The Role of Marketing Restructuring in a Company Crisis

by

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Abstract. A company crisis can be defined as a short-term, undesired, unfavourable and critical state in the company (organization) which has derived from both internal and external causes and which directly endangers the further existence and growth of the company. In crisis not only short-term measures but also long-term vision and business directions must be prepared and implemented in order to be able to provide further existence and development. One of the most important area is marketing restructuring which represents a transition from the prior structural combination of programmes and markets to a new structure that must enable greater profitability and effectiveness of operations. In regard to such a restructuring, one must take into account the inter-linked relationship of the market (the chosen segment of customers) and of the programme (product, service), since, in principle, it is true that the identical programme of offer cannot be placed on the new market or the new programme in the prior market (segment). If the marketing restructuring is one of the most important restructuring area in the company in times of crisis it should be based upon marketing concept in order to follow the right direction of the renewal. However, empirical evidence from the author’s research has shown that companies in acute crisis pay surprisingly little attention to their marketing restructuring, even though in this case this is the most important area of reorganization. In the article some guidelines for the marketing restructuring for achieving the company renewal based on marketing knowledge and practice are presented.

Key words: crisis, marketing restructuring, recovery, renewal.
JEL classification: M30

1 Introduction

The growing intensity and dynamics of events and realizations in companies (or other profit or non-profit organizations) as well as in their environment – “brought to our attention” especially by the global financial crisis from 2008 (“mega-crisis”, Alpaslan and Mitroff 2011, xiv) – influences the increased difficulty and complexity of ensuring adequate competitiveness and consequently the existence and development of companies (organizations). It is therefore not surprising, that these and other crises are becoming an inseparable part of modern business. Resolving or even preventing a crisis situation, however, requires the reorganization of the company, which can often only be achieved with radical methods of change. All this has an immense effect on the theory and practice of modern management.

All crises create a distressing, uncertain and worrisome situation, which endangers property as well as people and influences established business and life flows, which is why we want to solve this situation as soon as possible. A crisis can impact any company (Crandall and Mensah 2008) even if at a certain time the company is efficient in a fast-growing and, according to all criteria, a high-potential industry, as the crisis can be caused by reasons which are not directly connected to the same industry. The life cycle of a business and the industry in which it operates can be very different. There are countless examples of global companies in domestic and foreign business history, which seemed indestructible in their peak but are actually gone today.

The extent of the crisis is simultaneously reflected in several areas, making it a complex or multidimensional phenomenon, affecting the economic, social, traditional, psychological and legal aspect. A crisis is a short-term undesired, unfavourable and critical situation in a company (organization), directly endangering the existence and further development of this organization and is caused by an intertwined
and simultaneous action of both external and internal sources (Dubrovski 2004; Dubrovski 2011, 31).

2 Conditions for successful reorganization and recovery from the crisis

Recovery of the company is only viable when the crisis has already taken affect and is still assessed as being manageable along with the company’s situation. The crisis could have begun, when preventive measures were unsuccessful or neglected or when unforeseen unfavourable external events occurred. Thinking that the crisis will go away on its own can be fatal. A crisis situation is highly virulent and spirals deeper and should be regarded as such, i.e. as a highly dangerous disease, which could reach epidemic proportions (= crisis chain reaction).

Crisis recovery in a company can only be successful if applied on all business levels of the company and it is therefore essential during recovery (reorganization) to ensure the simultaneous implementation of measures for solving the crisis in two basic areas, namely (cf. Kraus and Glass 2004, 121; Seefelder 2007, 27):
- business (substantive, operative) recovery,
- financial recovery.

Although a crisis in a company is directly reflected in the financial area (insolvency, deep debts, negative cash flow, etc.), it is actually only the result of developments in other (substantive) areas. Recovery projects are thus frequently focused only on solving financial problems, instead of directing attention to other areas, which are being neglected (“we could solve the crisis with additional financial resources”). For example, financial consolidation alone cannot bring positive results, if the product/service range is outdated, if excessive costs are being generated, if key personnel have left the company, if product quality is questionable etc.

