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Maja Szymura-Tyc

THE ROLE OF MARKETING INTELLECTUAL CAPITAL IN CREATING COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE IN THE INTERNATIONAL MARKET – THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS AND EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE OF POLISH FIRMS COMPETING IN THE EUROPEAN MARKETS

Introduction

Knowledge is becoming the main source of wealth and power, but also of difference, between nations, regions, companies and people (Castells, 1996). It is the base for innovation and competitiveness. Today, competitiveness means answering individual needs of customers and it requires a very sophisticated knowledge management. A specific role in creating competitive advantage of firms and their networks is played by the marketing knowledge and its management. Research shows that marketing knowledge that results from marketing orientation is not equally distributed among companies from the Old and New Europe*. Inability to eliminate the gap in knowledge resources between the firms from CEE countries and the Western firms may become an obstacle for creating "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge based-economy in the world", which is the goal for the European Union declared by the Lisbon European Council in 2000 (Rodrigues, 2002). Better understanding of the nature and structure of the marketing intellectual capital, as well as its role in creating competitive advantage of Polish and other CEE firms in the European and international market should help in further implementation of successful strategies and business models leading to market success and wealth of these firms and countries.

1. Intellectual capital as a source of value for firms in the international market

In the management literature much attention has been recently given to the intellectual capital of organizations considered to be a significant source of value for contemporary firms. The issues of the firm's learning process and the process of knowledge management have been discussed widely. Intellectual capital (knowledge) is mentioned here as a specific (idiosyncratic) resource used in order to create value for the customer and for the firm, consequently – the source of competitive advantage of a firm or network of firms in a given market**.

* The international comparative research carried out at the end of the nineties in several European countries indicates a general problem of the lack of the marketing orientation of firms in Central and Eastern Europe, which results in a lack of marketing knowledge. In Poland the marketing orientation is implemented mostly in the foreign owned firms or firms with foreign shares which used to invest in their marketing resources and capabilities (Fonfara, 2001).

** The issue of knowledge as a source of competitive advantage of firms and their networks is developed within the knowledge-based theory of a firm (the competence theory of the firm) in eighties and nineties by many authors, inspired by early works of B. Wernerfelt, J. Barney, G. Day and R. Wensley, and popularised in the nineties in the management sciences by C. Prahalad and G. Hamel.

Astonishingly, the marketing theory used to remain on the margin of this research stream and discussion, although the issue of marketing knowledge has been present in marketing literature since the beginning of the 1990s. The need to create, disseminate and use of marketing knowledge in activities undertaken by a firm was raised in the discussion on the marketing (market) orientation of a firm (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990). The concept of marketing orientation has been developed in the nineties and there were attempts to incorporate the concept in the resource-based theory of a firm (the resource-based theory of competitive advantage) (Hunt and Morgan, 1998)[*] as well as in the concept of learning organisation (Slater and Narver, 1995), which has later become the research priority of the Marketing Science Institute for the years 2002-2004 (Morgan, 2004). Still, there is a gap in understanding the nature and structure of the marketing knowledge or marketing intellectual capital, its management and influence on competitive advantage resulting in superior value for the customer and the firm in the local and international markets.

An insight into the influence of marketing knowledge on the competitive advantage in the international market is provided by the international production theory formulated in the early eighties and developed in the nineties by J. H. Dunning (Dunning, 1993). The market and marketing knowledge is considered here an important source of competitive advantage. The knowledge itself and the desire to use it at one's own discretion by firms operating in the international market are of particular meaning among all the tangible and intangible resources of an international firm. The knowledge is considered here to be a source of the ownership advantage (O) and the internalisation advantage (I). The knowledge of an international firm is the knowledge obtained by a firm as a result of gathering experiences during the performance of a given activity. It is emphasised that the most important knowledge resources of firms operating in the international market include technical and marketing knowledge, as well as the knowledge and skills related to the management of the international activity of firms that create ever wider, more complex and geographically dispersed networks. Apart from the knowledge resources held by firms operating in the international market, there is yet another source of competitive advantage: the localisation advantage (L). It may be seen as a source of the specific knowledge resources and skills owned by the local partners of a firm, to which the latter has access (Zorska, 1998).

The possibility of building competitive advantage in the international market due to the knowledge resources a firm holds and controls results from the fact that knowl-

[*] Such an attempt was made by S. Hunt and R. Morgan in a series of articles published at the end of the nineties in the Journal of Marketing. They were promoting the so called Comparative Advantage Theory of Competition where the marketing (market) orientation was assumed as a potential resource for comparative (competitive) advantage (Hunt and Morgan, 1998).

edge (intellectual capital) has certain features that make it different from other resources or forms of capital. The first of these features is attributed to the intangibility of knowledge, which makes it easier and cheaper to transfer the knowledge in space and over state borders, in comparison to other forms of capital (e.g. material capital), without the barriers encountered for example by the financial capital. Another feature is called the inexhaustibility of intellectual capital, which allows it, contrary to physical or financial capital, to be utilised many times, without losing value, with other resources or capabilities of a firm, including those available abroad (e.g. local brands, resources of local partners). It is even emphasised that the more frequently the intellectual capital is used in various situations (e.g. in various markets, including the international/multinational one), the more it gains in value. Knowledge (intellectual capital) is also characterised by simultaneity, which means that it can be used by many people and organisations or firms at the same time and in many places simultaneously (e.g. in foreign subsidiaries of a firm, by foreign partners), without losing effectiveness. Finally, there is the domination – a feature which means that the efficiency and effectiveness of using other, whether tangible or intangible resources of a firm (plant and machinery, technologies, distribution channels, brands, etc.) depend on the intellectual capital of the firm. All the features listed above show that intellectual capital, unlike any other resource of a firm, may be used to build competitive advantage in the international market, becoming a significant source of value for contemporary firms and their networks*.

2. The marketing intellectual capital of firm: a concept and structure

Before the concept of the marketing intellectual capital of a firm is presented here, it is necessary to mention that in the management literature the intellectual capital itself is defined in many different ways. In the broadest approach, the intellectual capital is identified with all the intangible resources of a firm that result in the firm's market value exceeding its book value (Edvinsson and Malone, 1997). This approach to the intellectual capital of a firm is connected primarily with the attempt to measure or estimate the capital in question. But in the management literature, a narrow approach to the problem of defining the intellectual capital of a firm has been more frequently adopted. It appears wherever attention of the researcher focuses on the issue of the management process of the intellectual capital of a firm, identified then only with

* Other features of knowledge frequently mentioned include nonlinearity, complexity, usability and connection with learning.

its knowledge and skills (capabilities, competencies). This is the approach which is adopted in this paper.

