

**U.S. TRADE ASSOCIATION INTERNATIONALIZATION
ACTIVITIES AS COLLECTIVE STRATEGY**

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ABSTRACT

This paper empirically explores U.S. trade association internationalization activities as a manifestation of collective strategy. Data were drawn from eighty-four respondents to a survey of association executives and from secondary sources. The findings indicate that trade associations engage in internationalization activities involving information dissemination about foreign government activities and international marketing and also in maintenance of international capabilities and functions. Relative market internationalization, membership demand for international services, and membership industry sector all had an influence on the degree of trade association internationalization activities.

INTRODUCTION

In the last decades, markets have undergone continuing global integration. Changes in the economic and political environments coupled with ongoing improvements in communication, transportation, and production technology have made a variety of new markets accessible to all United States' firms. These international markets had been hitherto beyond the resource capacity of all but large transnational corporations, but they are now accessible to a variety of foreign suppliers of goods and services regardless of size (Dunning, 1993).

Businesses have experienced increasing interconnectedness with their suppliers, buyers, and competitors, as well as with political entities, because of these global macro-structural changes (Boddewyn & Brewer, 1994). These interdependencies in both competitive and institutional environments have fostered increasing environmental uncertainty for individual businesses. Firms sharing similar forms of uncertainty and similar environmental contingencies increasingly turn to collective action. For example, smaller businesses can seek to secure their external resources and exchange relationships through a spectrum of interfirm strategic alliances (Dollinger, 1990; Dollinger & Golden, 1992).

In the international arena, firms have used cooperative or collective strategies -- for example, joint ventures -- to manage the environmental uncertainties associated with entering foreign

markets (Child & Faulkner, 1998). Like joint ventures, trade associations are a manifestation of collective action by businesses (Barringer & Harrison, 2000). A trade association is a formal organization that represents a coalition of businesses that face similar environmental contingencies and that seek to adapt to them collectively (Staber, 1985). As formal organizations distinct from their member firms, trade associations can play an important role in facilitating the adaptation of businesses to environmental contingencies, such as the internationalization of markets (Svevo-Cianci, 1995).

This paper draws upon theories of competitive and collective strategies to develop and test hypotheses concerned with the activities that trade associations undertake to facilitate the internationalization of their member firms' businesses. We begin with a background discussion of issues in internationalization of firms and markets, the environment and collective action, and trade associations. We then offer and test hypotheses concerned with the factors that promote trade association internationalization activities. Finally, we review our findings and discuss their implications.

BACKGROUND

In recent years, technological advances have facilitated product and process innovations. The new global economy is characterized by both new economies of scale and revamped minimum efficient scales. Traditional conceptions of comparative advantage and factor-markets have gone by the wayside. These advances have facilitated the easier entry of smaller firms into international markets, but have also brought increased research and development costs. For smaller firms collective action to deal with these greater costs is a natural strategy.

Among other major trends in the restructuring of the global environment of business has been the emergence of regional trading blocks. The Europe 1992 agreements leading to a single European currency, the North America Free Trade Pact, and the ASEAN block, for example, all have raised competition from the level of the nation-state to that of the multi-state region. These larger markets work together with technological advances to foster global products and markets. Moreover, these trading blocks inevitably bring supranational political entities, such as the European Union, onto the political scene. Smaller firms naturally engage in collective action to respond to these larger economic and political entities, especially when they enter into the international arena. Such collective action is the theoretical response to the environmental uncertainty engendered by these technological, economic, and political developments.

Environmental uncertainty is the lack of predictability in a business environment. Uncertainty is related inversely to the sense of control that managers perceive when addressing their environments, and, therefore, is the primary source of a firm's uncertainty. In dealing with this uncertainty, smaller firms, especially those in fragmented industries, rely upon collective strategies (Dollinger & Golden, 1992).

