

Tactical marketing decisions of managers in times of crisis

Qatar Airways Company, Grounded Theory

Sevinj Omarli

This research study is conducted with the primary aim of exploring tactical marketing decisions of managers in times of crisis; using Qatar Airways Company as a sample. The main purpose of the study is to determine which factors impact on the tactical marketing decisions of managers and what marketing activities are applied in times of crisis. The interviews with marketing information executives were analyzed using grounded theory methodology. Data analysis in the study followed Strauss and Corbin (1990) coding processes. 4500 coding materials were analyzed in two interviews. Results indicated that four major components marketing strategy of a company, marketing informational system (MIS), environmental factors, and internal restrictions and limitations of the company - play important roles in the decision-making process of managers in the crisis period. It was determined that if a company makes tactical promotional decisions such as proposing new campaigns, placing advertisements at local websites and tourism agencies, allocating budget for promoting the website as a sales channel, they will get positive outcomes during crisis periods.

Keywords: Crisis, Tactical decision, Marketing activities, Grounded Theory

1. Introduction

Economic difficulty influences customers to change their buying behavior. Not only customers but also companies make changes in their marketing policy to provide better service and to fulfill the new customer preferences.

In crisis periods, companies make very significant adaptations in their marketing strategy. Crisis situations are an integrable characteristic of corporate behavior in the market economy. Given the need for external environmental factors; internally, managers should set up a plan for anti-crisis corporate activity and adaptation in order to stabilize the process. Rollins et al. (2014) examined B2B companies and determined that they quickly adapt to the crisis, they reallocate their marketing investments, and change marketing strategy.

2. Literature Review

Crisis may have an important impact on company performance, however its impact is not the same for every firm. Some companies consider crisis as an opportunity to strengthen their business and follow an aggressive marketing approach. According to Srinivasan et al. (2005), proactive marketing leads to superior business performance even during recession. Another author, Mirjavadi (2015) determined that the marketing strategy impacted on business performance during the recession in Iran and

confirmed the role of proactive marketing in improving market and business performance. Similar results were found that companies modifying their strategies in times of crises can improve their performance.

In the table below, you can see some studies in the literature that pointed to the importance of marketing activities in a crisis period.

Table 1 The Literature on the Marketing Impacts of Crisis.

Subject	Research Topic	Source
General effects of the crisis	The impact factor of crisis on marketing in the United States., field interviews	Rollins et al. (2014)
	Tackling A Crisis Smoothly, synthesis of business practice and academic theories	Kitching et al. (2009)
	The impact of economic downturns on marketing	Rollins et al. (2014)
	The recent literature review of crisis, providing the integrative framework	Latham and Braun (2011)
	Economic crisis impacts on companies, assessment of the effects of marketing strategies on company performance in such conditions, survey, Turkey	Köksal and Özgül (2007)
	Propose the construct of proactive marketing	Srinivasan et al. (2005)
Marketing Budget	Time series analysis of advertising and promotional expenditures on firms' earnings, a differential impact of crisis	Graham and Frankenberger (2011)
	Meta-analysis of extant research on marketing expenditure during recessions.	O'Malley et al. (2011)
	Marketing's contribution to the profitability of Greek enterprises during the economic crisis	Chouliaras et al. (2015)
	The Impact of Proactive Strategies on Market Performance in Economic Downturn: The Case of Hungary	Gyulavari, Kolos (2015)
	Whether firms should spend more on research and development and advertising in recessions., large panel of US firms.	Srinivasan et al. (2011)
	Firm- and industry-level antecedents of advertising spending during economic contractions	Özturan, et al. (2014)

Source: own study

Decreasing the marketing budget is the typical reaction of companies in crisis periods. Retrenching or investing seem to be critical decisions in crisis times. Companies face pressure to decrease marketing expenditures sacrificing future sales

and profits (Gyulavari–Kolos 2015). On the other hand, proactive firms have the chance to improve their competitive advantage (O'Malley et al. 2011). Contrary to this, companies can also benefit from the increasing number of Internet users and of different and innovative low-cost online advertising (Quelch–Jocz 2009).