Defining intellectual capital by referring to the concept of knowledge may lead, however, to further doubts, resulting mostly from the fact that there are two different approaches in the literature to the very essence of knowledge and to the process of managing or creating knowledge within an organisation. The former approach – the Western one – defines knowledge with reference to the concept of data and information. The latter – the Eastern approach – was disseminated in the literature by the Japanese authors I. Nonaka and H. Takeuchi, and it identifies knowledge with the beliefs of an individual confirmed in action (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). These two concepts of knowledge, the Western and the Eastern, have been present in management sciences for over a decade now, intertwining and enriching each other. One of the results of this is found in the frequently quoted definition of knowledge given by T. Davenport, D. Delong and M. Beers, which links the two approaches, considering knowledge to be information combined with experience, context, interpretation and reflection (Davenport, Delong and Beers, 1998). More detailed definition of these type is given later by T. Davenport and L. Prusak who regard knowledge as the "[…] fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information and expert insights that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information. It originates and is implies in the minds of knowers, in organisational routines, processes, practices and norms" (Davenport and Prusak, 2000, p. 5).

The above considerations lead us to the definition of marketing knowledge. Referring to the definitions of knowledge in the literature that draw on the Western approach, marketing knowledge can be defined simply as the application of marketing information in practice or as an organised marketing information resource. One could also define it more broadly and refer to the Eastern approach, noting that marketing knowledge is a unique resource of a firm created in the process of accumulating experiences in conducting marketing activities. Using the definition of knowledge given by T. Davenport, D. Delong and M. Beers, marketing knowledge may be considered as marketing information combined with experience in performing marketing activities, allowing one to interpret the activities in question correctly and to reflect on them. This reflection would in turn lead to the acquisition of new experiences and information.

Knowledge, including marketing knowledge, can be classified according to the aim that it serves or according to its content. In the former case, one can distinguish strategic knowledge (know-what), practical knowledge (know-how), and theoretical knowledge (know-why) (Quinn, Anderson and Finkelstein, 1996). Strategic marketing knowledge comprises the knowledge that a firm has gained as a result of its previous experience connected with the process of defining value for the customer (knowledge about the market, i.e. its volume, dynamics, segmentation, structure, competitiveness on individual markets and market segments, sources of competitive advantage and behaviour of competitors, competitive value offers for the customer, etc.). Practical marketing knowledge results, first of all, from the experience a firm has gained in the process of developing, communicating and offering value to its customers (i.e. researching customer needs and preferences, developing the features of a product, branding, building relationships with customers based on satisfaction and loyalty, communicating with customers, selecting promotional tools, building distribution channels, managing sales forces, servicing customer). Theoretical marketing knowledge, in turn, enables one to identify cause-and-effect relationships concerning, for example, the influence of changes in the environment on market volume, dynamics and structure, reasons for certain customer behaviour patterns, potential reactions of purchasers to imposed prices or employed promotional tools, features of individual types of co-ordination mechanisms in distribution channels.

When one takes into consideration the content of marketing knowledge, it is possible, as in the case of general knowledge, to distinguish catalogue knowledge (answering the question "what is it?"), historic knowledge ("how did it happen?"), process knowledge ("how does it happen?"), instrumental knowledge ("what decides about what?") and scalar knowledge ("how many/much?" and "how strong?") (Ruggles, 1997, p. 2). Marketing knowledge, therefore, enables one not only to evaluate the current economic situation (e.g. market volume, price structure of the market, intensiveness and type of competition, availability of distribution channels), but encompasses experience form the past as well (e.g. how the market has been changing and, consequently, which development stage it has now reached). Marketing knowledge enables one to answer the question of how a certain process takes place (e.g. creating a brand image, building relationships with customers), which marketing instruments (tools) should be used in order to achieve the envisaged goal (e.g. a certain sales rise as a reaction to price reductions, influence of the margin level on the level of customer service), in which proportion and with what intensity individual tools should be used (e.g. advertising and sales promotion, price reductions and intensive distribution) in order to achieve the best possible effect.

Using knowledge in practice constitutes the basis for skills, capabilities and competencies. In the case of marketing knowledge, one may speak about marketing skills, capabilities and competencies, which can be described, in general, as the assets based on marketing knowledge enabling a firm to use its tangible and intangible assets in the process of creating value for the customer and for the firm (Szymura-Tyc, 2005). Consequently, marketing skills are specific marketing abilities possessed by individuals or certain groups in a firm that use the available marketing knowledge to perform specialist marketing activities, such as market and marketing research, conducting marketing campaigns, pricing products, performing promotional activities or managing sales teams. Marketing capabilities, in turn, are connected with the individual stages of the marketing process, which encompasses defining value for the customer, developing the value and communicating it to the customer. They can be defined as the assets based on marketing knowledge which enables the co-ordinated use of a certain sets of tangible and intangible assets of a company in marketing activities of defining, developing and communicating value to the customer. Finally, marketing competencies can be described as these abilities of the firm which consist in an intentional use of available marketing knowledge for coordinated engagement of all the assets owned and controlled by the company (tangible as well as intangible), including marketing skills and capabilities, in order to create and deliver value to the customer, which is reflected in gaining competitive advantage. The marketing competencies of a firm are different from marketing skills and capabilities because they do not relate to individual marketing activities, but encompass the whole value chain of the firm and its relationships with the market partners. They are indispensable for the company to be able to gain competitive advantage on a given market.

