MARKETING STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY AGRICULTURAL TRADING COMPANIES IN KENYA AND THEIR EFFECT ON FIRM COMPETITIVENESS

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this study was to determine the marketing strategies adopted by agricultural trading companies in Kenya to gain competitiveness. This research problem was studied through the use of a descriptive research design. The target respondents included management staffs working in selected agricultural trading companies' offices in Nairobi. Stratified random sampling was used to select a sample of 68 top and middle level management staffs (30% of the 228 possible respondents) from the target population. A survey questionnaire was employed as the sole research instrument. The researcher randomly dropped the questionnaire to the staffs who were deemed to be conversant with the firms' operations. Data collected was both qualitative and quantitative and it was analyzed by descriptive and content analysis techniques. The descriptive analysis employed descriptive statistical tools such as SPSS and MS Excel which helped the study to describe the data and determine the extent used. The findings were presented using tables and charts. The study found that the agricultural trading companies' marketing strategies are effective and provide opportunity to work together towards achieving the competitiveness of the firms. The study recommends that the management of the agricultural trading companies should ensure that their brands attain certain standards of quality. The firms should continuously review their brands in consideration of aspects like product relevance and awareness, product quality and product brand rejuvenation. The study recommends that the companies should embrace pricing strategies to increase volume sales by increasing their efforts to sell more products which will enable them gain competitive advantage.

Key Words: *Marketing strategies, Agricultural Trading Companies, Competitiveness*

INTRODUCTION

Today's world of business presents an ever changing and expanding set of challenges. Modern business people are influenced by a variety of current management practices and trends including customer relationship management (CRM), organizational downsizing and re-engineering, quality improvement initiatives, learning and knowledge management, team orientation and relationship marketing (Gartner, 2009). Markets have become highly competitive and turbulent and are constantly changing. The environment in which organizations operate is continuously changing with diverse factors influencing them. Many organizations are endeavoring to utilize marketing as their strategic advancement in terms of the competition.

Coping with the increasingly competitive environment has called on firms to rethink their marketing strategies (Pearce and Robinson, 2005). Strategies are a critical element in organizational functioning but whereas most organizations have good strategies successful strategic management practices remain a major challenge. A company's strategy consists of the business approaches and initiatives it undertakes to attract customers and fulfill their expectations, to withstand competitive pressures and to strengthen its market position. These strategies provide opportunities for the organization to respond to the various challenges within its operating environment.

In response to changing market conditions, manufacturing companies have traditionally become more customer-centric and innovative, in a way that customers receive products that better fit their needs. Formulating competitive marketing strategies also involves, recognizing relationships between elements of the marketing mix as well as assessing the impact of competitive and market conditions on marketing mix formulation (Neu and Brown, 2005). The benefits of the marketing activities in the business reflect in the strength of the industry to eliminate or at least minimize the effects of various challenges. The competitive aim is to do a significantly better job to its customers. The success of every organization is determined by its responsiveness to the customer needs.

According to Yildirim and Philippatos (2007) a certain degree of competition is generally perceived to be essential and desirable to improve allocative and productive efficiency in the provision of financial services. The influence of marketing activities can be part of the culture of the organization can be basis for the actions that the leaders will create in the future. According to Krohmer, Homburg and Workman (2002) a firm gains competitive advantage by performing these strategically important activities more cheaply or better than its competitors. One of the reasons the value chain framework is helpful is because it emphasizes that competitive advantage can come not just from great products or services, but from anywhere along the value chain. It's also important to understand how a firm fits into the overall value system, which includes the value chains of its suppliers, channels, and buyers.

The selling of places is the last agenda on a long list of tasks. Regional marketing includes strategic planning based on market studies and research. Regional marketing implies a management-oriented entrepreneurial view of planning that uses an outside-inside approach to set objectives. The outside-inside approach is based on the view that regions are placed in a competitive market environment, where conditions change constantly (Blumberg and Perrone, 2001). Through market research on a national and global level the outside environment, future opportunities and threats of a particular region are deduced. Here, planning is based on a clear vision of what markets demand and how they behave. Then, these forces of the outside environment are brought together with the needs and wants of the community, in order to set economic objectives.

Kenyan firms, just like any other firms in the world, exist in a complex environment that needs to be assessed and responded to appropriately (Rugut, 2012). Blumberg and Perrone 2001) contend that marketing strategies should be centered on the key concept that customer satisfaction is the main goal. In order to keep up with the competition and changing consumer needs and wants in the competitive business environment, trading companies need to use effective marketing strategies in managing customer needs for them to survive. Changing consumer needs and business environment in the Kenyan market has necessitated trading companies to adopt marketing strategies to gain competitive edge hence attracting and retaining customers. Product and price strategies have remained a key roadmap to the best performing firms in Kenya.

Statement of the Problem

The intensity of competition in an industry is rooted in underlying industry economics and goes well beyond the established competitors. Not all industries have equal potential. They differ fundamentally in their ultimate profit potential as the collective strength of the forces of competition differs; the forces range from intense in industries like tires, paper and steel, where no firm earns spectacular returns, to relatively mild in industries such as oil field equipment and services, cosmetics and toiletries, where high returns are common (Walker, 2011). Marketing of a product or service is a central activity for a successful business; it is concerned with identifying, anticipating and meeting the needs of customers in such a way as to make a profit for the business (DeDee and Vorhies, 2008). One of the environmental influences to a business arises from competition. Firms in the agricultural trading industry have to respond strategically to environmental factors in order to be sustainable.

Increased competition threatens the attractiveness of an industry and reduces the profitability of the players (Hamel and Prahalad, 1993). To succeed in the long term, organizations must compete effectively and out-perform their rivals in a dynamic environment. To accomplish this they must find suitable ways for creating and adding value for their customers. Ivy (2001) posits that strong competitive positions can be maintained by building barriers to competitive action by various means. Inspired by their success, marketing firms across the globe have made a commitment to serve lower income segments through a variety of approaches (downscaling, service company model, wholesale financing etc). Several scholars have carried out extensive studies on competitive marketing strategies in other industries, such as, manufacturing, energy, and service (Murage, 2001 and Mulaa, 2004). Another study by Ogutu and Mbula (2012) indicated clearly that for multinational banks to maintain their competitive edge in the market they have largely adopted broad differentiation strategy.