If a manager assertively decides to apply promotion techniques such as coupons, bonuses, free samples etc. in a crisis period, it can positively affect the customer, and achieve value immediately or improve company performance. Other studies suggest that during the crisis, the best strategy for companies is to change distribution policy. In this way, companies can eliminate inefficient channels and intermediaries, and reallocate limited resources (Ang et al. 2000, Köksal–Özgül 2007) When companies change their promotional strategies during and after the crisis, sales income and market share can be increased.

Every company has constant interaction with its surroundings. In this context environmental factors affect companies quite strongly. In the decision-making process, managers should take environmental factors into consideration during the crisis. The company has a mutual and continuous relationship with its surroundings in the open system model. Managerial decisions making and behaviors should be based on the interaction model considering many factors, both internal and external. According to Omarli (2017), the manager's deep knowledge of environmental factors such as competitors, economic crisis, politics and so on are very important to achieve success in companies. Another study conducted by Graham (2004) found 46 strategic marketing decisions from 32 small businesses. The author held six in-depth interviews in designing and implementing a theoretical research framework in the strategic decision-making process. It was found that the external contextual factors are strongly affected by decision-making processes. Companies are directly impacted upon by all types of fluctuations and adjustments in general environmental factors. As examples of external contextual factors, stakeholders, competition, technology, macroeconomic indicators (financial credit, interest rate, inflation), and regulation (political-legal) etc. were cited.

On the other hand, the general environmental factors mentioned above also involve local environmental factors affecting companies and their actions. For example, during economic crisis times, customers are impacted and therefore stop purchasing. As a result, competitors face challenges in finding new customers by attacking each other's market shares, hence competition in the industry increases (Eren 2001). In this case, managers have to consider changing their decisions based on varying environments (Omarli 2017)

In this research tactical marketing decisions of managers in times of crisis were identified; using Qatar Airways Company as a sample. Qatar Airways is one of the youngest global airlines to serve all six continents. It connects more than 160 destinations on the map every day. A lot of companies like Qatar Airways were affected by crisis in 2017. The main purpose of the study is to determine which factors impact on tactical marketing decisions of managers in times of crisis and what marketing activities they apply.

3. Research Methods

Grounded theory is one of the most popular research methods in qualitative studies. It is a method which involves the progressive process of identification and integration of categories of meaning from data. It consists of two part; the process of category identification and integration part is a method and its product is a theory. Grounded theory provides us with instructions on how to identify categories, how to make a connection between categories and how to constitute relationships between them.

Grounded Theory was originally conceptualized by Strauss and Corbin in 1990 and it refers to a general systematic research methodology of data collection and analysis that uses a systematically applied set of methods to generate theory about a substantive area (Glaser 1992).

This research study is conducted with the primary aim of exploring tactical marketing decisions of managers in times of crisis; using Qatar Airways Company as a case study. To this end, two interviews with marketing information executives were analyzed using grounded theory methodology.

4. Grounded Theory (Interviewing)

4.1. Research Question

Which factors impact on tactical marketing decisions of managers and what marketing activities are applied in times of crisis?

4.2. Purpose of Selecting Interviewee

How many participants is enough? According to Seidman (2005), “enough is an interactive reflection of every step of the interview process and different for each study and each researcher”. If we consider practical exigencies of time, money, and other resources, one interviewee is enough for learning how to do grounded theory.

The first interviewee was Mr. A. E., one of the marketing information executives of Qatar Airways Company in Azerbaijan. The second was Mr. S.E. who is one of the marketing managers of Qatar Airways Company in Turkey.

4.3. Interview Guide

According to Weiss (1994), “An interview guide is a listing of area to be covered in the interview along with, for each area, listing of topics or questions that together will suggest lines of inquiry”. In the unstructured interview method, the researcher comes to the interview with no predefined theoretical framework, and thus no hypotheses and questions. Rather, the researcher has conversations with interviewees and generates questions in response to the interviewees’ narration. The interview guide consists of two parts; problem-solving and decision-making.