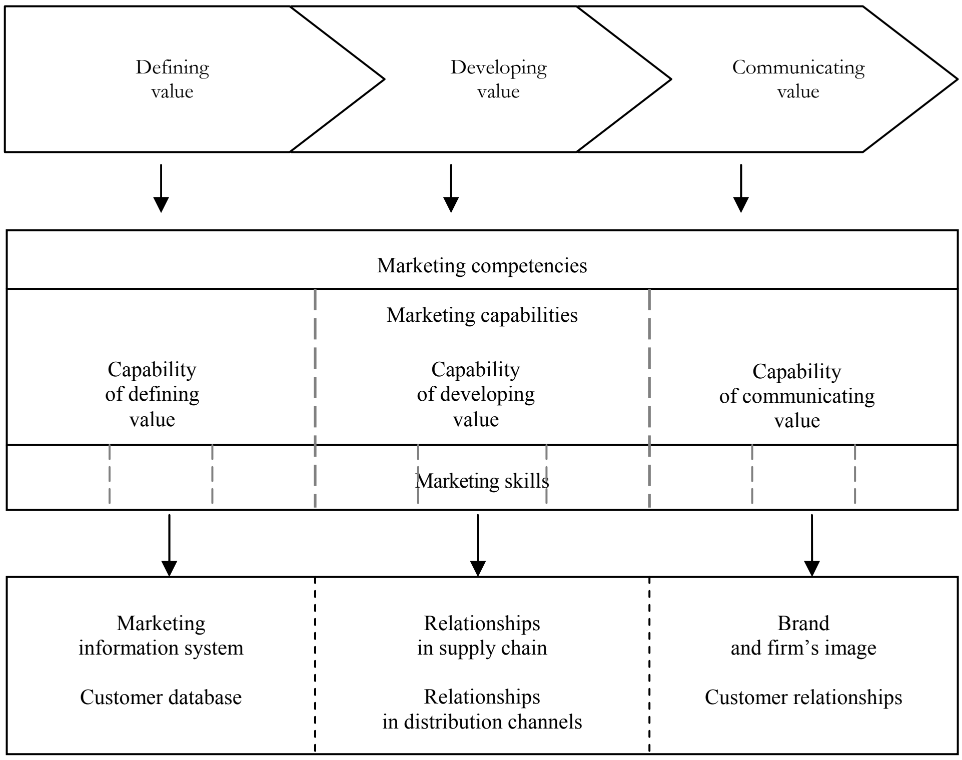

Figure 1. The marketing process and marketing resources classification
Source: Based on Szymura-Tyc (2005, p. 212).

The specific role of marketing knowledge and resources based on the knowledge in question, i.e. marketing skills, capabilities and competences consists in their responsibility of creating other marketing recourses, widely recognised as sources of competitive advantage of contemporary firms, i.e. brand and firm image, relationships with customers and partners in the supply chain and distributions channels, as well as the marketing information system and customer databases. The marketing resources based on marketing knowledge, resulting from conducting the marketing activities composing the processes of defining, developing and communicating value for customers together with the other marketing resources created in the processes, are shown on the Figure 1.

Defining marketing knowledge, marketing skills, capabilities and competencies makes it possible to describe the nature and structure of the marketing intellectual capital of a firm. One may refer to the concept of knowledge pyramid by D. Skyrme where data are considered signs, images and facts taken out of the context; information is regarded as data presented in the context, knowledge is treated as information combined with an understanding of this information and at the top of this hierarchy there is wisdom (intelligence), which is a combination of knowledge and the ability to use it (Skyrme, 1999, p. 47). If so, one may assume that marketing intellectual capital encompasses market and marketing data and information, marketing knowledge, as well as marketing skills, capabilities and competencies of a firm. Figure 2 shows the structure of the marketing intellectual capital of a firm together with the conditions of managing this capital successfully.

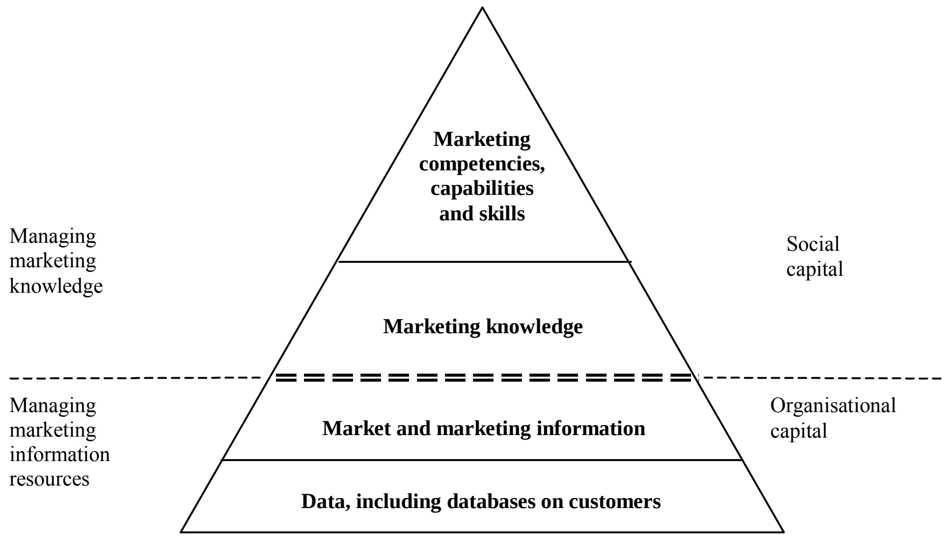

Figure 2. The marketing intellectual capital of a firm
Source: Based on Borowiecki and Romanowska (2001, p. 29).

At the base of the pyramid representing the elements of marketing intellectual capital of a firm, there are data, especially data from customer databases, data on competitors and market partners of the firm (suppliers, buyers) and on the broader environment of the company. These data also reflect the results of marketing activities carried out by the company (e.g. sales in different sectors, costs related to such sales, imposed prices and margins, etc.). Processing and analysing the available data results in the creation of market and marketing information. On the third level of the pyramid there is marketing knowledge and above it, there are marketing skills, capabilities and competencies that represent the ability to use marketing knowledge in marketing activities of a firm. All these are the assets that are created in the marketing process as a result of marketing activities undertaken by individuals, groups and the firm as a whole.

3. Managing marketing intellectual capital on the international scale

The evolution of the concept of knowledge currently taking place allows not only the understanding of the essence of knowledge itself, but also of the organisation's learning process and the knowledge (intellectual capital) management process. In the 20th century, when the issue of knowledge management was discussed, usually the management of the information resources of a firm was emphasised. Attention used to be focused on formal, explicit information and knowledge, as well as on the information systems and information technologies used to accumulate, process and analyse that information and to make it available to specific units and groups within the firm. The process has been supported by the firm's organisational capital, i.e. the relevant organisational structure ensuring information flow within the company. Today, it is more often emphasised that in the intellectual capital management process, apart from managing the information resources of a firm, it is also necessary to manage the organisation's learning process. This brings about the need to create an incentive for learning and for sharing knowledge, as well as to strive for mutual trust and co-responsibility for the effects achieved, i.e. to develop the social capital of the firm, which includes privileged intra- and interorganisational relationships based on trust and intention to collaborate; these relationships bind not only individuals and groups within the organisation, but also organisations between themselves (Borowiecki and Romanowska, 2001).