Based on several empirical researches (e.g. Krauss and Glass 2004, 121) and many actual cases it can be stated that for the successful reorganization of companies with existential problems four essential common conditions generally have to be met:
- a healthy core business, capable of ensuring a positive cash flow and profits, including development or future prospects, based on added value;
- a capable, competent management team with the necessary authorizations (without which even the best projects are bound to fail);
- available financial resources (preferably long-term) to overcome liquidity deficits (including the payment of remedial costs) and ensuring development steps (revitalization);
- a positive attitude and sufficient motivation of the employees for the reorganization process.

Considering the variety of reasons causing the crisis, the type of crisis, available resources and the specifics of a company, no general model, concept or approach for solving a crisis is available. A latent crisis cannot be solved by adopting the same measures as in the event of an acute crisis. Or a strategic crisis by using the same approach as in the case of a liquidity crisis. We will also not attempt to solve problems in realizing development goals the same way we solve a stagnant crises. In a small company different principles and guidelines are applied in comparison to a large company system and the actions taken in a service company are different from those taken in a manufacturing company. Generally, the applied measures for a corporate enterprise and for a non-profit organization will differ. Because of the diversity and complexity of each individual crisis there is therefore no general recipe or formula.

Considering that a crisis is a state which directly endangers the further development of a company, it cannot be solved with small modifications in structures and processes alone, as radical, often painful (“no pain – no gain”) measures will be necessary to stop the negative developments in the company. In the
preparation and implementation of measures which are initially short-term (immediate), the long-term aspect must also be taken into consideration, as the final purpose of a reorganization is not only to stop the negative effects (reversal of the acute crisis) but also to ensure the existence and further development of the organization.

3 In crisis revolutionary changes are necessary

Should the company adaptation to the conditions changed in the environment be planned, smooth and correct, they shall be considered as progressive or evolutionary changes. However, should the company be rapidly, radically and dramatically changed, these changes shall be subject to revolutionary changes. The revolutionary changes (wide-oriented, transformational, strategic, dramatic, radical, and periodical) are needed when progressive (narrow-oriented, transactional, operational, recognized as current, less thorough) delayed or insufficient in terms of changed conditions. In the event that the scope of progressive changes is insufficient or these changes are not in compliance with the requirements of the changed environment, they are often followed by the phase of indefinite and unplanned transformation without any clear and elaborated policies and goals; therefore this first phase, for the reasons related to the existence of the company, should be followed up by a phase of radical changes to be carried out by a crisis management in many cases. A distinction should be made both, between the evolutionary (current and smaller) and revolutionary (less frequent and bigger) changes, and between the methods and concepts designed for preparing and carrying out (change management) these changes, as follows:

- methods of evolutionary transformation,
- methods of revolutionary transformation.

The methods of revolutionary changes comprise of all those related measures that currently, daily ensure transformation in the frame of the mission and company’s vision set up, long-term objectives and fundamental strategies including regular and progressively improved effectiveness and operational efficiency. In such cases, both a normal strategic operation and achievement of specially determined objectives, based on a project approach, are involved (e.g. introduction of business operations in accordance with the standards such as ISO 9000, ISO 14000, OHSAS 18000, ISO/TS 16949, VDA 6.1, DS 3027, HACCP, SA 8000, BS 7799, GMP, MDD and Qweb, following the “20-key” methods, Kaizen Programme, 6-Sigma Project, KVP², Project of Business Excellence or TQM, Learning Organisation, and implementation of various other projects of progressive changes).

In the methods of revolutionary changes, the following should be included:

- restructuring (emphasis to be on changes in structures), and
- reengineering (emphasis to be on changes in processes).

The main difference among the methods of revolutionary transformation and evolutionary achievement of changes is that the first methods are less frequently used; however, they are consistent and wide-oriented, carried out with increased intensity and in a shorter time and much more risky and demanding certain sacrifices. These sacrifices may refer to tangible assets (sale of objects, withdrawal of equity ties and trade relations, sale of so-called social standard objects, reduction of non-business investments, sale of real estates and lease back, and the like) and intangible assets (dismissing staff, exchange and departures of experts, sale of a patent or brands, loss of information sources, breakdown of business networks or current links with customers, and the like). However, because of the above mentioned sacrifices the methods of revolutionary transformation are not known as pleasant ones, but they entail fear, uncertainty, distress and stress.