From the foregoing, there is a knowledge gap on the marketing strategies adopted by trading companies in Kenya to cope with the increased competition. Agriculture being the backbone of Kenya’s economy, due to its significance in contributing to economic growth, stiff competition exists among the companies involved in the trade for agricultural products and their inputs. As a consequence, of the is increased competition, there is a compelling need to look at the marketing strategies being adopted by trading companies in this competitive environment, marketing tactics that have enabled them to survive the increasingly more challenging competition. Therefore, the purpose of this research study was to find out the marketing strategies adopted by agricultural trading companies in Kenya and their effect on firm competitiveness where the context of focus was on Bio Medica Laboratories Ltd, Monsanto, Osho Chemicals and Syngenta.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study was to determine the marketing strategies adopted by agricultural trading companies in Kenya and their effect on firm competitiveness where the context of focus was Bio Medica Laboratories Ltd, Monsanto, Osho Chemicals and Syngenta. In order for the study to achieve its main objective it was guided by the following specific objectives: To determine the effect of pricing and product branding as a competitive marketing strategy of agricultural trading companies in Kenya

Research Questions

The study attempted to answer the following questions:

i. What are the effects of pricing as a marketing strategy in influencing competitive abilities of agricultural trading companies in Kenya?
ii. How does product branding as a marketing strategy enhance competitiveness of agricultural trading companies in Kenya?

Scope of the Study

The focus of this study lay on investigating the marketing strategies adopted by trading firms in Kenya to cope with competition. The geographical context of the study was the marketing strategies adopted to cope with competition by Bio Medica Laboratories Ltd, Monsanto, Osho Chemicals and Syngenta in Nairobi, Kenya. As such the Bio Medica Laboratories Ltd, Monsanto, Osho Chemicals and Syngenta whose head quarters are located in Nairobi were involved in the study. This involved collecting information from the management staffs on the marketing strategies adopted by agricultural trading firms in Kenya to gain competitiveness. This was relevant in collecting the data required as finances and distances are the limiting factors that inhibit collecting the data from all the trading firms across the country.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Literature

Organizations make strategic choices that a manager will follow in every possible attainable situation in an industry to attain an advantage over his firms competitors. Pearce and Richard (2003), point out that a company's ability to adapt to changing surroundings influences the performance and competitive position of the industry sector and the company and this has proven to be an extremely important and demanding quality. The priority, therefore, is on enhanced knowledge about how the company competitive strategies are implemented in consideration of limited resources, along many dimensions, to record impressive performance, qualitative as well as quantitative. This study on marketing strategies adopted by agricultural trading companies in and their effect on firm competitiveness is based on various theories which include Porter's Five Forces Theory, Resource Based View Theory, Ansoff's Product

Market Growth Strategy and Competitive Advantage Theory.

Porter's Five Forces Theory

The theory says that competition within an industry is determined by five forces namely; rivalry of industry competitors, threat of new entrants, bargaining power of buyers, bargaining power of suppliers, and the threat of substitute products (Porter, 1980). The theory further says that basing on the strengths or weaknesses of industry players, the competitive position of individual firms is partly determined, the rest of the external threats notwithstanding. Awareness of the five forces in any competitive business helps a company understand the structure of its industry and stake out a position that is more profitable and less vulnerable to attack. Porter, (2008), notes that the five forces model helps one to look beyond his direct competitors. He notes four competitive forces that can hurt profits: savvy customers that can play you and your rivals, powerful suppliers who may constrain your profits by charging high prices, aspiring entrants armed with new capacity and hungry for market share, and substitute offerings that can lure your customers away.

Porter (2000), says that for a firm to benefit from the five forces model it must be able to comprehensively define its industry. It states that, defining the industry in which competition takes place is important for good industry analysis, not to mention for developing strategy and setting unit boundaries, to this end he notes that the firm must determine the product and geographical scope and identify the players and segment under the four segments listed above. The analysis should also assess the strength and weaknesses of these competitive forces. It is also crucial to understand the industry profitability and the recent positive and negative developments in the industry. There is a relationship between the dependent variable (Market share and Profitability) and competition posed by the two factors. Since there is obvious threat from the bargaining power of buyers, Safaricom must devise a strategy for dealing with its two categories of buyers (Corporate and individual) who have differing bargaining powers.

Porter, (2008), concludes that, the five competitive forces reveal whether an industry is truly attractive, and they help investors anticipate positive and negative shifts in the industry structure way before they are obvious. He also notes that this deeper thinking about competition is a more effective or superior method to achieve investment success than financial projections and trend extrapolation that dominates today's investment analysis. While the proponent of this theory argues that these five forces are the only or major determinants of success or failure of organizations in the marketplace, my theory is that new product development has the capability of delivering competitive strength (s) to an organization in the face of competition. Further, new product development has the potential to neutralize competitive threats through product or service differentiation.

Resource Based View Theory

The other theory that informs this study is the resource based view. Resource based view has its roots in the work of Penrose in the late 1950s but was introduced in the in the field of strategic management in the field of strategic management and became dominant framework in the 1990s. Resource Based View addresses why firms are different and how firms achieve and sustain competitive advantage. The RBV framework combines the internal (core competence) and external (industry structure) perspectives on strategy. Like the frameworks of core competence and capabilities, firms have very different collections of physical and intangible assets and capabilities, which RBV calls resources.

Competitive advantage is ultimately attributed to the ownership of a valuable resource. Resources are more broadly defined to be physical (e.g. property rights, capital), intangible (e.g. brand names, technological knowhow), or organizational (e.g. routines or processes like lean manufacturing). No two companies have the same resources because no two companies have had the same set of experience, acquired the same assets and skills, or built the same organizational culture. And unlike the core competence and capabilities frameworks, though, the value of the broadly-defined resources is determined in the interplay with market forces. For a resource to be the basis of an effective strategy, it must pass a number of external market tests of its value.

As from the theory it is habitual to consider that those resources are in internal and external factors of the enterprises. The entrepreneur, by means of the strategy combines these factors establishing his distinctive competencies. As from the theory of resources and capacities it is habitual to consider that those sources are in internal and external factors of the enterprises (Grant, 2001). Brown's (1997) interpretation of multiple resources theory was that timing involves verbal resources at the perceptual/central stages, whereas search and tracking are 9 spatial tasks. This argument, though, still fails to explain the asymmetry. If anything, there should be minimal interference, as the tasks draw on separate resource pools.

In the event of an interference effect, it should affect both tasks in a similar manner, rather than affecting one task while leaving the other untouched. On the other hand, working memory, with its central executive, can offer an explanation. The central executive controls attention and coordination functions, such as allocating attention between dual tasks. Mental arithmetic and timing both draw on the central executive, which is why bidirectional interference occurs between these two tasks (Grant, 2001).