3.1. Managing international marketing information system

The issue of managing marketing information resources has been discussed in marketing literature for a long time. It appears here in the context of building a marketing information system (MIS), within which one can distinguish the information acquisition system (including the internal records system, marketing intelligence system and marketing research system) and the marketing decision support system (Kotler, 1997). Firms operating in any international market create an analogous international marketing information system (IMIS). They face, however, a very specific challenge, as the system they need in order to compete effectively in the international market has to perform additional functions that involve the monitoring of the international environment in order to follow new trends, the identification of possibilities and threats that appear here, the evaluation of the effectiveness of marketing strategies, as well as of specific marketing programmes in various national and regional markets, and the controlling and coordination of marketing activities of a firm within its international structure. This makes the international marketing information system (IMIS) much more complex than the national MIS. IMIS contains a much larger amount of data and information relating to the individual national markets, as well as indicators which make it possible to analyse the effects of the firm's marketing activities in particular countries and in the international market in which it operates. What is more, the international marketing information system should be independent of time and geographical location, allowing using the system flexibly in various time zones and geographical conditions. The system should also ensure cultural and linguistic compatibility, making it possible to collect data from various cultures and language zones, legal conformability with local legal systems, standardisation, securing the homogeneity of gathered information, flexibility to determine the possibility of adapting to the needs of local users, and finally, possibility of integrating data related to many users, countries, places, etc. (Duliniec, 2004, pp.171-175).

Creating such an international marketing information system requires time, experience and significant financial resources. The development of information technologies has contributed to a great extent to the broadening of the possibilities for creating and using international information systems in practice, but their use brings about not only an increase of the costs, but also a significant risk of failure. What is worse, the information technologies based on the Internet do not solve all the problems connected with the creation of an IMIS, as they only make it possible to develop some of the IMIS subsystems, in particular the operational information system, marketing decision support systems and marketing expert systems, which constitute a basis for what is called databased marketing. Marketing based on databases containing data about customers, products and, for example sales staff, allows firms to conduct many marketing activities, including those carried on an international scale. In particular the analysis of data on customers, markets and competition, the management of customer service, marketing campaigns, sales process and communication with customers which are available thanks to the operational information system constitute a source of value for the customers and for the firm. The experience related to its implementation and investments incurred by the firm in one country may be effectively and efficiently used in other countries, the more so if the countries form a common market (i.e. the European Union). As a consequence, in the case of IT implementations one may speak of a scale effect, allowing firms operating in the European market to obtain additional value from IT technologies used to build the IMIS[*]. It is worth emphasising, however, that despite the development of these technologies, the usefulness of marketing decision support IT systems, marketing expert systems, or, broadly speaking, databased marketing and customer relationship management (CRM) systems, is still considered to be limited (Boulding, Staelin, Ehret and Wesley, 2005). In looking for the reasons, we have to bear in mind that IT systems supporting marketing decisions currently cover only a part of the marketing information resources the organisation needs in order to build competitive advantage in its current and future markets. They are weak in terms of including information about competitors and the value of their offers, and they frequently induce companies do "wrong things in a better way". They do not solve the problem of value innovation either, which does not allow firms to implement the "blue ocean strategies". Marketing databases cannot replace marketing intelligence, whose significance is currently increasing, or market and marketing research, which is frequently underestimated. What is more, it seems that even if one could create a marketing information system containing all the essential, strategically important information and sophisticated analysis methods and tools allowing one to transform data into useful information quickly and efficiently, this would not be sufficient to build competitive advantage for the firm. Competitive advantage is most of all connected with the marketing knowledge embodied in people's minds, resulting from their experience in performing specific marketing activities, which becomes explicit knowledge of a firm only if the firm is capable of extracting it and including it in its information system and using it in practice.

3.2. Managing marketing knowledge in the international market

As it has already been mentioned, the marketing knowledge originates as a result of conducting marketing activities. It is created by individuals and groups in a firm participating in activities consisting of defining value for the customer, developing it and communicating to the customers. The marketing knowledge of individuals may become marketing knowledge of groups within the firm or of the entire firm if the latter

[*] C. Carpano and M. Rahman show that especially in the case of standardised international marketing strategy the support of information technology is needed and results in increasing market shares of foreign subsidiaries in the local markets. In that case the IT is a competitive weapon in implementation of the international marketing strategy (Carpano and Rahman, 1998).

creates conditions for creating and sharing this knowledge within the organisation. This requires support from the social capital which includes intraorganisational relationships based on trust and the desire for collaboration to achieve common aims, in this case: the marketing goals of a firm. Interorganisational ties binding the firm with its partners in the supply system and in distribution channels, as well as with customers, make it possible, on the other hand, to transfer marketing knowledge between partners within a network, allowing it to build competitive advantage in a given market.

In the description of the process of creation of marketing knowledge it was assumed that a firm created knowledge by conducting marketing activities autonomously. However, this model of creating marketing knowledge does not reflect well the cases where the firm outsource its marketing activities to independent, specialised firms. In the international market and in the European Union in particular, we are dealing with a situation where a large part of the marketing activities is outsourced. Market and marketing research, the communication activities of European firms (advertising, creating brand image, promotional campaigns) are very frequently performed by specialised, international consulting, research or advertising firms which jealously guard the knowledge they have acquired, and which has become their core resource, making it available only to a limited extent (e.g. by licensing). What results from this is that firms using services of those firms are cut off from the sources of marketing knowledge created as a result of the accumulation of experiences from conducting marketing activities autonomously. By outsourcing these activities, firms can benefit from highly professional services, but they neglect the possibility of creating a unique (idiosyncratic) marketing knowledge resource which may become a source of value for the firm (Achrol and Kotler, 1999)[*]. Transfer of marketing knowledge between the contractor and the ordering party becomes particularly difficult when the outsourcing of marketing activities is based on non-recurring contracts. Access to marketing knowledge may only be ensured by privileged relationships based on many years of collaboration, trust and reciprocal knowledge sharing, which ties the firms to specialised companies conducting marketing activities.

