Micro and Small Restaurants in Nairobi's Strategic Response to their Competitive Environment

BELINDA KANANA MURIUKI
University of Nairobi Enterprises and Services Ltd
Nairobi, Kenya
EMAIL: bkanana@uonbi.ac.ke

Abstract

The key factors that promote competition in restaurants are speed of service, quality of food and competitive prices (Shay and Rothaermel, 2002). Porter's Five Forces Model (Porter 1980, 1985) is frequently used in management literature to assess the competitive environment (e.g., Boulding and Staelin, 1993). They are threats to new entrants, bargaining power of suppliers, bargaining power of buyers, threats of substitute products and services and rivalry among existing firms. To overcome these forces management must employ various strategic responses to combat the competitive pressures. Porter (1980) developed successful generic strategies for creating a defensible position and out performing competitors. They are, cost leadership, differentiation and focus. A survey was carried out in 311 licensed micro and small size restaurants in Nairobi. From the research findings, majority of the MSE restaurants have been in business for 1-2 years and have less than 20 employees. Managers and owners were the major players directly involved in decision making and most of them had tertiary education. From the mean scores, use of the provided strategic responses to the stated competitive forces were nearly all rated as 'average' by the respondents, except 'focus on reputation' that was the only strategic response rated 'very important.' The paper concludes that there was no general consensus among the respondents on the strategic responses MSE restaurants employ in response to the common competitive forces they face.

Key words: MSEs, Competitive pressures, Strategic responses

1.0 Introduction

Competition in an industry is rooted in its underlying economic structures and goes well beyond the behaviors of current competitors. The state of competition in an industry depends on the five basic forces; threats to new entrants, bargaining power of suppliers, bargaining power of buyers, threats of substitute products and services and rivalry among existing firms (Porter 1980). According to Pearce and Robinson (1997) a competitive environment comprises of factors in the competitive situation that affects a firm's success in acquiring needed resources and in profitably marketing its goods and services. These factors are a firm's competitive position, composition of its customers, its reputation among suppliers and creditors, and its ability to attract capable employees. Since the competitive forces of each may be well apparent in all competitors, the key of developing competitive strategy is to analyze the sources of each knowledge of the underlying sources of competitive pressure.

2.0 Research Focus

The research focussed on micro and small restaurants in Nairobi. According to the Government of Kenya's baseline survey report on SME's (2008), the concept of MSE in Kenya is defined as micro enterprises having less than 10 employees; and small enterprises having 10-49 employees. According to Nairobi City Council Licensing Office (2009), there are 1,635 licensed restaurants in Nairobi who qualify as MSEs. Nairobi City Council categorizes the size of restaurants in terms of sitting capacity and not number of employees as in the case of the other industries such as retail, agriculture transport, factories among others.

3.0 Research Problem

Organizations respond to competitive environment by adjusting and changing their strategies to gain competitive advantage. This is usually done after a business has diagnosed its competitive forces and their underlying causes which helps a firm to be in a position to identify its strengths and weaknesses relative to the industry (Porter 1980). The competitive forces experienced by the restaurants include the high power of customers and suppliers, new entrants, competition for existing firms, amongst others. Further, the internal competitive forces include inadequate resources to compete, such as lack of access to credit, lack of enough qualified personnel, limited product lines and inadequate organization structure, amongst others, (Longenecker, 2006). The micro and small size restaurants are expected to respond strategically in order to combat the competitive forces and gain competitive advantage. Similar

studies have been conducted in quick service restaurants in South Africa on Porters five forces and the competitive strategies employed to remain competitive. They concluded that the restaurants use competitive strategies such as franchising, market coordination product and service differentiation (Maumbe, 2010). This study addressed quick service restaurants only.