Conceptual Framework

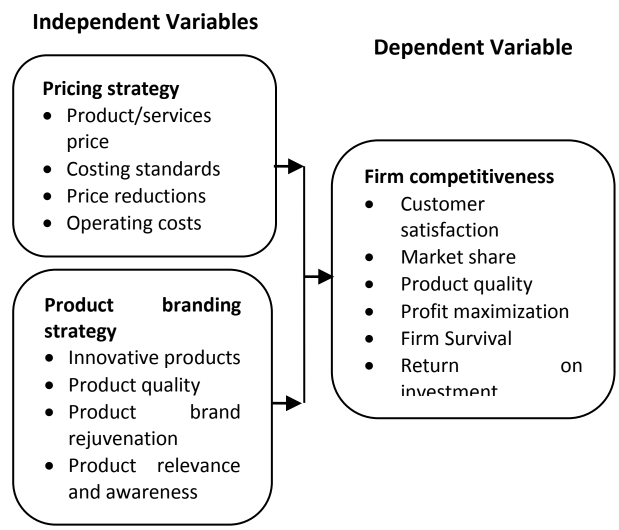

Figure 1: Conceptual framework

Marketing Strategies and Firm Competitiveness

Market-oriented strategies, embodied in managed competition, have become the primary focus of contemporary company policy. Being a fundamental construct in marketing, market orientation has received a great deal of attention from marketing scholars. According to Kohli and Jaworski (1990), while the marketing concept is commonly defined as a philosophy or way of thinking that guides the allocation of resources and formulation of strategies for an organization, market(ing) orientation is considered to be activities involved in the implementation of the marketing concept. With this definition, three sets of activities – intelligence generation, intelligence dissemination and responsiveness to market intelligence, represent the operationalization of market orientation.

Cravens (2000) argued that marketing is a major stakeholder in new product development, customer management, and value/supply-chain management, and marketing strategy provides concepts and processes for gaining a competitive advantage by delivering superior value to the business's customers. Therefore, to deal with the current challenges, the businesses must have more distinctive and purposeful marketing strategies and they should be effectively implemented (Cravens et al., 2000). Many companies cascade a strategy throughout an organization, by creating strategy tactics that then become strategy goals for the next level or group. Each one group is expected to take that strategy goal and develop a set of tactics to achieve that goal. This is why it is important to make each strategy goal measurable. Marketing strategies are dynamic and interactive. They are partially planned and partially unplanned. Every marketing strategy is unique, but can be reduced into a generic marketing strategy.

Marketing strategies determine the choice of target market segments, positioning, marketing mix, and allocation of resources. Common marketing concerns such as input costs, price, advertising, and distribution are likely to differ dramatically in the countries in which a firm elects to market its goods or services. The competitive aim is to do a significantly better job of providing what customers are looking for, thereby enabling the company to earn a competitive advantage and outsmart rivals in the market place (Ghemawat, 2003). The core of a company's marketing strategy consists of its internal initiatives to deliver satisfaction to customers but also includes offensive and defensive moves to counter the maneuvering of rivals, actions to shift resources around to improve the firm's long term competitive capabilities and market position, and tactical efforts to respond to prevailing market conditions.

Product Branding Strategy

According to Nakata, Im, Park, and Won Ha (2006) emphasizing product branding strategy has a stronger positive impact on product performance (Zhou, 2006). Also, exporting firms have explicitly implemented innovativeness to achieve better performance (Ussahawanitchakit, 2007). Then, firm with the greater degree of product branding appear to achieve potential higher product performance. Branding appears to be a necessary means of building sales by identifying products and services. Branding is the initial means to build consumer awareness by naming the offer, but also by distinguishing the offer from other similar products or services within an established category. Branding is about being different (Kay, 2006).

A product branding strategy provides the framework to orient a company's marketing projects as well as its development process. There is no one right strategy for a company. The strategy takes into account the company's capabilities (strengths, weaknesses and core competencies), the competition's capabilities (strengths, weaknesses, core competencies and strategy), market needs and opportunities, goals, and financial resources. Branding does not only inform external stakeholders, such as customers and investors, about the values of the organization, it also potentially instructs and directs organizational members. In this sense, branding can be viewed as a management and leadership practice. Brands and branding activities not primarily as marketing tools, but rather as a way of expressing preferred values and meanings and transferring them to the internal and external audiences (Kärreman and Rylander, 2008).

The concept of product branding is conceptualized as a second-order reflective construct, whose first-order facets include opportunity analysis, technical development, product testing, and product commercialization. A good product branding strategy must have originality, goals, logical coherence, must take into considerations the risks and resources, must have flexibility (Lynch 2006, p.19). Within this “product decision” framework, branding decisions have certainly been effectively applied to products and services for many decades. Tsai (2004) propose new product development was a critical activity because new products become the core of the competition. Firm with higher level new product development tend to have potentially important source of competitive advantage and response to the changing competitive environment as well as lead to superior performance in exporting ultimately.

Organizational capabilities are important to compete in global that it combines skills, abilities, and expertise of an organization (Ulrich and Smallwood, 2004). Technological capability is one of the major constituent of organizational capabilities and concerned engineering and new product research and development skill that it can increase growth of firm (Zehir, Acar, and Tanriverdi, 2006). Therefore, technological capability as an important strategic resource enabling firms to achieve competitive advantage within their firm because if firm with superior technological capability can achieve pioneering process innovation and greater differentiation by new products in order to achieve potentially higher export performance. In the formulation of an effective marketing strategy, there are several internal forces and external forces incorporated. The use of technologies such as internet and worldwide web can be considered as another innovative action on marketing (Williamson, 2009).

Pricing Strategy and Business Performance

A firm producing at the lowest cost in the industry enjoys the best profits. Producing at lower cost is a strategy that can be used by various firms so as to have a significant cost advantage over the competition in the market. This in effect leads to growth in the market share. This strategy is mostly associated with large businesses offering standard products that are clearly different from competitors who may target a broader group of customers. The low cost leader in any market gains competitive advantage from being able to many to produce at the lowest cost. Factories are built and maintained; labor is recruited and trained to deliver the lowest possible costs of production. A low cost leader’s basis for competitive advantage is lower overall costs than competitors. The need to manage cost is nothing new, yet surprising number of organizations struggles to successfully control their operating expenses overtime (Bertone, Clark, West and Groves, 2009). Successful low cost leaders are exceptionally good at finding ways to drive costs out of their business.

In today’s economic Climate companies cannot simply grow their way out of profit problems. Manufacturing costs have been cut to the bone, there is pricing pressure, and demand is declining. As Tsai (2004) argues pricing is essential in achieving competitive advantage whereby the selling price of a product is calculated to produce a particular rate of return on investment for a specific volume of production. At the most fundamental level, firms create competitive advantage by perceiving or discovering new and better ways to compete in an industry and bringing them to market, which is ultimately an act of innovation. Innovations shift competitive advantage when rivals either fail to perceive the new way of competing or are unwilling or unable to respond. There can be significant advantages to early movers responding to innovations, particularly in industries with significant economies of scale or when customers are more concerned about switching suppliers.