It seems that the multinational corporations operating in the European Union markets are aware of this, as they seek to continue collaboration with selected companies which have experience in these markets. At the same time they maintain teams within their structure, in order to transfer marketing knowledge in a competent manner to the internal part of the organisation. Small and medium firms, including firms from Central and Eastern Europe, most frequently cannot afford to use services of such international research or advertising companies, they are not capable of establishing

[*] Therefore R. Achrol and Ph. Kotler foresee that in the near future a reintegration of these activities should occur, leading to creation of marketing knowledge within the organisation (Achrol and Kotler, 1999).

partner relationships with them that would make it possible to transfer marketing knowledge, nor are they capable of obtaining such knowledge autonomously within a short time frame, as it is created as a result of accumulating experiences from an earlier activity in the same or in similar markets*. This lack of access to marketing knowledge related to the conditions of conducting marketing activities in Central and Eastern Europe markets makes it difficult for them to achieve competitive advantage, but does not make it impossible. Firms conducting marketing activities in CEE countries accumulate experiences that constitute a source of their marketing knowledge, which in turn can be used in other countries of the region. A certain similarity between the CEE markets makes it possible to distinguish relatively homogenous market segments, with customers whose needs and expectations become a basis for formulating a standardised offer of value. This particularly relates to such issues as the structure of value offered to customers, including an adequate level of quality (benefits) and price (costs), acceptable customer service standards, the attitude of customers to global and international brands, to brands imitating international ones and to local brands.

The methods of communicating with customers are also becoming more uniform; the same can be said with respect to delivering the firm's offer to the customers. This frequently makes marketing activities in one country equally effective in others. If conditions are created within a firm to share knowledge between teams or subsidiaries in various countries, marketing knowledge may become a source of that company's advantage over others that do not have similar experiences. The awareness of this fact encourages CEE firms to take their first steps towards internationalising their marketing activity, particularly in markets in their own region, despite the fact that they are relatively less attractive in comparison to the Western European ones. This strategy frequently leads them to success and, as a consequence, allows them to penetrate into Western European markets.

Speaking of the sources of marketing knowledge, it is worth emphasising once more that marketing knowledge related to customers, competitors, suppliers and market intermediaries operating in CEE markets is held not only by specialised research and consulting companies or companies which operated in such markets at an earlier date. Local companies also have this knowledge, so they can become valued partners of a firm. They frequently know best what kind of value customers in a given market expect, how to develop the value in a given market situation, how to communicate with target customers and how to deliver them the value offer. Geographical, cultural and economic proximity should encourage firms from the region to establish privi-

* K. Fonfara also indicates a general problem of the lack of the marketing orientation of firms in Central and Eastern Europe. The international comparative research carried out at the end of the nineties in several European countries shows that in Poland the marketing orientation is implemented mostly in the foreign owned firms or firms with foreign shares which used to invest in their marketing resources and capabilities (Fonfara, 2001).

leged relationships with local partners in these markets. Firms operating in the CEE markets looking for new, more effective sources of competitive advantage should reach deeper into the knowledge resources of local market partners, and even into those held by customers, seeking to establish privileged relationships with them, based on trust and desire for collaboration. The new sources of knowledge are described by C. Prahalad and V. Ramaswamy (2003). The firm's social capital created in this way, comprising intra- and interorganisational relationships, makes it possible not only to share marketing knowledge between individuals and groups within the firm, between the subsidiaries of an international company, but also between the firm and its local market partners (suppliers, collaborators, intermediaries in distribution channels), and even with customers in the local markets. Such privileged relationships, based on trust resulting from many years of collaboration in seeking to achieve common goals, binding partners undertaking their activities in CEE markets should be more frequent and should contribute to building of their competitive advantage in the European market. The increasing interdependence of firms creating vast networks, as well as the economic, legal and cultural community created by CEE countries within the European Union create stimuli to develop such collaboration and may contribute to the creation of marketing intellectual capital of firms operating in these markets, which is a necessary condition for building competitive advantage.

4. Sources of competitive advantage of Polish firms on European markets – review of empirical researches

The process of transformation of Polish economy – from a centrally-planned to a market-driven one – has last for almost 20 years (since 1989). The liberalisation process, the opening of the economy for international exchange let it participate in internationalisation and globalisation processes as well as integration within European Union. This has led to the presence of foreign firms on the Polish market and the radical change of conditions for competition and marketing activities on the local market. On the other side, Polish enterprises have gained the new opportunities to compete in foreign markets, particularly on the expanding European Single Market. Polish accession to the European Union (in 2004) has served as an additional impulse for developing international competition on the local market and internationalising of Polish firms activity.

A fundamental question that must be asked in this context is whether Polish firms are able to compete with foreign firms on the local and international markets in an effective way, and what may be the potential sources of their competitive advantage on these markets. Particularly interesting here is whether the marketing resources, such as the marketing intellectual capital, brand or firm image, relationships in supply chain and distribution channels, as well as customer relationships may be the sources of the competitive advantage of Polish firms over the foreign ones, both on the Polish and the international market, especially the European Union one.

To answer these questions one may refer to the results of empirical studies carried out in Poland last years. The researches on the competitiveness of Polish firms and the sources of their competitive advantage have been conducted in Poland for over 15 years*. These empirical studies have been carried out by research teams and by individual researchers from the leading academic centres in Poland.

The goals and scope of particular empirical studies, the research samples and the applied methodology varied significantly, but in all of the studies discussed here the sources of competitive advantage of Polish firms were analysed. Empirical data for these researches were usually obtained by a survey and/or an interview with managers of researched firms based on a list of sources of competitiveness arbitrarily established by the researchers. The respondents were asked to indicate the factors perceived as having impact on the competitiveness of a given firm on the local and/or international markets.

A comparative analysis of the researches results enabling tracing the changes in competitive advantage sources is very difficult. It is because the number of factors surveyed varies significantly from one study to another and because the researchers apply three different approaches for listing the factors, sometimes inseparably. The simplest approach, which is becoming less frequently used, consists in searching for the sources of competitive advantage within the particular functions of a firm (e.g. R&D, manufacturing, finance, marketing, etc.), without paying attention to the resources used or activities carried out. The second approach, which is the most popular now, is founded on the contemporary resource-based model of competitive advantage and lies in searching for the sources of advantages among tangible and intangible resources of a firm, particularly among knowledge-based resources, as well as within the relationships created by the firm with its market partners. The third approach applied in these researches, accompanies those described above and consists in indicating those elements of customer value (named instruments of competition or market success factors) which are decisive for the competitiveness of the firm's customer value offer over the value of its competitors' (e.g. price, quality, delivery time, etc.). For the purpose of the paper the resource-based approach has been implemented as the most adequate to investigate the changing role and significance of marketing resources in creating the competitive advantage of Polish firms on domestic and European markets.