Arsalan et al., (2010) carried out a study on small and medium size catering and restaurants in Karachi, Pakistan on marketing practices and their effects on firm's performance. They found that only advertising (marketing) practice is positively associated with firm's performance. This study addressed marketing aspects only.   A study conducted by Joel,K et al., (2009) reported that issues to do with collateral, interest charged, lack of education and culture seemed to impact negatively on the growth of cafes in Kisumu City, Kenya.   The researcher has not come across studies that broadly address strategic responses of micro and small restaurants to competitive forces within the industry. This study seeks to specifically pursue that approach to research.

4.0 Theoretical Background of the Research

4.1 Competitive Environment

Understanding the competitive environment in which micro and small size restaurants operates requires an appreciation of multiple perspectives to help craft long-term competitive strategy. Porter's (1980) model describes the five competitive forces outside the firm as key drivers affecting industry competitiveness. They are (1) rivalry between existing competitors, (2) threat of new entrants, (3) threat of substitute products, (4) bargaining power of suppliers and (5) bargaining power of buyers. The utility of Porter's model is that it provides an analytical framework to determine how to gain competitive advantages by strategically positioning a firm within an attractive industry environment, and then leveraging these advantages over rival competitors (Shay and Rothaermel, 2002). First,in threats to entry, differentiation creates a barrier to entry by forcing entrants to spend heavily to overcome existing customer loyalties. Government can limit or even foreclose entry into industries with such controls as licensing requirements and limits to access of raw materials (Porter 1980).

Secondly, rivalry between competitors occurs because one or more competitors either feels the pressure or sees the opportunity to increase their competitive position by using tactics such as price competition, product re-introductions and advertising battles. Thirdly, a high threat of substitution implies that an alternative product offers a price or performance benefit and limits industry's profitability. The firm can earn satisfactory profits while undercutting any potential competitor on price by pursuing a cost leadership strategy. Thus by reducing the alternative product types price advantage, the firm protects itself from attack in the long term (Scherer and Ross, 1990; Porter, 1980). Fourthly, high levels of buyer power will limit a firm's ability to charge higher prices as more powerful buyers will be able to demand price concessions from other suppliers (Scherer and Ross, 1990). Porter (1980) states that buyers compete in the industry by forcing the prices down, bargaining for higher quality or more services and playing competitors against each other at the expense of industry profitability.

Finally, suppliers can exert bargaining power over participants in an industry by threatening to raise prices or reduce the quality of purchased goods and services. To overcome these competitive forces, management can employ various strategies such as cost leadership, differentiation and focus According to a study conducted in South Africa, the key factors that promote competition in the quick service restaurants are speed of service, quality of food and a good price to value relationship (Shay and Rothaermel, 2002). The competitive strategies being employed to gain competitive advantage   range from franchising, co-branding, market coordination, product differentiation, service differentiation and customer relationship management (CRM) strategies, (Maumbe, 2010)

A study conducted by Joel,K et al., (2009) reported that issues to do with collateral, interest charged, lack of education and culture seemed to impact negatively on the growth of cafes in Kisumu City and therefore cannot compete with the large restaurants and hotels in the city. The study further reported that 75% of café owners depend wholly on income from their cafes and only 25% of respondents indicated that other external incomes come in handy to support their café business, especially in hard times. The study also   reports that over 50% of the respondents had no formal training in hotel business.

4.2 Strategic responses

Strategy may   be defined as the study of sources of efficiencies that makes firms successful for example innovation, new product development, diversification, entry, corporate governance, acquisitions, joint venture and strategic alliances, executive compensation, influence of top management teams (Camerer, 1991). Hax and Majruf (1996) defined strategy in terms of a competitive domain of the firm and a response to external opportunities and threats. Strategies are usually crafted in advance of the actions which they apply, designed to outwit the competitor and can

be revolutionary (Hamel, 1996). Porter (1980) developed successful generic strategies for creating a defensible position and out performing competitors in a given industry. The first, overall cost leadership emphasizes low cost relative to competitors. The second, differentiation requires that firms create something unique permitting the firm to command higher than average prices. The third, focus strategy is the choice of which firms focus on particular group of customers, geographical segments or product line segments.

