

**THE ROLE OF COMPETITIVE
ENVIRONMENT STRATEGIC DIAGNOSIS
IN RAISING CULTURAL ORGANIZATIONS'
COMPETITIVENESS. CASE STUDY: THE
NATIONAL OPERETTA THEATRE "ION
DACIAN"**

Abstract

The concern of managers in the cultural field, regarding knowledge and application of management tools used by organizations aimed at obtaining profits, has become obvious taking into account that the environment of the cultural organizations is becoming increasingly competitive. Currently, most cities around the world use to promote cultural organizations as a means to improve the urban image and urban development by attracting tourists and investments. So cultural organizations have become a vector differentiation in the urban competition, due to their significant potential to generate local revenues. In this context, the need to understand the sources of competitiveness made the diagnosis of strategic competitive environment to be a necessary step in the process of efficiency and organizational effectiveness growth. It identifies opportunities, whose appraisal contributes to the organization's competitive position by finding appropriate competitive advantages. This paper presents how strategic diagnosis of the competitive environment can contribute to increasing the competitiveness of the National Operetta Theater "Ion Dacian" from Bucharest.

Keywords: urban competition, culture, cultural organizations, competitive advantages, the diagnosis of strategic competitive environment.

JEL CODES: L32, L82, R00, R58, Z10

**ROLUL DIAGNOSTICĂRII
STRATEGICE A MEDIULUI
CONCURENȚIAL ÎN
CREȘTEREA
COMPETITIVITĂȚII
ORGANIZAȚIILOR
CULTURALE. STUDIU DE
CAZ: TEATRUL NAȚIONAL
DE OPERETĂ „ION
DACIAN”**

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Rezumat

Preocuparea managerilor din domeniul cultural pentru cunoașterea și aplicarea instrumentelor manageriale utilizate în cadrul organizațiilor care urmăresc obținerea profitului a devenit evidentă, în condițiile în care mediul ambiant al organizațiilor culturale este din ce în ce mai concurențial. În prezent, majoritatea orașelor din întreaga lume utilizează promovarea organizațiilor culturale ca mijloc de îmbunătățire a imaginii urbane și de dezvoltare urbană prin atragerea turiștilor și a investițiilor. Astfel, organizațiile culturale au devenit un vector de diferențiere în competiția urbană datorită potențialului lor însemnat de a aduce venituri locale. În acest context, nevoia de cunoaștere a surselor de competitivitate a făcut ca diagnosticarea strategică a mediului concurențial să fie o etapă necesară în procesul de creștere a eficienței și eficacității organizaționale. Aceasta identifică oportunități, a căror valorificare contribuie la creșterea poziției concurențiale a organizației prin găsirea unor avantaje competitive adecvate. Această lucrare prezintă modul în care diagnosticarea strategică a mediului concurențial poate contribui la creșterea competitivității Teatrului Național de Operetă "Ion Dacian" din București.

Cuvinte cheie: competiție urbană, cultură, organizații culturale, avantaje competitive, diagnosticarea strategică a mediului concurențial.



Proceedings of the eighth Administration
and Public Management International
Conference

1. INTRODUCTION

Strategic diagnosis of the competitive environment identifies opportunities, whose appraisal contributes to increasing the competitive position of the organization by using appropriate competitive advantages. Choosing these starts from the premise that "the fundamental basis of performance above average on long-term is the sustainable competitive advantage, without which performance results, usually last from exploiting the last resources of a product or declining activities" (Porter, 2001, p. 24). "Competitive advantage may mean, in essence, to achieve a low cost for products or services, or to distinguish them, from one or more respects, from the competitors' products" (Cârstea et al, 2002, p. 174), and the "real sources of the competitive advantage can be found in skills that enable organizations to adapt quickly to changing opportunities" (Prahalad and Hamel, 2011, p. 290):