* The short review of the researches presented in this paper is mainly based on a broad study of their results to be found in (Pierścionek and Jurek-Stepień, 2006).

4.1. Marketing resources as sources of competitive advantage of Polish firms?

One of the earliest studies on competitive advantage was carried out as part of the research on the privatisation of Polish enterprises in the years 1993-1996 (Gierszewska, 1997). The research concerned the impact of the form of privatisation on firms' abilities to compete. Fifty nine privatised Polish firms had been researched. The research indicated that the level of competitiveness of privatised firms depends strongly on the form of privatisation applied (privatisation with foreign capital, privatisation with Polish capital or privatisation via "quick sale"). Firms privatised with foreign capital shares were characterised by a higher level of competitiveness than those that were privatised with Polish capital only. The research also showed that the quality of products, staff, machinery and technologies at firms privatised with essential shares of foreign capital was higher than that at firms privatised by Polish capital. Such enterprises usually strived for further territorial expansion, entering global markets and enlarging customer base by supportive activities, such as marketing or cost reductions. Firms privatised by Polish capital focused their attention on maintaining or strengthening their position on the local market, avoiding more decided competitive steps like adjusting products, reducing costs or marketing support activities.

In 1995, the research on the role of intangible resources in building competitiveness of Polish firms was carried out (Kłosiewicz and Słonimska, 1996). There had been 270 trade and manufacturing firms researched. The research showed that the firms achieving success on the Polish market were those which declared profound knowledge of their competitors, and this was mostly characteristic for firms with foreign capital. The information about competitors was derived from observation, not formal market research; however, firms with foreign capital shares sometimes made use of such studies as well. Knowledge and marketing skills had been recognised as an important resource that allowed building competitive advantage on the Polish market, yet the foreign firms valued theses resources four times higher than the Polish firms. Firm image and good reputation were recognised to be the key resources decisive for a firm's success, but again the foreign firms shared this opinion more frequently than the Polish ones.

The research on the competitive potential of Polish firms in the context of the European integration was conducted in the years 1997-1999 (Stankiewicz, 1999; Godziszewski, 2001). The research sample consisted of 95 Polish firms leading in their sectors. The research showed that intangible assets, such as know-how, skills and relationships with market partners and employee attitudes were perceived as the most important factors in a firm's competitive potential, while marketing and R&D were considered the main weaknesses of Polish firms. In the opinion of the researchers, the weakness of marketing and R&D constituted a source of threat to the development of the firms and needed to be eliminated as quickly as possible, since these fields determine, to a large extent, effective competition on the EU markets. The research also indicated a limited use of IT technologies supporting management processes at the firms. The study ended with a conclusion that Polish firms were able to compete effectively on the domestic and foreign markets, however their competitive potential was in many cases much lower than that of foreign competitors.

Similar issues were studied in the research on the competitiveness of Polish firms in the context of integration within the European Union, which was conducted in 2000 (Gorynia, 2002). Ninety three medium and large firms registered in Poland from manufacturing, construction, transportation and forwarding sectors, exporting to several European markets had been researched. As a result of the research, the following indicators of the competitive potential of Polish firms were distinguished: awareness of current and future customer needs, quality of managerial staff, firm's reputation, and firm's concern in quality and latest technologies. The research proved that the competitive potential of Polish firms was lower than that of an average competitor from the European Union in relation to all factors under research. The surveyed managers were of the opinion that competing on the domestic market was easier than competing on the European Union markets, mainly because of smaller needs and expectations of customers and weaker competitors.

Subsequent research dealing with the competitiveness of Polish enterprises in the context of the globalisation of economy was conducted in the years 2000-2002 (Stankiewicz, 2002). There had been researched 76 Polish firms leading in their sectors. It showed that in the managers' opinion the success of Polish firms was mainly determined by marketing resources and skills (the opinion was shared by almost half of the respondents), though the resources and skills in the field of employment, production, organisation, management and finances were also important. As the basis for achieving success in marketing activity, the respondents indicated the following: a developed distribution network, market knowledge and marketing research, as well as the ability to use instruments of competition such as quality, price and assortment of goods. The research let formulate a conclusion that competing on the globalising markets requires further internationalisation of Polish firm activity.

The research on the behaviour of Polish firms facing competition from the foreign investors appearing in their sectors was conducted in 2004 (Gorynia, 2005). This time the research sample included 77 small and medium Polish firms from construction and automotive sectors. The research conclusion was that prior to foreign investors entering the Polish market the main strengths of Polish firms had included adjustment of goods to Polish customers' preferences, firm reputation (image) and quality of goods. As their weaknesses, the Polish firms' managers mentioned the following: research and skills in R&D, ISO systems application, marketing and ability to use external funds for financing current activity. In the opinion of Polish firm managers, after foreign investors had entered the Polish market, the Polish firms strengthened their advantages and substantially corrected their weaknesses. The adjustment of products/services to suit Polish consumers' tastes and the quality of such products scored the highest. The level of investments in R&D, financing of the current activity from external sources, size of the firm and its possibility to finance current activities from its own sources were evaluated as the weakest points in comparison to an average foreign firm. The conclusion from the research was that despite improvements in progress, the competitive potential of the Polish firms was much lower than that of their foreign competitors.

Another study on the success factors of Polish enterprises on the European Union markets that was conducted in 2005 (Pierścionek and Jurek-Stępień, 2006) aimed at specifying the potential sources of the competitive advantage of Polish enterprises on the European Union markets. The research sample consisted of 247 leading Polish firms exporting to European markets. The success factors included: competitive labour costs in Poland, high integration among marketing, production, supplies, etc., ability to learn about customer preferences and behaviour, careful choice of market expansion direction and flexibility in changing the direction, and competitive technology. The conclusion of the research was that during the researched period the Polish firms competing on the European Union markets still concentrated on building the competitive advantage on the low costs basis and a cost leadership strategy. The majority of the researched firms insufficiently used the sources of advantage related to the ability to collect and process data on customers and competitors, integration of technological and marketing skills and concern about knowledge development of management board and employees. Moreover, the development of marketing skills and outsourcing were underestimated, though the existence and maintenance of special relationships with customers, brand and company's reputation, as well as the intensive and consistent search for customers were considered as important instruments of competition. The research showed significant differences in competition strategy between large, medium and small firms. Large companies predominantly applied strategies based on brand and reputation, supported with intensity and/or quality of promotion, while medium firms preferred the cost advantage strategy. Small, niche firms targeting their operations at small groups of customers declared innovation in products as the main instrument of competition with their larger rivals.

