

ADAPTIVE CAPABILITY OF PT ASIA TRAN SINERGI FARMA DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 restriction giving an impact on the business operations and marketing strategies of companies in Indonesia including PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma, a pharmaceutical company in Indonesia. This study examines how PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma can adapt to the changing situation. Before the pandemic, the company relied on traditional offline approaches, including frequent visits to healthcare professionals. However, the COVID-19 restrictions limited their ability to engage directly with professionals, prompting the company to digitalize customer interactions and enable remote work. The thesis explores the company's marketing strategies during and after the restrictions, emphasizing adaptability and the use of technology-based approaches to maintain customer engagement. It also compares PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma with its competitors, highlighting their unique selling points and strategies. The study concludes that the company's ability to adapt and adjust during the crisis, including the adoption of hybrid medico-marketing activities, allowed them to remain competitive and generate profits. The findings underscore the importance of adaptability and resilience in navigating business challenges, as demonstrated by PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma's successful response to the COVID-19 crisis

Keywords: adaptive capability, COVID-19, marketing strategy, sales representative, pharmaceutical industry

BACKGROUND

COVID-19 has spread worldwide, infecting millions of people and threatening health, economy, education, and society, including in Indonesia. Several nations have adopted the "lockdown" strategy to stop the spread of COVID-19, which will hinder economic activity and pressure future global economic growth in Indonesia (Susilawati et al., 2020). The national government of Indonesia implements a lockdown-like strategy in an effort to reduce the spread of this virus. This regulation is called Large-Scale Social Restriction (Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar, known as PSBB) and PSBB-variant that is Expanded and Tightened Social Restriction or Pembatasan Sosial yang Diperluas dan Diperketat (PSDD) (Syuhada et al., 2021).

Consumer and producer behavior has altered as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and these changes are because of the pandemic's regulations that require people to maintain physical distance (Purba et al., 2021). Business activities, where customers usually directly engage with business people, must go online. If this policy is enforced for an extended period of time, it can cause a business to close. According to the World Bank survey of 850 company in Indonesia, all firms' sector is negatively affected by the COVID-19 crisis. 86% of the firms (731 companies) experienced a reduction in sales in June 2020. Most reported a sales drop of more than 20%.

A survey by the Indonesian Central Bureau of Statistics also found that COVID-19 affected how business operations ran. Usually, all the employees will go to the office for work. However, with COVID-19, several companies must change how they operate their business (BPS, 2020). The ability of a firm to adapt is crucial for it to survive in the future as a result of changes in the situation during a crisis. Being able to adapt will enable a business to outperform its rivals, even if it may be challenging but not impossible (McCallum, 2001). The ability of an organization to

change its strategy, operations, management systems, governance structure, and decision-support capabilities in order to respond to disruptions or changes in its external environment is referred to as adaptive capability (Starr, Newfrock, and Delurey, 2003, as cited in Isip, 2022).

During COVID-19, many companies reduced their expenses in order to be saved up. In 2021, The marketing budgets dropped to 6.4% of overall company revenue 2021, down from 11% in 2020. Companies see advertising as an expense during the crisis, and easier for them to reduce their marketing expenditure (Nikbin et al., 2021). In order to survive the economic crisis, businesses want to conserve their limited resources. Therefore, marketing spending in many businesses becomes cyclical, with companies increasing their marketing budgets during economic booms and cutting them down during downturns (Nikbin et al., 2021).

The pandemic has enormously impacted all sectors of the economy, including the pharmaceutical sales and marketing industry. One of the companies in the field of marketing in Indonesia is PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma. The company's main businesses are medical devices (dental consumables and disposal surgical), pharma (oncology and primary care), and consumer goods (skincare treatment and personal care). PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma has several business partners, such as Pfizer in primary care, KaVo Kerr in dental consumables, Kimia Farma in oncology, and Hermed in herbal medicine.