4 Defining restructuring
If a particular structure in a company or one of its individual components and/or correlations among the latter does not correspond to circumstances demanded by the (altered) environment, then the existing structure is to be transformed and a new one is to be set up. This radical process that represents a transition from the existing structure into a new one, and does enable greater effectiveness and successfulness of a company, when better prospects for survival and accelerated development of organisation are assured, is denominated restructuring.

In regard to restructuring the following significant rules are to be taken into account (Dubrovski 2011, 274):

- it affects numerous spheres (transforming structure in one sphere demands transformations in other spheres),
- it derives from defined fundamental business strategies of a company,
- it commences by transforming the programme-market structures (= programme-market restructuring),
- it contains all characteristics of the methods of revolutionary transformations (already mentioned).

Restructuring usually cannot be carried out in a particular individual sphere (e.g., function) independently from the rest, but results will only be visible when structures in various spheres are co-ordinately transformed. Transformation of the product portfolio (programme-market restructuring) can also demand transformations of a corporation's organisation (organisational restructuring), technology (technological restructuring), sources of financing (financial restructuring), employees (HR restructuring), the information system (informational restructuring), etc. Sometimes, various transformations depend on or are triggered by owners (transformation of the ownership structure). This is particularly true subsequent to a co-ordinated and simultaneous restructuring for relieving crisis that cannot be put under control merely by financial restructuring, while other spheres of operations are left unchanged.

Restructuring, which represents a method of achieving a corporation’s fundamental business strategies, commences by analysing and comprehending the existing structures, defining their critical points and preparing their improvement, and consequently continues by replacing (redesigning) the existing structures with new ones.

In these cases, on-going transformations over a short period of time will not immediately demonstrate outcomes of the process of restructuring; on the other hand, if the state-of-affairs of structures is compared between t-1 and t points in time, one can determine that such transformations have led to restructuring of a part of a corporation or even of its entirety. Restructuring can be carried out integrally over a relatively short period of time (e.g., a few months)\(^1\), therefore, the implemented transformations are typical of the radical integral redesigns (the method of "long-steps"). The same results can be achieved through a longer lasting process of transformation (systematically and gradually), whereas minor alterations, which constitute a larger transformation, are not perceived as being radical, although, similarly to the first case, the achieved state of affairs profoundly transforms the existing structure.

5 Different roles of restructuring

In regard to a corporation's situation from its endangerment or the prospects point of view, restructuring can have the following roles in:

- crisis solving,
- crisis prevention,
- accelerated development of a corporation,
- equity and business alliances,
- insolvency procedures.

\(^1\) A German survey (Kraus and Becker-Kolle 2004, 117) demonstrates that the most of restructuring projects lasted one year (33%), followed by two years (24%), while 10% were carried out in a few weeks or even days. Wildemann (2009, 392) states that the preparation and execution of a restructuring project will need from 2 to 3.5 years.
Crisis solving on its own requires a wide variety of new areal structures (programme-market, personnel, technological, organisational, financial, ecological, manufacturing...), the intention of which is to stop negative flows at the beginning. Therefore, setting up new structures (and processes) in this phase is rapid, smaller in extent and not holistic, since short-term results are required. Only in the second phase, when fundaments of development and profitable operations are being set-up, holistic and in-depth penetrating projects of restructuring are carried out that will have medium-range and long-term impacts. Therefore, the role of restructuring in the first phase of crisis solving (stopping adverse processes) is less stressed but at later stages becomes prioritised.

In comparison to crisis solving, when measures having short-term positive results are prioritised, restructuring has an even greater role in regard to prevention of crisis and accelerated development of a company. Although the development of a company contains activities that simultaneously represent prevention of crisis emergence, various restructuring can take place merely to adjust the corporation continuously to the circumstances in the environment by introducing significant transformations (major steps) and by doing so, to prevent latent or acute crises, since the corporation does not develop more rapidly than the environment (competitors, altered demand or behaviour by consumers etc.). By appropriate strategic planning a corporation can improve its competitive position and developmental possibilities while continuously transforming its internal structures (small-steps).

