

A SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY FOR THE AUTOMOTIVE REFINISH DISTRIBUTION INDUSTRY

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Abstract: The ever-changing nature of competition, soaring customer demands and immensely competitive refinishing market has resulted in some automotive refinish paint distributors having to adopt innovative, creative and proactive approaches when planning the strategic execution of their sustainable business development strategies. Some of these innovative, creative and proactive approaches are difficult to evaluate against marketing principles or by using traditional business management tools. What is perceptible to the management of these automotive paint distributors, albeit unknown to them, is that they are practicing a multi-dimensional approach to doing business in the automotive refinish retail distribution sector – a strategic mix between customised technical services support structure and the management sales support activities.

Key phrases: *automotive refinish business, customer satisfaction, customer service and support, sustainable business development strategies*

1. INTRODUCTION

Drucker (2000:32) maintains there is only one valid definition of business purpose: to create a customer. Accordingly, in the current complex and turbulent automotive refinish distribution industry, building growth and sustainable business development that focuses on creating a satisfied customer, should be a business corporate strategy and an integral part of the business management milieu. Thus, to remain competitive, businesses need to be dynamic and be able to act in flexible and adaptive ways to create a customer (Rosenberg 2007:18, Van Heerden & Du Toit 2000:82).

The single most important aspect of business management is to establish a simple, clear, focused idea of how a firm's products and services are perceived by customers, which differentiate them from those of the competitors (Peeling 2005:107). In order to do this, management must ensure that their sustainable business development strategies are consistent with their business goals and objectives so that the firm's resources and capabilities can be moulded to produce distinctive competencies. These competencies enable creativity, innovation, efficiency, and customer satisfaction, all of which create competitive advantage.

2. THE CONCEPT OF CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

There is significant evidence in the marketing literature that customer satisfaction is an important driver of a firm's profitability (Kotler, Armstrong & Tait 2010:27; Luo & Homburg 2007:133; Stone, Kurtadikar, Villanueva & Arnold 2008:489). Marketing literature also concedes that consumers are in control, and have been since the start of the 21st century (Passikoff 2007:42). Thus, contemporary businesses must strive to satisfy customer needs in the most convenient way, minimising the time and energy that customers spend in searching for, ordering and receiving goods and services (Kotler, Jain & Maesincee 2002:10).

Marketing, more than any other business function, deals with customers (Kotler *et al.* 2010:18), thus the definition of marketing. This implies that the first task of marketing is to discover customers' current and future needs. Only by finding out the needs of customers can business organisations respond to these needs (Kotler & Armstrong 2006:6). In the automotive refinish distribution industry where competitive advantage is fragile, winners are those businesses who bring superior value to customers by providing customers with best value for their money.

This can be achieved by positioning the business in such a way that differentiates its products and services that are offered to a distinct group of customers (Marcus 2006:9). For these reasons, marketing in the automotive refinish distribution industry must combine all the organisation's resources in well-defined market-oriented target markets that are aligned with the overall business goals and objectives, all of which must be associated with satisfying customer needs. It is therefore imperative that customer needs are clearly defined and understood by businesses so as to develop appropriate innovative strategies to fulfil their needs at a profit.

3. DEFINING AND UNDERSTANDING CUSTOMER NEEDS

Customer needs are the problems a business would like to solve (Hoffman, Czinkota, Dickson, Dunne, Graffin, Hutt, Krishinan, Lusch, Ronkainen, Rosenbloom, Sheth, Shimp, Singuaw, Simpson, Speh & Urbany 2005:282). Products deliver solutions to customers'

problems and there are usually many different kinds of solutions for each customer need (Olsson & Karlsson 2003:311). Customers also have very specific needs that a product must address to be truly successful (Bakken 2001:31). These detailed needs can be difficult to unearth, because most detailed needs are specific to particular context in which the product is used (Karkkainen, Piippo, Puumalainen & Tuominen 2001:293). Clearly, no product is perfect. Each product is a compromise, in that it only partially solves a complex set of customer problems. Ultimately, products are sets of features that deliver extremely well for some needs, adequately for others, and not deliver at all for others (Hoffman *et al.* 2005:282). Over time, customers choose products with the set of features that deliver the maximum benefit for them (Stone, Kurtadikar, Villanueva & Arnold 2008:492).