A firm gains competitive advantage by performing these strategically important activities more cheaply or better than its competitors. One of the reasons the value chain framework is helpful is because it emphasizes that competitive advantage can come not just from great products or services, but from anywhere along the value chain. It's also important to understand how a firm fits into the overall value system, which includes the value chains of its suppliers, channels, and buyers. With the idea of activity mapping, Porter (1996) builds on his ideas of generic strategy and the value chain to describe strategy implementation in more detail. Competitive advantage requires that the firm's value chain be managed as a system rather than a collection of separate parts.

Pricing choices determine not only which activities a company will perform and how it will configure individual activities, but also how they relate to one another. This is crucial, since the essence of implementing strategy is in the activities - choosing to perform activities differently or to perform different activities than rivals. A firm is more than the sum of its activities (Yang and Liu, 2006). A firm's value chain is an interdependent system or network of activities, connected by linkages. Linkages occur when the way in which one activity is performed affects the cost or effectiveness of other activities. Linkages create tradeoffs requiring optimization and coordination.

Empirical Review

According to Case and Shiller (2004) strategy is about where is the business trying to go in the long term, which markets should a business compete in and what kind of activities are involved in such markets, how can the business perform better than the competition in those markets, what resources (skills, assets, finance, relationships technical competence, facilities) are required in order to be able to compete, what external, environmental factors affect the business ability to compete and what are the values and expectations of those who have power in and around the business. Managerial deficiencies have been noted to be one of the reasons for business failures (Burnes, 2000).

It would be of a bigger challenge for enterprises operating in today's competitive market. It would be essential to find out whether there exists an association between management abilities and his/her business performance. A company's competitive strategy consists of the business approaches and initiatives, it takes to attract customers, withstand competitive pressures and strengthen its market position. The objective quite simply, is to knock the socks off rival companies ethically and honorably, earn a competitive advantage in the market place and cultivate a clientele of loyal customers (du Cluzeau, 2006). A company's strategy for competing typically contains both offensive and defensive actions, with emphasis shifting from one to the other as market conditions warrant. A marketing strategy is most effective when it is an integral component of corporate strategy, defining how the organization will successfully engage customers, prospects, and competitors in the market arena.

Competitive advantage within the industry is being constantly redefined and to maintain their presence, key industry players are being forced to revamp their organisational structure, overcome huge barriers in R&D, clinical trials simply to ensure continuity and maintain profitability (Radjou, 2001). The dynamic global market firms have been adopting various competitive strategies for growth and expansion. Generic and new products coming up in the market have resulted in a shorter lifecycle and low sales for such products. The weak entry barriers added more complexity leaving trading companies a difficult task to contain costs as well as find ways to counter the growing threat from the generic drugs. An important and sometimes overlooked factor that distinguishes one company from another in the trading companies is strategic planning (Bhandari et al, 1999).

Porter's model looks at the competitive arena in which businesses operate and describes five basic competitive forces that directly impact on how successfully a business unit operates. By understanding and knowing what these competitive forces are and how they impact on the business, managers are better equipped to prepare their plans. The trading companies traditionally have been constrained by rigid global manufacturing with specialized production equipment, long lead times for materials and extensive regulatory requirements. This has led to inflexibility and an inability to react quickly to changes and facilities that are either capacity constrained or underutilized (Radjou, 2001).

Knowledge Gap

According to Owuor (2009) the present day competition in the market place is becoming increasingly intense with globalization. As a result the role of management control system to monitor the effectiveness of competitive strategy and to provide feedback for adjustment to strategy has therefore become more important. On the premise that critical obstacles to bringing about change lie in the realm of adopting marketing strategies to realized a competitive edge in the sector. Lack of guarantee for markets for agricultural products has compounded the problem as agricultural trading companies have no incentive to invest in increasing marketing practices and strategies. Despite the increasing urge to understand the five forces and structure of firms industry and the need to build up competent personnel and steadfast technological systems to enable organizations survive in the current dynamic environment; many organizations still struggle to maintain their customers unsuccessfully and therefore lack of competitive edge (Weitz and Sandy, 2005). Such a case is the experience within the competitive laboratories sub sector in Kenya where stiff competition exists between laboratories and other pharmaceutical institutions.

Despite the presence of a vibrant economy and better terms as compared to their counterparts in the industry, the trading companies in the local setting still remain underdeveloped and continually lose their clients to the other trading companies. This is largely attributed to the lack of competitive advantages to enable them tackle the diverse competitors in the market. In spite of the much attention that has been given to the trading companies in general, no study has ever concentrated on establishing how various marketing strategies influence the competitiveness of trading companies in Kenya (Alila and Atieno, 2006). There is therefore a knowledge gap that needs to be filled as an attempt to realizing the economic pillar of Kenya's Vision 2030. This study therefore seeks to determine the marketing strategies adopted by Bio-Medica laboratories in Kenya to cope with competition.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research study applied the descriptive research design in the process of determining the findings in relation to the marketing strategies adopted by agricultural trading companies in Kenya to gain competitiveness. Descriptive research design was chosen because it enables the researcher to generalise the findings to a larger population. This research study on the marketing strategies adopted by agricultural trading companies in Kenya to cope with competition used a descriptive research design.

Target Population

The target population of this study was the staff working in Bio Medica Laboratories Ltd, Monsanto, Osho Chemicals and Syngenta offices in Nairobi. There were approximately two hundred and twenty eight (228) top and middle level management staffs serving in the offices of selected firms in Nairobi. The study focused more on the section and particularly on the top and middle level management staff who are directly dealing with the day to day management of the companies since they were the ones conversant with the marketing strategies adopted by agricultural trading companies in Kenya and their effect on firm competitiveness.

The researcher examined a sample of staff drawn from the population of 228 staff working in the Company of the top and middle level management ranks.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

Sample of responding staff was drawn from 228 top and middle level managers from the staff working in the selected companies' head offices in Nairobi. Kotler (2001) argues that if well chosen, samples of about 10% of a population can often give good reliability. Other literatures have shown that sample size selection to a great extent is judgmentally decided. Stratified random sampling method was used to sample respondent top and middle level management staffs from the firm's offices in Nairobi.

This generated a sample of 68 respondents which the study sought information from. This made it easier to get adequate and accurate information necessary for the research. The selection was as follows.

Type and Sources of Data

The study collected both primary and secondary data for the purpose of analyzing the marketing strategies adopted by agricultural trading companies in Kenya and their effect on firm competitiveness. Primary data was collected using a questionnaire while secondary data was obtained from annual reports of the companies.

Data Collection Instrument

This study utilized a questionnaire comprising of two sections. The first part was designed to determine fundamental issues including the demographic characteristics of the respondents, while the second part consisted of questions where the four variables were focused.

