business development capabilities, and customer and market knowledge). The following three propositions are used for our hypothesis.

1) Integration capability: Strong leadership to take full advantage of poor resources.
2) Construction capability: Strengthening the transmission of information to provide better quality and enhance product capabilities.
3) Relocation capability: Developing an entirely new sales channel for differentiation from other companies.

The three hypotheses are based on the following. Forsman identified six types of innovation capabilities. Sakai [11] noted the importance of creating relationships with customers. Expansion of sales channels is an important issue when establishing a brand, as it paves the way to strong top sales. We operate to places where we know the value of our company. It deepens the connection with customers by using the Internet · SNS · event. According to Kanama [12], “innovative innovation” by which completely new products reach the market, leads the company to success.

“The integration capability” is presented from two capabilities of Forsman’s six capabilities, entrepreneurial capabilities and change management capabilities. “Strong leadership and changing management capabilities must be needed to take full advantage by integrating poor resources.”

“Construction capability” is presented from two capabilities of Forsman’s six capabilities, business development capabilities and utilization of knowledge risk-management capabilities. In addition, “innovative innovation” by Kanama [12], which states that when new products reach the market, it leads a company to success. As a result, strengthening the transmission of information providing better quality and enhances product capability must be needed as the “construction capability.”

“Relocation capability” has been presented from two capabilities of Forsman’s six capabilities, networking capabilities, and customer and market knowledge. Furthermore, Sakai [11] noted the importance of creating relationships with customers. As a result, we have set the “relocation capability,” which can be developing an entirely new sales channel for different companies.

4. Research Method

In this research, we performed a case analysis using available information from related books, magazine and newspaper articles, trademarks, designs, patents, web sites, and financial data. We selected tofu manufacturing companies as our target, because the raw materials are the same for all companies and they are traditional manufacturing companies. In addition, employees in the food manufacturing industry are the most numerous in Japan. We chose a company with established brands in Kyoto, Japan. This company was sought and selected based on tofu sold at department stores. As a result, although we searched for information about nine companies, we chose only one among them that resembles the scale of Japan’s Kansai region. We selected managers’ comments, strategies, and philosophy from newspaper and magazine articles, trade journals, published books, trademarks, designs, patents, and company web sites. Furthermore, company financial information was obtained from the Teikoku Databank Company on December 21, 2015. The reason for a case study analysis is to understand phenomena that deviate from statistical behavior. In addition, we consider the content required to develop a new theory. A case study has the advantage of being able to track changes in time continuously. Furthermore, I consulted K. Yin’s Case Study Research before selecting the single case study of this research [14]. The case-study method rather than quantitative analysis fits the purpose of the research, which is to answer the “how” question.

Barny is a leader of resource strategy theory, who mentioned the following about corporate strategy theory: Capabilities are invisible and intangible, and cannot be accrued as bringing value in accounting. Although it is
difficult to measure and evaluate intangible resources and capabilities, there is a possibility that corporate performance can be materially affected. However, on the other hand, Barny provides standards for evaluating corporate management resources and capabilities: (1) whether there is economic value, (2) whether there is scarcity, (3) whether imitation is difficult, and (4) whether organizational policies and procedures are in place. In this research, we conducted a case study based on public information; thus, evaluations were based on points (1) to (3).

5. Case Analysis

We performed a case analysis from the open information discussed in Section 4. For tofu manufacturing, product differentiation is difficult and the tofu manufacturing industry contains small and medium-sized enterprises. They are relatively protected by law. For this reason, the tofu manufacturing companies within the food manufacturing industry provide a perfect case analysis for the purpose of this study. Our analysis comprises one company, Otokomae Tofu Shop.

1) Otokomae Tofu Shop company.
Kyoto, Japan
Company president: Shingo Ito
Company type: Private, Established year: 2005
Capital stock: 38 million Yen, Number of employees: 98

Founded in 2005, the Otokomae Tofu Shop has developed a variety of tofu products and has increased its visibility in the food manufacturing industry. Reports of the company have been published in many newspaper articles. For example, Machida [15] stated that the strategy of the Otokomae Tofu Shop was to improve the quality of products, as a result of which the unit price would rise, avoid advertising costs, and sell to buyers. The company’s president, Shingo Ito established these policies in 1998 and started product development [16].