It is therefore imperative to understand that customer needs are complex and developing successful products requires an understanding of the details of their needs. While needs are rather stable, the most successful solutions to customer needs change over time (Bakken 2001:35). Accordingly, customer needs are often ascertained initially through qualitative market research. Qualitative market research is often conducted with a small number of customers. Three methods, from the perspective of Hoffman *et al.* (2005:284) are especially useful for determining customer needs qualitatively, namely:

- becoming the people with the problem the firm wants to solve;
- critically observing those with the problems of interest; and
- talking, through interviewing, to people in depth about the problem.

Once a full set of needs has been gathered qualitatively, then a number of quantitative market research techniques can be used to predict which needs are more important (Hoffman *et al.* 2005:284). There is however no single technique that is sufficient to produce a full understanding of customer needs, consequently the best outcomes are obtained when multiple methods are used to understand consumers' problems in detail. This research investigates whether the needs of the automotive refinish customers, which are mostly auto-body repair shops, could be satisfied by implementing a sustainable business development strategy that includes customer service and support

systems. To do this the study seeks to develop a combination of innovative strategies which are centred both around market and customer focus that would work together to produce a sustainable automotive refinish business.

4. SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

Traditional strategy framework was oriented towards a simpler economic time, one of stable, scale-oriented industry environments, high systematic growth rates, and meaningful opportunities for product differentiation (CEO series 2003:40). However, in the current aggressive business environment, traditional strategy tools – with their emphasis on market growth and relative market share, on core competencies, on ‘time-to-market’ and ‘experience curve’ economies – cannot provide valuable sustainable growth. That is why Worthington and Britton (2006:4-15) and Freemantle (2007:xviii), proposed the philosophy of sustainable business development as the only way forward to create a competitive world economy.

Sustainability is often employed as a short-hand term for sustainable development (Morse 2010:1). Many traditional business people assume that sustainability refers to ‘eco-efficiency’ initiatives (Boyd 2001:36; Hartshorn & Wheeler 2002:108-110; Luchsinger 2009:165-166). Some people also think that sustainability means only environmental regulation (Welford *et al.* 1998 in Veleva & Ellenbecker 2000:102). This is an unfortunate assumption because business sustainability is actually connected to a wide range of diverse areas, including organisational behaviour, business strategy, operations management, accounting, finance, economics, environmental science, ethics, and social psychology – just to name a few (Freese 2007:27-33; Pojasek 2007:81-85). Some business leaders understand that sustainability increases efficiency and reduces waste and costs (Day 1997:247; Freese 2007:28). In short, sustainability requires good customer-oriented business processes.

A sustainable business is one whose characteristics and actions are designed to lead to a “sustainable future state” (Funk 200:65-67). However, as there are no ‘perfect’ or ‘ideal’ indicators of business sustainability applicable to any organisation (Veleva &

Ellenbecker 2000:117), the use of a well-developed strategic mix that is based on satisfying customer needs can be considered as an ideal philosophy in the current customer-ruled and technology-driven automotive refinish marketplace. Having the foresight to identify the threats and opportunities posed by the market and the tools to respond appropriately is critical for sustainable business growth (Hartshorn & Wheeler 2002:108). Success is not only a question of achieving competencies or skills within a single strategy element – success is a multidimensional concept, and there exists an interaction between each success criteria (Martensen & Dahlgaard 1999:632).

Whilst all businesses wish to sustain their operations as far into the future as possible (Dobson & Swift 2008:57), the question of sustainability is more than one of mere commercial development for the automotive refinish paint industry. It rather seeks to create long-term shareholder value by embracing the opportunities and managing the risks that result from an organisation's economic, environmental, and social responsibilities (Pojasek 2007:81), all of which should be associated with satisfying customer needs. Given that most of the past attempts at diversification have been largely unsuccessful in creating the required topline growth (Davila, Epstein & Shelton 2006:13), the approach to adopt an innovative, creative and proactive multidimensional concept of building a sustainability strategy, whilst aiming to accomplish a competitive advantage through superior customer service and support systems, has in this study, been identified as key concepts that could play an important role in orchestrating sustainable business development objectives throughout the organisation.