Data Collection Procedure

This study collected quantitative data using a self-administered questionnaire. The researcher dropped the questionnaires physically at the respondents' place of work. Nevertheless, where it proved difficult for the respondents to complete the questionnaire immediately, the researcher left the questionnaires with the respondents and pick them up later. The structured questions were used in an effort to conserve time and money as well as to facilitate in easier analysis as they are in immediate usable form; while the unstructured questions were used so as to encourage the respondent to give an in-depth and felt response without feeling held back in revealing of any information. Each questionnaire was coded and only the researcher knew which person responded. The coding technique was only used for the purpose of matching returned, completed questionnaires with those delivered to the respondents.

Data Analysis and Presentation

Before processing the responses, the completed questionnaires were edited for completeness and consistency. The data was then coded to enable the responses to be grouped into various categories. Data collected was purely quantitative and it was analyzed by descriptive analysis. The descriptive statistical tools such as Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and MS Excel helped the researcher to describe the data and determine the extent used. The findings were presented using tables and charts. The Likert scales were used to analyze the mean score and standard deviation, this helped in investigating the marketing strategies adopted by agricultural trading companies in Kenya and their effect on firm competitiveness where the context of focus was Bio Medica Laboratories Ltd, Monsanto, Osho Chemicals and Syngenta. Data analysis used frequencies, percentages, means and other central tendencies.

Tables were used to summarize responses for further analysis and facilitate comparison. This generated quantitative reports through tabulations, percentages, and measure of central tendency. Cooper and Schindler (2003) notes that the use of percentages is important for two reasons; first they simplify data by reducing all the numbers to range between 0 and 100. Second, they translate the data into standard form with a base of 100 for relative comparisons. This provided the generalization of the findings on the marketing strategies adopted by the agricultural trading companies in Kenya and their effect on firm competitiveness.

In addition, to quantify the strength of the relationship between the variables, the researcher conducted a multiple regression analysis so as to determine the marketing strategies adopted by agricultural trading companies in Kenya and their effect on firm competitiveness. Regression analysis is a statistical tool for the investigation of relationships between variables. Multiple regression analysis involves combining several predictor variables in a single regression equation. As such, the data was broken down into the different aspects of marketing strategies adopted by agricultural trading companies in Kenya and their effect on firm competitiveness. The regression equation was:

$\mathbf{Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1X_1 + \beta_2X_2 + \varepsilon)}$: Whereby

Y = Firm competitiveness, X_1 = pricing strategy, X_2 = product branding strategy. Further, β_1, β_2 = Regression Coefficients and ε **=** Error term an error term normally distributed about a mean of 0 and for purposes of computation ε is assumed to be 0.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Reliability Analysis

A pilot study was conducted using the questionnaire on ten (10) management staff working in Bio Medica Laboratories Ltd, Monsanto, Osho Chemicals and Syngenta to test the reliability of the research instrument.

The purpose of pilot testing was to establish the accuracy and appropriateness of the research design and instrumentation and therefore enhance face validity.

Table 1: Reliability Test of Constructs

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items	Comments
Pricing strategy	0.904	3	Accepted
Product branding strategy	0.903	3	Accepted

The findings indicated that pricing strategy had a coefficient of 0.904, product branding strategy had a coefficient of 0.903. All constructs depicted that the value of Cronbach's Alpha are above the suggested value of 0.7 thus the study was reliable (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Nunnally, 1974).

Response Rate

From the target population Two hundred and twenty eight (228) top and middle level management staffs currently serving in the offices of selected firms in Nairobi this study sampled 68 respondents from the target population in collecting data with regard to marketing strategies adopted by agricultural trading companies in Kenya and their effect on firm competitiveness. The questionnaire return rate results shows that out of the 68 respondents from Bio Medica Laboratories Ltd, Monsanto, Osho Chemicals and Syngenta filled in and returned the questionnaire. The response rate achieved for the questionnaire was 81.0%. This response rate was quite commendable and was made a reality by the fact that the researcher administered the questionnaires by herself to Bio Medica Laboratories Ltd, Monsanto, Osho Chemicals and Syngenta.

Out of the response rate of 81% recorded, 25% of the responses were received from Syngenta, 22% of them were received from Bio Medica Labs Ltd, 18% of the responses comprised of questionnaires from Osho Chemicals while 16% of the responses were from Monsanto. This was valid and reliable representation of the targeted population hence adequate for the study analysis.

General Information

Gender of the Respondents

In this study the respondents sampled were expected to comprise both male and female staffs working in the agricultural trading companies i.e. Bio Medica Laboratories Ltd, Monsanto, Osho Chemicals and Syngenta. As such, the study required the respondents to indicate their gender by ticking on the spaces provided in the questionnaire.

Accordingly, 62% of the respondents were males while 38% of them were females. The findings show that the selected agricultural trading companies in Kenya have both male and female staffs; however the majority of them are males. The findings imply that the views expressed in these findings are gender sensitive and can be taken as representative of the opinions of both genders as regards to marketing strategies adopted by agricultural trading companies in Kenya and their effect on firm competitiveness.

Age Category

This study sought to investigate the composition of the respondents in terms of age brackets. This aimed at understanding how the respondents were distributed across the various age brackets and consequently their opinions on the topic of study. The findings showed that majority 38% of the respondents indicated that their ages fell between 41 and 50 years 28.0% of the respondents recapped that they were aged above 50 years, 21 % of them indicated that they were aged between 31 and 40 years, while 13.0% of the respondents were between 21 to 30 years of age.

Highest Formal Qualification

The study thus sought to establish the highest academic qualifications attained by the respondents. This difference might contribute to differences in the responses given by the respondents.

The outcome depicted showed that majority of the respondents had at least an undergraduate degree and hence understood the information sought by this study, that is, 40.5% of the respondents had acquired a graduate degrees level of education, 50.0% of the respondents indicated that they had acquired a post graduate level of education, while 9.5% of the respondents indicated that they had acquired college diploma levels of education. These outcomes mean that majority of the respondents had at least a graduate degree and hence understood the information sought by this study. These findings further imply that all the respondents were academically qualified and also familiar with their duties and could dispense them effectively in terms of professional work ability and performance.

Length of Service with the Agricultural Trading Companies

The study sought to establish the length of time that the respondents had been working in agricultural trading companies in Kenya.

From the study, 38% of the respondents unanimously indicated that they had worked with the agricultural trading companies for a period of 5 - 10 years, 34% of them had been working in the selected agricultural trading companies for 1-2 years, 15% of them had been working in the agricultural trading companies for less than one year whereas 13% of them had worked in the agricultural trading companies for a period of more than 10 years. This implies that most of the staffs participating in this study had been operating for an ample time thus they were conversant of the information that the study sought pertaining to the marketing strategies adopted by agricultural trading companies in Kenya and their effect on firm competitiveness.