For the case study, we investigated newspaper and magazine articles in the Nihon Keizai Shim bun, Yomiuri Shimbun, Asahi Shim bun, and Mainichi Shim bun publications. We searched for full articles in the “Nikkei Telecom 21” section of the Nihon Keizai Shim bun, “Yomida su Rekishikan” section of the Yomiuri Shim bun, “Kikuzou2 Visual” section of the Asahi Shim bun, and the “Daily News Pack” section of the Mainichi Shim bun.

First, we searched articles that were published during the 20 years between 1994 and 2014 using the keyword “tofu.” The results are shown in Table 2, and Figure 1. We found 1,000 to 2,500 articles per year, with a noticeable increase from 1996 to 2000. We consider that this is likely due to the introduction of Internet-based newspapers. As our results show, there were not large variations between the four newspapers. However, we then used each company name as the keyword and again searched the four publications for articles during the 20 years between 1994 and 2014. We found that the Nihon Keizai Shim bun, which is a financial newspaper, had the most articles of the four publications. The articles were mostly about company management, the company itself, trends, and new products.

Second, we analyzed the trends of the Otokomae Tofu Shop. We searched the four publications for numbers of articles during the 20 years, as shown in Table 1 and Figure 1. As Figure 1 indicates, we found more than 30 articles in 2006. Because Otokomae Tofu Shop was opened in the famous department store Takashimaya, Nihon Keizai Shim bun published a remarkable 20 articles on the company. We consider that the Otokomae Tofu Shop began building its brand at this time. We searched for published articles about the Otokomae Tofu Shop’s capabilities, as shown in Table 1. We found the following characteristic representative of integration with regard to the Otokomae Tofu Shop’s capabilities the president’s strategy of opening shops in department stores. After opening shops in department stores, the company has access to special events at which its performance could be observed. This illustrates the capability of construction. Furthermore, the company was featured in the media and could expand its sales channels and collaborate with other companies. This depicts the capability of relocation in which case, the company used collaboration. As shown in Table 2, we analyzed articles about Otokomae Tofu Shop between 2005 and 2014. For Table 2, we classified the content of the newspaper articles to explain their aim. In the early phase, Otokomae Tofu Shop’s president built its tofu brand from scratch using the name “Blowing the Wind Tofu Johnny” [17]. Although the president was shown the number and proportion of cases, we confirmed that there are many articles about collaboration with other companies as well as those about the company itself and its manager. For example, the company co-developed Cream Bread with Pasco Shikishima Corporation in 2008 and it co-developed Japanese sake with Gekkeikan Sake Corporation in 2013. The logo designed by the president, appeared on the packaging. Recently in 2017, Otokomae Tofu Shop consolidated three factories into one in Kyoto. The reason cited by Otokomae Tofu Shop’s president is as follows. “The purpose is that the manufacturing site can always be checked with your own eyes.” News was published in such publications as Sankei Shim bun[16], the magazine Commercial World [18], and Nikkei Design [19],and Nikkei Business [20] covered the actions and abilities of agree with the prevailing common sense in the tofu industry of selling tofu at bargain prices. Thus, he founded the company independently and aimed to open a store at Futako-Tamagawa Takashimaya in 2005 with strong sales. The opening of this store led to the building of the brand. There are also publications in newspapers and magazines about the shop, including those on sales in established department stores and the opening of these stores. As Futako-Tamagawa town is a famous area of luxury in Tokyo, whenever Ito opened a store, the mass media covered it with interest. It is published sales strategy in the Nihon Keizai Shim bun and Ito himself wrote a book. Furthermore, in the magazines Commercial World [18]
and *Nikkei Design* [19], the unique design of the company’s tofu container was a topic of interest. Ito himself developed and distributed a revolutionary double-bottom container.