5. CUSTOMER SERVICE AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS

One of the most important strategies for creating a competitive advantage in the automotive refinish market is the delivery of high-quality technical service and support. Customer service can be defined in the context of the broader construct of service quality. Gronroos (2007) suggested that service quality consisted of technical and functional aspects. Technical aspects of service quality refer to what is delivered, whereas functional aspects focus on how service is delivered. In the automotive refinish

environment, both technical and functional aspects are used concurrently. As a result, customer service and support systems represent a key element of the automotive retail distribution strategy for maintaining a sustainable competitive advantage, even during difficult economic times (Grewal, Krishnan & Lindsey-Mullikin 2008:341). Consistent with these formulations, the term 'customer service' as used in this study refers to both technical and functional service quality delivered by employees.

At the heart of building long-term relationships with profitable customers is the quality of customer service, where quality is no longer considered as a separate discipline but as the central part of service (Omar, Azrin & Sarah 2009:68). Through extraordinary quality of customer service, an organisation can leverage differentiated services to provide a superior customer experience that can build brand loyalty and increase profits (Tripathi 2009:92). It is thus suggested by Omar *et al.* (2009:73) that when employees are customer-oriented, have good rapport with customers, and exhibit perceptive and attentive listening skills, customers will evaluate the service more highly and be more likely to return. Thus, drawing on the work of Yuen and Chan (2010), customer service can be said to be of high quality when customers are served in a manner consistent with their expectations regarding the interpersonal contributions that should be made by employees during the service encounter.

A customer service and support system is both a competitive advantage and an organisational cost. It requires a serious strategic approach in order to decide what should be provided (Sullivan & Adcock 2002:248). The ideal test therefore is to ensure that every service provided adds value to the retail distributor's operation and enhances the volume/value of business in a competitive marketplace to an extent that more than covers the cost of provision. Managing a successful customer interface requires a well-developed and well-thought-out customer service strategy (Grewal *et al.* 2008:341). Customer service is critical in creating retail identity and maintaining relationships with customers. Good technical service and support must meet or exceed the customer's expectations (Hoffman *et al.* 2005:412). During difficult economic times, customer service is even more important to ensure customer retention.

Managing customer service and support in a retail organisation, according to Fernie, Fernie and Moore (2003:240), includes developing both the 'hard' factors – the formal structure, process and procedures – which comprise the business, and managing the 'soft' factors – the informal style of doing business.

The hard factors include the following:

- formal statements of objectives and strategies
- formal planning process
- organisational structure
- formal communication system
- formal processes and procedures.

The soft factors include the following:

- shared norms and aspirations
- informal networks of communications which modify formal policies and information flows
- the established style of doing work
- the skills, knowledge and expertise of the workforce.

The soft factors are 'people related' rather than 'process related', and because customers' perception of good service is closely related to their interaction with the workforce, it is especially important that retail managers recognise and manage the 'fit' of the informal culture of the organisation with the formal strategy and structure (Fernie, Fernie & Moore 2003:241). Differentiated customer service optimises infrastructure, applications, business processes, and people to provide a customer service experience that sets a business apart from its competitors. At the core of market differentiation for any business is the ability to deliver superior customer service through providing the ultimate customer experience (Tripathi 2009:92).

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

6.1 Research design

The research method for this study is based on exploratory research. The research takes a qualitative approach which, according to Collis and Hussey (2009:13), is more subjective in nature and involves examining and reflecting on perceptions in order to gain an understanding of social and human activities. Furthermore, qualitative research is associated with research questions and phenomena of interest that require exploration of detailed in-depth data, aimed at description, comparison or prescription (Partington 2002:109), which are the points of interest in addressing the outcome of this research.

In this study, the decision whether to follow quantitative hypothesis testing or to follow the interpretative social science approach of qualitative analysis was resolved by applying the usefulness of the outcomes to the problem under consideration. Qualitative research would seem to have a domination of the ability to study meaning and as Hollway and Jefferson (2000:10) explain, 'telling it like it is'. Many qualitative researchers have suggested that a methodology is required for studying people that reflects the differences between people and the objects of the natural sciences (Holliday 2002:7; Leedy & Ormrod 2005:101).

Although both quantitative and qualitative methods are used for data collection in case studies, the latter will normally predominate in the study of processes in which data collection, analysis, and action often take place concurrently (Gummesson 2000:3; Leedy & Ormrod 2005:135). This study focuses on a single case of a refinish paint distributor, because a case study is designed to gain an understanding of a phenomenon (unit of analysis) within its operating context. Of necessity, case study research is about engaging with the complexities of the real world, and about making sense of them (Partington 2002:177). Case study research is therefore flexible and can be adapted to many areas of knowledge creation.