Theoretical coding refers to a systematic process used to make sense of research data by categorizing and grouping similar examples from the data. There are three commonly accepted types of theoretical coding: open/initial coding, axial coding and selective/focused coding (Charmaz 2006, Strauss–Corbin 1990).

Each step of coding enables scholars to break data down further into categories and themes to examine the relationships within the data (Birks–Mills 2012).

5.1. Coding Materials

The initial or open coding is the first step in data analysis. It is a way of identifying important words, or groups of words, in the data and then labeling them accordingly (Birks–Mills 2012).

Figure 2 Sample from the interview material

Interviewer: Could you tell me please what type of information do managers need in times of crisis?

Respondent: If we talk about local Azerbaijani markets, especially airline companies, firstly we need information of our competitors. We are analyzing our rivals. If there is a crisis, it affects our competitors as if us. Thereby we analyze our competitors and know what kind of activities they have.

We compare the activities of our competitors with our own activities. What differences are between transact business of our company and others? What kind of activities of our company are more superior to other companies? What are the advantages our competitors? What is the opportunity? We make comparisons.

Before the crisis, the price of ticket of Qatar Airways to Maldives was 1,300 AZN. The number of travelers was also quite large. There is a growing competition on the market. There is a growing competition on the market now. To set an example, the competition for flying to Indonesia (Ballet) or Goa (India) has increased nowadays. Low-cost airlines (loco) airline companies have just broken into market. 2 years ago, even those who said 'I would never fly to Bale without Qatar airlines' are using low cost airlines now. Because the price difference is obvious. We are obliged to measure the current customer behavior and decide to make our own plans according to that situation and competitors.

Sevinj Omarli May 23, 2017
Gathering information on competitors and analyzing
Reply Resolve

Sevinj Omarli Market Surveys

Sevinj Omarli Making the comparison

Sevinj Omarli Analysing competitors

Sevinj Omarli Disclosure of differences

Sevinj Omarli Srengths

Sevinj Omarli Opportunity

Sevinj Omarli Increase in competition

Sevinj Omarli New entrants to the labour

Sevinj Omarli Intensity of competitors

Sevinj Omarli Change in purchasing behavior

Sevinj Omarli Decline in customer loyalty

Sevinj Omarli Analysis of customer

Source: Own construction

Developing categories through the process of intermediate coding will increase the level of conceptual analysis in the developing grounded theory. At this time, the researcher may choose to select a core category that encapsulates and explains the grounded theory as a whole. Developing categories through the process of intermediate coding will increase the level of conceptual analysis in the developing grounded theory. At this time, the researcher may choose to select a core category that encapsulates and explains the grounded theory itself (Birks–Mills 2012).

Table 3 Open and Axial Coding

Open Coding	Axial Coding
New Competitors to the Labor Market Intensity of Competitors Changing Purchase Behavior of Customer Increasing Competition	Category 1: Characteristics of the crisis period Subcategory 1. Consumer Issue Subcategory 2. Competitors Issue
Analyzing Market Surveys Customer Analyzing	Category 2: Marketing Research
Gathering Information from Competitors	Category 3: Marketing intelligence
Considering Particular Importance to Customer Satisfaction Creating New Target Audiences Making Special Discount to the customer Efforts to Increase the Degree of Loyalty Trying to Increase the Intention to Buy Keeping Customer Requests in the Planning Front	Category 4: Tactical Marketing Decision Subcategory 1: Customer oriented activities
Proposed New Projects or Campaign Placing Ads in Local Website Placing Ads in Tourism Agency Promoting Website as a Sales Channel Using Google AdWords	Subcategory 2: Promotional activities:
Transferring Budget Effective Use of Budget Decreasing Advertisement Expenditure Reduction/ Cancellation of Marketing Activities	Subcategory 3: Efficient using of budget:
Arrange Events with Partner Company Arranging Business Events with Agencies Making Joint Marketing Activity	Category 5: Cooperation with Partner Companies:
Decline in Customer Loyalty Failure to Reach Target Decrease in Marketing Budget Reduction in Advertisement Expenditure (Budget)	Category 6: Negative result of crisis period
Increasing Incentives Strict Business Rules Low Decision-Making Speed Slow Procedure High-Price Ads	Category 7: Challenges of difficulties
Analytical Tools - Adobe Marketing Cloud Using Different Analytical Tools Database (MIS) Increasing Productivity with MIS	Category 8: Informational Tools