In their empirical study, Dollinger and Golden (1992) found that small manufacturing firms engaged in collective activity of both emergent and intentional nature. The firms in their study joined in community activities to establish networks. They engaged in joint-venture-like activities with suppliers, competitors, and buyers, and they received important economic and technical information from indirect, industry-wide activities. Some of these activities are intentional approaches to collective strategy that businesses can use to complement their competitive strategies. Intended collective strategies involve different levels of commitment and control that vary in formality: Regulatory legislation, mergers, joint-ventures, interlocking directorates, trade associations, and collusion are all examples of intended collective strategies (Barringer & Harrison, 2000).

A trade association is an example of formal, organized coordination of interdependence among businesses. Associations consist of their member firms, but they are also independent formal organizations capable of developing their own strategies (Staber, 1985). Their budgets derive from their members' voluntary contributions. Their defining missions involve the furtherance of their membership's goals and strategies. Historically, the rise and fall of trade associations, like that of mergers -- another form of collective strategy, has been associated with industry and market cycles. For instance, many modern trade associations, first formed at the end of nineteenth century, focused primarily on defending their memberships from economic downturn (Staber, 1985).

Trade associations can engage in a number of activities. They can act to collect data and facilitate information exchange within industries, and also as public relations clearinghouses for member firms in their interactions with outside constituencies. They also can promote international trade through the collection and dissemination of data of relevant foreign markets, the organization of exhibitions and trade fairs, and the establishment of overseas contact networks for member firms. Even the lobbying of foreign governments and regional political entities, such as the European Union, appear to be viable trade association activities that would promote international trade. In some cases, trade associations may even sponsor export trading companies or supervise industry trading conditions and regulations (Potter, 2001; Rosamond, 1998).

HYPOTHESES

We seek to explore how trade associations, as manifestations of the pooling of interests of a collectivity of businesses, might facilitate adaptation to the internationalization of markets. As industries internationalize, domestic firms encounter new foreign competitors who become rivals for resources. These new rivals contribute to resource scarcity and interconnectedness in a firm's environment and lead to greater conflict and interdependence, both of which exacerbate uncertainty. When industries have internationalized, we expect trade association activities to be commensurately internationalized.

Hypothesis 1: A trade association's internationalization activities will be greater the more internationalized the markets in which its members participate.

We further expect trade associations to be responsive to their members: Not only should trade associations help member firms maintain domestic markets, but more proactively, trade associations should help member businesses to think more internationally (Harrison & Westgeest, 1998; Potter, 2001). Since membership in trade associations is voluntary, we expect member satisfaction to be critical to an association's viability. We therefore expect internationalization activities of trade associations to be commensurate with their memberships' needs and demands.

Hypothesis 2: A trade association's internationalization activities will be greater, the greater the demand of the association membership for such services.

Historically, trade associations have been more active in periods of industry and market change (Staber, 1985). In the ongoing development of the global economy, organizations and entire economies are becoming increasingly interconnected. Trade associations can encourage collective action to deal with uncertainty in times of great flux. Especially for small businesses, such collective action may be the only viable means of effectively addressing

large-scale change (Johnson, 1996; Welch, Young, & Wilkinson 1998). Given the unprecedented new uncertainties in domestic markets attributable to industry internationalization, we expect organizations to welcome the possibilities for collective action that trade associations could offer in addressing these changes.

Hypothesis 3: A trade association's internationalization activities will be greater, the greater the volatility of its member firms' domestic markets.

The classical economic theory of comparative advantage holds that nations will tend to specialize in the production of goods and services in which they are relatively more productive. This comparative advantage is based on the relative endowment of factors of production. Recent revivals of the theory of comparative advantage have focused on inclusion of a dynamic element, recognizing that among the factors of production that may provide national competitive advantage for an industry are historically developed, inimitable skills or tacit knowledge (Porter, 1990).

In industries that have developed such national competitive advantage, the internationalization activities of trade associations serve as another means for the pooling of collective interests in the defense of the market domain. Moreover, in industries in which competitive advantage appears to be strong, efforts on the part of trade associations to maintain and augment their members' competitive advantage probably flow from established relative national competitive advantage.