6.2 Sampling methods and data collection

In qualitative research, according to Hague, Hague and Morgan (2004:91), a simpler and less costly means of obtaining a representative sample is to set a quota for the interviewers to achieve the same characteristic that mirrors the population that is being researched. In addition, quota samples are typically selected in such a way that demographic characteristics of interest to the researcher are represented in the sample in the targeted proportion (McDaniel & Gates 2008:346; Mitchell & Jolley 2010:287). Thus, quota sampling that was used in this study was made up of fourteen respondents, namely; senior managers, sales, marketing, and technical personnel of a single automotive refinish paint distributor.

A questionnaire was used in this research as a vehicle to conduct the empirical study. Detailed in-depth interviews were conducted so as to gain an insight and understanding of the underlying reasons and motivations of each statement from the respondents. Interviews were based on the number of people involved during the interview, the level of structure, the proximity of the interviewer to the participants, and the number of interviews conducted during the research, as proposed by Cooper and Schindler (2006:204). During interviews, close attention was paid to the body language – posture, gestures, facial expressions, dress – of the respondents, as postulated by Gummesson (2000:127); in an attempt to evaluate these observations; being as significant as the verbal statements. The observations were recorded in the findings of the study.

6.3 Data analysis

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, most of the results were interpreted using semi-structured interviews with open-ended and closed-ended questions, focus group discussions, observations, projective and participatory approaches. Inductive reasoning was used in the analysis of the data collected from the interviews. The findings of the literature study and the empirical research were integrated into a proposed guideline which was used to develop a model indicating the key drivers to promote, improve and facilitate the business sustainability of the automotive refinish paint distributors.

6.4 Validity and reliability

Validity and reliability are central concepts that permeate every research process (Neuman 2006:188). To ensure reliability in qualitative research, examination of credibility, dependability, confirmability, consistency and trustworthiness is crucial (Given 2008:753; Golafshani 2003:601).

In this study, reliability was tested by using a pilot-test questionnaire where interviewees were asked two or more questions that are similar and designed to measure the same thing, most interviewees answered all questions the same, which indicated that the test has internal consistency. Validity, on the other hand, was assessed by being involved face-to-face with interviewees to gain a full understanding of the knowledge and meaning of the interviewee to ensure that the tests or measures used by the researcher do actually measure what they were supposed to.

7. RESULTS

7.1 Sustainable business development strategy

It was evident that the firm's strategy for competitive advantage was an all-inclusive service offering and a complete technical support which was available to all customers. In order to support this competitive advantage, an operations-oriented approach aimed at continuously striving to improve on products or services given to customers appeared to have created a strong fit between strategy and organisational capabilities. There was also a strong fit between the internal operating systems and the organisation's work climate which made it difficult for the competition to copy. The firm's business strategy was found to have been developed with the purpose of satisfying customers by giving them innovative and cutting-edge technology-driven products, together with undeniable technical services.

The fundamental competitive edge of the automotive refinish paint distributor of this study appeared to be associated with a holistic strategic thinking of its stakeholders, including systems such as assessment of technological advancements, systematic analysis of market direction, on-the-field demonstrations, and an in-depth study of

customer-specific requirements. Technical knowledge and support systems that included quick response time to solve customer problems were seen as a central base for achieving a competitive advantage across various levels of the business. The firm's strategies to support their competitive advantage were centred on improving its added value on technical support.

7.2 Customer service and support systems

The automotive refinish coatings business appeared to be based on three principles, namely, *quality, service and costing*. In order to fulfil the above mentioned requirements, a holistic approach of knowledge-based sales driven strategies where all sales and technical specialists had to make an intense effort in engaging the customer, analysing customer needs, and turning objections into a communication platform, was found to be one of the reasons for a successful execution of the firm's sales strategy.

Decisive interactive customer relationships, highly effective communication between management and employees and extensive face-to-face interaction with customers were all found to have provided the foundation for the firm's efforts to profitably serve their customers' unique needs. In the automotive refinishing business, customer relationships were considered to be the business strategy that aims to understand, anticipate and manage the needs of the firm's current and potential customers with the aim of building lasting customer confidence, close personal relationships and loyalty.