5.0 Research Methodology

The research design was a survey. The population was all the licensed micro and small size restaurants operating within Nairobi. According to Nairobi City Council Licensing Office (2009), there were 1,635 licensed restaurants in Nairobi, all of who qualified as MSEs. Random sampling was used to pick the restaurants. The sample size was 311 using the Cochran's (1977) sample size equation. Self-administered questionnaires were used to collect data. The questionnaires were divided into three sections (1) obtained demographics of the respondents. (2) competitive forces, and (3) Strategic responses employed. Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the data. These were measures of central tendency and the measures of variability. For measure of central tendency the mean was used. For the measures of variability the standard variation was used. The independent variables considered included attributes of low cost, differentiation and focus, from Porter's model.

6.0 Results of the Study

Overall, 286 questionnaires were returned giving a response rate of 92%. The demographic findings were age of the business, level of education of the decision makers and number of employees. From the survey results, 44% of MSE restaurants in Nairobi have been in business for 1-2 years which represents the majority of the restaurants. It is also worth noting that there is an adequate representation of restaurants that are between 3-5 years. Only 4% are less than 1 year old. This means that most of the MSE restaurants are relatively young in business. Managers and owners were the major players directly involved in decision making with an equal representation of 45% .This means that the strategies of the businesses are done by both managers and owners. The results also indicated that 89.5% of the MSE restaurants have less than 20 employees. Only 1% indicated that they had over 51 employees which means that vast majority of the restaurants are either micro or small. Further, 40% of the respondent's level of education is tertiary education while 34% of the respondents have secondary education. It is worth noting that 6% did not indicate their level of education. Very few managers or owners have only primary education with a representation of 2%. This indicates that majority of the respondents have an adequate level of education to successfully run their businesses.

6.1 Competitive Forces Experienced by MSE Restaurants in Nairobi

The competitive forces experienced by the MSE restaurants in Nairobi are ranked in order of perceived effect and presented in Table 1. The respondents were asked to rank the competitive forces they experience in their businesses. A 5 point scale was used with values ranging from "1-very low effect" "2-low effect," "3-average," "4- large effect," to "5-major effect." The analysis was based on the ranges: 1-1.5 very low effect, 1.6-2.5 low effect, 2.6-3.5 average, 3.6-4.5 large effect and 4.6-5.0 major effect.

From the Table 1, competitive forces of suppliers raising prices of raw materials, a lot of customers demanding low priced food/drink and demanding high quality products/ services, diverse large customer base whose needs and wants keep on changing had a mean score of 3.48, 3.45 and 3.43 respectively. Suppliers delivering low quality inputs and lacking raw materials when you require them for production, restaurants providing lower priced products and services had a mean score of 3.26, 3.17 and 3.06. Other respondents indicated that major suppliers being monopoly of markets and new restaurants utilizing unique technology were also average competitive forces affecting their businesses with a mean of 2.93, 2.97 and respectively. It is worth noting that few respondents indicated that new restaurants opening up that provide similar services was a low competitive force for their business with a mean score of 2.48. However, there were great variations in the respondents with standard deviation being as high as 1.53 in restaurants providing lower priced products and services and new restaurants opening up that provide similar services. In other areas the standard deviation was also high.

6.2 Strategic Responses Employed by MSE Restaurants to Competitive Environment

This section presents results of the strategic responses employed by the restaurants to several competitive forces identified in the previous section. The respondents were asked to rank their strategic responses in order of importance.   A 5 point scale was used with values ranging from "1-Least important" "2-Low Importance," "3-average," "4-very important" to 5- "Most important". The analysis will be based on the ranges. 1-1.5 least important, 1.6-2.5 low importance, 2.6-3.5 average, 3.6-4.5 very important and 4.6-5.0 most important.

