

General Characteristics, Role and Importance of International Marketing Information System

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Osnovne karakteristike, uloga i značaj međunarodnog marketinga informacionih sistema

ABSTRACT – *Information flow from the company to the market, and contrary also, enables effective communication of the subject with the environment. Formalizing and directing that kind of flows emanates information systems. The task of such systems is constantly refreshing the content of the information flow. This ensures that company's decisions, which would be undertaken, are adequate and in the right time. Information systems find their application in almost all areas of business. Maybe the most interesting of them are marketing information systems. However, such systems are often considered a substitute for marketing (market) research, or if there are undertaken marketing (market) research, then there is no need for marketing information system. This paper seeks to prove the opposite, that these two concepts are not identical, and therefore not mutually exclusive but rather complementary and compatible. Since the operations of business entities are increasingly becoming regional or global, that makes sense to talk primarily about international marketing information systems. Local business levels should be regarded only as a fragment of the total portfolio of markets. The last statement is valid especially if the domicile market is not sufficiently large for profitable production or if it is under-developed*

KEY WORDS: *information systems, market, marketing, information, marketing research, international environment*

Characteristics of international marketing information system

Definition of international marketing information system

It is not an easy task to give a comprehensive and complete definition of international marketing information system (IMIS), which would be easily understood at the same time. Defining difficulties arise from the complexity of the aforementioned system, interwoven elements that make up the IMIS, their entanglement and complementarity with other activities in the enterprise, as well as understanding the role and importance of the IMIS. In order to understand properly the meaning of the IMIS it is recommended to start with the etymological analysis of the IMIS concept. The compound "international marketing information system" will be briefly analyzed word by word "system", "informational,"

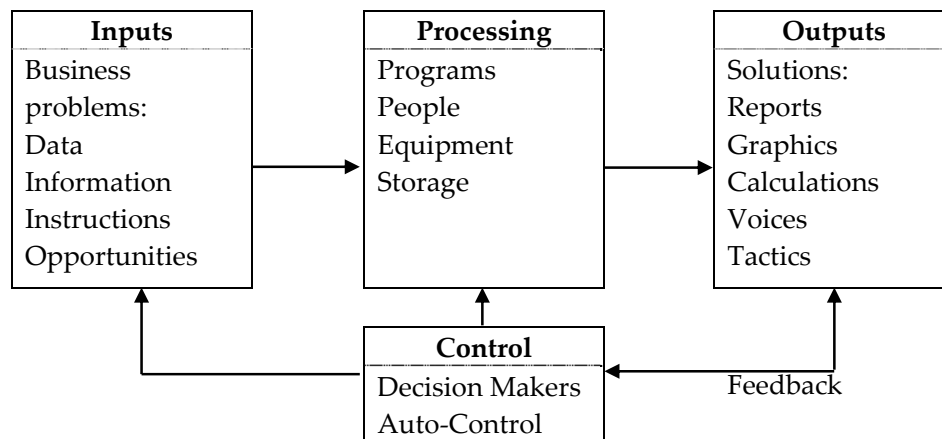
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"marketing," while the adjective "international" is in brief content analyzed through the entire text.

It is important to understand correctly the meaning of the word "system" because it is the basis for not only a IMIS, but also any other form of organization. According to Efraim Turban, Ephraim McLean, and James Wetherbe (1999, pg. 40, 41) a system is a collection of elements, such as: people, resources, concepts and procedures, intended to perform an identifiable function or serve a goal. A system is separate from its environment by a boundary. The system is inside the boundary, whereas the environment lies outside. In short, the system is determined by elements, its tasks and purpose, as well as the limits that can be very abstract. Especially interesting are the systems that collect and process various kind of information. Information system (IS) of enterprise is defined as a set of human and technical means that, with a certain organization and methodology, perform the collection, storage, processing and disseminating to the use of data and information (Lazo Roljić, 1997, pg. 23). IS can be represented graphically by the diagram as follows:

Figure 1. Schematic view of the Information System



Source: Turban, McLean, and Wetherbe (1999, pg. 18)

In the previous figure is shown that the tasks of the IS are to collect and process information, which goal is to create information reports for different purposes. The information system is a system that is oriented to decision making information.

