

Business competitiveness in the handicraft sector. Case study of San Antonino Castillo Velasco, Oaxaca

La competitividad empresarial en el sector artesanal. Estudio de caso de San Antonino Castillo Velasco, Oaxaca

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Abstract

The artisanal sector represents a means of subsistence for a large number of families worldwide, mainly in marginalized indigenous communities. The companies belonging to this sector produce and market products that transmit the culture and identity of their communities. Oaxaca is a state of the Mexican Republic rich in cultural diversity where the artisanal sector is extremely important for its economy, artisanal companies have had to adapt to the new conditions of a globalized market, making use of different tools and strategies that enhance their competitiveness. This article aims to describe the triggering elements of the competitiveness of the artisan sector of San Antonino Castillo Velasco, Oaxaca, Mexico, a community recognized for its production of textiles and artisan embroidery, the methodology is based on a documentary analysis of different theoretical models contrasted with an ethnographic study based on observation and unstructured interviews within its specific reality.

Competitiveness, Communities, Artisanal

Resumen

El sector artesanal representa un medio de subsistencia para una gran cantidad de familias a nivel mundial, principalmente en comunidades indígenas marginadas, las empresas pertenecientes a este sector elaboran y comercializan en el mercado productos que transmiten la cultura e identidad de sus comunidades. Oaxaca es un estado de la República Mexicana rico en diversidad cultural donde el sector artesanal es de suma relevancia para su economía, las empresas artesanales han tenido que adaptarse a las nuevas condiciones de un mercado globalizado, haciendo uso de diferentes herramientas y estrategias que potencialicen su competitividad. Este artículo tiene por objetivo describir los elementos detonantes de la competitividad del sector artesanal de San Antonino Castillo Velasco, Oaxaca, México, comunidad reconocida por su producción de textiles y bordados artesanales, la metodología se basa en un análisis documental de diferentes modelos teóricos contrastado con un estudio etnográfico basado en la observación y entrevistas no estructuradas dentro de su realidad específica.

Competitividad, Comunidades, Artesanías

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Introduction

In a globalised world that is constantly changing, with great technological advances that have resulted in various support tools for business management, competitiveness has become an extremely indispensable element for companies to ensure their permanence and increase their positioning in highly competitive markets, not only in a local environment, but also at a global level. Regardless of the line of business, characteristics or typology of the business, it cannot be overlooked that competitiveness represents a multifactorial set of factors to promote economic growth and market participation.

There are certain relevant economic sectors in the regions that require studies to understand and analyse those factors that affect their levels of competitiveness; in Mexico and especially in Oaxaca, the handicraft sector is highly relevant. The competitiveness of the handicraft sector derives from the satisfaction of the tourist customer (national or foreign) through the adaptation of products to their needs, offered at a reasonable price and promoted through efficient communication strategies (Diaz Pichardo, *et al.*, 2017).

In Mexico, according to the National Household Income Survey (ENIGH) of 2018, the number of people dedicated to the production and sale of handicrafts who depend economically on this activity amounts to 1,118,232 individuals (Fondo Nacional para el Fomento de las Artesanías, 2020 [FONART]). These data highlight the fact that the handicraft sector in the country is of utmost importance for the national economy.

The production of handicrafts symbolises a family economic activity of great relevance and importance, mainly in rural areas, since for these families it often represents the main source of income, which has sustained generations. Creating handicrafts is a process that is linked to various categories of human development: culture, economy, social development, education, even science, this activity is seen as "art" but it is also considered a "business" which must maintain and preserve standards of efficiency, quality, innovation, among many other factors to make it competitive and achieve a place in the market (Hernández, *et al.*, 2002).

In Oaxaca, according to the State Development Plan 2016-2022, one of the main strategic sectors of its economy is the handicraft business (Government of the State of Oaxaca, 2016 [GEO]), however, as mentioned in the Strategic Sectoral Plan to Boost the Economy, there is little information on this sector in a macroeconomic environment which makes it difficult to identify, characterise and quantify producers and handicraft products (GEO, 2016). It is in this state where a great diversity of communities are recognised by the large number of artisan enterprises dedicated to the production of handicrafts based on clay, textiles, wood and other elements, 95% of which are considered micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) family businesses (Diaz Pichardo, *et al.*, 2017).