6.2.1 Strategic Responses to New Restaurants Opening up that Provide Similar Services

Table 2 presents competitive pricing and increased advertising as average strategic responses by respondents, with a mean score of 3.40 and 3.01, respectively. Offering of unique and innovative products, brand identification, innovation in marketing techniques and methods, increased breadth and range of product and service line were also rated average strategic responses with mean scores ranging from 2.98, 2.81,2,79 and 2.75, respectively. This indicates that there was general consensus among all the respondents. Advertising recorded a high standard deviation of 1.45.There were also high variations in the other strategic responses. The variations are also depicted in Figure 1.

6.2.2 Strategic Responses to New Restaurants Utilizing Modern Technology

Increased efficiency on production and service methods, having experienced and trained personnel, provision of unique business process were rated average strategic responses employed by the MSE restaurants to respond to the competitive force on new restaurants utilizing modern technology as shown in Table 3 with mean scores of 3.25, 2.84 and 2.83 respectively. It is worth noting that few respondents indicated that provision of unique technology was of low importance with a mean score of 2.53.Having experienced and trained personnel recorded a high standard deviation with a score of 1.39. The other responses also recorded high standard deviations ranging from 1.27 to 1.36 denoting that the opinions of respondents also varied. This is also depicted on Figure 2.

6.2.3 Strategic Responses to Suppliers Raising Prices of Raw Materials/Supplying Low Quality Goods

As shown in Table 4, having a pool of many suppliers, maintaining high inventory levels were rated average by respondents with a mean score of 3.25 and 3.10. Access to low cost suppliers and having product specification contracts with suppliers were also rated average strategic responses with mean scores of 2.93 and 2.87 respectively. However, the standard deviation was very high in having product specification contracts with suppliers with a deviation of 1.56. The other strategic responses also had high variations. This is also shown in Figure 3 below.

6.2.4 Strategic Responses to a Lot of Customers Demanding Low Priced Products and Demanding High Quality Products

Table 5 and Figure 4 shows that few respondents rated focus on reputation as very important strategic response for their business. Improving efficiency, improving service and product quality, product quality control and using low cost materials were rated average by the respondents. It should be noted that introducing customer retention programs was the only strategic response that was rated low importance with a mean score of 2.58. Standard deviation was very high in improving efficiency at 1.64 and also high in other strategic responses.

6.2.5 Strategic Responses to Diverse Large Customer Base Whose Needs and Wants Keep on Changing

As shown in Table 6 and Figure 5, good customer service, developing/refining existing products were rated average strategic responses to respond to the competitive force of diverse large customer base whose needs and wants keep on changing with   mean scores of 3.51 and 3.03. Brand identification, serving low priced markets, focus on specific customer groups were also rated average by some respondents. It should be noted that focus on certain geographic locations and serving high priced markets were rates low important strategic respondents by few respondent with mean score of 2.55 and 2.41 respectively. Standard deviation was high in serving of high priced markets at 1.42. It was also high in the other strategic responses.

7.0 Discussion

From the results of the survey, the restaurants are still relatively small and young in business. This is presented by the duration they have been in business and the number of employees. The restaurants' managers and owners were the vast majority who were directly involved in decision making. Majority of the respondents have an adequate level of education to successfully run their business with majority having had tertiary education.

The competitive forces experienced by the MSE restaurants were ranked in order of perceived importance by the respondents. From the mean scores, the competitive forces were rated average by respondents except the competitive force of new restaurants opening up that provide similar services that was rated low effect.   However, the standard deviations were high in all the competitive forces which mean that the respondents' opinions differed.

From the competitive forces, the respondents were asked to rank in order of importance the various strategic responses they use to combat each competitive force. To respond to the competitive force of new restaurants opening up that provide similar services, all the strategic responses had a mean rating of 'average' by   the respondents. This can be seen from the mean scores. However, standard deviation was high in all the strategic responses meaning that there was no general consensus among the respondents.