PT Asia Tran Sinergi has three business models to gain revenue. The first model is Contract Sales and Marketing Organization (CSMO), where they market products from partners and get specific fees. The second model is the management fee. They market and distribute products from partners by getting special prices, such as a discount from the introductory price. The final model is Co-marketing, in which the alliance partner's products, brands, or corporate images are marketed together as one system (Farrelly et al., 2005)

THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

Resilience

Business resilience is the ability of an organization can adapt quickly and respond to all types of risks. According to (Li et al., 2021), the definition of business resilience can be divided into three different perspectives. First, resilience is defined as a company's capacity to return to its perceived pre-crisis normalcy in terms of operation and capacity. The second view of resilience is the ability of a company to gradually implement changes and new business ideas that naturally develop through the improvement of current goods, practices, and operations is the focus of the second interpretation of resilience. Third, resilience is based on the transformative effects of a crisis or disaster. Building a resilient firm should become a strategic imperative since resilience should be linked to a corporate competitive advantage (Gorjian Khanzad & Gooyabadi, 2021).

The reason why we need resilience in a company is that it can show an indication of how prepared the company is when facing a crisis. Another reason is that business is prone to changes that are urgent, unplanned, and drastically different from the current business models, leading to the creation of whole new markets, products, services, operations, collaboration networks, and leadership (Dahles & Susilowati, 2015).

Nowadays, sustainability in the environment is a salient topic. Many companies compete for sustainability while still maintaining their profitability and the quality of their products. If a company is able to do this action, it could be considered they successfully implemented business resilience. One of example in the services industry is a marketing company. Many companies have decided to reduce their expenses in promotion and marketing during COVID-19. This situation causes marketing companies to be prone to the negative impact of COVID-19. Therefore, they must be resilient in order to adapt quickly to the risks.

Adaptive Capacity

Adaptive capacity is the ability of an organization to alter its strategy, operations, management systems, governance structure, and decision-support capabilities so that it can uncover and adjust to continually changing risks and endure disruptions (Starr et al., 2004). The concept of

adaptive capacity is at the heart of today's business continuity strategy (Dalziell & McManus, 2024). The ability of the enterprise to respond to changes in trade regulations and policies is seen as having an adaptive capability because it best explains the enterprise's potential to change its systems, which is defined by its socioeconomic characteristics (Isip, 2022).

Strategy becomes very important in terms of adaptability because it can assist the firm in making a successful approach because it can adjust more readily to a volatile circumstance. If a company has good adaptability and flexibility, it can mitigate and prevent a sudden situation like the COVID-19 crisis. Flexibility is seen in the company's capability to innovate and adapt to changes. Hence, there is a downturn in the economy; a company has strategic flexibility to maintain its financial performance.

Nesise et al. (2021) have found that organizational resilience looks at an organization's ability to adapt to gradual changes in the organizational environment. This theory is also supported by a recent study on the construct of adaptive capabilities in organizations, and results showed that the dynamic ability makes organizations resilient and competitive in the presence of environmental disruptions, threats, and increased vulnerabilities (Isip, 2022).

Marketing Strategy

A marketing strategy refers to an integrated organizational decision design that defines important choices regarding products, markets, marketing activities, and marketing resources in the creation, communication, and/or delivery of products that offer value to customers in exchange with the organization and thereby enable the organization to achieve its goals (Varadarajan, 2009). The term "marketing strategy" refers to an organization's comprehensive set of choices regarding the execution of its marketing activities and how these activities are carried out in the selected markets and market segments.

Pharmaceutical marketing may be defined as "the business of advertising or otherwise promoting the sale of pharmaceuticals or drugs" (Sawad & Turkistani, 2021). Promoting Physicians is the most common method of pharmaceutical marketing. Physicians are often specific in prescribing medical brands. Marketers collaborate with physicians and seize the chance to create monopolies since medical prescriptions have moral and legal power, urging patients to comply (Rollins & Perri, 2014). Pharmaceutical companies rely on pharmaceutical sales representatives to involve with physicians and patients. Even though this is considered a traditional approach, this method is effective because the medical representatives can directly influence the targeted market.