Although the production and marketing of handicrafts is one of the main economic activities in the state, it also presents a wide range of problems, starting with misinformation about the sector, low levels of production due to the time invested, difficulties in the distribution and marketing of products, complications in obtaining inputs or raw materials, among many other problems that have a direct impact on the competitiveness levels of the sector (Rojas, *et al.*, 2017).

Although handicrafts are elements recognised in Oaxaca by the state and the market as relevant economic products, in no area are efficient and substantial alternatives generated that combat the existing inequalities between the artisans of a territory, which are developed in a free market economic model. San Antonino Castillo Velasco is a municipality in Oaxaca where the commercialisation of handicrafts is one of the main economic activities, recognised for its embroidery and textiles. However, it is also a territory where inequalities are observed in terms of the competitive levels of the companies belonging to this sector.

Competitiveness and business competitiveness

When talking about competitiveness, one could think directly of companies, however, it is measured and used in the same way in other sectors and with other agents such as territories such as countries, states or regions, or even with professionals or activities.

De la Dehesa (2009) mentions that the word competitiveness originated in the business world and has now evolved to such an extent that it is no longer only used by entrepreneurs, highlighting its use in the political world due to its relationship with the economic factors and variables involved.

National competitiveness is so important that in Mexico there is an organisation in charge of carrying out various studies on the levels of territorial competitiveness called the Mexican Institute of Competitiveness (IMCO), which generates various indices with multiple variables to determine internal and external national competitiveness.

Competitiveness is directly linked to economic growth, which is why a country can be considered competitive or not, depending on the increase in the production of its companies and the improvement in the quality of life of its society (Medeiros, *et al.*, 2019).

In this way, competitiveness is directly and indirectly linked to a myriad of variables at different scales such as: growth, development, sustainability, quality of life, income, innovation, production, among many others, resulting in strategies that allow the creation of advantages of an actor over its competition.

Over time, the term competitiveness has been discussed by a large number of authors and organisations, including Michael Porter, who was the first to structure and systematise a theoretical approach to the concept, relating it to the human factor and productivity for market participation, on the other hand, authors from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) take into consideration public policies as elements that trigger competitiveness, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) highlights the relevance of business management within what it calls structural competitiveness (Suñol, 2006).

Thus, within the theoretical baggage of competitiveness we find different terms and concepts such as territorial competitiveness, business competitiveness, structural competitiveness, to mention a few, and in turn different models, approaches and units that enable its analysis and measurement.

Business competitiveness is conceptualised as the set of business capabilities that enable the creation and implementation of competitive strategies to maintain or increase market shares and ensure certain business sustainability (Medeiros, *et al.*, 2019).

Competitiveness is an indispensable element for companies in their development within the markets; those that are not interested in increasing their competitiveness will run the risk of falling behind or even disappearing, given that nowadays the range of competitors in any commercial sector is highly elevated, promoting an endless number of offers to consumers.

Hence, the terms competition and competitiveness maintain a relationship generated from the unification and breadth of markets, even at a global level, highlighting that when barriers between countries and companies are overcome, competitiveness becomes essential for survival (De la Dehesa, 2009).

Globalisation, information and communication technologies (ICTs), e-commerce, social networks, generational habits, even the global pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus, have forced companies to establish mechanisms to stay in the market and to face not only their local competitors, but also competitors of a higher level, since today it is common to acquire products from other countries without as much complexity as in the past.

Business competitiveness depends on internal factors such as organisation and production capacity, but also on countless external factors within various environments such as political, social, technological, among others, the ability to compete will determine the creation of wealth and economic growth, promoting employment and raising the quality of life. (Rubio y Baz, 2015).

Business competitiveness becomes a multidimensional element where two important procedures converge: on the one hand, it is necessary to establish optimal processes for managing resources and taking advantage of strengths, and on the other hand, it is extremely important to know and identify what is happening abroad in order to generate growth opportunities.