- The cost advantage is to reduce costs until these become lower than competitors' costs, regardless the method used, but without sacrificing quality in any way. The factors that contribute to reducing costs reduction take into account the following (Cârstea et al, 2002): (1) the experience effect enjoyed by the organization; (2) lower production costs, (3) de degree of utilization of production capacities, (4) the entry on the market (age may be an advantage through notoriety, but also a disadvantage due to the difficulty to find suppliers, attract customers, etc.), (5) exploitation of economies of scale, (6) privileged access to resources that have lower prices, (7) relations with unions, government (these may not be available for competitors).
- Differentiation means promoting a product on the market, that the consumer perceives to be unique, referencing certain criteria that are vital for the product. The most commonly used methods of differentiation are (Cârstea et al, 2002): (1) product quality; (2) brand image [a strong and positive brand offers a crucial competitive advantage (Popescu, 2011, p. 145)]; (3) the after-sales services. It can be distinguished the following differentiation factors: (1) election strategy and general policy, which take into account the quality of offered products and services and used resources; (2) entry on the market (the existence of a company on the market for a longer time can create an advantage – notoriety, fame), (3) the area where the organization is located; (4) the diversity and size of activities that the company conducts.

"Given the non-economic value of arts and culture, it is necessary to take into account a series of typical features, such as the short life of the cultural production, the uncertain position of artistic leaders, the

development of the cultural production driven by demand and the tension between the taste of the public and the artistic development of authors of the cultural production" (Hagoort, 2003).

The need to take into account some qualitative factors has increased the importance of the public aesthetic experience, artistic coordination of the creative process, the relations between groups and individuals within the production process and critical appreciation.

2. CULTURAL SECTOR AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Currently, more and more cities around the world promote cultural organizations as a means to improve the urban image, foster development, to attract tourists and investors.

This is because, in time, cultural organizations have become a key element in the urban competition, due to their potential to bring significant local revenue, thus boosting the economies of cities. Also, in economically advanced countries, measuring the quality of life in big cities can't be achieved without taking into account opportunities for culture, art and creative activities. Thus, cities with a strong cultural infrastructure are important epicentres that must be taken into account in any program of urban and regional development.

Cultural sector includes institutions, spaces, in which take place elitist" (theatre, museums, exhibitions, opera, operetta) and "mass" (cinemas, entertainment shows, concerts) cultural activities (CRCC, 2010, p. 4). People working in this area are generally very involved and passionate, so it can be said that "cultural work is highly interdisciplinary and requires thorough knowledge in order to master the processes and mechanisms of culture" (Ardelean, 2009).

Referring to the culture industry, Toffler show that there are "two types of cultural institutions: some acting in the profitable area (publishing commercial books, record production) and others who work as a non-profit institution (theatres, operas, museums, etc.). Of these two types of institutions, non-profits are facing financial problems, turning them regularly in deficit, while those from profitable areas can be profitable" (Șimăndan, 2007).

According to the National Institute of Statistics, in 2010 in Romania, the number of performance institutions (theatres, philharmonics and similar institutions) was 153, recording a decrease of 1.9% compared to 2007. The number of performances and concerts in 2010 was about 19,000, up from 2007 (5%), and the number of viewers increased by two million (NIS, 2011). Concerning the opera, operetta and classical music (philharmonic), industry experts say that this is a very limited market. In Romania, this kind of performance institutions are found only in the country's large regional centers with over

100,000 inhabitants (there are only 7 cities hosting such units). Not even the capital can say that it has a very good position in this respect; it has only an opera, operetta and a philharmonic.

3. PARTICULARITIES OF THE NATIONAL OPERETTA THEATRE "ION DACIAN"

The National Operetta Theatre "Ion Dacian"¹ (NOT) is a public cultural institution subordinated to the Ministry of Culture. It is the only institution from Romania that has as a main activity operetta. Since 1985, all plays are performed in the Small Hall of the National Theatre Bucharest.

From projects dedicated to making the artistic act more accessible ("Operetta next to you"), to co-productions and international collaboration (Open operetta - "Silvia", "Merry Widow"), from the artistic reinterpreting of the classical operetta performances in order to meet the present horizon of expectations to the new musical productions ("Romeo and Juliet"), from tradition to innovation and experiment and socio-educational projects (Studio Arts for children, the workshop "Romeo and Juliet Junior" social projects - "Giving you'll acquire" Adoption of animals), NOT plans, with each project, to create a unique and attractive cultural strategy in order to promote the value, uniqueness and importance of artistic musical performances, both in Romania and abroad" (NOT, 2012a).