To respond to the competitive force of new restaurants utilizing modern technology it is worth noting that provision of unique technology was the only strategic response that was rated 'low importance' by the respondents. All the other strategic responses were rated 'average' by the respondents. The standard deviation was also high which means

that the opinions of the respondents also varied greatly. Strategic responses to suppliers raising prices of raw materials/supplying low quality good were all rated 'average' by the respondents. However standard deviation was high in all the strategic responses which mean there was no agreement among the respondents.

To respond to lot of customers demanding low priced products/services and demanding high quality products, it is important to note that focus on reputation was the only strategic response that was rated 'very important' by the respondents. The other strategic responses were rated 'average importance' except introducing customer retention programs that was rated 'low importance' by the respondents. The opinions of the respondents also varied greatly which can be seen from the standard deviation.

Strategic responses to diverse large customer base whose needs and wants keep on changing were rated 'average' by the respondents except focus on certain geographic locations and serving high priced markets which were rated 'low importance' by the respondents. The standard deviations were high in all the strategic responses which also mean that the opinions of the respondents also varied.

To the policy makers, there is need to come up with policies that address monopoly of suppliers and inflation. There is need to promote healthy competition among suppliers by allowing as many investors to come to the country to sell various raw materials. This will create a large pool of suppliers which business owners can select from and bring prices down.

8.0 Conclusion

From the analysis of data collected, it is evident that restaurants experience various competitive forces and employ various strategic responses to respond to competition. However, there was no general consensus by the respondents on what is most important, very important, average important, low important and least important strategic response for each competitive force. From the mean scores, majority of the respondents rated most strategic responses as average for their business. Very few strategic responses were rated low importance. The analysis also support existing literature where (Porter, 1980) recognizes that strategies business use to compete in an industry can differ in a variety of ways. It also confirms that there is no market leader in the MSE restaurant industry to set the tone for competition as mentioned earlier in the statement of the problem.

Limitations of the study include some of the respondents were not willing to give information and as a result it took a lot of money and time to collect data from the field. This study only focused on identifying strategic responses employed by MSE restaurants in Nairobi which may not be generalized across the entire restaurant industry in Nairobi. Studies should be done to the large restaurants to determine the strategic responses they also employ. Areas of further research should determine how the strategic responses employed by the MSE restaurants affect their business performance. Cluster analysis should be done on the MSEs based on their strategic responses to determine which restaurants use low cost strategy, focus, differentiation, mixed strategies or stuck in the middle.

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Belinda Kanana Muriuki is the Manager for Arziki Restaurants and Conference Center of the University of Nairobi Enterprises and Services Limited. She graduated with a Bachelor of Science Degree from the United States International University (USIU), Nairobi, Kenya in 2001, and a holder of a Masters Degree in Business Administration, specialising in Strategic Management from the University of Nairobi, Kenya in 2011.

Table 1: Competitive forces experience by SME Restaurants

Rank	Competitive forces	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean Effect
1	Suppliers raising prices of raw materials	3.48	1.34	Average
2	A lot of customers demanding low priced food and drink and demanding high quality products and services.	3.45	1.39	Average
3	Diverse large customer base whose needs and want keep on changing	3.43	1.40	Average
4	Suppliers delivering low quality inputs.	3.26	1.31	Average
5	Suppliers lacking raw materials when you require them for production	3.17	1.32	Average
6	Restaurants providing lower priced products and services	3.06	1.53	Average
7	Major suppliers being monopoly of markets	2.93	1.25	Average
8	New restaurants utilizing unique technology	2.71	1.22	Average
9	New restaurants opening up that provide similar services	2.48	1.53	Low effect

Table 2: Strategic Responses to "New Restaurants Opening up that Provide Similar Services"

Rank	Strategic Responses	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean effect
1	Competitive pricing (R_1)	3.40	1.24	Average
2	Increased advertising (R_2)	3.01	1.45	Average
3	Offering unique and innovative products (R_3)	2.98	1.23	Average
4	Brand identification (R_4)	2.81	1.30	Average
5	Innovation in marketing techniques and methods (R_5)	2.79	1.28	Average
6	Increased breadth and range of product and service line (R_6)	2.75	1.34	Average