In further text we focus only on marketing or programme-market restructuring as the most important part of whole company renewal in the process of crisis solving.

6 Contents of marketing restructuring as a part of whole company renewal

Among the variety of required and available measures, those in the sphere of programme-market transformations are most frequent during the periods of crisis solving and also during the periods of corporate development as the story of (un)successfulness starts here. A crisis often reveals that using current models, programmes and strategies will no longer ensure the existence and development of a company in the future (Heinerth, Keinz and Lettl 2011). Because investing in new programmes during the crisis peak is very difficult and often even impossible, it is even more important to consider occasional and future means of profit (new "potential") in times of favourable conditions, conjunctures and above-average results. The methods and content of a marketing restructuring naturally depend on the external environment and the position of the industry and the individual company. According to the American magazine Entrepreneur, more than a half of the businesses on the “Fortune 500” (list of the most successful American companies) were established during a recession or market crash! There are indeed many opportunities even in times of a crisis, however, the manner of establishing and realizing these opportunities is different.

The marketing or programme-market restructuring represents a transition from the prior structural combination of offered products or/and services (programmes) and served markets to a new structure that must enable greater successfulness (profitability) and effectiveness of operations. In regard to such a restructuring, one must take into account the inter-linked relationship of the market (the chosen segment of customers) and of the programme (product, service), since, in principle, it is true that the identical programme of offer cannot be placed on the new market or the new programme in the prior market (segment), although in principle one could also separately discuss both the programme restructuring and the market restructuring. Because this kind of restructuring is based on a marketing approach, where market possibilities and opportunities must first be established and a suitable offer later designed, radical changes in the area of programmes and markets is also
known as the marketing restructuring, where the substantive approach is emphasized and not the technical method, which is distinctive of the programme and market restructuring.

A survey conducted with 221 marketing experts (Shaw and Mazur 1997, 10) indicated that altered relationships in the marketing environment in particular are the foundation for the programme-market restructuring. Schreuder (1993), while investigating 120 corporations in manufacturing, construction and transport industries, during the 1972-1985 period, 30 of which had strategic problems, came to the following findings: all successful ones implemented measures in the sphere of markets and products, in comparison with unsuccessful companies where transformed market strategies were included in 62% and transformed products in 81%; less successful ones implemented primarily measures in the domain of cost-reduction; successful ones were also more active in the spheres of organisation and finances.

In one research it is found out that most British companies in telecommunications and media (78 companies studied) reacted to the crisis in 2009 not by implementing short-term reactive measures, such as asset sales, outsourcing and reducing costs for R&D, but with increased innovation (31%), organic growth (16%) and strategic partnerships (15%), which should also ensure reaching long-term objectives. In comparison, the dominant growth strategy in 2007 (before the crisis) was based on capital mergers and takeovers (60%), new markets (16%) and organic growth (7%) (CFO Europe 2009).

Homburg and Bucerius (2005) find in their research, that marketing improvements are far more effective for financial performance than, for example, cost reductions. The consulting firm Roland Berger focused one of its researches on studying 40 companies listed on the stock exchange in 1993–2002 and identified a pattern of four basic restructuring models (Lafrenz 2006, 45–46, 50): performance improvements through cost management (55% of companies), change in programmes and markets (32%), expansion growth (8%) and extent changes with outsourcing (5%). In the second case (marketing restructuring) since the beginning of the project an average of over 136% excess returns were generated in two years, whereas in the first case (cost management) that amount was just over 54% (cf. Blatz and Haghani 2006, 19).

The objective of programme-market restructuring is a new combination of programmes and markets that, from a corporation’s point of view, represent a transition into higher value levels on the bases of greater value-added per employee, which consequently enables more successful operations of the corporation. Greater value-added per employee is a consequence of offering more sophisticated products and services since, except for the labour itself, more types of knowledge and gained experience had been invested into. In various cases, it will not be able to insure the aforementioned transition, if prior to or simultaneously to the transition offering inferior and low value-added products and services is not terminated, which can be a genuine “revolution” for a corporation (radical transformation by long steps).