Departments of the Respondents

Marketing strategies affect the various aspects of competitiveness of organizations across various departments. It was therefore important to ensure that questionnaires were distributed and returned from various departments within the agricultural trading companies in Kenya. This was to ensure that all the areas of firm competitiveness affected by marketing strategies adopted by agricultural trading companies are captured in the study. From the results 42.9% of the respondents were working in the finance departments, 19.0% of them were working in the human resource departments, 19.0% worked in procurement department, and 14.3% worked in the operations department, while 4.8% worked in marketing departments. This implies that all departments that were targeted by the study were involved and that the findings are not biased hence representative of the various departments’ views on marketing strategies adopted by agricultural trading companies in Kenya and their effect on firm competitiveness.

Designation of the Respondents

The study targeted to collect data from the staffs comprising of top, middle and low level management ranks. Accordingly, the study included heads of managers, assistant managers and supervisors as well as other general staffs. This was relevant to assess the distribution of the respondents across the management levels.

According to the results 41.0% of the respondents indicated that they were assistant managers, 25.63% of them were supervisors, 23.1% of them indicated that they were general staffs and 10.3% of the respondents comprised of managers. These findings show that the respondents that participated in the study were mainly those involved in the formulation and implementation of the decisions concerned with the marketing strategies that affect the competitiveness of agricultural trading companies in Kenya.

Marketing Strategies and Firm Competitiveness

The main objective of this study was to determine the marketing strategies adopted by agricultural trading companies in Kenya and their effect on firm competitiveness where the context of focus will be Bio Medica Laboratories Ltd, Monsanto, Osho Chemicals and Syngenta. Accordingly, the respondents were requested to rate the effectiveness of agricultural trading companies' marketing strategies. The results are as depicted in Table 2.

Table 2: Effectiveness of Marketing Strategies of Agricultural Trading Companies

Rating	Frequency	Percent
Very much effective	21	38.5
Much effective	21	38.5
Moderate effective	13	23.1
Total	**55**	**100.0**

According to the results depicted in Table 4.9, majority of the respondents (comprising 38.5% of the population studied) rated the agricultural trading companies' marketing strategies to be very much effective, another 38.5% of them rated the agricultural trading companies' marketing strategies to be much effective, while 23.1% of them rated the agricultural trading companies' marketing strategies to be moderate effective. These results imply that the agricultural trading companies' marketing strategies provide opportunity to work together towards achieving the competitiveness of the firms. They concur with Hartman (2004) who established that a key component of marketing strategy is often to keep marketing in line with a company's overarching mission statement. An effective marketing strategy is one part of the business that is absolutely essential to its success. Cravens (2000) also reported that marketing is a major stakeholder in new product development, customer management, and value/supply-chain management, and marketing strategy provides concepts and processes for gaining a competitive advantage by delivering superior value to the business's customers.

The respondents were further required to rate the importance of various marketing objectives to agricultural trading companies. Table 3 shows the results of the study.

Table 3: Importance of Marketing Objectives to Agricultural Trading Companies

Marketing Objectives	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	Std. Dev.
Customer satisfaction	7.7	9.6	17.3	9.6	55.8	3.9615	1.35707
Profit maximization	0	1.9	9.6	65.4	23.1	4.0962	.63430
Market share growth	0	21.2	21.2	34.6	23.1	3.5962	1.07118
Product quality	11.5	9.6	11.5	44.2	23.1	3.5769	1.27335
Survival	23.1	7.7	36.5	23.1	9.6	2.8846	1.27808
Target return on investment	13.5	17.3	32.7	25	11.5	3.0385	1.20394

Majority of the respondents agreed that marketing strategies are importance for profit maximization as shown by mean scores of 4.0962, customer satisfaction as shown by mean scores of 3.9615, market share growth as shown by mean scores of 3.5962 and product quality as shown by mean scores of 3.5769. On the other hand the respondents indicated neutrality on that the marketing strategies are importance in targeting return on investment as shown by mean scores of 3.0385 and survival of the firms as shown by mean scores of 2.8846. The market strategies employed by companies are use of sourcing strategies, research and development, sales and customers' service, high level of market orientation, marketing research, new products development practices and other operations. According to Ghemawat (2003) the core of a company's marketing strategy consists of its internal initiatives to deliver satisfaction to customers but also includes offensive and defensive moves to counter the maneuvering of rivals, actions to shift resources around to improve the firm's long term competitive capabilities and market position, and tactical efforts to respond to prevailing market conditions. Developing an appropriate marketing strategy that would be effective in a competitive and changing environment is quite a challenging task. Success in developing a marketing program for any type of product requires the ability to understand both management and customer perspective (Gabor, 2000).

Pricing Strategy

The first specific objective of the study was to determine the effect of pricing as a marketing strategy in influencing competitiveness of agricultural trading companies in Kenya. As such the results on the extent to which pricing strategy affects the competitiveness of agricultural trading companies in Kenya are as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Extent to which Pricing Strategy affects Firms Competitiveness

Extent	Frequency	Percent
To a very great extent	21	38.5
To a great extent	23	42.3
To a moderate extent	11	19.2
Total	**55**	**100.0**

From the study, 42.3% of the respondents indicated that pricing strategy affects the competitiveness of agricultural trading companies to a great extent, 38.5% of them indicated to a very great extent, while 19.2% of the respondents opined that pricing strategy affects the competitiveness of agricultural trading companies to a moderate extent. The results imply that price is the only element of the marketing mix to generate revenues and strongly affects agricultural trading companies' operations and plausibility of a price reduction influences consumer perceptions of the advertised offer. The results coincide with those of Tsai (2004) who established that pricing is essential in achieving competitive advantage whereby the selling price of a product is calculated to produce a particular rate of return on investment for a specific volume of production.

The study further sought to establish the extent to which various aspects of pricing strategy affect the firms' competitiveness in the market. The results obtained are as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Aspects of Pricing Strategy that affect the Firms' Competitiveness

Aspects of Pricing Strategy	No extent	Little extent	Moderate extent	Large extent	Very large extent	Mean	Std dev
Product/ services price	15.4	11.5	26.9	40.4	5.8	3.0962	1.1759
Costing standards	0	7.7	28.8	17.3	46.2	4.0192	1.0382
Price reductions	7.7	15.4	19.2	26.9	30.8	3.5769	1.2886
Quality measures	0	5.8	7.7	34.6	51.9	4.3269	.85683
Operating costs	18.8	10.4	35.4	35.4	33.3	3.2972	1.6102

According to the results depicted in Table 5, the respondents reiterated that quality measures affects the firms' competitiveness in the market to a great extent as shown by a mean score of 4.3269, costing standards affects the firms' competitiveness in the market to a great extent as shown by a mean score of 4.0192 and price reductions affects the firms' competitiveness in the market to a great extent as shown by a mean score of 3.5769, while operating costs affects the firms' competitiveness in the market to a moderate extent as shown by a mean score of 3.2972 and product/services price affects the firms' competitiveness in the market to a moderate extent as shown by a mean score of 3.0962. Previously, Yang and Liu (2006) Pricing choices determine not only which activities a company will perform and how it will configure individual activities, but also how they relate to one another. This is crucial, since the essence of implementing strategy is in the activities - choosing to perform activities differently or to perform different activities than rivals. A firm is more than the sum of its activities.