Classification of IS in companies can be done in various ways. IS can be classified taking into account four main aspects: the organizational level, functional area, provided support, system architecture, etc. However, regardless of classification, the structure of IS is the same and consists of the previously mentioned elements. For this paper, the most interesting classification of IS is based on the division of functional areas in the companies. Besides to marketing IS, there are also: accounting IS, financial IS, manufacturing IS, human resources IS and the like. Also, for purpose of this paper it is important only formal IS, as opposed to informal whose study is more in the field of operating management, or sociology.

In order to understand properly the marketing information system, it is needed to start with the concept of the marketing system. The essence of the marketing system is the



information flow between producers and consumers. The flow of these data is twofold. Data from consumers go to the manufacturer. The content of this data include: needs, desires, preferences and problems, and it is defined as the purchasing power demand. On the other hand, information circulate from the manufacturer to the consumers and the content of this data is about its mission, goals and tasks, in other words information about marketing plan and program - defined as an offer. The process of communication between company and customers is needed to ensure that market exchange would be performed without complications and to mutual satisfaction. This means that the consumers will satisfy their needs, meet their desires, solve their problems and remove the tension; and, at the same time, the company will make a profit with lasting affection by consumers. As could be seen, the marketing system is very complex, and when it is added to the information system leads to more complex systems.

To generate a continuous flow of appropriate information is an essential task of IMIS. The environment of the company is subject of constant change. These changes are particularly evident in the international environment. IMIS goal is to create an optimal database as a basis for effective marketing management. There are two basic tips to keep in mind when observing the IMIS that are continuous flow of data collection and international environment as inevitable element in a globalized business world.

The main task of IMIS is an "intelligence". Intelligence refers to the gathering of information from decision-making system's environment and exploring that information in an effort to recognize the existence of problems (Gilbert A. Churchill, 1991, pg. 28). Therefore, the tasks of the IMIS are to continually survey the widest surrounding, to collect general data that is even few suspected that might be of importance for the system, further processing of these data, then thoroughly explore, and try to determine whether these data represent or suggest changes in the environment that could be a threat or an opportunity for the reference system. When it is concluded on the basis of such "general information" and using "insight" that there are threats or chances in environment, such information is further transferred to a higher level of decision making.

When it comes to comparison between marketing information system (MIS - referring to the information system oriented toward the domestic market only) and IMIS, the conclusion is the same as the comparison between domestic and international marketing research. Looking evolution through time first have came MIS. However, the issue of performance is not a matter of chronology rather than rationality. The broad framework of observation, or more statistical populations, theoretically creates a greater chance of optimal choice. The practical significance of IMIS, in a liberalized and the changing business world, is increasing. The need for a systematic approach to information collection and dissemination in the field of international marketing is conditioned by the weaknesses that are typical for most companies. According to Boris Tihi (2003, pg. 320) those weaknesses can be summarized as follows:

- There are many information, concerning various aspects of market problems, but the lack of a system that would select and direct that information force decision-makers to take unsystematic "information hunt" in making any specific marketing decisions;



- Above mentioned “hunting” takes place in the business environment and within an entity, and a result of unsystematic work is the fact that many valuable information are losing within the organizational structure of a subject;
- What makes situation more difficult is that a lot of information are often not formally recorded, information are kept in minds of individuals who sometimes jealously keep information for themselves believing that it could “increase their authority” in some situations;
- Late arrived information at the decision making place are practically worthless;
- Due to unsystematic data collection and use of different sources of information, it is difficult to assess the degree of reliability, which is an essential precondition for the quality of decisions.

The only applicable way to solve the mentioned to solve the mentioned problems is a systematic approach. One of the possible systematic approaches to the problem mentioned is by IMIS. The emphasis in these systems must be on determining the precise information needs of each marketing decision makers. This ensures that they have exactly the information they need, when they need them, to make the decisions that they have to. It is not easy, but it is possible knowing what characterize quality and developed IMIS. For indicators of the quality and development of information activities Miodrag Jovićević (2001, pg. 161) takes the following:

- The time between the moment of emerging and the moment of noticing a problem;
- Sources of data and information – to be known in advance and to provide data and information of current, future and historical character;
- Quality of data and information – reliability, accuracy and authenticity;
- Procedures and programs of data and information processing – to be known and provided in advance, that we know what the relationships and the degree of abstraction of the past and the future projection;
- Knowledge – a fundamental prerequisite for solving problems and conducting informational activities.