Despite having no previous connection, the president is attempting to sell tofu directly to a famous department store in large cities, such as Tokyo and Osaka. He succeeded in pioneering a new sales channel, but it should also provide value to the customer. Since many tofu companies sell to supermarkets through wholesalers, many of these companies will not go directly to supermarkets or department stores. Taking full advantage of inadequate resources shows strong leadership, which is a scarcity and cannot be imitated by rivals.

Moreover, he tried a technology to make thick soy milk with rich flavor. The changes are linked to management’s ability to build, relocate, and integrate. Ito is trying hard to differentiate his small company within the tofu manufacturing industry, and is trying to add value according to his managerial capabilities.

Table 1. Number of published newspaper articles on “Otokomae Tofu Shop” (Prepared by the author)

| Year | Nihon Keizai Shimbun | Asahi Shimbun | Mainichi Shimbun | Yomiuri Shimbun | Total |
|------|----------------------|----------------|------------------|-----------------|-------|
| 1994 | 0                    | 0              | 0                | 0               | 0     |
| 1995 | 0                    | 0              | 0                | 0               | 0     |
| 1996 | 0                    | 0              | 0                | 0               | 0     |
| 1997 | 0                    | 0              | 0                | 0               | 0     |
| 1998 | 0                    | 0              | 0                | 0               | 0     |
| 1999 | 0                    | 0              | 0                | 0               | 0     |
| 2000 | 0                    | 0              | 0                | 0               | 0     |
| 2001 | 0                    | 0              | 0                | 0               | 0     |
| 2002 | 0                    | 0              | 0                | 0               | 0     |
| 2003 | 0                    | 0              | 0                | 0               | 0     |
| 2004 | 0                    | 0              | 0                | 0               | 0     |
| 2005 | 4                    | 2              | 2                | 0               | 8     |
| 2006 | 21                   | 6              | 5                | 1               | 33    |
| 2007 | 9                    | 4              | 0                | 3               | 16    |
| 2008 | 6                    | 0              | 0                | 1               | 7     |
| 2009 | 1                    | 1              | 0                | 1               | 3     |
| 2010 | 5                    | 1              | 2                | 1               | 9     |
| 2011 | 3                    | 0              | 0                | 0               | 3     |
| 2012 | 3                    | 0              | 0                | 0               | 3     |
| 2013 | 3                    | 2              | 1                | 2               | 8     |
| 2014 | 1                    | 1              | 0                | 0               | 2     |
| Total| 56                   | 17             | 10               | 9               | 89    |

Table 2. Detailed classification of “Otokomae Tofu Shop” in *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* (Prepared by the author)

| Year | Item Proportion | Item Proportion | Item Proportion | Item Proportion |
|------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| 2005 | 4              | 100%           | 0              | 0%            |
| 2006 | 12             | 57%            | 8              | 38%           |
| 2007 | 6              | 67%            | 3              | 33%           |
| 2008 | 2              | 33%            | 3              | 33%           |
| 2009 | 0              | 0%             | 4              | 67%           |
| 2010 | 1              | 20%            | 1              | 100%          |
| 2011 | 1              | 33%            | 7              | 33%           |
| 2012 | 2              | 67%            | 0              | 0%            |
| 2013 | 1              | 33%            | 0              | 0%            |
| 2014 | 0              | 0%             | 1              | 100%          |
| Total| 29             | 52%            | 16             | 29%           |

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The president endeavored to provide high quality products. Because the quality of tofu is difficult to differentiate, most tofu makers concentrate on cost reduction, rather than developing high quality products. His construction capability is highly valuable and cannot be imitated by rivals easily.

Ito stated that once the customer had the container in his or her hands, he or she could observe that it was a product, could taste that it was good, and could feel a high technical standard. Ito recognized that this has an effect. These are linked to building and relocation capabilities. Furthermore, when sales declined in 2013, Ito closed three factories in Yamanashi, Ibaraki, and Aomori prefectures. He took countermeasures to rapidly consolidate his manufacturing base in Kyoto, where the head office is located. This move was tied to the company’s integration capabilities. An article in Nihon Keizai Shim bun [21] indicated that Otokomae Tofu Shop had occupied the top ranking for tofu product sales for more than 10 years. Therefore, the company’s success was not transient. We succeeded in finding articles about the company's technology development. We interpret this as the company having capability for relocation, construction, and building from scratch.