Companies become competitive when they manage to combine various factors, for example, educational level, business culture, infrastructure, level of market sophistication, environment, among others (Ibarra, González, and Demuner 2017).

Entrepreneurs must be aware of what is happening inside and outside their organisation in order to design and execute the most effective strategies to achieve and maximise the best results, and competitiveness is also related to the ability to adapt to change.

Carrasco, *et al.*, (2021) mentions that business competitiveness depends on three main levels: the first is the competitiveness of the country where it is developed, involving variables such as macroeconomic stability, openness and access to markets and the complexity of regulation for companies; the second level refers to the infrastructure that is available and the third focuses on those resources and internal capabilities of companies.

Several authors agree that competitiveness depends on internal and external factors, both of which are equally important for consideration in the design and strategic planning to maintain an active participation in the markets.

Competitiveness models

As mentioned above, there have been several authors and organisations who have discussed competitiveness theoretically, proposing approaches, systems and concepts that are important for its understanding. In this section, different models are analysed in order to understand their similarities and differences.

The first model is the one proposed by the competitiveness pioneer Michael Porter, which focuses on understanding that business results depend, to a large extent, on two main factors: the characteristics of the environment in which they develop and the ability of each business to adapt to this environment and manage it efficiently (Pérez and Polis 2011).

In order to talk about competitiveness, it is important that entrepreneurs develop a deep internal and external analysis that allows them to determine their strengths and weaknesses for the operation and the opportunities and threats that enable growth and development.

Porter's Expanded Competitiveness Model" or also called "Porter's Five Forces", is a management tool applicable to any industry that allows the development of an external analysis through a study of the industry or sector to which the business activity belongs (Pérez and Polis 2011).

This model seeks to investigate the role of companies in the industry in which they operate by analysing the relationships between various actors that interrelate to achieve certain objectives in the market. Undoubtedly, Porter is an important benchmark for competitiveness and his work contributes to any economic sector, through his scheme he aims to clarify five elements that must be considered for the generation of the so-called "competitive advantage".

To visualise Porter's model graphically, see the following figure:



Figure 1 Porter's Five Forces Model

Source: Adapted from Porter's Five Forces Competitiveness Model, (Pérez and Polis, 2011)

Porter's Five Forces" is a model that allows determining the current position of companies in order to select the most appropriate strategies.

These five forces mainly define prices, costs and investment requirements. Through its analysis it is deduced that rivalry between competitors is influenced by four elements: threat of entry of new competitors, threat of possible substitute products, bargaining power with suppliers, bargaining power of customers that combined lead to the fifth force, which is the rivalry between existing competitors (Perez and Polis 2011).

This model disaggregates each of the forces and elements into variables to be considered in order to foster a more comprehensive analysis for businesses and thus determine their position in the market.

In 1999 Vargas presented Bueno Campos' proposal on the competitive forces of the market, regrouping Porter's model together with the introduction of two more forces that were possibly omitted in the model that precedes it, in such a way that it generates three categories: current competition, potential competition and bargaining power of the agents (Benítez-Codas, 2012).

The aforementioned model is more extensive and complex on the basis of Porter's Five Forces, its purpose is to facilitate a SWOT analysis for those organisations or sectors where it is taken up and applied.:

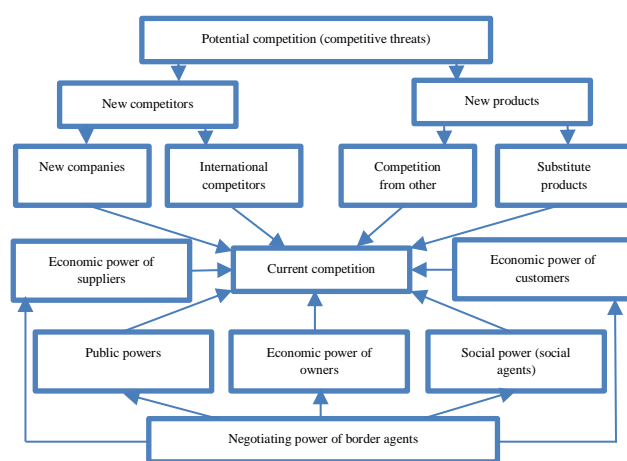


Figure 2 Bueno Campos' 10 Forces Model

Source: Adapted from *Evolution of the concept of competitiveness*, (Benítez-Codas, 2012, p.77)

The so-called "boundary agents" represent both economic and social actors that are part of the competitive environment of a company and that can exert power or influence the ability to compete, which is why the process of negotiation with them is necessary (Benítez-Codas, 2012).