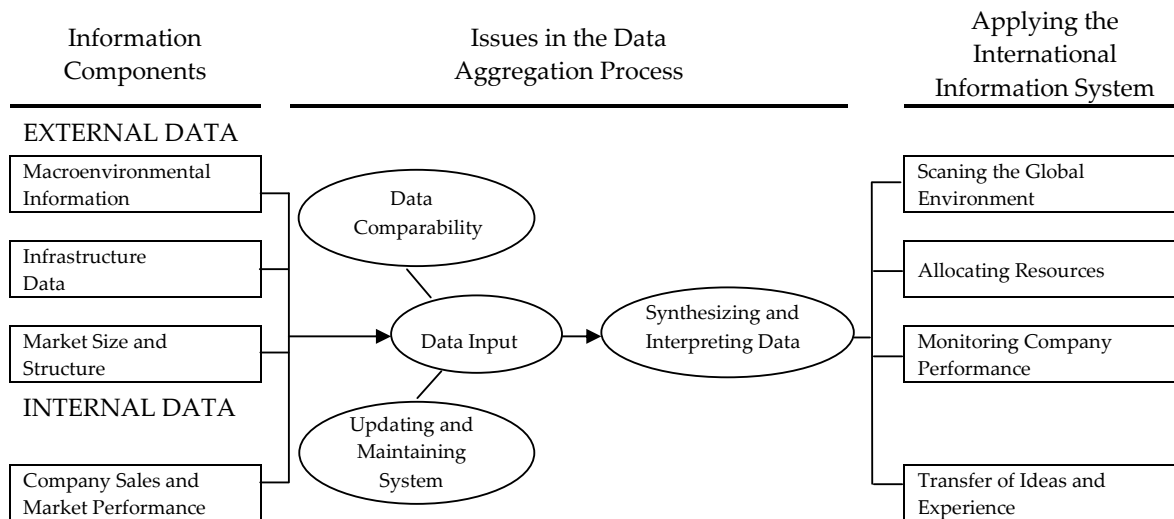
Content of an international marketing information system

Within a IMIS comes to generating information necessary for strategic and tactical decision-making in an international environment. For a better insight into complex structure, and for the completeness and clarity, content of IMIS will be shown as a picture. This ensures a complete overview of the elements and relationships between elements of a IMIS.

On the next figure is shown the content and structure of elements, and a connection between them in IMIS. The system consists of three essential parts: the information component, processing of collected data and the application of the IMIS. Information components are included in the IMIS in the form of internal, external and other data. Based on the data collected, it is necessary to apply the methods of sorting, processing, analysis and synthesis. The resulting information are input in the subsystem's tasks of IMIS. What is important to emphasize and what is not shown in the previous figure, is a feedback. Data and information regarding the purpose and quality of the IMIS application, or decisions

made on the basis of information obtained through IMIS, have to become one of the components of information or re-entry to MISS.

Figure 2. *International Marketing Information System*



Source: Samule C. Craig, and Susan P. Douglas (2005, pg.423)

The functioning of the international marketing information system

For successful operation of a IMIS is necessary to exist three sub-systems shown in the second figure. In the following text will be briefly analyzed each of the subsystems and connections between them.

Information components – source of the required data is the basis of the work of any of information system. All data sources, from the point of origin can be divided into external, internal and other sources.

External data are: macroeconomic indicators, data on infrastructure, as well as data on market size. Data about macro-economic situation in individual countries, regions or globally, could be only the secondary. The most complete such information can be found in the database of: UN, World Bank, OECD Economic Indicators, Eurostat and the like, as well as on the websites of other institutions that monitor such indicators. Data on market infrastructure can also be geographically structured, for example: globally, regionally, nationally, and locally in the cities, depending on which the target market is. These are data about the media infrastructure, for example: electronic media, print media, outdoor advertising media (billboards, posters, etc.), and retail infrastructure, e.g.: type of organization and structure of retail organizations and wholesale legislation, the nature of competition and the like. Data about company's products, about market size and it's structure, as well as alternative and complementary products can be found in databases. It is



important that the product's market would not be too narrowly defined. Therefore there is the need to collect and analyze data on complementary and substitute products.

Internal data are contained within the company itself. These data are relating to: financial indicators (for example ROA, ROE, etc.); market indicators (for example market share, sales costs, increased sales by individual product lines and the like); data about employees (example fluctuations, the emergence of new professions of interest to the company, etc.); data obtained through the marketing research studies (for example research centralized or organized for particular target markets and the like).