Hypothesis 4: A trade association's internationalization activities will be greater, the greater the national competitive advantage of the industries in which its members compete.

Control Variables

The economic sector, for example, manufacturing or agriculture, in which a trade association's members compete probably has an influence on the extent and nature of the association's internationalization activities. As a reflection of its members, an association's size or budget also probably influences the degree and type of internationalization activities the association pursues. We control for these influences in our analyses.

METHODS

Sample

An initial sample of the 212 largest trade associations in the United States was identified. These constituted all trade associations with annual budgets over \$2.5 million (Columbia Books, 1992). This budgetary threshold was chosen, because it encompassed a sufficiently large sample to assure the inclusion of trade associations whose activities might have a strategic impact on competitive outcomes.

To discover the extent of trade association internationalization activities, we conducted several informational interviews with association executives as well as a search of the relevant professional literature (see Svevo-Cianci, 1995). This initial information gathering served as the grounding for the development of a questionnaire to probe the steps that the trade associations in the larger sample were undertaking to promote the internationalization of their member firms' industries. This questionnaire instrument was mailed to the top-ranking executive in each of the 212 trade associations.

Respondents returned eighty-five completed questionnaires. Another nineteen declined to participate for a variety of reasons. Our effective response rate was thus 49%. Because of missing values, the final sample used in the statistical analyses consisted of eighty-four trade associations; representing a 40% response rate.

Measures

Association Internationalization Activities. A principal components factor extraction analysis with varimax rotation using thirty-one items from the questionnaire was performed to develop the measures of trade association internationalization activities (Dollinger & Golden, 1992; Kim & Mueller, 1986; SPSS, Release 6). Three factors with Eigenvalues greater than 1.0 emerged from the analysis. Items with factor loadings greater than .50 were retained in the factors. A review of the items indicated that two of the factors were concerned with information collection and dissemination. These factors were labeled 1) Information Dissemination - Foreign Government Activities and 2) Information Dissemination - International Marketing. The third factor concerned an association's internationalization activities and its capabilities to undertake them. This factor was labeled 3) International Capabilities and Functions. Based on our interviews we had identified activities, such as trade missions, as a form of internationalization activity in which trade associations participated. We also had recognized that information services were important, but we had not discerned the distinctions that emerged from our factor analysis.

The items in each factor along with their factor loadings and inter-item reliabilities (Cronbach's Alpha) appear in Table 1. We used the factor loadings to weigh the measures and summed them to construct the factors.

The independent variables in the analyses were measured as follows:

Market Internationalization. The extent to which the markets in which an association's member firms participated had internationalized was measured by the ratio of exports to industry output as supplied by the questionnaire respondents. We relied on respondents rather than archival sources for this measure, because we believed respondents' data would more precisely define the industries in which their members participated.

Membership Demands. A principal components factor extraction analysis with varimax rotation of sixteen questionnaire items was used to develop measures of trade association membership demand for internationalization services (Dollinger & Golden, 1992; Kim & Mueller, 1986; SPSS, Release 6). Two factors with Eigenvalues greater than 1.0 emerged from the analysis. Items with factor loadings greater than .50 were retained in the factors. The two factors were labeled: 1) Membership demands for international information, and 2) Membership demands for international functions. The factor loadings and internal reliabilities appear in Table 1.

Environmental Uncertainty. Two measures of environmental uncertainty were developed. The first measured market volatility to determine the predictability of a firm's environment. Less predictable environments are more uncertain (Dollinger & Golden, 1992). Following Tosi, Aldag, and Storey (1973) (see also Snyder & Glueck, 1982), market volatility was measured as the average of the coefficients of variation of sales divided by average sales revenue for individual firms in the industry. The formula used was that of Snyder and Glueck (1982). The years used in the calculation were 1986 to 1990 inclusively. Data were drawn from Standard & Poor's COMPUSTAT tapes.