In this model, public relations are highlighted and it is recognised that some external agents can have an impact on business growth and, above all, support the competitive capacity of companies. It is interesting to understand the author's vision through his categorisation and how the elements of his model are interconnected at a point in the current and real competition of companies.

In 1993, during a period of stable growth with markets dominated by large companies as a result of re-engineering and mergers, small players begin to appear and compete for lucrative segments, which leads Treacy and Wiersema to study these phenomena through a theory that concludes with the existence of "value disciplines" (Benítez-Codas, 2012).

For these authors, competitiveness is linked to another concept, "value", which was also taken by Porter, since his theory focused on adding value to products and customers through competitive strategies.

Value in business provides tools and strategies to position itself in the markets and expand its growth, in this sense the concept of innovation begins to be linked to competitiveness.

Treacy and Wiersema's (1993) model is based on three dimensions: customer intimacy, operational excellence and product leadership. See Figure 3.



Figure 3 Model based on the Treacy and Wiersema theory of value disciplines

Source: Adapted from *Evolution of the concept of competitiveness*, (Benítez-Codas, 2012, p.79)

Operational excellence or also called "the formula" consists of the fusion of quality, price and ease of procurement achieving full customer satisfaction at a fair and acceptable cost by optimising resources (Neira-Guevara, 2022).

As mentioned above, competitiveness is directly linked to productivity, which entails optimisation of production processes and adequate use of resources, which is why the authors call it "the formula", as it is through it that a customer-company relationship will be fostered through the sale of its products and its competitive positioning.

The next element called product leadership is also known as "talent" which seeks to place the company in the best market position against its competitors by making use of innovation, problem solving and initiative for new and improved products (Neira-Guevara, 2022).

Leadership implies influencing, directing, guiding, in this sense everything is applicable from the company that seeks its competitive strategy towards its competitors, avoiding as much as possible to be the follower of the new initiatives or products launched by other organisations and taking the direction to be the one that marks the starting points.

The last element represents knowing the customer, also known as "the solution" to fully meet the expectations and needs of consumers, in order to build long-term loyalty (Neira-Guevara, 2022).

Customers represent to a large extent the survival of a company, since without them companies cannot position or sell their products and therefore would not be able to obtain income.

This model brings together three factors that, although they may seem contrary when viewed as a whole, promote competitive companies that optimise resources, promote quality and relevance to their customers through innovative products and services (Neira-Guevara, 2022).

The last model to be analysed is based on the blue ocean strategy proposed by W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne (2005) who mention that for business management it is necessary to understand that its universe is made up of two different types of spaces where it can develop: red and blue oceans. See figure below:

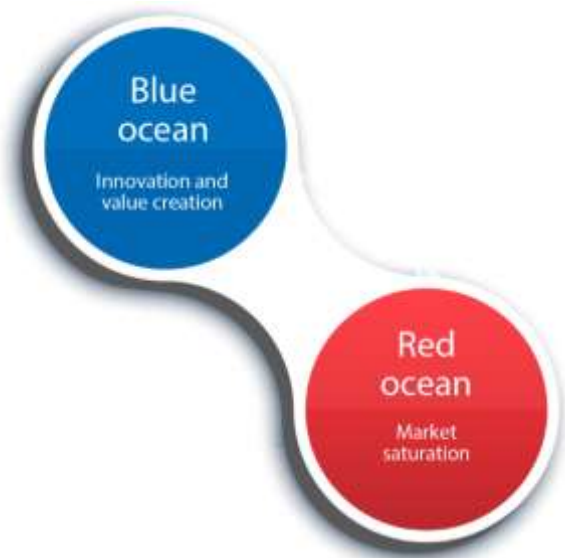


Figure 4 Model based on the blue oceans theory
Source: Adapted from *Evolution of the concept of competitiveness*, (Benítez-Codas, 2012, p.80)

In the year 2000, market saturation was once again perceived and it is because of this that Kim and Mauborgne analysed the "Cirque du Soleil" and formulated the blue oceans theory, which in contrast to Porter, who focuses on the creation of competitiveness strategies with traditional operations, this theory seeks the incursion of new markets through the innovation of products and services, generating value for customers (Benítez-Codas, 2012).