Other data sources can be divided into two groups: people as a source of data and observation of physical stimuli as another data source. People could create and transfer ideas, experiences and knowledge within the organization, or between world or region markets. They create and transmit information to each other. Such communication occurs in the oral and written form, staff meetings, teleconferencing and so on. Also, this communication can be separated to the internal, within the same enterprise, and external, communication with sales representatives, managers from other countries, promotion agencies, distributors and so on. A complete picture about same market could be obtained only by visiting that market, observing it and talking with customers and business partners, looking at shopping habits and the type of retail outlets, monitoring advertisements on electronic and print media, looking at weather conditions, geographical terrain, quality of transport infrastructure and the like.

Issues in the Data Aggregation Process – IMIS could not function ideally just on the basis of data collected. There are also some technical problems, for example: quality of data collected, data entry, constantly update the content of the data collected and the like. The quality of data collected depends on the possibility to make comparisons with data collected in other countries. This problem is usually related to the existence of different data collection procedures, as well as different accounting practices between countries and regions of the world. Data are presented in units of measure that can be quantitative, qualitative and monetary indicators (e.g. goodwill). Quantitative measures generally are not a problem. However, monetary measures are subject to strong and rapid changes due to: changes in exchange rates, price fluctuation on stock exchanges or other markets, changes in fiscal policy of the observed countries, or due to changes in the ways of their calculation. Entering data procedures define the degree of similarity and type of data to be collected to be useful for the system. There have to be defined by whom and how to enter data within the enterprise, in order to make collection procedures more successful. Also, it have to be defined how to change data presentation to make them comparable. This is particularly important for data coming from external sources. Data issued by the UN or World Bank generally do not have mentioned problems because those data usually cover the entire world, and their parameters are either global or highly standardized for certain regions or countries. The problem is with a regional or national data. These problems are reflected in different ways of: collecting, sampling, systematization, generalization of data and the like, to the language of presentation. It is necessary to ensure that the system continuously collects new data and to processes them. The processed data are synthesized, in other words those processed data are the basis for drawing conclusions. New information should be



compared with previous ones and, in the case of difference, investigate the difference and inform management. The system should be constantly maintained and serviced.

Application (tasks) of IMIS – by Roche (as cited in Craig and Douglas, 2005, pg. 434), IMIS is used in performing the following four tasks: scanning the global environment to monitor trends and pinpoint those with specific implications for the geographical areas and product markets in which the company is involved, assessing how to reallocate resources and efforts across different countries, products markets and target segments so as to achieve desired rates of growth and profitability, monitoring performance in different countries and product markets through the world, and transferring ideas and experience from different countries and areas of the world throughout the organization.

Feedback – even if it is not shown in the previous figure, the importance of feedback should be particularly emphasized. Through the previous analysis of IMIS it is mentioned the importance of re-entry of data into the system. The information flow in IMIS is continuous. This is a fundamental feature of the marketing information system that ensures the quality of marketing decisions (Momčilo Milisavljević, 1999, pg. 62). Based on the information collected and create through the IMIS, the company affects its environment. The environment reaction creates a new situation. New data from changed environment represents a new entrance into the system. In that way a company gets a feeling about the success of implemented decisions, and the effectiveness of an IMIS, which in turn should be constantly creating new, more favorable business conditions for the company.

The process of international marketing research in the absence of an international marketing information system

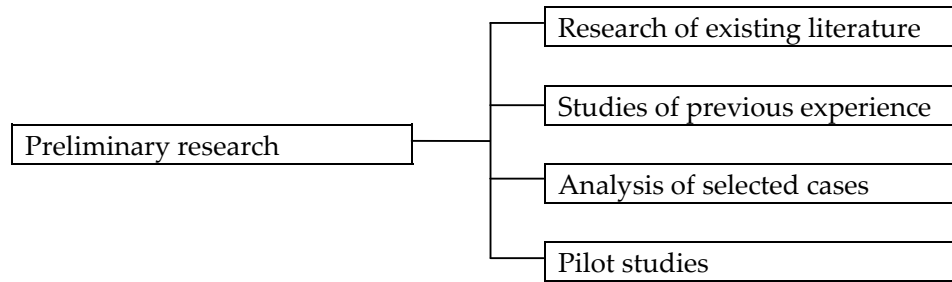
The relationship between international marketing research and IMIS has to be understood as a relationship of complementarity rather than equality or competition. Although they have the same goals and similar tasks, ways of achieving these goals and tasks are based on different grounds. This reflects their complementarity. International marketing research project usually occurs when a company finds the problem that often needs to be urgently solved. That leads to an emphasis on data collection and analysis rather than on the development of the formal and regular collection of information. Therefore, the main difference between the research project and the system is in time and speed of execution. The research project appears in times of crisis, so from time to time and as rarely as possible. On the other hand, the data collection process is ongoing, or the keyword in the definition of marketing information system is "regular", since the emphasis in marketing information system is the establishment of systems that produces information needed for decision making on a recurring basis (Churchill, 1991, pg. 24). However, the project must be completed as soon as possible due to the fact that the duration of the crisis only exacerbates the situation of the entity which drives the research project. The system of data collection, since it is a continuous process, has enough time to conduct quality research and make the necessary analysis.