Receiving New Email Newsletters Increasing Money Circulation Doubling the Budget in Crisis Period	Category 9: Achievement of company in crisis period
Decision-Making Becomes Constructive Individual Decision Making Group Decision Making	Category 10: Type of Decision Making
Cost Sharing Win - Win Strategy Making Comparison Disclosure of Differences Strengths Opportunity Conducting Cost Optimization Development of Cheap Sales Channels	Category 11: Marketing Strategy of Company
Restriction for Placing Adv. in the local website Restriction for Cost Issues High-Price Difference with Competitors High Decision-Making Speed of Competitors	Category 12: Restriction/ Limitation of Company
Facilities Evaluation Process Competition Evaluation Process Key Performance Indicator (KPI) Checking Process KPI Evaluation Process	Category 13: Internal Evaluation Process
E-Mail Customer Segment Social Media Customer Segment Online Channel Orientation	Category 14: Type of Customers

Source: Own construction

63 coded materials are in the Open Code, 14 categories are (5 subcategories) in the Axial Code.

Selective coding is the process of choosing one category to be the core category and relating all other categories to that category. The essential idea is to develop a single storyline around which everything else is draped. There is a belief that such a core concept always exists.

5.2. Selective category emerged from Axial coded materials

Selective coding begins only after the researcher has identified a potential core variable. Subsequent data collection and coding is delimited to that which is relevant to the emerging conceptual framework (the core and those categories that relate to the core) (Holton 2010).

Table 4 Selective Coding

Selective Coding	Core Category: Tactical Decision of Manager in Crisis Period
Cooperation with Partner Companies Marketing Strategy	Category 1. Marketing Strategy of Company
Marketing Research Informational Tools Marketing intelligence	Category 2. Marketing Informational System
Advantage of Competitors Limited Budget Procedure	Category 3. Restriction and Limitation of Companies
Characteristics of the crisis period Advantage of Competitors Type of Consumer Internal Evaluation	Category 4. Environmental Factor Subcategory 4.1: Internal Factors Subcategory 4.2: External Factors
Negative result of crisis period Challenges of difficulties Achievement of company in crisis period	Category 5: Outcomes Subcategory 5.1: Negative Result Subcategory 5.2: Positive Result