From the perspective of refinish paint customers, any customer offering that causes receiving the service more difficult is likely to impinge negatively on their perception of the service quality. Ease of access to technical support, good visibility of colour specialists and prompt response to customer complaints is likely to make them feel good about the service provider. This is in line with Grewal *et al.* (2008:341) revelation that customer satisfaction with the service provider and support system positively affects satisfaction.

In order to synchronise the main findings of this study, a business sustainability model was formulated and developed in an effort to integrate business management tools for a business sustainability framework for the automotive refinish paint distributors.

8. THE MODEL FOR SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS

The model for a sustainable business, as shown in Figure 1, identified two building blocks of sustainable development architecture, namely key strategies and key support functions. These building blocks would enable the organisation to be in a good position to cope with the ever-changing market-driven customer demands in the automotive refinish distribution industry

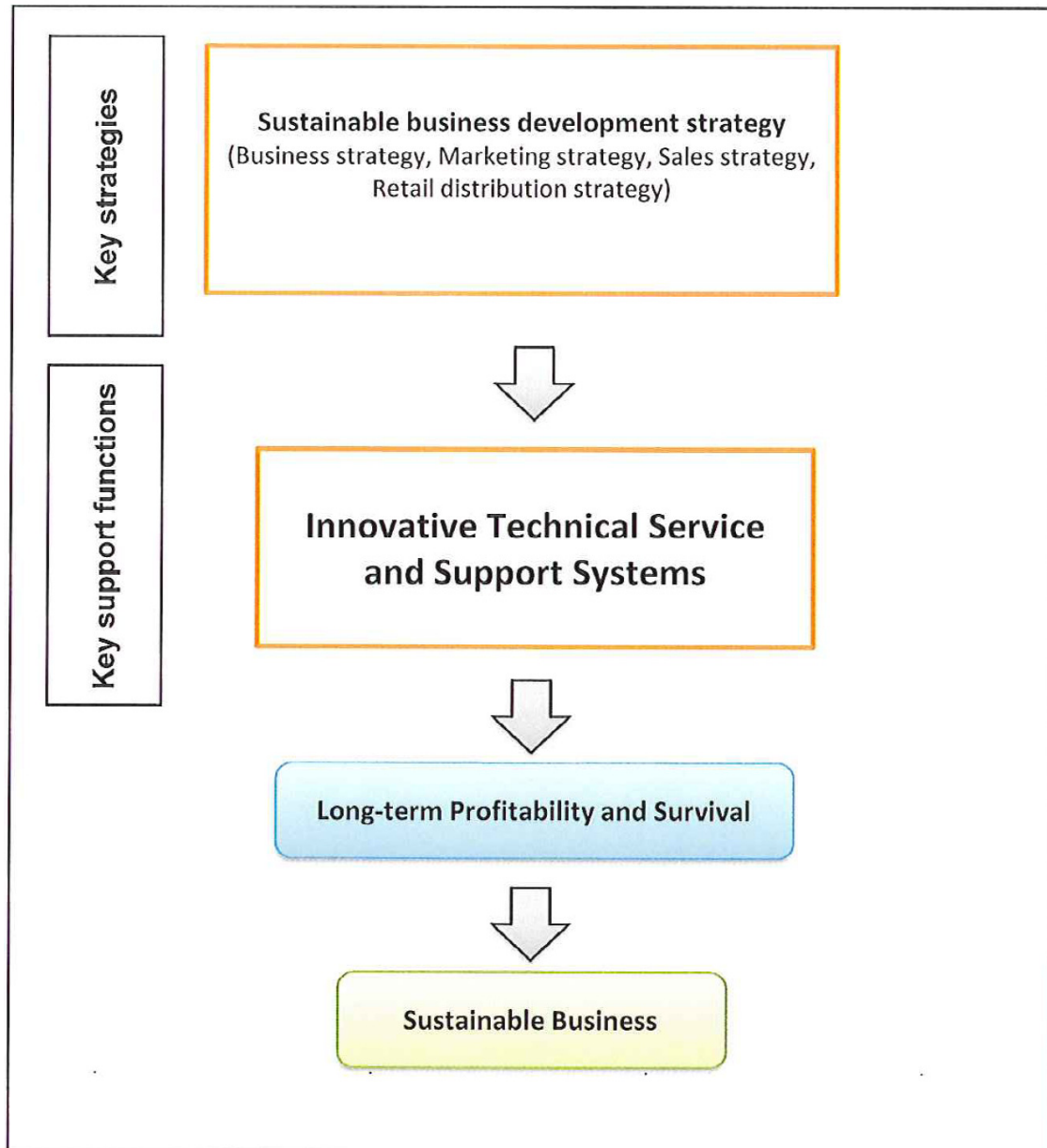
8.1 Key strategies

The model indicates that implementation of a sustainable business development strategy requires managers to develop a combination of different functional strategies namely, business strategy, marketing strategy sales strategy and retail distribution strategy, all of which should be associated with providing customer-specific needs. The reason for this strategic approach is that combination of innovative strategies that are developed to provide cutting-edge technology-driven products, an all-inclusive service offering and a comprehensive technical support system cannot easily be duplicated by the competition and they provide benefits to customers.

8.2 Key support systems

Through extraordinary quality of customer service, the automotive refinish paint distributors can leverage differentiated services to provide a superior customer experience that can build brand loyalty and increase profits. Thus, the most important outcome of a sustainable business development strategy for creating a competitive advantage in the automotive refinish market must be the delivery of an all-inclusive customer service and technical support systems that are moulded to satisfy customer needs.

FIGURE 1: MODEL FOR SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS



Source: Researcher's own construct

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

The management approach that is designed to assist, coordinate, unify and integrate the business' decisions to achieve goals and objectives of the firm, would not only cause the firm to gain and sustain a competitive advantage, but it would also serve as a

strategic tool for identifying ways to create increased customer value in the customer-driven automotive refinish industry. It is therefore recommended that such strategic tactics be implemented on at all levels of the firm in the automotive paint distribution industry.

In order to satisfy customers, automotive refinish paint distributors should provide customers with innovative and cutting-edge technology-driven products. This approach allows the firm to customise its products to targeted customer segments and customer groups resulting in maximising their total customer satisfaction. It is thus proposed that the firm's strategy for competitive advantage should include breaking down a firm's value-creating processes into strategically relevant activities that are developed to provide an all-inclusive service offering and a comprehensive technical support system.

