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Competitor Intelligence Profiling Framework for Shipping Industry¹

Anastasios-Nikolaos Kanellopoulos²

Abstract

This study introduces a conceptual Competitor Intelligence profiling framework aimed at enhancing strategic decision-making for Shipping companies operating in a dynamic and highly competitive global market. With the Shipping industry increasingly influenced by globalization, technological advancements, and fluctuating economic conditions, companies must adopt a proactive approach to gain insights into competitors' strategies, capabilities, and market positioning. The proposed framework guides companies through four key steps: identifying competitors' current strategies and capabilities, analyzing micro and macro environmental factors, forecasting future trends, and benchmarking against technological innovators. By applying this framework, Shipping companies can improve their ability to anticipate market shifts, identify potential growth opportunities, and make informed strategic decisions that foster long-term competitiveness. This approach provides a structured and comprehensive methodology for competitor analysis in the Shipping industry, helping companies navigate the complexities of a fast-evolving business landscape. The study emphasizes the critical role of competitive intelligence in sustaining a competitive edge in the sector.

Keywords: Competitor Intelligence, Intelligence Profiling Framework, Shipping Industry.

Introduction

This paper explores the evolving field of Competitor Intelligence (CI) within the Shipping industry, with a focus on the development of a new CI profiling framework for Shipping companies. The Shipping industry, integral to global trade and supply chains, faces increasing pressure from globalization, rapid technological advancements, and fluctuating economic conditions. As highlighted by scholars like Stopford (2008) and Lorange (2009), these forces have transformed the competitive environment, intensifying competition among companies operating within this sector. This growing complexity necessitates the need for companies to adopt advanced tools and frameworks to gain a competitive edge.

One such tool is CI, which enables companies to systematically gather, analyze, and apply information about their competitors to improve decision-making. Comai (2016) and Gelb and Zinkhan (1985) provide key definitions of CI, emphasizing its role as a structured process for collecting and utilizing intelligence about competitors' strategies, weaknesses, and future actions.

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Building upon these ideas, Porter (1980) defined CI as a system designed to catalog and analyze competitors' activities and market positioning, offering companies insights that allow for better strategic planning. However, as competition becomes more dynamic and technology-driven, there is a growing need for new frameworks that go beyond traditional CI methods.

The objective of this paper is to synthesize the existing literature on CI in the Shipping industry, highlighting gaps and proposing a conceptual framework for competitor profiling. This framework aims to address the complexities of the modern Shipping industry by integrating elements of strategic analysis, environmental scanning, technological innovation benchmarking, and forecasting. Through this literature review, the paper lays the groundwork for a comprehensive profiling system that can guide Shipping companies in making proactive, informed decisions that enhance their market competitiveness in an ever-changing global environment.

Shipping Environment and Competitor Intelligence

The dynamic development of the global supply chain systems and the emergence of international trade agreements between states and corporates have all contributed to a globalized Shipping industry. Stopford (2008), in his book “Maritime Economics” discusses the impact of globalization on the Shipping industry, explaining how it affects the companies’ competitiveness, through the high paced technology evolvement and the changing economic and business environment. In the same direction, Lorange (2009) argues that Shipping is a perfectly competitive part of the world economic activity and the Shipping markets are essentially undifferentiated. He also states, that even innovative parts of this sector, gradually become perfectly competitive, due to the high imitation potential from the new business entrants.

Eventually, Shipping companies are called upon to operate in a high level and increasing intensity business macroenvironmental, with aggressive competitors that search ever harder for a competitive edge. The competition is not based only on price or upgraded services, but be determined by quickening of innovation pace and frequent technological niche attacks, that create brand new sub-sectors in Shipping trading market. Hence, achieving a long-term differential strategic planning, possess emerging implication difficulties, making intelligence and specifically CI a significant tool of tackling competition.