3.1. NOT – artistic approach and diversity of programs

NOT follows the repertoire system, with a number of performances of a series of plays that alternate throughout the season. So "most plays are reruns of opening nights from previous seasons, meaning that that only a few repetitions are required. This is a system that we encounter in most opera theatres from Germany, Austria and Eastern Europe. The system is totally different from the one known as *stagione* (season), where each production has a limited number, but highly intense, of performances, starring performers especially hired during the rehearsals and performances. Many opera houses use a system that combine the *stagione* type with the repertoire, which means that a title enters the repertoire for a season and is played alternately with several other titles for a limited time. This system is used in opera theatres from Italy, France and the United Kingdom" (SCENART, 2010, p. 12).

The 2011-2012 season has included five musicals, five operettas, three performances of "theatre and dance", two magic performances and three performances for children. It is noted that "NOT performances cover very different genres, from classical operettas to symphonic music, chamber music, musicals and dance theater. Also, NOT's activities include special events, such as workshops for

¹ After 1990, the name Operetta Theatre was supplemented by that of the well-known tenor, Ion Dacian, becoming *Operetta Theatre "Ion Dacian"*. On the anniversary of 50 years of existence of the theatre as a public institution, by Government Decision, it was given the title of National Theatre, so getting to be named National Operetta Theatre "Ion Dacian", a name which is retained until today.

children, social activities outside the theatre, and festivals like the International festival "Life is Beautiful"². Last but not least, NOT makes a tour abroad every year: the most recent took place in Budapest, on the occasion of the National Day of Romania, and Egypt in cultural exchange" (SCENART, 2010, pp.13-14). Thanks to the diversification of the programs that NOT is hosting, it covers larger market segments, thus forming a solid strategic activity core. By including programs for children, not only that it covers this segment, represented by people aged less than 14 years, but also it forms and elite audiences who goes to the operetta, who enjoys to be part of an environment full of artists. The aim is to train the viewer to be able to understand the performances that NOT is offering.

3.2. Introducing the musical genre to NOT

A new type of events planning helped NOT to change its image and to gain a new audience. This is represented mostly by the inclusion of the musical genre, as it is proven by the performance "Romeo and Juliet", of Gérard Presgurvic, played in April 2009: all performances were sold out, which was a major success for NOT.

The musical is a modern adaptation of Shakespeare's plays, on pop and rock music, with melodies that catch the public attention and lyrics that are easy to follow. Romeo and Juliet, a co-production with Operetta and Musical Theatre from Budapest, represents a real revolution in history of NOT. And not just because it is the first pop-rock musical played in Romania, but also because of the quality of sound and light design, choreography, costumes and use of the rotary stage.

"This type of performance meets the needs of the public from Romania. The new generation of theatre managers (some of whom come from the TV sector) tends towards a marketing approach - they study the market and try to satisfy the audience taste. They have broadened the sphere of activities and diversified the program season of the theatre they lead" (NOT, 2012b).

This approach is also used by the representative of the Commission for Education, Culture, Religion and Sport of the Bucharest City Hall, who oversees 14 theatres in Bucharest: given that the monitoring the theatre activity is also based on qualitative indicators, not only quantitative, the best indicator of quality should be the one provided by the public; theatres should do market researches, similar to private companies, and the city hall should ask the audience what performances they want to see, so that they can decide how to allocate available the funds.

² The International Festival of Musical Performing Arts "Life is Beautiful" is one of the most important NOT projects. Through this project, "NOT wants to become an active participant on the Romanian cultural scene, identifying problems and developing solutions to meet technical, artistic and reception requirements, which operetta and musical generally face today in Romania" (NOT, 2012a).

3.3. Cost advantages and pricing strategies approached by NOT

For most performances, NOT employs the following prices (NOT, 2012c):

- Cat. I: 40 RON;
- Cat. a II-a: 30 RON;
- Cat. a III-a: 20 RON;
- Discount for students, pensioners: 10,5 RON.