Another important difference relates to the scope of research. Considering that the study (project) of research is conducted in a relatively short period of time, it is very often that so called preliminary (investigative or orientation) research is neglected. According to the Tihi



(2003, pg. 83) preliminary research is a way to get an information that is not strictly formalized, as is the case with detailed research based on the plan drawn up in advance, and therefore this type of study is called investigative. The ultimate goal of investigative research is obtaining the necessary prior knowledge of the specific problem in a rational manner. It is a preceding surveys and it is based only on secondary data. In preliminary studies are commonly used four methods shown in the following figures:

Figure 3. The four methods of Preliminary Research



Sources: Tihi (2003, pg. 84)

The figure shows a structured review of methods of preliminary research. The first and basic method of search is to use available literature: books, magazines, newspapers, databases accessible through the Internet, libraries, statistical publications, regular information services for marketing research and the like. Also, the use of others' experiences much simplifies and cheapens investigation. Therefore, it is necessary to collect other experiences: field vendors, consultants, engineers and specialists, consumers and customers, competitors and so on. The third method is based on learning through case studies. It is a realistic analysis of some past or current problems and opportunities facing a company. The last method of preliminary research is a pilot studies. These are informal methods of communication with customers through which could be know the motives and opinions of consumers. Preliminary research is especially important to a large international marketing research projects. Many of the facts, opinions and attitudes, which are already well known in the domestic market, we have to find out when we come to another market. Therefore, the phase of preliminary research is almost obligatory in these cases and requires the collection and analysis of numerous and diverse data (Tihi, 2003, pg. 397).

The third difference between the market research in general, and therefore the international marketing research and IMIS is contained in the following assertion: The task of marketing research is to provide information, while the marketing information system focuses on the routing of information flow in the direction to those who make marketing decisions. This distinction is important because the information is completely worthless unless it is relevant and is effectively communicated (Geoff Lancaster and Lester Massingham, 1997, pg. 333). Previous thesis is based on the Kotler's model of marketing information system, where marketing research is treated as a subsystem of marketing information system (Philip Kotler, 1999). In this system, marketing research is conducted on behalf of marketing information system. All obtained information are analyzed and compared with information gathered from internal sources of the company, as well as

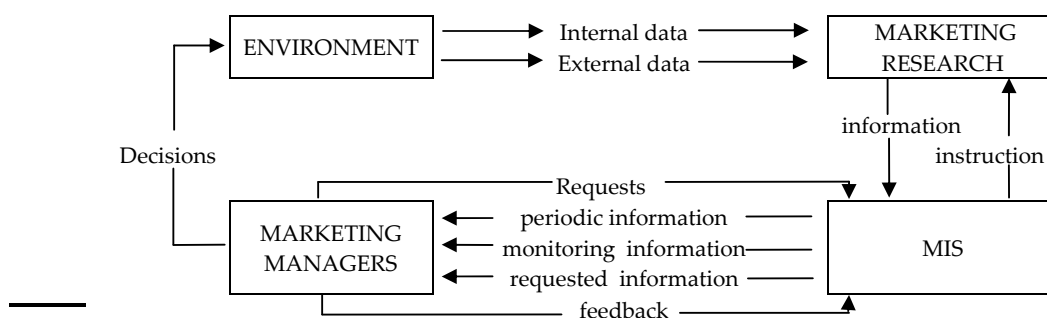
scanning the environment. Thus the final information has high value and reliability because it has been checked and confirmed many times. From the prior discussion could be seen how the international marketing research methodology would be quite poor and the less reliable if it is not combined with IMIS. Their combination is a superior way of gathering reliable information. This is a sure path to successful decision-making and management in international marketing.