Table 1. Factor Analyses

Internationalization Activities

Factor 1. Information Dissemination - Foreign Government Activities

How much information is your Association able to provide to members in each of the following categories?

	<u><i>Factor Scores</i></u>
Regular information on volume of exports to the U.S.	.84595
Regular information on volume of exports from the U.S.	.80169
Foreign customs' duties & excise taxes	.80145
U.S. government regulations for exporters	.75604
Other government regulations	.71047
Assistance available from government sources in the U.S.	.70455
Foreign taxation	.68427
International standards	.67293
Copyright/patent infringement regulations	.66248

(4 = We can help a great deal, 0 = We can not help at all)

$\alpha = .9055$

Factor 2. Information Dissemination - International Marketing

How much information is your Association able to provide to members in each of the following categories?

	<u><i>Factor Scores</i></u>
Directorates or mailing lists of potential overseas customers	.86055
Foreign health, language, culture, customs, etc.	.81483
Identification of agents & distributors overseas	.80865
Identification of potential joint venture partners	.70733
Advice on advertising, direct mail, and marketing abroad	.69073
Enquiries received from abroad	.61974

(4 = We can help a great deal, 0 = We can not help at all)

$\alpha = .8806$

Factor 3. International Capabilities and Functions

Does your Association maintain:

	<u><i>Factor Scores</i></u>
Employees whose background makes them especially suited for work in the international arena?	.79430
An international affairs committee?	.73048
Overseas offices?	.62053
An export market research department?	.59184

(Yes = 1, No = 0)

(Table 1 continued on next page)

Has your Association participated in any of the following international activities or events?

Overseas conferences .58536
 $\alpha = .69$

Membership Demands

Factor 4. Membership demands for international information

How often have your members sought the following information or services from your Association?

	<u>Factor Scores</u>
Overseas product standards	.86951
Overseas market research	.83189
Information on foreign government regulations	.81685
Information on foreign markets	.65511
Other marketing assistance	.68284

(4 = Often, 0 = Never)
 $\alpha = .8839$

Factor 5. Membership demands for international functions

How often have your members sought the following services from your Association?

	<u>Factor Scores</u>
Study tours	.85032
Trade missions	.79565
Overseas trade fairs	.73797
Overseas conferences	.58758

(4 = Often, 0 = Never)
 $\alpha = .8158$

National Competitive Advantage

	<u>Factor Scores</u>
U.S. firms operate more efficiently	.82585
U.S. firms invest more heavily in personnel training	.81295
U.S. firms provide customer service superior to foreign competition	.79501
U.S. firms have better product or brand identification than foreign competitors	.72339
U.S. firms produce products of a quality equal to or superior to foreign competitors	.68445
U.S. firms have better warehousing and distribution facilities overseas	.58569
U.S. firms maintain production facilities in other countries	.51172

(4 = generally true, 0 = not at all true)
 $\alpha = .8829$

A second surrogate measure of environmental uncertainty, the four-firm industry concentration ratio, also was used. We anticipated that concentration would be inversely related to environmental uncertainty. This measure was calculated as the mean of the concentration ratios of the industries, identified by the U.S. 4-digit SIC codes, in which association member firms participated. Similarly, Dollinger and Golden (1992) used concentration as a surrogate for the complexity dimension of environmental characteristics. To perform the calculations, information on industry sales were drawn from *Ward's Business Directory of U.S. Private and Public Companies* (1992).

National Competitive Advantage. A measure of national competitive advantage was derived from a principal components factor analysis of 11 items in a portion of the questionnaire. A single factor, which we termed national competitive advantage, emerged (Eigenvalue > 1). As with the other measures derived through factor analysis, the exact items, their loadings, and the internal reliability measure appear in Table 1.

Manufacturing Sector. A dummy variable was used to code whether or not an association's membership was primarily in the manufacturing sector (1=membership primarily engaged in manufacturing; 0=membership primarily engaged in other than manufacturing).

Association Size. Association size was used as a control variable and was measured as the association's 1991 annual budget.