The theory of blue oceans seeks and pursues constant innovation as part of the operation, abandoning saturated markets where there is even unfair competition and opening new niches where new products or services are positioned to meet the needs in a different way.

The red oceans symbolise the sectors that currently exist, i.e. the already known markets, in them the limits are clearly identified and the rules to encourage competitiveness are understood, in these oceans companies seek to achieve a position of advantage over their rivals to increase their share of the existing demand, as soon as more competitors appear in the same market, the profits and growth of the companies decrease (Kim and Mauborgne, 2005).

It is of utmost importance to highlight that in comparison with the state, which reports 60.4 % of the Economically Active Population (EAP) (INEGI, 2022), the municipality has a higher indicator of 72.3 % of the EAP (HACSACV, 2022), positioning itself above the state average with 11.9 percentage points.

Taking as a reference the data from INEGI's National Statistical Directory of Economic Units 2019, 452 commercial establishments were identified in San Antonino Castillo Velasco with 106 different economic activities, of which fifteen are dedicated to the activity of clothing, embroidery and weaving of textile products, representing 3.31 % of the total (HACSACV, 2022).

However, according to the census carried out by the Artisans' Committee of the municipality, there are approximately 160 textile artisans and around 30 workshops, which shows that the national censuses do not reflect the correct information regarding these aspects.

For many years, mainly the women of the community, have promoted for generations the art of a unique style of embroidery in the state, producing mainly blouses that are currently internationally recognised, this being their typical product that gives them identity (HACSACV, 2022). See Figure 6.



Figure 6 Blouse with embroidery by San Antonino Castillo Velasco

Source: Adapted from the *Municipal Plan for Sustainable Development of San Antonino Castillo Velasco 2022-2024*, (HACSACV, 2022, p.115)

Method

The approach of this research is qualitative and ethnographic, using the techniques of participant observation and unstructured interviews derived from constant visits to the community, under the premise of obtaining natural and fluid information without any type of alteration or deviation, which allowed us to identify the information necessary to understand the elements that trigger competitiveness in the artisanal sector of San Antonino Castillo Velasco, Oaxaca.

Through documentary research, support was provided on the dimensions, categories and promoting elements of business competitiveness, comparing and discussing different theoretical models and thus contrasting theory and practice in the community under study.

The research is descriptive-explanatory in nature as it seeks to identify the elements that promote the different levels of competitiveness of the artisan sector in San Antonino Castillo Velasco, Oaxaca, Mexico.

It is non-experimental in nature, since by observing the reality in its own context, the categories of the study are not manipulated in any way, and specifically has a cross-sectional design, since the data collection was carried out at a specific moment in time.

Results

After making several diagnostic visits to the municipality, it was observed that the handicraft businesses are very varied in terms of their presentation, size and other physical characteristics that could affect the approach of customers and therefore their level of competitiveness.

From those that only have a printed or painted advertisement, to those that allow the visualisation of some of the products, to a few very colourful and large ones in the main streets of the community. In interviews with municipal authorities, it was mentioned that there are some artisans who sell their products on public streets and that some of them go to the "Baratillo" on Fridays to offer their handicrafts, regardless of whether or not they have a physical establishment.

The following figures show certain physical differences between the artisan enterprises in San Antonino Castillo Velasco, Oaxaca.



Figure 7 Artisanal enterprise

Source: Own photograph taken during the diagnostic visit on 11 April 2023



Figura 8 Craft enterprise "Atenas".