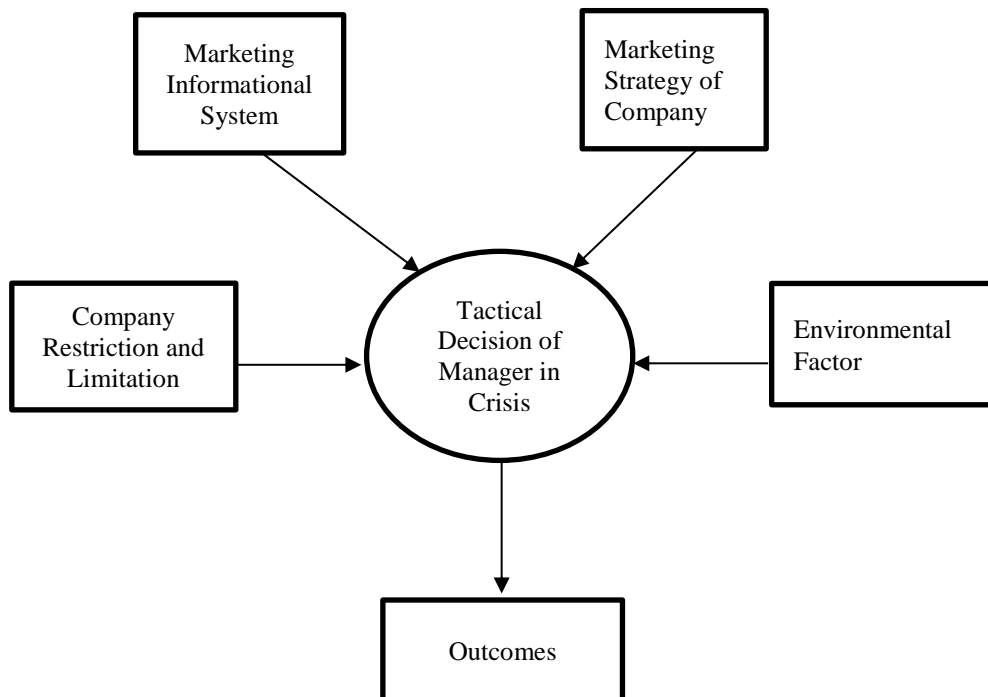
Source: Own construction

6. Findings and Results

The final product of a grounded theory study is an integrated and comprehensive grounded theory that explains a process or scheme associated with a phenomenon.

The main theme is “Tactical Decision of Managers in the crisis period”. The tactical decisions in marketing are related to the implementation of strategic decisions. They are directed towards developing divisional plans, structuring workflows, establishing distribution channels, and acquisition of resources. It is obvious that these decisions are taken at the middle level of management. During economic crisis, four major components are related to tactical decision making in marketing and especially on their marketing activities: These are; Marketing Strategy of Company, Marketing Informational System, Environmental factors, Restriction, and Limitations of Company.

Figure 3 Grounded Theory



Source: Own construction

In the crisis period, the most significant factor is environmental factors. Especially the external environment is constantly changing. Moreover, marketing managers understand the changes and know how to make a tactical marketing decision.

The competition also plays a considerable role in shaping marketing mix, market share, and market demand since the enterprise cannot have full control of this variable. During the crisis, new competitors enter the labor market and competition is increasing and getting more intensive.

[...] To set an example, the competition for flying to Indonesia (Ballet) or Goa (India) have been increased nowadays. The low-cost airline (loco) companies have just broken into the market. Two years ago, even those who said `I would never fly to Bale without Qatar airlines` are using low-cost airlines now. Because the price difference is obvious. We are obliged to measure the current customer behavior and decide to make our own plans according to this situation and we have to consider our competitors as well.

Marketing managers should consider internal environmental factors when making a tactical decision. For example, managers have to evaluate business facilities which increased competitiveness or to monitor and evaluate the key performance indicators. Another environmental issue is changes in purchasing behavior of customers. The financial crisis motivated customers to act more economically. In general, during financial crisis customers become more “money minded”. They start to buy only necessities, switch to cheaper brands and have a more rational view of promotion.

When managers are making a tactical decision, they arrange some customer orientation activities in crisis periods. The company has considered customer requests on the planning front, giving importance to them, granting special discounts, increasing intention to buy and making efforts to increase the degree of loyalty.

Tactical Marketing Decision is the type most related to marketing strategy. In crisis periods, managers arrange events with a partner company, conduct Joint Marketing Activities, and apply Cost Sharing Strategy, as building a partnership directly with marketing companies proves to be less expensive and more successful than the alternatives from inside of the company.

[...] I use these data and present it to some companies like “Master card” and suggest that let’s do a joint marketing. Let’s spend 5000 dollars and arrange the event with cost sharing, then make special discounts for the customer of Master Card. In short, we can provide opportunities which are more efficient by using such analytical information during the crisis periods.

In the crisis periods, Qatar Airways decided to promote the website as a sales channel. This is also a marketing strategy. In that case, they developed cheap sales channels, saved the budget and performed optimization.

Another important category “Marketing Information System” (MIS) is related to the tactical decision-making process as well. The role of MIS has been described and analyzes the capability of decision-making. According to the coding result, the marketing information system constitutes marketing intelligence: how management can keep up with the new knowledge of competitors and emerging conditions. In our study, it is determined that market research is the process of collecting and analyzing data for the purposes of identifying and resolving problems. It is related to companies’ marketing services and marketing opportunities, and planned and managed activities on a scientific basis to ensure efficiency in dealing with these problems and opportunities.