Analysis

Table 2 contains descriptive statistics as well as the correlation matrix for all measures used in the analyses. None of the variables appear sufficiently correlated to introduce multicollinearity into further analyses.

Three regression analyses were carried out. The three measures of association internationalization activities served as the independent variables. Market internationalization, member demands for international information and functions, market volatility, concentration, and national competitive advantage served as independent variables. Manufacturing sector and association budget served as control variables. Table 3 provides the results of these analyses.

RESULTS

The regression analyses as reported in Table 3 indicate support for Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2. This support indicates that when the markets in which the membership participated are relatively more internationalized and/or when the trade association membership had a relatively greater demand for international information and functions, trade associations provide internationalization information regarding volume of exports to and from the U.S., foreign customs' duties and excise taxes, government regulations for exporters, assistance available from government sources in the U.S., foreign taxation, or international standards including copyright and patent regulations.

Also, when the respective markets are internationalized and/or the membership demands it, associations are more likely to maintain employees whose background makes them especially suited for work in the international arena, an international affairs committee, an overseas office, an export market research department or to participate in overseas conferences.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Information Dissemination- Foreign Government Activities	13.01	9.80										
2. Information Dissemination – International Marketing	7.69	6.12	.55									
3. International Capabilities and Functions	1.89	1.45	.54	.57								
4. Market Internationalization	.64	0.37	.49	.30	.55							
5. Demand for International Information	8.60	5.62	.67	.75	.67	.34						
6. Demand for International Functions	5.56	3.95	.37	.66	.47	.04	.58					
7. Market Volatility	4.11	4.14	.11	-.06	.10	-.10	.12	.09				
8. Industry Concentration	0.39	0.20	-.11	-.07	-.14	-.03	-.08	-.14	.01			
9 National Competitive Advantage	15.51	7.22	.21	.14	.09	.26	.19	.11	.09	-.10		
10. Manufacturing Sector	0.61	0.49	.06	.02	.14	-.02	.03	-.10	.07	.13	-.07	
11. Association Budget	8.88	10.57	.01	-.06	.05	.16	-.03	-.07	.12	.01	.04	-.09

N=84 | ρ | \geq .37 p<.001

The findings did not support Hypothesis 3. Domestic market volatility appears to have a negative relationship with trade association information dissemination about international marketing, contrary to the hypothesis. Otherwise, neither market volatility nor industry concentration appears related to the internationalization activities of trade associations. Hypothesis 4 also did not find support in our analysis. The status of a membership's industries with regard to national competitive advantage does not appear to have been related to the degree to which the trade association engaged in internationalization activities.

With regard to the control variables, only the manufacturing sector appears to have been an important control. There was a positive association between having a membership concentrated in the manufacturing sector and maintaining international capabilities and functions. No statistically significant relationship between association budget size and internationalization activities was found.

Table 3. Regression Analyses^a
(n=84)

	Info. Dissemination: Foreign Governments	Info. Dissemination: International Marketing	International Capabilities & Functions
Market Internationalization	0.21*	0.07	0.28**
Demand for International Information	0.60***	0.53***	0.49***
Demand for International Functions	-0.01	0.38***	0.19*
Market Volatility	0.05	-0.16*	0.03
Concentration	-0.05	0.02	-0.09
National Competitive Advantage	0.05	0.01	-0.08
Manufacturing Sector	0.05	0.05	0.16*
Association Budget	-0.01	-0.01	0.06
F-score	9.45***	19.15***	12.51***
Adjusted R ²	0.45	0.64	0.53

* p<.05** p<.01 *** p<.001

^aCoefficients are standardized

DISCUSSION

Our results supported our first and second hypotheses, and were consistent with earlier theorizing regarding trade associations. Research has suggested that trade associations activities are often defensive, for example, potential competitors use the trade association as an agent of a collective strategy in reaction to threats to the *status quo* (Staber, 1985). Hypothesis 1 posited that association internationalization activities would be commensurate with the internationalization of members' markets. Thus, the association internationalization efforts could be seen as a means for firms to maintain global market share when their domestic market shares are threatened or diluted by foreign competitors.