Compatibility of international marketing information system with international marketing research

Compatibility analysis

According to Jovićević (2001, pg. 129)²⁹ compatibility could be determined as a situation in which two or more objects (procedures, methods, goals, programs, ideas, etc.) can coexist within one, as a part of the same system, so that the existence of one does not preclude the other. Some studies have shown that managers do not know what information to request for researchers and analysts. They know only what is available. Experience from local and international business practice show that many companies do not have established market research systems or the systems are reduced only to routine predictions based on empirical cognitions or to analyzing of historical data (Hasan Hanić and Čivić Beriz, 2009, pg. 43). This problem could be overcome by efficient functioning of IMIS. It provides, among other things, the survey of the international environment and general information in form of intelligence. On the basis of such general information, managers can identify important threats and opportunities in the environment, and how it fits into the strategy and other plans of the company. Thus they are able to know exactly what information they need, and such, in this case, detailed information should be required of analysts and researchers of international marketing. Such detailed information could be provided by comprehensive international marketing research. Above mentioned is most easily represented graphically as follows:

Figure 4. Relationship between Marketing Research and Marketing Information System



Sources: Tull, Hawkins, 1987, (as cited in Tihi, 2003, pg. 325)

²⁹ similar Milan Vujaklija. (2002).; grupa autora, (1994, pg. 638)



Figure 4 shows the relationship between marketing information system and marketing research, as well as their relationship with marketing managers and the environment. Previous paragraph depicted an explanation of such relations in the international environment.

A slightly different relationship between marketing information system and marketing research is shown in the third Kotler's model (Philip Kotler, 1999). In that model, a marketing research system, as a subsystem of marketing information system, is integrated into the whole system together with the other three subsystems. According to the mentioned model, a system of marketing research, in union with the system of internal reports, marketing information system and system-analytical marketing, is working on collecting and converting data from the internal and external environment into information useful in making decisions. According to that model, international marketing research is part of a larger system – marketing information system. This is clear evidence that those two systems do not overlap. If it is provided that they are integrated into a higher system and the system is properly organized, than there is no overlapping goals and responsibilities in their mutual existence, as well as excessive spending organizational resources.

All of these on the relationship between IMIS and international marketing research could be circled by the following Heinzlbercker's (1977) statement (as cited in Hasan Hanić, 2003, pg. 599): In the last two or three decades market research is developed in three complementary directions which represent paths from traditional marketing research till marketing information system. They are characterized by:

- Orientation to the method,
- Orientation to the decision-making,
- Orientation to the system.

It is expected that the integration gap between marketing research and marketing management will soon be eliminated thanks to the system orientation of marketing research. Affirmation of systematic approach in marketing has led that a trends in marketing research, method and decision making oriented, connect with each other, simultaneously providing the missing link - organization of the whole range of marketing information in relation to the needs of marketing managers for information. This attitude becomes clear by following Bell's (as cited in Hanić, 2003) stating: Although the market research continually modernize and make it more relevant for management problems solving, because of the narrowness of its functions it is, unfortunately, inadequate to fully satisfy the information needs of marketing staff. Due to concerns about implementation of marketing research techniques, researchers were unable to resolve a number of information problems in a company. As marketing has become more complex, there was a need to expand its functions in order to provide greater quantity and higher quality of information. Application of marketing approach has led to the development of marketing information systems. Systematic orientation in marketing has led, therefore, to the knowledge that traditional market research should be seen as part of a larger marketing information system. According to Hanić (2003, pg. 602) development of marketing research toward marketing information systems enabled:

- Marketing research orientation to the needs for information of marketing management.



- Continuously collecting of external information – marketing information system contributes to the elimination of the situation in which are the most continuously collected only internal information, while the collection of external information is made by *ad-hoc* marketing research with a defined beginning and end, concerning a particular project. Marketing managers need a marketing intelligence system, which would be "tailored" to suit their needs.
- To organize total IT activities in the marketing – marketing information system should be structured so that decision-making processes is supported by organized flow of relevant information from sources that are in the company and outside it.

Based on the presented analysis, it can be said that international marketing research and IMIS not only compatible but also complementary, i.e. they complement each other to achieve the common goals at a higher level.