Qatar Airways Company has used certain technical tools such as Adobe Marketing Cloud to analyze the company data to support better tactical decision-making, identify new business opportunities and reduce costs and in this case, the company increased productivity in crisis periods.

[...] Therefore, you can be more certain in the crisis period. The Adobe Marketing Cloud helps us to measure the effectiveness of our advertising channels. For instance, we placed a bank account on the website (www.hesab.az). It has a given price approximately 500 AZN (Azerbaijan National Currency). We can see the “search visual” by clicking on “create”, “purchase create” buttons. Adobe Marketing Cloud informs us that 1,500 people out of 2000 people made search the advertisement which is placed on the hesab.az website by us and 5 people of them display purchasing behavior.

Company restrictions and limitations influence tactical marketing decisions during economic crisis. In terms of crisis, decision-making is getting more constructive. These are the restrictions the company faced; cost issues, strict rules, high price difference with competitors, and greater decision-making speed of competitors. Moreover, some big companies face difficulties such as increasing incentives, strict business rules, low decision-making speed, slow procedure, and high-priced ads. Thereby it affects tactical decision making. They start to decrease the advertisement expenditures or reduce/cancel marketing activities to use their budget more efficiently.

The last category is “outcomes of a company”. Well-planned entrepreneurial activities can increase company sales and profits by overcoming customer retention tendencies during the crisis period.

Some negative outcomes for the company are; failure to reach the target, reduction in the marketing budget, decreasing offline advertisement expenditures, and so on.

[...] The marketing budget is reduced because your company can't reach the target, and you have to cut off the budget of advertising or eliminate some marketing activities.

When companies are recalculating their budgets, they mostly decide to reduce the expenses for advertising and marketing during crisis periods. But specialists in the field of communications advise that advertisement is the most important tool for bringing the biggest volumes of sales in difficult periods, and that companies must take advantage of these opportunities for subsequent periods.

Qatar Airways Company did make some tactical promotional decision. They proposed new projects and campaigns, placed ads in local websites and tourism agencies, allocated money for promoting the website as a sales channel, and so on. In this way, the company got positive outcomes, for example, instituted a new email newsletter, increased money circulation, and doubled the budget during the crisis period.

[...] We were arranging 12 commercial events during the year. Due to the crisis, we reduced the number of events 3 times. We spent money on the last 9 activities on the website's advertising

expenditures and promoted our website as a sales channel. When I started to work for this company in 2015, the money circulation of the website was 0.9 million dollars. I decided to make it doubled and it increased to \$ 1.8 million dollars. The reason for our achievement is to cancel different activities and put money on different budgets.

7. Conclusion

In periods of economic crisis, customers are affected and therefore they stop buying, while competitors have difficulty finding new customers, attacking each other's market shares as competition in the industry gets hotter (Eren 2001). It has become imperative for managers to make and change decisions according to the ever-changing environments (Omarli 2017).

The competition also plays a considerable role in shaping marketing mix, market share, and market demand, since the enterprise cannot have the full control of this variable. During the crisis, the number of new competitors entering the labor market increases and the market becomes more intensive. In this study we analyzed Qatar Airways Company using certain technical tools such as Adobe Marketing Cloud to analyze company data, in order to support better tactical decision making, identify new business opportunities, and reduce costs, and by doing so, the company actually increased productivity in the crisis period.

We applied a qualitative research method, grounded theory, to analyze our data. In the study, we used Qatar Airways Company as a case study. During the crisis periods, exactly what kind of marketing activities are applied by managers was determined, as were the factors which have an effect on tactical marketing decisions by managers. Two interviews with marketing information executives were analyzed using grounded theory methodology. To conclude, by diminishing the negative influences of the crisis, Qatar Airways Company made marketing budgets more efficient by increasing customers' loyalty and attracting new customers by building a strong, distinct brand image. In the crisis period investigated, Qatar Airways Company also arranged events with a partner company, engaged in certain Joint Marketing Activities, and applied Cost Sharing Strategy to form a partnership with a marketing company which proved less expensive and more successful than the alternatives available within the company.

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