7 Marketing approach must be a starting-point of restructuring

The essence of the programme-market restructuring is in the marketing approach. Marketing is way of thinking, behaving and acting of personnel in an organisation that focuses on customers, including their needs and requirements, which, in order to achieve one’s own purposes and objectives, are to be fulfilled as completely as possible by an appropriately designed marketing-mix. Marketing-orientated thinking, behaving and acting is not directed merely towards external relationships but it must pervade all parts of a corporate system i.e. also the internal relationships within the corporation. The programme-market restructuring, as a transition to new structures of products and markets, also automatically brings
about a transition to higher levels of marketing understanding and acting.

Strategies, which include definition of objectives and ways of achieving them, therefore, cannot be created without a thorough knowledge of markets and of the advantages and disadvantages of one’s own products and services. The instrument, upon which the planning and execution of the marketing science are founded, is the marketing-mix.

Due to diversity and unfamiliarity with market environment, there are many risks for making the wrong business decisions, when deciding on the selection of potentially interesting export or local markets, on the way to enter the selected markets and ways to act once present there. Wrong business decisions can annul all efforts and endeavour that had been invested into the present development of a corporation, and can endanger its development or even existence regardless of its size. Therefore, the marketing approach is necessary.

A decline in sales and revenue is standard during a crisis. Ensuring a sufficient revenue level is therefore critical, however, the main problem is that the decline of sales must first be stopped and then transformed into growth, which can require a longer period of time and certain investments with time-delayed results, while a company in acute crisis has only a limited amount of time and limited resources for investing in the market and new programmes (Dubrovski 2011, 159). It is even worse when the operation rationalization or cost reduction takes a long time to take effect. Immediate efforts to increase sales are practically the basis of a company’s existence and are therefore essential, however, they must be carefully selected.

Stopping the decline in sales is an immediate short-term measure, whereas increasing sales is a more mid-term measure, due to the time gap between the initial activities and inputs on one hand and the actual results on the other, which can be contradictory to the efforts of ensuring liquidity resources for establishing a minimal financial solvency. That is why in this context companies are more likely to opt for the form of sales increase that will ensure an immediate or fast positive cash flow. Although the crisis “forces” a company to take short-term measures and the efforts to increase sales revenues are actually mid-term measures (in the short-term only produce more costs), these mid-term measures must be implemented at the very beginning of the company’s recovery project. The sooner actions to increase sales begin, the sooner the results will be visible.

While it is indeed necessary to begin resolving a crisis with short-term solutions, it is true that this is only the first step, which is essential but on its own insufficient for the recovery of a company and must be supported by activities associated with further development for post-crisis business. For example short-term, incorrectly directed marketing strategies can therefore cause long-term problems and damage the attractiveness of the programmes or even the entire company (e.g. reckless cost reduction to reach at least partial sales stabilization, a decrease in quality to cheapen materials). Because the image of the company and its products can suffer in a crisis, the main focus must be set on product quality and the correction of any eventual faults in the product.

Process of the marketing or programme-market restructuring, as a rule, is conducted in a parallel manner in two spheres:

- the internal sphere that relates to achieving the optimal position of the programme in regard to the relationship between the interlinked and mutually dependant business functions and to the organisational units of a corporation (from the technological, developmental, profitability, liquidity, capacities and market point of view);

- the market (external) sphere that relates to the investigation of possibilities for selling the existing or a new programme in the selected markets, i.e. segments.

The most basic classification of market strategies is the one that differentiates between focusing on the products of mass production, with the price as the key factor of competitiveness, and focusing on the products
of higher (top) discriminative quality, where other elements of competitiveness prevail. The selected market strategy influences decisively the set objectives of the programme-market restructuring, by all means. Such a classification is rather simplified, therefore, various possibilities of combination are to be taken into account, either peculiar for each individual industry or for further differentiation within a particular orientation.