Due to the COVID-19 problem, consumer purchasing behavior has altered, and businesses must adapt their operations to accommodate the changing demands of their customers. For instance, consumers increased their emphasis on product durability, increased price sensitivity, reduced spending by purchasing items at lower prices, and concentrated on buying inexpensive and accessible products during a financial crisis (Nikbin et al., 2021). Implementing effective marketing strategies is crucial for a company to successfully navigate the risks and obstacles that the COVID-19 situation has posed to their organization (Fuciu, 2020). In this situation, CMOs recalculate the spending budget on advertising. 72% of the overall marketing budget is spent on investments in pure-play digital channels, whether they are owned, paid for, or earned. Less than 9% of the marketing budget is spent on offline advertising (Forbes, 2021).

With the changes in customer demands and purchase behavior during the COVID-19 crisis, it is wise for the company to rely on innovative marketing practices and strategies. A manager must take action in these circumstances. According to Nikbin et al., 2021 survey, the marketing mix strategies during COVID-19 are as follows: 1) Product (Avoid cutting R& D costs and emphasize more on it; Withdraw non-profitable products; Redesign product lines; Introduce new and also affordable products; Emphasize durability and functionality characteristics in new product development; Improve services), 2) Price (Keep the same prices, but offer products with higher quality/offer superior value; Do not reduce the price by lowering quality; Reduce the price by reducing quality; Reduce the prize by reducing the size; Keep the original price and offer temporary price discounts), 3) Promotion (Offer price discount; Increase advertisement and

promotion budget; Reduce the costs of traditional advertisement; Invest more in online marketing; Invest more in social media marketing; Offer coupons, bonuses, and free sample; Send direct emails to customers), 4) Place (Find new profitable markets; Eliminate costly channels and intermediates; Move to online channels; Leave markets that are not strong in it and reallocate scarce resources to markets in which you are stronger in them).

The changing situation due to COVID-19 restrictions forces pharmaceutical companies to adapt and reassess their marketing strategies, to remain competitive. Additionally, there is evidence that pharmaceutical firms have taken action to fight the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic using a variety of technology-based strategies, such as digital marketing, e-detailing customer relationship management, e-sampling, innovative work behaviour, and telemedicine revolution to promote product value and expedite prescriptions to the target consumer (Sawad & Turkistani, 2021). During the COVID-19 lockdown, pharmaceutical companies rely on telemarketing, digital marketing, and miscellaneous offers.

Sales Representatives

Sales representatives (reps) are critical intermediaries between buyers and sellers in business-to-business (B2B) industries because they serve as the company's public face. The success of B2B companies is significantly influenced by their capacity to match the requirements of potential clients (accounts) with the products or services offered by their company (Shi et al., 2017). Contacts with customers, coworkers, and direct and indirect supervisors are a source of motivation to work, job satisfaction, and, most significantly, (Pawloska, 2020).

Adaptive selling strategies are becoming more popular among pharmaceutical companies. Due to the distinctive personal selling method used in the pharmaceutical industry, adaptive selling behaviors are specifically linked to the sector. Many pharmaceutical organizations are slowly transitioning away from fast-paced scripted sales routines, and adaptive relational strategy is taking hold in many businesses (Medhine, 2020). During the lockdown, pharmaceutical sales representatives heavily utilized social media sites, including WhatsApp, LinkedIn, and Snapchat, as a means of communication and contact with healthcare professionals and business clients (Oamen, 2021).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The author used a qualitative approach in this research to analyze the adaptive capacity of PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma during COVID-19. The author used primary and secondary to gather data and to answer the research question. The data for this research is collected from the literature review and the interview process with PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma. The author interviewed several people related to PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma. The first interviewee is PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma's head of commercial. The second interviewee is PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma's managing director. The author will also interview PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma's competitors to see how they deal with this problem. The secondary data for this research is from various sources. It includes relevant articles and journals, books, news articles, and professional writings from government agencies and consultants. Internet search engines are used to find professional papers, scientific evaluations, and websites. The literature review is used because it provides much information from prior research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before the COVID-19 restriction, all PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma business operation and marketing strategy was conducted in the classical approach, where all activities are 100% offline. Customer engagement is key in the pharmaceutical marketing industry. Therefore, the field force used to visit a healthcare professional more than once a month since there is no restriction. The COVID-19 restriction limits the company's movement to engage directly with healthcare professionals. From the literature review that pharmaceutical companies used technology-based strategies to fight the negative effects of the pandemic. Hence, during the pandemic, PT Asia Tran

Sinergi Farma decides to digitalize the interactions with their customers. Moreover, this event also disrupts the business operation, where all the employees cannot commute to the office, forcing them to work from home. The restriction caused the company to face disruptions to field operations and lower revenue.

PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma implements a new marketing strategy in order to adapt. As it is mentioned in chapter two, there are four marketing mix strategies during COVID-19: product, price, promotion, and place. Similarly, what also happened with PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma is that they followed these marketing strategies by not cutting training field forces costs to improve services and investing in online marketing. Sales representatives are used to persuade healthcare professionals to prescribe their brand drugs, therefore, adaptive selling strategies are becoming popular to build personal relationships. PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma uses this adaptive selling strategy as its unique selling point, such as their field force is experienced in the pharma industry, which will be helpful to build personal relations with healthcare professionals. Moreover, PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma is adaptive to its client's needs by offering several business models.

Engagement with healthcare professionals is very important in pharmaceutical companies. As mentioned in the literature review, in pharmaceutical firms use e-detailing customer relationship management, and telemedicine revolution to promote product value and expedite prescriptions to the target consumer. This method was also implemented by PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma, during COVID-19, the sales representatives are engaged with healthcare professionals through virtual such as telephone and WhatsApp. However, the new way of engagement may affect the relationship between sales representatives and healthcare professionals. Therefore, to maintain its engagement, the company brought the Internet of Things into medical sessions and events for healthcare professionals to fulfil their unmet needs during the pandemic.

After the pandemic, the company did not return to normal since there were changes in customer behaviors. The company used a combination of virtual and face-to-face engagement marketing strategy models called hybrid medico-marketing activities. This new method proves that there are benefits in cost saving, increased customer coverage, and time effectiveness. PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma took this action to remain competitive, showing that the company can adapt to new situations by increasing its quality while saving costs.

PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma also has competitors in the pharmaceutical industry, just like other companies. Compared with competitors such as PT Wellesta and PT SOHO Global Health, PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma is indeed smaller. Nevertheless, the way they deal with the COVID-19 crisis is almost similar. To further discuss PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma comparison with competitors, it will be easier to use benchmarking.

Benchmarking is used as a tool to make comparisons between PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma and its competitor. Even though the competitor was also established in 2019, they have more employees because PT Wellesta CPI Healthcare was formerly known as PT Citra Pharma Indonesia and was acquired by Wellesta. PT Citra Pharma Indonesia had previously been operating for 12 years, and now they have become a multinational company with its headquarters in Singapore. Having more employees like PT Wellesta is more beneficial because they can have more business partners in a wider range of areas, leading to higher revenue.

Each company has its own unique selling point (USP). PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma USP are employees with varied experience and backgrounds in the pharma industry, using sales force automation systems, and the company has several business models that the client may choose depending on their needs. At the same time, PT Wellesta CPI Healthcare USP are employees who are experienced in their therapeutic classes, using a sales force effectiveness system, and regular training for the field force. From the overall unique selling point, PT Wellesta CPI Healthcare has a better USP. First, therapeutic classes are needed for employees, especially for the field force. Therapeutic class is a classification system used in healthcare and pharmacology to categorize drugs based on their therapeutic properties and indications (FDA, 2018). This class will be very helpful for sales representatives when persuading healthcare professionals to prescribe their brand of drugs because they know basic drug knowledge. Second, Regular training for the field force is

important so they know about the product knowledge, enhance communication and selling skills, and build key relationships with healthcare professionals.