These prices are lower than the ticket prices for theatre performances held by the theatres of Bucharest or National Opera (these are NOT's direct competitors): National Theatre (Cat I: 60 RON), National Opera (Cat I: 55 RON). This is a very important competitive advantage (cost advantage) that NOT has.

Prices for: (1) musicals "Rebecca", "Romeo and Juliet", "Paris, mon amour" (2) operetta "Die Fledermaus" and (3) the theatre-dance performance "Royal Fashion" are subjects to the "umbrella" price strategy. Thus, for "Rebecca", "Romeo and Juliet" and "Royal Fashion" the price for a lodge ticket reaches 105 RON for "Paris, mon amour" 95 RON and for "Die Fledermaus" 50 RON. Although, prices are for different categories, if we should compare them with the prices of NOT performances, or even beyond, it is easier to note that these are higher. Tickets for the performances of these shows are more expensive because production costs are higher. This is justified by hiring staff, special props that are used for these plays (for example, there is a rotary stage with traps and bridges that lean up in the musical "Romeo and Juliet").

For the children's performances tickets and for the children's evenings tickets it is used the dominance strategy, due to the fact that the sale price decreased proportionally with lowering the costs (costs are the lowest compared to other performances that are played by NOT).

Thus, the price to children's performances is 10.5 RON, while for children's evenings the price is 15 RON for kids' access. During the children's evenings, during a performance, children participate in various workshops that are supervised. This way, in addition to attracting viewers thanks to lower costs, another market segment is reached, which is represented by young children. At the same time, because children must be accompanied by an adult, this sector is also targeted, because parents come to see their children engaged in cultural, creative workshops, in addition to watching the performance. Actually, there can be at least two reasons why a parent would come with his child: to a children's evening: the workshop where the child can take part in and the show itself.

3.4. NOT's projects

The openness to children and youth has resulted in the organizing free classes and performances for children and orphans. These activities have the following purposes: (1) increasing the number of NOT viewers in the long term, children are the potential public, (2) solving social problems. Thus, NOT currently manages several educational and social projects (NOT, 2012d):

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- "In October 2009 NOT, in partnership with Accademia Teatro alla Scala from Milan, has initiated the project SCENART - Support for skills in the performing arts, dedicated to the development of labour market and human resources in the performing arts in Romania, in the artistic, technical and administrative areas. SCENART is a project co-financed by the European Social Fund, throughout the Operational Program For The Development Of Human Resources, and is the first strategic project, for a period of three years, aimed at developing human resources in the performing arts in Romania" (NOT, 2012a);
- NOT has initiated with the Budapest Operetta Theatre the first European Union of Musical Theatres³, with the main goal to contribute to conservation, development and promotion of European culture and its tradition through the operetta and musical genres, to set up a platform for exchange of best practices and maintain a high professional level on the musical performances market. Among the activities undertaken by the Union in order to achieve its objectives are included: co-production between member institutions, exchange of artists and stage professionals, workshops, training and education training created in collaboration with partners, activities related to copyright, organizing festivals, common events and collaborations with other European cultural actors;
- "Romeo and Juliet Junior", a project directly related to the co-production with the Operetta and Musical Theatre from Budapest. The project consists of a ten-day workshop that concludes

³ The official launch of the "Union of the European Musical Theatre" took place at the first International Festival of Performing Arts „Life is Beautiful”, on November 14, 2008, in Bucharest. Part of the Union are some of the most important musical theatres in Europe, institutions which have a rich musical tradition in the performing arts, with a long experience and history in promoting and preserving this kind of performance.

with a performance. Thanks to its success, NOT aims to repeat the project at least once per quarter;

- "NOT children's evenings". While parents watch the performance, children are involved in the activities proposed by the artists of the theatre, gaining a quality experience. The activities included in the "NOT children's evening" take place at Studio for Kids, which is a special place dedicated to creation whose story began from the desire to give viewers an alternative to family members, whom for every show had to find a way to divide themselves between their interest for theatre and the caring for the junior viewer left at home;
- Social projects for children and elders, including special performances held in orphanages and nursing homes, for a duration of 45 minutes, and which present famous operetta arias and ballet moments;
- A project for cultural tourism: the aim is to bring the public in other cities to see NOT's "Romeo and Juliet" and to visit Bucharest. The project began on February 20, 2010 with a first group from Constanta. Transportation is free; tickets are sold by the National Opera and Ballet Theatre "Oleg Danovski" from Constanta. The project "Cultural Tourism" addresses a maximum of 50 people per tour and cities located no more than 100 km from Bucharest.