In 2005-2007, the research on changes in the business model of Polish firms facing the accession of Poland to the EU was conducted (Gołębiowski et al., 2008). A sample of 133 Polish firms from food, clothing, machinery, and transportation--forwarding-logistic sectors had been researched. A part of the research involved an attempt to specify the significance of tangible and intangible resources of firms and changes in the competitive position of Polish firms in relation to those resources

(Lewandowska and Kowalik 2007). The most important intangible resources indicated were the following: a rate of firm adjustment to changes in the market, education of managers, knowledge about customers, their needs and behaviour, knowledge of legal regulations and IT systems supporting management, as well as certificates held. The research indicated that after Poland's accession to the European Union, the significance of all intangible resources increased. The largest significance was ascribed to knowledge of legal regulations, customer knowledge, brand reputation, certificates, educated staff and intensity of training. The research ended with the conclusion that firms that operate on the Polish market improved their market knowledge and the level of staff's education. They are aware of the significance of knowledge for their potential competitiveness. This led to belief that Polish enterprises had already started to achieve advantages from investing in intangible resources and that the process would be continuing and contributing to the improvement of their competitiveness on the European Union market.

4.2. Marketing resources and recommended business models for Polish firms

The review of empirical researches on sources of competitive advantage of Polish firms facing foreign competition on local and international markets show that the marketing resources are commonly perceived as very important sources of the firms' potential advantage. The marketing intellectual capital, consisting of the marketing information system, marketing knowledge, skills etc., has been put on the top of the lists of success factors. Additionally, marketing resources, such as brand and company image, relationships in the supply chain and distribution channels, as well as privileged relationships with customers are appreciated and broadly mentioned as sources of competitive advantage and instruments of successful competition on local and international markets. However, the conclusion from the review also suggests that Polish firms are relatively weaker when compared with their foreign rivals both on the Polish and European markets. The weakness concerns, first of all, the marketing resources of these firms and their R&D potential. Having this limitation in mind, Polish firms concentrate their activities on building their competitive advantage on the low costs basis (Pierścionek and Jurek-Stępień, 2006). Nevertheless, the perspective is not very promising now because the cost advantage of Polish firms is decreasing. The traditional, location-based sources of advantage on the European markets disappear as a result of the expansion of firms from other "inexpensive" countries and *offshoring* enabling West European firms to reduce costs by cooperating with cheaper partners from Far East countries.

In that situation the solution for Polish firms is to find their competitive advantage on differentiation of customer value offers and to make precise selection of targeted market, which requires knowledge about customers' characteristics and their needs and demands. This is the condition for providing superior value to the most attractive customers for a firm i.e. for creating the competitive advantage of the firm over its competitors on the local and international market. Building advantage based on customer value differentiation needs substantial development of the marketing resources of Polish firms, first of all – their marketing intellectual capital which is responsible for creating other marketing resources, such as brand or firm image, customer relationships or relationships in the supply chain and distribution channels. This should also lead to reconfiguration of the value chain or business models of Polish firms allowing them to create value for their customers and for the firms themselves.

The traditional business model, mainly implemented by Polish firms, is the model of the Integrator – a firm that carries on all activities of the value chain, beginning from the material resources supply and finishing with after – sale customer service. In the era of globalisation, the model is not efficient anymore, especially when it comes to competition on the international scale. It is so because the Integrator model requires developing resources in all fields – both R&D, technology, manufacturing, finance, logistic and marketing as well. It is difficult to have them all distinctive – nobody is perfect in everything. The problem is that Polish firms managers still believe it is possible and may lead to success on the international market. The managers are reluctant to use new forms of competition e.g. strategic alliances, fusions or acquisition of firms, to get access to distinctive resources of other domestic or foreign firms and to defend their position against foreign competitors or to solve common and difficult restructuring problems (Gierszewska, 1997). This is even more visible when the international activity of Polish firms is concerned. The research carried out in 1995 indicated that the fundamental strategy for entering foreign markets by firms with Polish capital was based on traditional modes of entry such as direct and indirect export. Moreover, the research conducted in the year 2000 (Gorynia, 2002) showed again that Polish companies had still been preferring export, without much interest in such methods of expanding into the EU markets as *joint-ventures*, direct investments, licenses, *franchising* or strategic alliances. Similar results were received in later research on modes of entry of Polish firms (Mikołajczyk, 2005; Gołębiowski and Witek-Hajduk, 2007), though the research conducted in 2004 (Gorynia, 2005) resulted in discovering that different forms of cooperation were possible but only on the domestic market and they depended strongly on a sector a firm belonged to. The lack of the international market orientation was prevailing there.

The Operator model is another business model which has been recently implemented by many Polish firms facing foreign competition on the European markets. The Operator is a specialised firm that may be a part of a widespread value network of firms operating in the international or global market. The relatively scarce resources of Polish firms justify focusing activities on selected operations within the value chain.

Therefore, the Operator model is a business model that is most frequently recommended for Polish firms (Gołębiowski, 2007). Specialisation of a firm within a network allows it to gain benefits from the economy of scale and/or the effect of experience. The advantages from the scale of operations or strengths achieved through specialisation make it possible to differentiate the customer value offer and may be used to reinforce the bidding strength in relationships with business partners in the value chain leading for higher profits (value for firm). However, the efficiency of the Operator model depends on activities conducted by the firm. To get essential share in the value created by the value network, the Operator should engage in carrying on activities important for the superiority of value delivered to customers. Such activities should be beneficial for customers because of the cost advantage achieved or differentiation of the offered value. The problem with effectiveness of the Operator model for Polish firms arises from their lack of innovativeness and marketing knowledge and resources necessary for conducting above mentioned activities. Low innovative capacity limits the possibility of independent implementation of radical innovations by Polish firms, so the cooperation with foreign partners appears indispensable in form of a joint innovative project or transfer of innovations within cooperative relationships (e.g. purchase of licenses, joining a franchise system, subcontracting). The cooperative relationships may also contribute to strengthening the marketing resources and competences of Polish firms enabling them successful co-petition on the European markets (Gołębiowski, 2007).