Regarding CI a particularly interesting definition is provided from Comai (2016), who suggest that “Competitive Intelligence is a systematic process, recognized and accepted throughout the organization, for the search, selection, analysis and distribution of information about the environment in order to gain substantial competitive advance”. In addition, Gelb and Zinkhan (1985) state that CI

is a combination of defensive and offensive intelligence, that aims to learn about competitors' plans, strategies, weaknesses and opportunities. Therefore, it is not only a framework to scan and collect data, information and intelligence from the corporate environment, but it refers to the ability of adding value to companies, through the intelligence processes and analysis, that offer Competitor Intelligence to managers, assisting them in being proactive and make the right decisions (Prescott, 1999; David, 2013)

As an aspect of CI, Competitor analysis appears as the process of researching and evaluating your competitors, to gain insights into their operational strategy and tactics, as well as their strengths, weaknesses and market positioning. The goal of this analysis type is to identify opportunities, through competitors' potential business strategy and operation gaps or through acquiring imperative information and intelligence that offers a competitive advantage.

Competitor Intelligence Analysis

Competitor Intelligence Analysis is a holistic approach regarding a company competitors' positioning, in its environment. Obviously, companies need more detailed understanding on competitors' resources and capabilities, in order to achieve better market strategic engagement and protect themselves from competitive threats. Plus, Competitor Intelligence collection, management and analysis operations generate knowledge of competitors' internal company functions, based on the general company resources and external signals' overview. Michael Porter (1980) initiates the concept of Competitor Intelligence, mentioning that it is a system "organized for collecting, compiling, cataloging, digesting, analyzing and communicating competitor data". He also supports that the nature of competition is determined by the existence and intensity of five key elements, the threat of new company entrance in the same market, the power of the buyers, the power of suppliers, the threat of substitutes and the competitive rivalry in the industry.

According to Frates and Sharp (2005) CI is "frequently limited to competitor intelligence which focuses on identifying, monitoring and understanding specific current competitors". Global Intelligence Alliance (2005), states that the first among the three most important pillars of CI, is the collection and analysis of competitors' information and intelligence. Moreover, Leibowitz (2006) supports that the value creation of competitors CI, should be a business-within-business philosophy on a sustainable basis.

In the modern fast-changing business environment, companies need to adapt quickly to developments (Johnson et al, 2009; Day and Schoemaker, 2016). Due to the limitation of resources and the often, intense competition in the business sectors, they must define their priorities, a process that will also

assist CI executives to set appropriate configuration of their turnover (Ruhli and Sachs, 1997; Powell and Bradford, 2000; Piccoli and Ives, 2005). Basic priority for a high value company is the achievement of its top goals. This fact is rolled through the acquisition of economic surplus value from its activity and through the protection from any competition (Colakoglu, 2011; Gaspareniene et al., 2013).

Furthermore, companies can ultimately be guided to a comprehensive strategic planning, by bringing the diverse Business Intelligence processes, into a competitor focused CI framework (Boyer et al., 2010). CI helps in better assessment regarding the competitor's situation and the market condition (Deshpandé and Gatingon, 1994; Markovich et al., 2022). A well-structured and implemented competitor analysis allows the organization to focus on the direct competition organization, in its business environment (Yaw Adom et al., 2016). Companies that utilize CI to analyze competitors' strengths and weakness, acquire the ability to better predict markets developments and opportunities arise from them.

The process of approaching competitors through the system of three pillars (tactical, operational, strategic level), assist in a better acquisition of the knowledge and monitors the potential impacts to business strategy on a bottom-up line level (Chen, 1996; Weiss and Wright, 2006;). This methodology offers the possibility of controlling competitors, in all their involvement in the business environment, contributing to the identification of potential future partners or possible company acquisitions (Sewdass, 2012). In this way, corporate locating and analyzing competitors' strategies, weaknesses, vulnerabilities and strengths, that may formulate the future competitive business strategy (Bose, 2008). In the tactical level, the CI team monitors the environment trends that affects the competitors' decisions (Gaspareniene et al., 2013). In operational level, the monitoring is based on the competitors' business networks and the decisions they make regarding their position and development in the business environment (Du Toit, 2015; Ladipo et al., 2017; Jamal and Anwar, 2021). In the strategic level, CI framework, focuses on how competitors' decisions, networks and operational movements, will affect the company and differentiate the company image of the environment Leibowitz (2006). That's why is critical in assisting high level managers in creating competitive responses, to any potential competitor "threat" (Calof, 2017; Ansoff et al., 2018).