Identified savings due to the compatibility

From the analysis above it is clear that by combining and complementing IMIS and international marketing research are generating a new quality, which in itself contributes to the efficiency and savings for business enterprises. Effective, i.e. well structured and rationally organized international marketing information system, according to Hanić (2003, pg. 598), provides multiple benefits:

- Provide more information in the time unit.
- Allows to achieve the same level of satisfaction for information needs at lower cost.
- Helps to large and decentralized companies to integrate information scattered in smaller organizational units into a meaningful whole.
- Provide a basis for effective application of the marketing concept – contributes to enlargement of the overall marketing productivity of companies.
- Enables faster identification of trends in the marketing environment.
- It enriches the analysis.
- Provides optimal decision-making – developed and cultivated marketing information system contains a bank of models which help marketing managers in making optimal decisions.
- Provides better control of marketing plans and actions implementation.
- Provides data protection.

To the previous list it could be added the removal of redundancy as one more benefit. Avoid redundancy means saving time and unnecessary costs in obtaining information. In the case of international marketing research, the IMIS should be considered a benefit gained by its existence and costs arising from its organization and operation. Although there are some general indication about usefulness of the existence and functioning of the IMIS and international marketing research, in each case it should be re-checked their opportunity. Only in a case of their synergetic effect their combination justifies their purpose. Therefore, to determine the exact savings in the coexistence of international marketing research and IMIS depend upon the situation, or a planned project.



Conclusion

International marketing information system is a complex system, within the organizational structure, focused on information flow from a company towards the environment and vice versa. IMIS should integrate, lead and organize all communications between company and the environment. This communication should not be limited to data and information on supply of enterprise and demand from customers, but it should include all forms of information that could be used in company decision making, and better informing consumers before the act of buying. In that case, the company's environment should be widely seen, that takes information from all or most of the world market by various market segments, other industries, various centers of decision-making and the like. Collecting and processing data and information, and submission of processed information in decision-making must be timely. This provides rationality in business decisions making. The tasks of the IMIS, in addition to the above, are monitoring of business performance of organizational units of enterprises in various markets, as well as the transmission of ideas and experiences from other countries and regions of the world to the organization. Relationship between marketing research and IMIS are characterized by mutual complementarity and compatibility. Their complementarity is reflected in the fact that marketing research is detailed and targeted at solving specific problems. Unlike marketing research, which takes place periodically and with limited duration, the information flow in the IMIS is permanent and without a defined time period. From the mutual complementarity and compatibility between IMIS and international marketing research, derives cost savings for a company that strives to constantly observe its environment, thoroughly research and identify potential problems, timely decisions making and monitor the results of those decisions. Timely response to identified and explored, existing and potential problems, that the company meets, creates a greater benefit than the cost of implementation and operation of a IMIS. On the other hand, the elimination of consequences of bad or overdue decisions of the company, in terms where do not exist a IMIS, creates more costs than the costs of implementation and operation of a IMIS. Because of all this it could be concluded that the IMIS should take a more important position in the organizational structure of companies that are proactive and market-oriented.

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APSTRAKT – Protok informacija od kompanije prema tržištu, i obrnuto, omogućava efektivnu komunikaciju subjekata sa okruženjem. Formalizaciju i usmeravanje informacija omogućava informacioni sistem. Suština funkcionisanja sistema se odnosi na neprekidno osvežavanje sadržaja informacionog toka, što pruža mogućnost preduzećima za pravovremeno donošenje odluka. Informacioni sistemi nalaze primenu u gotovo svim oblastima poslovanja. Između ostalih, jedan od najinteresantnijih je marketinški informacioni sistem, koji se često smatra substitutom marketinškog istraživanja (tržišta). Njegova upotreba se često percipira nepotrebnom ukoliko se aktivno učestvuje u istraživanju tržišta. Cilj rada je da dokaže suprotno, tj. da ova dva koncepta nisu identična i međusobno isključiva, već komplementarna i kompatibilna. Kako poslovanje sve više teži regionalizaciji i globalizaciji, aktuelnost međunarodnih informacionih sistema dobija na značaju. Poslovanje na lokalnom nivou treba posmatrati isključivo kao fragment ukupnog tržišnog portfolija, naročito ako domaće tržište nema potrebne kapacitete za profitabilnu proizvodnju ili ako je nerazvijeno.

KLJUČNE REČI: informacioni sistemi, tržište, marketing, informacije, marketinško istraživanje, međunarodno okruženje

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