Table 3: Strategic Responses to "New Restaurants Utilizing Modern Technology"

Rank	Strategic responses	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean Effect
1	Increased efficiency on production and service methods R_1)	3.25	1.32	Average
2	Having experienced and trained personnel (R_2)	2.84	1.39	Average
3	Provision of unique business process (R_3)	2.83	1.27	Average
4	Provision of unique technology (R_4)	2.53	1.36	Low importance

Table 4: Strategic Responses to "Suppliers Raising Prices of Raw Materials/Supplying Low Quality Goods"

Rank	Strategic responses	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean effect
1	Having a pool of many suppliers(R_1)	3.25	1.23	Average
2	Maintain high inventory levels (R_2)	3.10	1.33	Average
3	Access to low cost suppliers (R_3)	2.93	1.31	Average
4	Having product specification contracts with suppliers (R_4)	2.87	1.56	Average

Table 5: Strategic Responses to "A lot of Customers Demanding Low Priced Products and Demanding High Quality Products"

Rank	Strategic Responses	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean effect
1	Focus on reputation (R_1)	3.61	1.23	Very important
2	Improving service and product quality (R_2)	3.21	1.29	Average
3	Product quality control (R_3)	3.11	1.35	Average
4	Using low cost materials(R_4)	3.09	1.30	Average
5	Improving efficiency (R_5)	3.09	1.64	Average
6	Introducing customer retention programs (R_6)	2.58	1.32	Low importance

Table 6: Strategic responses to "Diverse Large Customer Base Whose Needs and Wants Keep on Changing."

| Rank	Strategic Responses	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean effect
1	Good customer service (R_1)	3.51	1.33	Average
2	Developing/refining existing products (R_2)	3.03	1.40	Average
3	Brand identification (R_3)	2.86	1.28	Average
4	Serving low priced markets (R_4)	2.85	1.34	Average
5	Focus on specific customer groups e.g. health eaters (R_5)	2.73	1.38	Average
6	Focus on certain geographic locations (R_6)	2.55	1.34	Low importance
7	Serving high priced markets (R_7)	2.41	1.42	Low importance

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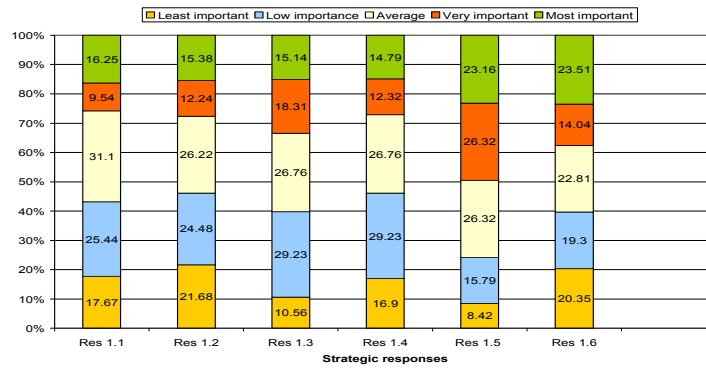
Figure 1: Perceived importance of strategic responses to "new restaurants opening up that provide similar services"
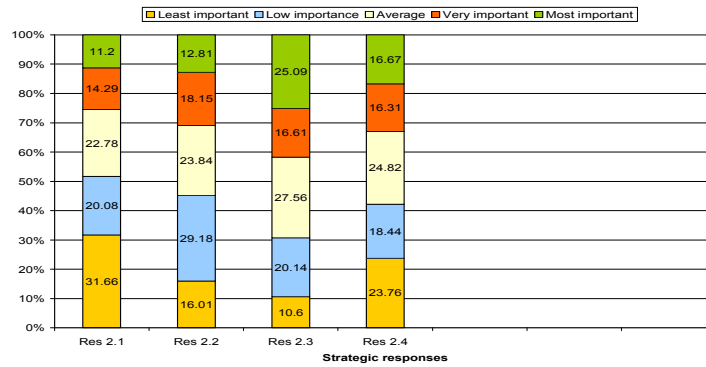