The study further sought to establish the respondents' agreement on various statements on the effects of pricing strategy on the competitiveness of agricultural trading companies in Kenya. A scale of 1 to 5 was provided where 1- Strongly Disagree, 2- Disagree, 3- Neutral, 4- Agree, 5- Strongly Agree.

Table 6: Effects of Pricing Strategy on Competitiveness of Agri- Trading Firms

Statements on pricing strategy	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	Std dev
The Firm has the best prices in the market	4.1	26.3	18.1	19.2	32.3	3.4612	1.2633
Our Company's pricing of products and services has contributed to its business success	29.2	43.8	8.3	8.3	10.4	3.5428	1.5152
This agricultural trading Company reacts swiftly to price changes in the market place	0	23.1	46.2	30.7	0	3.0769	.75955
Our competitors always copy and follow its pricing strategy	0	23.1	69.2	7.7	0	2.8462	.55470
The Firm establishes a specific price image to achieve a competitive positioning and customer loyalty	2.3	27.1	6.7	41.3	22.6	3.5489	1.1772

Majority of the respondents agreed that the agricultural trading companies establish a specific price image to achieve a competitive positioning and customer loyalty as shown by a mean score of 3.5489 and agricultural trading companies' pricing of products and services has contributed to its business success as shown by a mean score of 3.5428, while they indicated neutrality on that agricultural trading companies have the best prices in the market as shown by a mean score of 3.4612, agricultural trading companies react swiftly to price changes in the market place as shown by a mean score of 3.0769 and agricultural trading companies' competitors always copy and follow their pricing strategy as shown by a mean score of 2.8462. The findings are in accordance with Bertone, Clark, West and Groves (2009) who established that pricing strategy is mostly associated with large businesses offering standard products that are clearly different from competitors who may target a broader group of customers. In addition, Tsai (2004) argues that firms create competitive advantage by perceiving or discovering new and better ways to compete in an industry and bringing them to market, which is ultimately an act of innovation.

Product Branding Strategy

In its second specific objective, the study sought to assess the effects of product branding as a competitive marketing strategy of agricultural trading companies in Kenya. As such the respondents were required to rate the extent to which product branding strategy affects the competitiveness of agricultural trading companies in Kenya.

Table 7: Extent to which Product Branding Strategy affects Firms' Competitiveness

Extent	Frequency	Percent
To a very great extent	12	21.2
To a great extent	25	46.2
To a moderate extent	6	11.5
To a little extent	11	19.2
To no extent	1	1.9
Total	**55**	**100.0**

According to table 7, majority (46.2%) of the respondents indicated product branding strategy affects the competitiveness of agricultural trading companies to a great extent, 21.2% of them indicated that product branding strategy affects the competitiveness of agricultural trading companies t to a very great extent, 19.2% of the respondents indicated to a little extent, 11.5% of them rated the effect to be moderate extent, while 1.9% of the respondents indicated that product branding strategy affects the competitiveness of agricultural trading companies to no extent. These results indicate product branding strategy affects the competitiveness of agricultural trading companies to a significant extent. They are in line with Nakata et al., (2006) who found that emphasizing product branding strategy has a stronger positive impact on product performance. Kay (2006) also reported that firms with the greater degree of product branding appear to achieve potential higher product performance.

The study also sought to ascertain the level of application of the various product branding strategies in the agricultural trading firms. Table 8 shows the results of the study.

Table 8: Application of Product Branding Strategies in Agricultural Trading Firms

Product branding strategy	No extent	Little extent	Moderate Extent	Great extent	Very great extent	Mean	Std dev
Innovative products	13.5	17.3	32.7	25	11.5	3.0385	1.2039
Product quality	1.9	19.2	17.3	36.5	25	3.6346	1.1207
Product brand rejuvenatio n	7.7	7.7	30.8	23.1	30.8	3.6154	1.2232
Product relevance and awareness	0	11.5	17.3	38.5	32.7	3.9231	0.9871

From the study, majority of the respondents indicated that product relevance and awareness, product quality and product brand rejuvenation are applied in their firms to great extent as shown by mean scores of 3.9231, 3.6346 and 3.6154 respectively. On the other hand, there was a moderate the level of application of innovative products in the agricultural trading firms as shown by a mean score of 3.0385. The results are a reflection of Tsai (2004) who proposed that product branding was a critical activity because new products become the core of the competition demanding innovativeness, quality, product relevance and awareness. In the same line, Lynch (2006) indicated that product branding strategy shows originality, goals, logical coherence, takes into considerations the risks and resources and flexibility. As such, firms with higher level new product development tend to have potentially important source of competitive advantage and response to the changing competitive environment as well as lead to superior performance in exporting ultimately.

The respondents were further required to indicate their level of agreement with various statements on product branding strategy. The results are as shown in Table 9.

Table 9: Agreement with Statements on Product Branding Strategy

Product branding strategy	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Std. Dev.
Product branding has a stronger positive impact on product performance	3.8	5.3	27.8	18	45.1	3.9549	1.13394
Product branding strategy is a necessary means of building sales by identifying products and services	12.5	12.5	18.8	18.8	37.5	3.3750	1.20416
Product branding builds consumer awareness by naming the offer and by distinguishing the offer from other similar products or services	6.3	18.8	25	43.8	6.3	2.7500	1.12546
Product branding has been effectively applied to products and services in this Firm	18.8	18.8	18.8	18.8	25	3.6875	1.35247

Majority of the respondents agreed that product branding has a stronger positive impact on product performance as shown by a mean score of 3.9549 and product branding has been effectively applied to products and services in this firm as shown by a mean score of 3.6875, while product branding strategy is a necessary means of building sales by identifying products and services as shown by a mean score of 3.3750 and product branding builds consumer awareness by naming the offer and by distinguishing the offer from other similar products or services as shown by a mean score of 2.7500. A product branding strategy provides the framework to orient a company's marketing projects as well as its development process. According to Kärreman and Rylander (2008) product banding strategy takes into account the company's capabilities (strengths, weaknesses and core competencies), the competition's capabilities (strengths, weaknesses, core competencies and strategy), market needs and opportunities, goals, and financial resources.