The primary goal of business in the automotive refinish industry is to innovatively fulfil customers' unique requirements, thus in order to fulfil customers' unique requirements, the automotive refinish paint distributor should deliver high-quality technical service and support systems that are developed for a specific customer-base. This strategic approach of innovatively fulfil customers' unique requirements is proposed as a key element of the automotive refinish paint distribution strategy for maintaining a sustainable competitive advantage.

The recommendations made in this article, if properly applied and implemented, could lead to a tailored multi-dimensional approach that would result in customers' functional and emotional satisfaction. This could become a new business management approach in the automotive refinish industry.

10. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study was limited to a single automotive refinish paint distributor, and it is assumed, for purposes of this study, to be representative of similar types of automotive refinish paint distributors. Further research regarding this topic can be extended to include all manufacturers of automotive original paint in South Africa so that the same approach could be used in the case of the original automotive car makers.

11. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The competitive business landscape is continuously changing due to technological developments and advances in science. The ability of people to understand the fundamentals of transformation from previously exclusive domain knowledge to unambiguous, codified and replicable knowledge significantly changes the competitive scene.

The methodology applied in this study provided an objective and clear perspective of a philosophical approach to examining whether the qualitative nature of the case study approach is an appropriate mechanism to investigate, explore and explain innovative, creative and a proactive approach to ensure that the findings of the study would yield tenable theories. In addition, it was expected that the empirical findings of this study would be holistic in incorporating a number of variables. However, the findings indicated that the case study method used in this investigation made it possible to describe the activities that led to the competitive advantage of the automotive refinish paint distributor in sustaining its business development.

From an economic perspective, this article emphasises that the long-term profitability framework of an organisation, where innovative technical services and support systems become organisational culture, needs to be incorporated into the policies, procedures and processes of a business if it is to follow sustainable business development principles. This does not mean that new management methods need to be invented. Rather, it requires a new customer-based approach to manage automotive refinish paint distributors, and an extensive refinement to systems, practices and procedures.

Using all the information gathered in this study, it could therefore be concluded that personalised customer service and technical support systems are the key sources of competitive advantage applied by the automotive refinish paint distributor to sustain its their long-term successful business operations.

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