Figure 2:   Perceived importance of strategic responses to "new restaurants utilizing modern technology"
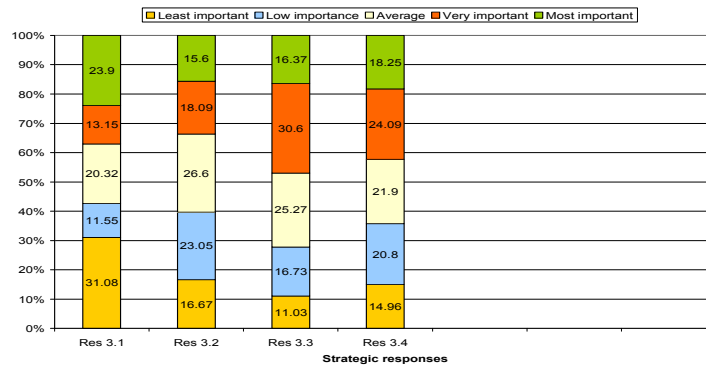

Figure 3: Perceived importance of strategic responses to "Suppliers raising prices of raw materials/supplying low quality goods"
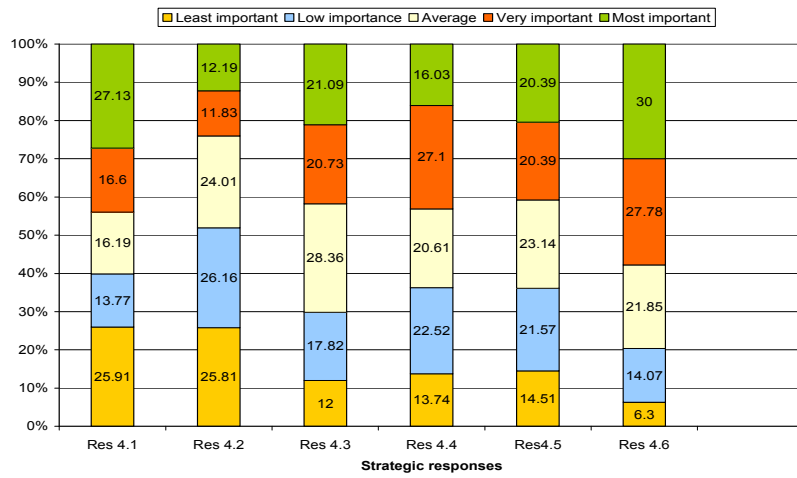
Figure 4: Perceived importance of strategic responses to "A lot of customers demanding low priced products and demanding high quality products."
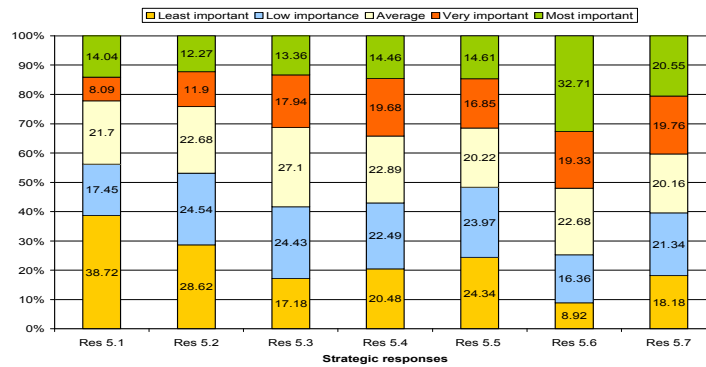

Figure 5: Perceived importance of strategic responses to "Diverse large customer base whose needs and wants keep on changing".

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