Similarly, our second hypothesis indicated that the levels of trade association internationalization activities were closely related to the demand for such activities or services. Membership in trade associations is voluntary, so the continuing existence of an association hinges upon an ongoing, positive cost-benefit analysis of membership by its member firms. Associations, like other organizations, depend on membership demand to shape their activities over time.

Our hypothesis regarding environmental uncertainty was not supported. Businesses, especially smaller businesses would have greater need for information in dynamic environments. Theoretically, these businesses would seek through collective means, such as a trade association, to secure information resources. Nevertheless, neither the present study nor Dollinger and Golden (1992) found a relationship between environmental dynamism and

cooperative strategy. Dollinger and Golden (1992) did, however, find that industry concentration was inversely related to collective strategies. Their results also confirmed earlier findings that less cooperation occurs in more competitive situations, and that more cooperation occurs in resource rich environments. This result is not inconsistent with the historical arguments and our findings regarding trade associations. Trade association activities, like other collective strategies, may be superseded by competitive forces unless resource munificence permits, or third parties, such as foreign competitors or government regulation, necessitate cooperative action (Staber, 1985).

Whether or not a trade association's members enjoy a national competitive advantage does not appear to influence the degree of the association's internationalization activities. One might expect an iterative process whereby association activities are likelier in industries that have comparative advantage and these activities would assist in maintaining and developing the membership's national competitive advantage. This, in turn, would promote further association with internationalization activities. On the other hand, associations of weak and threatened industries may act to defend against foreign entry. Unfortunately, our findings do not permit a conclusion.

With regard to our control variables, we did find that trade associations whose members were primarily manufacturers did maintain relatively more international capabilities and functions. We attribute this result to the dominance of the manufacturing sector in international trade.

Certain limitations to our research must be considered. First, the analysis is cross-sectional, and therefore does not lend itself easily to interpretations of causality. Further, the sample draws from trade associations in only one country, the United States of America. Although some U.S. associations may seek international members, future research might gain insights from dynamic comparative analysis of association activities among different nations or even among different regional trading blocks. Watson and Williams (1988), for example, suggest that association activities may be regulated at a regional trading block level. Closer scrutiny of individual associations who have undertaken the greatest internationalization efforts could offer a better understanding of the mechanisms by which collective strategies emerge in the actions of associations (Dollinger, 1990).

Our inability to find support for our third and fourth hypotheses may be attributable to incompleteness of our measures. Although we drew on multiple measures, our factors may not dimensionalize the constructs of environmental uncertainty or national competitive advantage in such a way as to offer insights into our research questions. Future research could seek to create more complete or alternative measures of these constructs.

More broadly, further research on trade association activities can offer insight into the returns that firms can receive by engaging in collective strategies. Rehbein and Lenway (1994), for example, found that use of trade associations as intermediaries in interaction with a specific government agency, via the U.S. international trade commission, was associated with greater industry political effectiveness. Costs associated with use of a trade association in this way would have to be weighed against benefits. From a managerial perspective -- especially from the standpoint of trade association executives -- the results indicate that there is a window of opportunity for proactive internationalization activities. Indeed, to the extent that trade associations can initiate activities that introduce their members' goods and services to new markets, great opportunities for proactive behavior still appear to exist. The Internet, or World Wide Web, has become a viable means for trade associations, governments, and others to facilitate business exports, especially for smaller firms (Farrell & Updike, 1997; Potter, 2001). Once trade associations successfully establish their abilities to facilitate their members' internationalization, a sustainable network to promote export promotion and member

internationalization should result (Johnson, 1996; Welch *et al.* 1998). Naturally, individual firms should not overlook the benefits that could be had through seeking internationalization help from their associations. This is especially true as the means and steps by which small business enter the international market become more diverse and less predictable (Wolff & Pett, 2000). In short, the potential international role of trade associations in helping small businesses internationalize remains unrealized.

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