The necessity of cooperation with domestic and foreign firms seems to be appreciated by managers of Polish firms nowadays. The research on forms of competition implemented by Polish firms (conducted in 2004) showed that the attitude of Polish firms had been changing – initially it was rivalry with foreign firms, which changed with time into cooperation strategies and searching for niches. Cooperative relationships, both with domestic and foreign partners, have become an important element of Polish firms' strategies, although cooperation with other domestic companies is preferred. It is predicted that in the future, cooperative relationships will grow in significance; however, there will be diversification within particular industries of the Polish economy (Gorynia, 2005).

As it was mentioned above, searching for niches is one of the available strategies for Polish firms. Relatively scarce resources of many Polish firms competing with stronger foreign rivals on domestic and international markets should incline them for searching market niches on the European or global market. The problem is whether Polish firms dispose the right resources to be successful in penetrating the international or global niches. Theoretically, concentration of the scarce resources on small but attractive segments of the market should ensure higher efficiency of their deployment than in case of diffusing them between too many sectors or markets (Gołębiowski, 2007). However, a problem arises – serving niches needs precise knowledge of specific needs and expectations of targeted customers and investments in a distribution system, brand image and advertisement spending on the international scale. The above is particularly confirmed by the case of the so called *born global* firms that are able to implement the niche strategy on the global scale within several years. The research on *born global* firm strategies show that the core competencies, distinctive for *born global* firms, include marketing competencies (Szulce and Florek, 2008). The *born globals* must cover high expenses on global marketing activities and be extremely flexible in adjustment to global environment changes. They need detailed marketing research, global segmentation, direct marketing, widespread relationships with local partners in the supply chain and in multi-channel distribution systems, innovative global media communication (i.e. Internet), as well as global brands with consistent global image. The above list of resources indispensible for a *born global* firm let us expect that there are not many widely known examples of that kind of firms in Poland.

The distinctive marketing resources and competencies are also characteristic for the firms implementing the business model of the Conductor. The Conductor is an opposite model to the model of the Integrator. The Conductor is a firm which may not engage in any of the material, primary activities of manufacturing and delivering goods and/or services to targeted customers. The Conductor is a firm which creates and manages a widespread integrated value network of firms conducting the primary activities necessary to produce and deliver products to the targeted customers (i.e. the marketing network). The Conductor is responsible for selecting target customers, defining the value offer for them, developing the value by coordinating activities of the firms in the value network and communicating the offered value to the customers, having the feedback from monitoring their satisfaction after sale. The Conductor model may be implemented on the local or international scale. The model is well--suited for firms with scarce technological, production or logistic resources. Opposite to *born global* firms, it allows for gradual internationalisation of firms' activity based on marketing knowledge gathered from past experience. The model of the Conductor is widely implemented by Polish firms from clothing industry outsourcing their primary activities to Far East and selling their goods with self-established brands on the CEE and WE markets. The success factors of these firms include their marketing resources, especially the intellectual marketing capital, privileged relationships with partners in the supply chain and distribution channels, as well as with customers. They invest heavily in information technology (IT) supporting supply chain management and customer relationship management (CRM). They have created strong brands valued by targeted customers on the domestic market and abroad along with good reputation among its globally dispersed market partners. The last allows them for marketing knowledge sharing, which leads for upgrading the marketing intellectual capital of these firms and their further internationalisation.

Conclusions

The review of the empirical research on sources of competitive advantage of Polish firms on domestic and international markets confirms the commonly known fact that the dominant position on CEE markets is held by multinational corporations (MNCs) competing on the global or pan-European scale (Palivoda, Marinova 2007; Schuh, 2007). They owe their competitive advantage not only to their marketing intellectual capital, but also to technological or manufacturing competencies that allow them to offer technologically advanced, high quality products at relatively low prices. They frequently achieve this thanks to an adequate, global configuration of the value chain, based on outsourcing of operations that have a low impact on the value perceived by the customer, making it possible to reduce costs, and consequently to increase value for the firm. These companies usually have the marketing resources created in the past (i.e. globally or internationally recognised brands or relationships within distribution channels). These resources allow them to create mass markets for products perceived in CEE markets as luxury goods, which deliver added value to customers thanks to emotional, social or psychological benefits connected with the international or global brands. The relationships within distribution channels allow them to ensure superior customer service by delivering services preceding, accompanying and following sales. As a result, wherever it is possible to standardise the value offer for large segments of the European market, the chance to build competitive advantage for relatively small or medium-sized companies from CEE countries, making their first steps in international marketing, is negligible. It appears only where the markets are fragmented, which brings about the need to adapt the offer to the diversified needs and expectations of the customers, where it is possible to create new brands corresponding to previously unrecognised needs, tastes, preferences or lifestyles. As the phenomenon of market fragmentation is developing in parallel with the process of market globalisation, the competitive space for firms from Central and Eastern Europe is not limited. However, in order to exist in this space, the firms in question have to develop their marketing intellectual capital, allowing them to recognise the diversified needs and expectations of customers correctly, to make innovations in value for the customers, to develop that value using the firm's own resources and those of its partners within the supply system and distribution channels, to communicate the value with brands created autonomously, by effective marketing communication operations, as well as to monitor customer satisfaction with the value obtained and react flexibly to the changing needs and expectations of the customers in the CEE markets. Therefore, the chance to build the competitive advantage in these markets by CEE companies depends on the successful creation of their marketing intellectual capital and marketing resources, which will allow them to create and deliver value to customers in these markets. The marketing intellectual capital should comprise an international marketing information system and a database about customers in the CEE markets, as well as marketing knowledge and related skills, capabilities and competencies resulting from experience in defining, developing and communicating value for customers in these markets. This also requires creation of adequate marketing resources, i.e. privileged intra- and interorganisational relationships, including relationships with local partners (consulting, research, advertising companies and intermediaries in distribution channels), as well as with the customers in CEE markets, by brands and firm image that they can recognise and value. The way to obtain competitive advantage for firms in Central and Eastern Europe is therefore open, provided that they appreciate the significance of the marketing intellectual capital and marketing resources in the process of building the competitive advantage in question.

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