Market Share as a Determinant of Making Profit in the E-Commerce Industry - An Empirical Enquiry

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ABSTRACT
Researchers, business analysts and practitioners are trying to determine the relationship between market share and profitability for e-commerce companies. We hypothesize that market share has a positive exponential relationship with profitability. This paper investigates the market-share/profitability relationship among 50 out of 173 publicly traded e-commerce companies.

INTRODUCTION
Since January 2000 nearly 10% of Internet-based companies have shut down or declared bankruptcy. In fact, e-commerce companies account for more than fifty percent of companies that failed in this industry. During the Internet boom, the majority of investors assumed that low operating costs in this sector would eventually lead to higher profits. The potential earnings that can be derived from Internet technology prompted many individuals to invest in newly formed e-commerce companies. As a result, in 2000 NASDAQ stock market reached the peak and closed at above 5,000 points. Since then more than four hundred e-commerce companies have shut down or gone bankrupt; a few are struggling to stay afloat. According to Webmergers.com, a total of 423 e-retails went out of business between January 2000 and April 2002, which constitutes 51% of overall online business shutdowns (Miller, 2002). Although the majority of e-commerce companies share similar business models, only a few of them have been able to realize any profits.

In 1999, retailers and venture capitalists were energized and excited about the prospect of capturing market share. Currently, the struggle for profitability weighs heavily on most online merchants. Failed e-commerce companies, falling stock prices, loss of venture capital and pressure from stockholders are forcing Internet companies to take a hard look at profitability. Companies with lower costs will obtain larger profit margins because profitability is a function of cost-efficiency (Gimeno and Woo, 1999). A study conducted by McKinsey-Salomon Smith Barney found that the cost of receiving orders online is lower than the cost of acquiring and distributing goods to customers. Despite low operating costs, the majority of e-commerce companies have not realized any profits. We hypothesized that a unit increase in market share would result in more than a unit increase in profitability. In order to test this relationship, we randomly selected 50 out of 173 publicly traded e-commerce companies. The study argues that market share is the primary requirement to earn profits and to succeed in this industry.

Thomas (1973) pointed out that larger companies have monopolistic power thus enabling them to bargain more effectively with suppliers compared to those with smaller market shares. Therefore they can obtain goods and services at discounted prices. Similarly, large companies benefit from economies of scale because they can spread their fixed costs over a larger volume of production. Economies of scale and market power can increase companies’ overall profits by reducing costs. In the e-commerce industry, 75% of cost savings come from economies of scale and companies’ abilities to bargain with suppliers (Morton et al. 2001). Thus, this study hypothesizes that a percent increase in market share will result in more than a percent increase in profitability (Fraering and Minor, 1994).

METHODOLOGY
We randomly selected 50 out of 173 publicly traded e-commerce companies. Financial data for each company was obtained from www.hoovers.com. According to The Market Share Reporter, the e-commerce industry sold $26.1 billion worth of goods and services in the year 2001. This figure was divided by each company’s sales to determine its relative market share in the industry. For example, in 2000 E-bay Inc. occupied 2.87% of total e-commerce market share, which was calculated by dividing total industry sales by the company’s revenue of $748.8 million. This relative market share was regressed against the operating profit margin. A similar method was used by Porter to determine the relationship between market share and profitability.

We hypothesized that a unit increase in market share would result in more than a unit increase in profitability. In order to test this relationship, we used regressed relative market share data against a company’s operating income (see Equation 1).

Equation 1.

\[ \pi = \alpha (MS)^{\beta} \]

\( \pi \) = Operating Margin
\( \alpha \) = Constant
\( MS = \text{Relative Market-Share} \)
\( \beta = \text{Market-Share Parameter} \)

Equation 1 suggests that there is a positive exponential relationship between the operating margin (dependent variable) and market-share (independent variable). Once the constant and the parameter of market-share are determined, we can calculate the minimum market-share required to break even (see Equation 2).
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A regression output showed a significant exponential relationship between market-share and operating margin. The relationship between the dependent variable profit margin and independent variable market-share is significant at a 1% confidence level (see Table 1).

When the predicted values for the constant and the coefficient of market-share were substituted in Equation 2, we obtained:

Equation 2.
\[
\ln \pi = \alpha + \beta \ln MS
\]

Or \(\ln \hat{\pi} = \hat{\alpha} + \hat{\beta} \ln MS + \epsilon\)

At a break-even point \(\pi = 0\)

Or \((1 + 0.639)^{0.473} = MS\)

Or \(MS = 2.84\)

By solving Equation 2, we determined that e-commerce companies must have 2.84% of market-share to break even. In other words, companies with a market-share of greater than 2.84% are likely to enjoy operating profits.

The average market-share and operating profit margin in the e-commerce industry was 0.55% and –1.3995 respectively for the year 2000. ADS Systems Inc., a Texas based computer software and Web hosting company, held the smallest market-share with 0.01%. The company posted a loss of $18 million for the same year. On the other hand, eMerge Interactive Inc., which provided online information and services to livestock producers controlled the highest share with 4.58% and a loss of $33 million.

Table 2 shows that companies with less than 2.84% market-share posted negative net income before taxes of $64 million on average. On the other hand, companies with equal to or more than 2.84% of market-share reported net income before taxes of $32 million on average.

DISCUSSION

As predicted, there is a significant exponential correlation between profit margin and market-share. A percent increase in a market-share leads to more than a percent increase in profit margin. E-commerce companies that wish to become profitable should aim to capture a market-share of greater than 2.84% of the industry. Companies with a market-share of less than 2.84% are unlikely to have market power to bargain with suppliers to purchase goods at discounted prices and will not be able to benefit from economies of scale. As a result, they would not be able to realize substantial profits. As discussed in the preceding section, profitability is a function of cost efficiency. Companies that have lower operating costs in any industry will enjoy higher profits. Companies with higher market-shares can reduce their operating costs by spreading fixed costs over a larger volume of sales and by bargaining with suppliers to obtain goods and services at a discounted price. In the e-commerce industry, market-share plays a significant role in determining a company’s profitability because receiving orders online and helping customers using “self help” websites, such as frequently asked questions, costs very little (Tillet, 2001). Further research needs to examine the correlation of market-share and multiple product offerings as well as other factors that influence the success of e-commerce companies.

REFERENCES


The Market Share Reporter (Detroit, MI: 2002)


www.hoovers.com

Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Coefficients</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>(Constant)</td>
<td>Beta</td>
<td>(1 - 2820)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Log Market-share</td>
<td>0.473</td>
<td>2.845</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ R^2 = 0.447 \]

* = Significant at 10% confidence level

** = Significant at 1% confidence level

Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Market-share</th>
<th>Number of Companies</th>
<th>Number of companies reported loss</th>
<th>Number of companies reported profits</th>
<th>Average Loss or Profit</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MS &lt; 2.84</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-64</td>
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<tr>
<td>MS &gt; 2.84</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>32</td>
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</tbody>
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