Source: Own photograph taken during the diagnostic visit on 11 April 2023



Figura 9 Vicky" Handicrafts

Source: Artesanías "Vicky" Bordados De San Antonino Castillo Velasco (2021)

The inequalities between the businesses belonging to the handicraft sector can be visualised graphically in the previous figures, inferring an impact on the customer intimacy dimension of Treacy and Wiersema's (1993) theoretical model of competitiveness.

These disparities reflect variations in brand management, corporate image and identity, and marketing; while in some businesses the customer can see the products from the outside, in others they cannot even imagine the creativity of the crafts on offer.

The interviews conducted with some outstanding artisans in the community revealed elements such as: training for the development of competencies (knowledge, skills and attitudes) in business administration and marketing; the use of social networks and digital sales platforms; the design, management and registration of a brand; participation in fairs and events outside the locality; the application for support from government bodies such as FONART and innovation for product diversification are elements that trigger the so-called competitive advantages according to Michael Porter.

These elements have enabled some companies in the handicraft sector in San Antonino Castillo Velasco Oaxaca to enter not only local but also international markets, exporting their products to countries such as the United States and Japan, increasing their sales, positioning themselves in social networks by using content marketing, increasing their levels of competitiveness compared to other companies in the same sector that do not use these tools and strategies, in contrast to the theoretical dimension of product leadership in Treacy and Wiersema's model (1993).

Some artisans mention that it was as a result of the pandemic that the community experienced a decrease in the number of tourists (who are their main clients), which gave them an impulse to promote their products through social networks, although some businesses maintain constancy and high levels of response in their networks, while others only consider these elements as part of a "fad".

Undoubtedly, knowledge and its application has led some handicraft businesses to increase their competitiveness to face globalisation, they recognise that it is necessary to generate changes in their processes and products to maintain a place in the market. Innovation is an issue to be highlighted by the artisans, who mention that it is through innovation that they adapt their products to the needs of an increasingly demanding client and with different expectations, validating the blue oceans model, derived from the fact that few artisan businesses in the locality have opened new markets by promoting innovative products. See Figure 10.



Figure 10 Key rings with embroidery from San Antonino Castillo Velasco, Oaxaca, Mexico
Source: *Aguja de Plata* (2021)

On the other hand, they have identified that production times are decisive for their sales volume and income generation, as some individual garments or products take 6 to 12 months to produce per unit, which is why part of the artisan sector in San Antonino Castillo Velasco, Oaxaca, have decided to work collaboratively, making use of the division of labour, optimising resources, reducing time and increasing their productivity, which in turn has a direct impact on increasing their competitiveness, highlighting the operational excellence of the model of the three disciplines of value.

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Conclusions

The handicraft sector of San Antonino Castillo Velasco Oaxaca, presents inequalities in the form of management of its constituent companies, with repercussions in different levels and manifestations of its competitiveness.

Theoretical and practical contrasts show that internal factors such as business strategy, resource management and the use of communication have a direct impact on competitiveness, as does the analysis of external environments such as the political environment, which provides government funding programmes for the sector, or the technological environment, which provides different tools for business use and which represent opportunities for growth and expansion.

An indisputable element of transcendence within the results of this research was innovation as a mechanism to open markets, to update to the trends and needs of clients and to the understanding of globalisation processes by the handicraft sector of San Antonino Castillo Velasco, Oaxaca.

With regard to the four theoretical models reviewed in this research, the most outstanding with respect to the data obtained are the relationship between practice and the value disciplines model by Treacy and Wiersema (1993) and the blue ocean theory model by Kim and Mauborgne (2005).

It is recommended to carry out more in-depth analysis projects on the Treacy and Wiersema (1993) model, due to the particularities it presents in its dimensions and which may be friendlier to the treatment of businesses belonging to the artisanal sector in order to understand in depth their form of operation, the strategies they implement and their business-customer relationship.

In the same way and equally important, it is suggested to analyse innovation practices and their repercussions on competitiveness and other factors of handicraft businesses, starting from the updating of products that are the result of unique and unrepeatable creative processes.

Finally, it should be noted that the qualitative analysis shows that the handicraft businesses in San Antonino Castillo Velasco, Oaxaca, maintain unequal levels of competitiveness due to various internal and external factors.

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