Additionally, PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma uses the Sales Force Automation (SFA) system, while PT Wellesta uses the Sales Force Effectiveness (SFA) system. Sales force automation (SFA) refers to the utilization of software to streamline sales-related responsibilities, such as sales tasks, order processing, customer management, sales forecasting and analysis, sales force management, and the exchange of information (Barker et al., 2009). The sales Force Effectiveness (SFE) system offers a comprehensive and thoughtful perspective on the sales organization, which sales professionals and researchers can utilize to evaluate the effectiveness of their sales force, as well as identify and tackle any issues or concerns within the sales team (Zoltners et al., 2008). The choice between SFA and SFE depends on an organisation's specific goals and challenges. Some organizations may prioritize automating sales processes and improving operational efficiency, making SFA the preferred choice. Others may prioritize overall sales team effectiveness, performance management, and strategic alignment, making SFE more suitable.

Before COVID-19 restrictions, both companies used the traditional approach in which all business operations and marketing strategies were conducted face-to-face. They conduct customer engagement face-to-face because this is the best way to maintain relationships with healthcare professionals or customers. However, during COVID-19 restrictions PT Wellesta changed all their business operation and marketing strategy to virtual such as detailing, product discussion, product presentation, and round table discussion. PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma also doing the same thing by digitalization all business operations. But PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma doesn't stop here. They also train field force teams to adapt to the new situation to face the pandemic while giving their best performance. During the COVID-19 era, PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma ensures product sustainability with distributors and availability to all channel outlets.

After the pandemic is over, PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma took this crisis as a way to improve their strategy because they saw advantages to using a hybrid medico-marketing strategy. On the other hand, PT Wellesta returns to a traditional marketing strategy like before the pandemic. PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma is better at adapting to a new situation because their new method not only helps them to bounce back in the crisis but also gives more advantages to the company.

CONCLUSION

The literature review showed that business is prone to changes, therefore the more resilient a company is in the business, the better it can adapt to crisis. A company needs good adaptability and flexibility to mitigate sudden changes like the COVID-19 crisis. There is a relationship between adaptive capability and resilience, where organizational resilience looks at an organization's ability to adapt to changes in the organizational environment gradually. This statement also has been proven by what PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma has experienced as they survived and bounced back during the COVID-19 crisis because they adapted and adjusted based on the situation. This company was able to generate a 3.1% profit in the middle of COVID-19 restrictions. They adapt to the new situation by digitalization all business operations and marketing strategies. As the managing director of PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma said, the company did not see COVID-19 as a restriction but as a new paradigm in the pandemic and post-pandemic situation within the healthcare ecosystem in Indonesia. This crisis transforms the company to be more adaptable and agile in the business operation while maintaining a high standard of service for the patients at medical channels

To generate more profit, PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma can reduce its operational cost. Currently, with only 40 employees they have two offices located in Bekasi and Jakarta. They can keep costs down by moving to one office, as these offices are not far from one another. In addition to cost-effectiveness, one sales representative should manage two companies with similar target customers because currently one sales representative only managed one company.

The primary method of promoting drugs in the pharmaceutical industry is direct marketing through sales representatives. In 2015, the estimated expenditure on detailing/direct marketing by the US pharmaceutical industry reached a substantial 20.4 billion US dollars. The representative is tasked with the responsibility of keeping healthcare professionals informed about the latest drug releases from the company through the use of promotional materials, thereby updating their knowledge in the field (Jacob, 2018). Therefore, PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma should hire a field force with good oral communication skills, creative, and innovative in using their knowledge. This job qualification is important for drug sales because it has been concluded through various studies that increased interaction between physicians and medical representatives in direct marketing results in higher prescription rates for the promoted drug and an increased number of drugs prescribed per patient (Jacob, 2018).

Since PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma is a relatively new and small company, it can learn from its competitors, such as PT SOHO Global Health Tbk. SOHO Global strategy is expanding doctors and hospitals coverage and executing several new launches prioritizing the products with the highest potential. The competitor's employees are also experienced in therapeutic classes. This kind of training should be conducted regularly for the field force by PT Asia Tran Sinergi Farma. Even though training requires additional cost, it provides knowledge about the drugs to the field force which can help increase sales. Also, the World Health Organization (WHO) Ethical Criteria for Medicinal Drug Promotion advises that medical representatives should possess suitable educational qualifications and receive training in essential medical and technical knowledge. Furthermore, they should uphold the integrity and present information about drugs accurately, impartially, and responsibly.

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