4. STRATEGIC ANALYSIS OF THE NATIONAL OPERETTA THEATRE "ION DACIAN"

"Strategic analysis of a company involves a diagnostic strategic of the external environment (the strategic analysis of the competitive environment) and a diagnostic strategic of the internal environment (the internal strategic analysis of the company)" (Deac and Dună, 2012).

The analysis includes two steps: (1) the analysis of NOT's potential and (2) analysis of the environment.

4.1. *The analysis of NOT's potential*

By analyzing NOT's potential there are identified its strengths and weaknesses, by comparing them with those of other competitors from the sector in which the company operates.

"The strength, measured in a competitive environment, is an attribute or functional aspect of the company, which gives it certain superiority in economic competition. Identified in terms of the company's relative position towards its competitors, its strengths manifest as competitive advantages (assets) in the relations with the competition" (Deac and Băgu, 2000). The synthesis of NOT's strengths is presented below:

- known brand;
- diverse offer represented by the diversity of the entertainment activities (operetta, musical, performances of dance-theatre for children);
- central area where NOT is located;
- consistent number of artists;
- experienced technical staff;
- starting from 2010, NOT is "the only institution in Romania that has obtained ISO certifications for its activities, according to ISO 9001 quality management norms, aiming to become an European institution in all the branches of its field of activity" (NOT, 2012a).

"The weak spot, established in a competitive context of the company, which determines a less favourable position, of inferiority, in its relations with the competition. The most dangerous weaknesses are those related to the combination of successful key points that are specific to the industry where the company activates. These are presented as key vulnerabilities" (Deac and Băgu, 2000). NOT's weaknesses are presented below:

- Lack of motivation of its employees due to low revenues⁴;
- Insufficient number of employees, while the employment in the public sector has been blocked since 2009. In this context, NOT uses two approaches: (1) contracting external collaborators for providing services, (2) retraining some of its employees. Thus, the share of its external collaborators has reached almost 30% of the staff that works in theatre. This triggers two consequences with negative impact: rising costs and conflicts inside the organization (because employees and collaborators have different attitudes, different rhythms of work and different wages, so working together generates tension);
- The trend of increasing the average age of the technical staff (stage and workshops staff);
- Changes in the organizational structure, in order to increase efficiency and effectiveness, are made with difficulty, any changes must be discussed and approved by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage.

⁴ The salaries of the NOT employees, due to the status of public institution, are fixed by law. Therefore, the minimum wage is that of an unqualified machinist and reaches more or less 700 lei. The management has the highest salaries - 4500 lei, with an average of 2,000 lei. Thus, a significant proportion of employees have collaboration agreements with other theatres as well.

4.2. Analysis of the environment

The purpose of the environmental analysis is to investigate NOT's external factors that have a direct or indirect influence on the company. By analyzing these factors, there are identified the external conditions in which NOT activates, and the environmental trends, by determining the opportunities and threats that NOT may face in its evolution.

This way, it can be determined the macro-environment factors that make up the institution. These "are general factors with an exogenous character in relation to agencies that make up the micro-environment. The connection that is established between the organization and these factors is usually indirect, their influence being exerted on long term" (Balaure and Adascalitei, 2003).

4.2.1. NOT customers – the profile of the culture consumer

The profile of the culture consumer is determined first of all by education. No matter the age, people who go to the performances hosted by NOT have a high level of education, a high capacity of understanding and openness towards the programs offered by the theatre.

Because NOT pursues to reach a wide market segment, it has initiated various programs, such as "children's nights" where parents come with their children, and during the performance scheduled for that night, it is held a creative workshop in which children participate. The direct involvement of children in such activities, in addition to the performances for children, make them to want to return. So NOT attracts another market segment that consists of children aged fewer than 14.