Finally, a special mention must be made on the issue of the company's information release to open sources. It is important for companies to apply a specific analytical and strategic filter on the information they release about their operational decisions, as it is important to protect their strategy from the collection of CI by other companies.

Competitor Profiling Procedures

Competitor profiles are a set of data that show key information for a competitor, including intelligence facts, deducted judgments and assumptions. They present an ongoing procedure of information gathering on competitors, monitoring their operational performance, daily tactical positioning and strategic decision-making. This procedure leads to a “live” industry mapping, aiming to a deep understanding of the business micro and macro environment. The goal of Competitor profiling is to identify potential areas of weakness within their strategy and operational approaches, as well as to benchmark technological innovations or business market cycle changes.

In order to identify properly its competitors a company can contact market research and industry analysis, so as to locate the companies offering similar products and services, with the same target market aims. The actual detection of the instant and principal competitors to be monitored, is a process that require market intelligence knowledge and experience. Competitors’ targeting intensity and extent proceed in accordance to the available resources and the general strategic aiming of the decision-makers.

As claimed by Porter (1980), there are four key pillars, shaping the competitors’ knowledge need for a company. These pillars include the competitors’ scope and goals, their advantages and sources, their tactical and operational environment approaches and signals and their response profile regarding actions, decisions and future plans. These information acquisition forming the current competitor profile and contributes in the prediction of its future business environment positioning.

Conceptual Competitors’ Profiling Framework in Shipping Industry

The conceptual competitors’ intelligence profiling framework provides a structured approach to understanding the competitive landscape in the Shipping industry. By systematically identifying competitors' current status, analyzing the business environment, forecasting future industry trends, and benchmarking against technological leaders, Shipping companies can develop more effective strategic responses. This framework enhances decision-making by offering a comprehensive view of market dynamics, allowing companies to anticipate challenges, seize emerging opportunities, and maintain a competitive edge in an evolving global Shipping industry.

Step 1: Identifying Competitors’ Current Status

Competitor profiling begins with a detailed assessment of competitors’ existing status within the Shipping industry. This step involves gathering intelligence on their current strategy, capabilities, and underlying assumptions. A structured evaluation can be achieved through four key elements: profiling

strategic information, assessing capabilities, conducting a SWOT analysis, and classifying competitors into strategic groups.

Firstly, profiling information on current strategy requires an in-depth analysis of competitors' market positioning, operational models, and financial stability. This includes identifying their core business segments, fleet composition, service routes, pricing strategies, and customer base. Publicly available reports, financial statements, and operational disclosures provide valuable data for this analysis. Furthermore, understanding competitors' investment patterns—such as fleet expansion, mergers and acquisitions, or technological advancements—offers insights into their long-term strategic intent.

Secondly, analyzing competitors' capabilities and assumptions enables companies to understand their strengths and limitations. Capabilities refer to tangible and intangible resources, including technological assets, human capital, operational efficiency, and financial reserves. Meanwhile, assumptions reflect competitors' perspectives on industry developments, regulatory changes, and global trade patterns. Recognizing these underlying assumptions helps in predicting their strategic moves and potential vulnerabilities.

Moreover, a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) further refines the understanding of competitors' positioning. Strengths and weaknesses focus on internal factors, such as fleet modernization, service reliability, and cost structures. Opportunities and threats derive from external factors, including market trends, regulatory shifts, and geopolitical influences. A comparative SWOT analysis helps in identifying market gaps and areas where competitive advantages can be established.

Lastly, classifying competitors into strategic groups enhances the granularity of the analysis. Strategic groups categorize competitors based on shared characteristics such as market segmentation, pricing models, or operational scale. For example, in the Shipping industry, competitors may be classified into global Shipping conglomerates, regional carriers, and niche market players. This classification assists in understanding competitive dynamics and predicting market behavior among similar entities.

Step 2: Analyzing the Current Micro and Macro Environment

A comprehensive competitor profiling framework requires an analysis of the broader business environment, encompassing both micro and macroeconomic factors. This step employs two primary tools: PEST analysis and stakeholder analysis.