Regression Analysis

To establish the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable of the study the study conducted inferential analysis. The study sought to complement the descriptive analysis by carrying out a multiple regression analysis. A multivariate regression model was applied to determine the relative importance of each of the four variables with respect to the marketing strategies adopted by agricultural trading companies in Kenya and their effect on firm competitiveness where the context of focus was Bio Medica Laboratories Ltd, Monsanto, Osho Chemicals and Syngenta. The researcher applied the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) to code, enter and compute the measurements of the multiple regressions for the study. The model Summary for the regression is shown in table 10 below.

Table 10: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.832	.692	.600	.0378

a. Predictors: (Constant), pricing strategy, product branding strategy

Coefficient of determination explains the extent to which changes in the dependent variable can be explained by the change in the independent variables or the percentage of variation in the dependent variable (firm competitiveness) that is explained by all the two independent variables (pricing strategy, product branding strategy).

The two independent variables that were studied, explain only 69.2% of the firm competitiveness as represented by the R^2. This therefore means the four independent variables only contribute about 69.2% to the performance while other factors not studied in this research contributes 30.8% of the firm competitiveness.

Table 11: Multiple Regression Analysis

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2.466	.515		0.917	0.367
	Pricing strategy	0.189	.144	.165	1.081	.0198
	Product branding	0.123	.113	.020	1.967	.0167

The researcher conducted a multiple regression analysis so as to determine the relationship between the performance and the two variables. The regression equation (**$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1X_1 + \beta_2X_2$**) became

$$Y = 2.466 + 0.189X_1 + 0.123X_2$$

According to the regression equation established, taking all factors (pricing strategy, product branding strategy) constant at zero, the competitiveness of the selected agricultural trading companies will be 2.466. The data findings analyzed also shows that taking all other independent variables at zero, a unit increase in pricing strategy will lead to a 0.189 increase in competitiveness of the selected agricultural trading companies. A unit increase in product branding strategy will lead to a 0.123 increase in competitiveness of the selected agricultural trading companies.

These results infer that pricing strategy contribution more than branding strategy contributed

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The general objective of the study was to determine the marketing strategies adopted by agricultural trading companies in Kenya and their effect on firm competitiveness where the context of focus was on Bio Medica Laboratories Ltd, Monsanto, Osho Chemicals and Syngenta.

The study ascertained that pricing strategy affects the competitiveness of agricultural trading companies to a great extent. According to these results, pricing element of the marketing mix generates revenue and strongly affects agricultural trading companies' operations. The study found that there are various aspects of pricing strategy affect the firms' competitiveness in the market. They include quality measures, costing standards, price reductions, operating costs and product/services price which affect the firms' competitiveness in the market. It was clear that the agricultural trading companies establish a specific price image to achieve a competitive positioning and customer loyalty, pricing of products and services has contributed to the business success, companies have the best prices in the market, agricultural trading companies react swiftly to price changes in the market place and agricultural trading companies' competitors always copy and follow their pricing strategy.

The study further found that product branding strategy affects the competitiveness of agricultural trading companies to a great extent. In this regard, product relevance and awareness, product quality and product brand rejuvenation are applied in their firms to great extents while there is a moderate the level of application of innovative products in the agricultural trading firms. From the study, product branding has a stronger positive impact on product performance, product branding has been effectively applied to products and services in the firms, product branding strategy is a necessary means of building sales by identifying products and services and product branding builds consumer awareness by naming the offer and by distinguishing the offer from other similar products or services.

Conclusions

There is a general conclusion that companies attempt to increase their business profitability and sustainability through innovative brand marketing strategies. The study concludes that the agricultural trading companies' marketing strategies are very much effective and the agricultural trading companies' marketing strategies provide opportunity to work together towards achieving the competitiveness of the firms. Based on the findings, the study concludes that marketing objectives are very important to the selected agricultural trading companies for profit maximization, customer satisfaction, targeting return on investment, for product quality, market share growth and survival. The marketing strategies are also important for product quality, customer satisfaction, market share growth, profit maximization, in targeting return on investment and survival of the firms.

The study concludes that product branding affects the competitiveness of the selected agricultural trading companies. From the findings, product relevance and awareness, product quality and product brand rejuvenation are applied in their firms to great extents while there is a moderate the level of application of innovative products in the agricultural trading firms. Entry barriers to competitors and substitutes, new product introduction and product line branding, new product development at the selected agricultural trading companies involves a greater degree of innovational challenge with an ultimate aim of increasing customer base, consumers seek different product benefits in various localities, thus as the selected agricultural trading companies expand. The selected agricultural trading companies may use product as one of their marketing strategies and choosing the product portfolio determines the selected agricultural trading companies' strategy for the medium term future and its senior management responsibility.

The study also concludes that pricing strategy affect the tourism performance at the selected agricultural trading companies. Price is the only element of the marketing mix to generate revenues and strongly affects customer acquisition and plausibility of a price reduction influences consumer perceptions of the advertised offer, the selected agricultural trading companies establishes a specific price image to achieve a competitive positioning and customer loyalty. From the study the various aspects of pricing strategy that affect the firms' competitiveness in the market include quality measures, costing standards, price reductions, operating costs and product/services price which affect the firms' competitiveness in the market. Price was the most important factor in for competitiveness of the selected agricultural trading companies and the benefit that the organizations accrue from the strategy leads to competitiveness of the agricultural trading companies.

Recommendations

From the foregoing, the agricultural trading companies' marketing strategies are effective and provide opportunity to work together towards achieving the competitiveness of the firms. For their products to be appreciated by customers, the management of the agricultural trading companies should ensure that their brands attain certain standards of quality. This will enable the companies in the industry to provide services and products that enhance their competitiveness. The firms should continuously review their brands in consideration of aspects like product relevance and awareness, product quality and product brand rejuvenation. In this regard, the companies should budget for these packaging strategies so as to protect their brand image and help the consumers differentiate the genuine from the fake brands. This will also help the companies regain their market share and hence competitiveness.

From the findings, pricing strategy affects the competitiveness of agricultural trading companies. Accordingly, the study recommends that the companies should embrace pricing strategies to increase volume sales by increasing their efforts to sell more products which will enable them gain competitive advantage. In this regard, the firms should pay special attention to quality measures, costing standards, price reductions, operating costs and product/services price. This will ensure that the firms establish a specific price image to achieve a competitive positioning and customer loyalty. Such approaches would also contributed to the business success and reacting swiftly to price changes in the market place.

Suggestions for Further Research

The study has investigated the marketing strategies adopted by agricultural trading companies in Kenya and their effect on firm competitiveness where the context of focus was Bio Medica Laboratories Ltd, Monsanto, Osho Chemicals and Syngenta. The researcher suggests that issues for further study on the drivers/determinants that influence the marketing strategies need to be investigated. In addition, a study on the effects of each of the marketing strategies on performance of companies within and outside the industry should be conducted in the local setting as a way of gathering generalizable findings that could act as guidelines for policy recommendations in marketing strategies and their effect on firm competitiveness in this era of technological advancements.

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