3.2.2. Competitors

NOT's competitors are represented by most organizations from Bucharest that host or organize cultural events, even if their program includes or not staging theatre plays. Given that the theatre consumer profile is actually the consumer of art, in general, NOT's competitors aren't only the National Opera and the theaters⁵ but also museums. In addition, taking into account that the type of the theatre consumer is that of an elitist, we must bear in mind that the persons included in this category always choose this type of activity, sometimes preferring to consume mass culture, such as music concerts or watching films in various cinemas of Bucharest⁶.

⁵ National Theatre "I.L.Caragiale" Bucharest, Comedy Theatre, Tândărică Theatre, Odeon Theatre, Nottara Theatre, Little Theatre, Metropolis Theatre, Ion Creanga Theatre, The Very Small State Theatre, Hebrew Theatre, Bulandra Theatre, Act Theatre.

⁶ The products that can substitute the services that NOT offer are represented by activities that are part of the "mass culture" and non-cultural activities of leisure. So, instead of choosing to go to a performance hosted by NOT, a person can choose to spend his time otherwise. This choice may vary depending on the availability of money, mood, and the persons that accompany him. For these reasons, a person can choose

Since the '90s, in Bucharest has appeared the café concept, where cultural activities take place, such as concerts, theatre plays. An example is Green Hours 22, a popular cafe from Bucharest, opened in 1994 and where are organized evenings of jazz and theatre, but also blues, alternative music and classical music. At the end of 2010, Café Godot was opened that combined a cultural event with a recreational activity. This approach differs from the traditional one that NOT supports, where the people who come to see a performance have exclusively this purpose - enjoying that's evening play.

The main opportunities and threats of the competitive environment that NOT is facing are the following:

Opportunities:

- Consolidating and renovating the building of the Bucharest National Theatre where NOT is located;
- The public's growing interest for online sale of tickets which can lead to an increase in the number of spectators;
- Creating a pleasant outdoor ambiance by arranging a park and a pedestrian area on the place of the existing parking;
- By building partnerships with theatres from other European countries, NOT expands its activity area, by staging performances in those countries [for example, NOT initiated with Budapest Operetta Theatre, Musical Theatre project of the European Union first. "European Union Musical Theatre aims to conserve, develop and promote European culture and its traditions through operetta and musical, to constitute a platform for exchanging best practices and maintaining a high professional level on the market of musical performances" (NOT, 2012a).

Threats:

- Departure of employees in the private sector due to demotivating wages;
- The NOT's status of public institution that is regarded as a constraint factor, which could be an advantage for the competitors from the theatre's private sector;
- Viewers tend to choose the consumption of "mass" culture or non-cultural activities of leisure.

to go to a movie or concert, activities that are part of the "mass culture", to walk in the park (non-cultural activity of leisure) – this is detrimental to NOT and the performances it has to offer.

5. CONCLUSIONS / RECOMMANDATIONS

"Another important issue, which is essential for the strategic diagnostic, is represented by the emphasis that must be laid on the necessary connection between the external and the internal diagnostic, because determining if an aspect constitutes a strength or a weakness for the company, respectively if it's an opportunity or a threat is made only comparing and relating to the competition" (Popa et al., 2007). In conclusion, I propose some recommendations for NOT:

- Exploiting the promotion methods which can be applied (because there are certain restrictions on this issue arising out of NOT's public status): playbill advertising, more frequent appearances of the artists in the media;
- Updating NOT's website with fresh and attractive content, which could attract potential viewers;
- A more active presence in the online environment;
- Attracting more sponsors, not only at festivals or projects that NOT is involved, thus increasing the available budget, including the one for motivating employees;
- Doing continuous market research to identify other needs of potential "clients". Once these needs are made aware for both spectators and "provider" (NOT), it may help to make NOT's offer of projects, festivals and performances include elements that can contribute to increase the satisfaction of "stakeholders".

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was supported from the European Social Fund through Sectorial Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013, project number POSDRU/89/1.5/S/59184 "Performance and excellence in postdoctoral research in Romanian economics science domain".

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