8 Empirical evidence

To determine whether these findings are indeed correct, the author researched measures, which were planned or implemented by the companies in an acute crisis in Slovenia during 2008–2012 and attempted to solve the crisis with an insolvency procedure of a compulsory arrangement (in-court restructuring), started on their proposal by the authorized court (the list available at www.ajpes.si/eobjave). If bankruptcy is a method of solving an out of control crisis, then a compulsory arrangement is a method of recovery, where the creditors play the key role. The creditors will not accept the proposal of a distress company, worsening the status of their claims if they cannot see radical changes in business practice of the debtor. New strategies, business models, strategies, structures and systems must be presented in the frame of programme-market restructuring. As mentioned earlier crisis recovery cannot be successful if it is not applied simultaneously in business (substantive) and financial areas (e.g. Kraus and Glass 2004, 121; Seefelder 2007, 27). Only from financial restructuring a distress company cannot ensure its further existence and development.

A well prepared and executed compulsory arrangement is often a necessary, yet insufficient condition for achieving a drastic change and ensuring re-development in a company. An insolvency procedure is a process, not a solution (Miller 2008, 202), which gives a company time and access to new ways of financing for the recovery and renewal. A compulsory arrangement is thus only one of the steps in saving a company, which, however, does not ensure its successful future business, but is vital for the implementation of further steps to solve the crisis (threat of bankruptcy). Out of 158 studied cases of companies in compulsory arrangement only 28 (17.7%) included marketing (programme-market) restructuring in their key recovery measures and as many as 82.3% of companies focused only on the various forms of financial restructuring. This research, other previously mentioned empirical researches and author’s own many years’ strategic management and restructuring consultancy practice have shown that such companies:

- in most cases attempt to solve the acute crisis with various forms of financial restructuring, meaning that they are actually dealing with the consequences rather than the causes of the crisis, which have brought on the need for financial disburdening;
- approach crisis problems with short-term financial methods, burdening their creditors and causing a crisis chain reaction reaching their suppliers;
- pay surprisingly little attention to their marketing restructuring, even though in this case this is the most important area of reorganization, which will ensure further existence and development;
- extremely rarely present changes to the business model (which would cause inevitable marketing restructuring) that would replace previous ineffective business practices that led to the acute crisis;
- will apparently even after financial disburdening continue to burden their creditors by continuing to rely on existing unsuccessful structures, processes, systems, strategies and models, thereby exposing the company to another imminent acute crisis.

Research of the adopted measures of companies, which are attempting to solve the crisis with an insolvency procedure of a compulsory arrangement (in Slovenia in the period 2008-2012), has shown that the survival rate of these companies in the next five years...
will be extremely low (perhaps 15–20%). One of the key reasons is neglecting the need for a complete change of the offered programme and target markets within the marketing restructuring, where it would be necessary to focus on the causes of the acute crisis (more difficult), whereas companies tend to focus more on the consequences of their crisis and the measures of short-term financial disburdening (simpler), which provides no guarantee to the participants that the crisis in these companies will actually be solved even for a mid-term time period.

9 Conclusions

Based on several empirical researches, author’s own strategic management and restructuring consultancy practice in 77 companies from various branches in Slovenia from 1994-2013, working also as crisis management and insolvency practitioner, including the research described in this paper it can be clare et distinta stated that marketing or programme-market restructuring is an essential part of recovery of a company from crisis and ensures its further survival or accelerated development. Considering all the above, it is possible to set the following guidelines of the marketing restructuring: 1) it represents a transition into higher value levels on the basis of increased sophistication/up-grading of products and/or services, i.e. the value added per employee, that provides greater efficiency and successfulness of business operations; 2) the role of restructuring differs with regard to the state and objectives of the company; 3) it requires an optimal combination of the internal and the external spheres of the planned offering package; 4) the process of the programme-market orientation is based on the marketing science and the marketing approach, taking into account a modern and complexly designed marketing mix and a clear definition of core (prospective) and non-core (non-prospective) programmes and possibilities; 5) it requires adjustment of other spheres according to the programme-market directions; 6) it requires coordinated investments in three domains: technology, employees, market.

The study of 158 Slovenian companies which attempted to solve the acute crisis during 2008–2012 with an insolvency procedure of a compulsory arrangement, has unfortunately shown that in these cases the reorganization programme was primarily based on short-term financial restructuring and not a overall business renewal, which would require an initial marketing restructuring, acting as a key factor in the future existence and development for at least a mid-term period.

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