Specifically, the president resists the common practice of normal tofu stores, and creates products with unique names and shapes that are not like normal tofu. The company planned, produced and sold this product by themselves. This relocation capability is a very scarcity, and cannot be imitated easily.

Otokomae Tofu Shop was successful at building its brand. It had excellent managerial decision-making, strategy planning, and execution. Specifically, the company had a “commitment to quality. There is absolute confidence in quality.” Furthermore, it was “building value. Sales decide the store.” Meanwhile, “initially, the president conducted brand building alone, which showed the capability of integration.” The strategy continued after the brand was built and was recognized by newspapers and consumers. We found that the company used collaboration and sales with other companies. This shows the capabilities of relocation and construction, which are common to the other two companies too. Moreover, the president built experimental production and new products, new packaging and logos from scratch. In addition, the company developed some trademarks, designs, patents. These observations are based on newspaper and magazine articles as well as patent information.

Finally, Otokomae Tofu Shop developed product and different distribution channel companies with other companies. For example, it co-developed bread company Shikishima Corporation, Japanese liquor company Gekkeikan Sake Corporation, dairy company Ezaki Glico Corporation and shopping center Izumi Corporation in Hiroshima region [22,23,24].

A strong connection among traditional industries involves a complementary relationship that makes use of each other’s name value. They have an established affinity for making delicious things together. Because tofu products can be processed as raw materials for other products, they can be used by other well-known companies in the value chain. Moreover, the purchase age of traditional industry and tofu products is relatively high.

However, eligible customers of Otokomae Tofu Shop are the young generation. Sometimes new customers can easily copy each other. In addition, start-up companies have the advantage of building brands by making full use of the recognition of traditional industries. There are advantages to undertaking collaboration with traditional brands, such as Shikishima and Gekkeikan. These include attracting customers, such as the young generation and female customers of emerging companies. Gekkeikan can attract new customers interested in health and beauty, by incorporating tofu ingredients into sake [25]. Shikishima has sought cooperation with Otokomae Tofu Shop [26] owing to the smooth texture of the tofu. The collaboration also enhanced the reputations of both Shikishima and Otokomae Tofu Shop in both customer bases. Even customers with few opportunities to buy tofu products were able to recognize the brand name. Moreover, collaboration with a company in a different market, would open a new pool of revenue. It is possible to differentiate from the same business company.

6. Conclusion, and Future Challenges

For the hypothesis, we discuss the results of our analysis.

1) Integration capability: Strong leadership takes full advantage of poor resources.
2) Construction capability: Strengthening the transmission of information provides better quality and enhances product capability.
3) Relocation capability: Developing entirely new sales channels differentiates a company from other companies.

Our analysis confirmed the hypotheses. Furthermore, we recognized the following two new points. First, for “building capacity from scratch,” management is often involved in brand building and producing new concepts. For example, Otokomae Tofu Shop’s president himself designed the unique packaging and conceptualized its products (in fact, he developed product prototypes). These facts are gleaned from newspaper articles and the president’s own remarks.

Second, for “forging collaboration capability,” managers built brands using their own products, but used collaboration with other companies. For example, they developed sales channels through collaboration as well as entirely new sales channels. In addition, they targeted a narrow sales capability to share sales force. This was gleaned from newspaper articles.

Our research results show the importance of management capability. Managers build brands in small and medium-sized enterprises. We found that managers
were committed to quality, sensitivity, and market development. In addition, they maintained a relationship between utilization and collaboration. They built brands in sales channels, as described in the two new points mentioned above. Although we found two unique points, our study has limitations. We researched only the case of tofu manufacturing in the traditional food manufacturing industry. The target company area was limited to Kyoto, and the target company was limited to one small and medium-sized enterprise. These limitations present opportunities for future research. We plan to implement a different case analysis for other industries and business categories. However, we consider it important to continue to focus on the capabilities in small and medium-sized enterprises.

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