The PEST (Political, Economic, Social, and Technological) analysis assesses external macroeconomic factors influencing both competitors and the industry as a whole. Political factors include international trade agreements, environmental regulations, and government policies affecting

maritime transport. Economic considerations cover global trade volumes, fuel price fluctuations, and supply chain disruptions. Social factors involve labor market dynamics, sustainability trends, and consumer preferences toward eco-friendly Shipping solutions. Technological elements focus on automation, digitalization, and emerging innovations such as blockchain-based logistics and AI-driven fleet management. By conducting a PEST analysis, companies can anticipate macroeconomic shifts that may impact competitors' operations and strategic direction.

At the microeconomic level, stakeholder analysis evaluates the influence of key actors within the Shipping industry. Stakeholders include regulatory bodies, customers, suppliers, port authorities, financial institutions, and environmental advocacy groups. Understanding competitors' relationships with these stakeholders provides insights into their market leverage, strategic alliances, and potential constraints. For instance, competitors with strong partnerships in key ports may enjoy operational efficiencies and cost advantages, while those with regulatory compliance issues may face financial penalties and reputational risks.

Step 3: Forecasting Competitors' Future Goals and Business Environment Changes

Accurately forecasting competitors' future strategic goals is crucial for proactive decision-making in the Shipping industry. This step involves two critical methodologies: general strategic forecasting and business cycle predictions.

General strategic forecasting involves analyzing competitors' investment decisions, research and development (R&D) priorities, and expansion strategies. The historical trajectory of a competitor's strategic moves often provides clues about their future direction. For example, if a competitor has consistently invested in eco-friendly vessel technology, it is likely to continue prioritizing sustainability initiatives. Forecasting models incorporate trend analysis, scenario planning, and AI-driven predictive analytics to anticipate future competitive moves.

Additionally, predicting business cycles enables firms to prepare for industry fluctuations. The Shipping industry is inherently cyclical, influenced by global trade demand, fuel price volatility, and supply chain disruptions. Competitor profiling must account for expected downturns, expansion phases, and periods of market saturation. Understanding where competitors stand in the business cycle—whether in a growth phase, consolidation, or financial distress—helps in formulating strategic responses such as market entry timing, fleet expansion, or cost-cutting measures.

Step 4: Competitor Profile Benchmarking

The final step in the conceptual competitor profiling framework involves benchmarking against industry-leading innovators. This stage ensures that a company remains competitive by comparing its capabilities with those of technological pioneers and market leaders.

Benchmarking focuses on technological innovators within the Shipping industry, assessing their adoption of advanced maritime technologies, automation, and digitalization efforts. Innovations such as autonomous vessels, AI-driven logistics management, and blockchain-based Shipping contracts are transforming the competitive landscape. By analyzing how leading competitors leverage technology, companies can identify potential areas for innovation and differentiation.

Furthermore, benchmarking includes evaluating competitors' financial performance, customer satisfaction levels, and operational efficiencies. Performance indicators such as return on investment (ROI), cost per Shipping container, and fuel efficiency ratios serve as comparative metrics. By identifying gaps between a firm's current performance and industry benchmarks, companies can adjust their strategies to enhance competitiveness.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the evolving competitive landscape of the Shipping industry, driven by globalization, technological advancements, and changing economic conditions, necessitates the adoption of more sophisticated CI frameworks. This literature review has highlighted the growing importance of CI in helping Shipping companies navigate the complexities of the market and secure a strategic advantage. By reviewing key definitions and concepts from scholars, it is evident that traditional CI methods must evolve to keep pace with the dynamic nature of the Shipping industry.

The proposed conceptual competitor intelligence profiling framework introduces a systematic approach to understanding competitors' current status, analyzing the macro and micro business environment, forecasting future goals, and benchmarking against technological innovators. This holistic framework offers Shipping companies the opportunity to better anticipate market shifts, identify opportunities, and refine their strategic decision-making. By leveraging this profiling framework, companies can enhance their ability to respond to emerging challenges and optimize their market positioning. Ultimately, this research sets the stage for further exploration of how advanced CI frameworks can help Shipping companies remain competitive in an increasingly complex and fast-paced global Shipping business environment.

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