



**FROM INTERMEDIARY RELATIONSHIP  
TO MULTIPLE RELATIONSHIPS –  
OPTION OF DEVELOPING THE NETWORK POSITION  
IN THE INTERNATIONALISATION PROCESS.  
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY  
OF A POLISH FOOD COMPANY<sup>1</sup>**

*Lukasz Małys<sup>1</sup>, Krzysztof Fonfara<sup>2</sup>*

Faculty of International Business and Economics

Poznan University of Economics and Business

<sup>1</sup> ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3078-1170>

e-mail: [lukasz.malys@ue.poznan.pl](mailto:lukasz.malys@ue.poznan.pl)

<sup>2</sup> ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0327-486X>

e-mail: [k.fonfara@ue.poznan.pl](mailto:k.fonfara@ue.poznan.pl)

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Abstract

Traditionally, the internationalisation process of a company has been analysed from the perspective of entering foreign markets. Currently, it is often analysed within the so-called network models, which take into account the importance of business relationships. The process of entry is not understood as a process of entering a foreign market, but a process of entering a network of business relationships on a foreign market. Insidership in such networks is necessary for successful internationalisation. Being an insider in the network means having a certain network position.

The aim of the paper is to identify based on a pilot study the possible way of building network position on foreign markets by Polish food companies. The paper will present a picture of one company, focusing on its operations on German market since the entry in 2006. The researched company started building network position on foreign markets by developing a strong relationship with one actor, who acted as key intermediary with the market. As a result of major change in the business environment, the company decided to revise the strategy and develop a number of weaker links with various actors. The paper presents a number of questions which raise from a pilot study and require further investigation.

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**OD RELACJI Z POŚREDNIKIEM HANDLOWYM DO RELACJI WIELORAKICH  
– OPCJA ROZWOJU POZYCJI W SIECI BIZNESOWEJ W PROCESIE  
INTERNACJONALIZACJI. BADANIA PILOTAŻOWE POLSKIEGO  
PRZEDSIĘBIORSTWA BRANŻY SPOŻYWCZEJ**

*Łukasz Małys, Krzysztof Fonfara*

Wydział Gospodarki Międzynarodowej  
Uniwersytet Ekonomiczny w Poznaniu

Słowa kluczowe: proces internacjonalizacji, pozycja w sieci, sieci biznesowe.

**Abstrakt**

Tradycyjnie proces internacjonalizacji firmy był rozpatrywany przez pryzmat wejścia (sekwencji wejść) na rynki zagraniczne. Obecnie jest często analizowany w ramach tzw. modeli sieciowych, które uwzględniają znaczenie relacji biznesowych. Zgodnie z ich założeniami proces wejścia nie jest rozumiany jako proces wchodzenia na rynek zagraniczny, ale proces wchodzenia w sieć relacji biznesowych na rynku zagranicznym. Bycie członkiem takiej sieci jest konieczne do udanej internacjonalizacji, a „członkostwo” w sieci oznacza posiadanie w niej określonej pozycji.

Celem artykułu jest identyfikacja na podstawie badania pilotażowego możliwego sposobu budowania pozycji w sieci biznesowej na rynkach zagranicznych przez polskie przedsiębiorstwa branży spożywczej. W artykule przedstawiono przypadek jednej firmy oraz jej działalności na rynku niemieckim od czasu wejścia w 2006 r. Badane przedsiębiorstwo zaczęło budować pozycję w sieci na rynku zagranicznym, rozwijając silne relacje z jednym podmiotem, który działał jako ważny pośrednik z rynkiem. W wyniku poważnej zmiany otoczenia biznesowego zdecydowało się na zmianę strategii i rozwój słabszych powiązań z różnymi podmiotami. W artykule przedstawiono wiele pytań wynikających z badania pilotażowego, które wymagają pogłębionych badań w przyszłości.

## **Introduction**

Studies conducted on the internationalisation process of companies constitute an important area of international business. Currently, intensification of globalisation processes at various levels of analysing economic and social actors – from national economies, through companies and other types of organisations, through to consumers – is observed (Kofman & Youngs, 2008; Buckley & Ghauri, 2004). In reference to companies, the share of actors with relatively small experience in international exchanges and the appearance of born globals are demonstrated (Knight & Cavusgil, 2004). International activity of small companies with small resources is also indicated (Ratten *et al.*, 2007). Understanding of stimuli initiating the internationalisation process of a company, its course and factors affecting its course as well as conditions of successful international expansion constitutes one of the key issues for both the theory as well as the practice of international business.

Traditionally, the internationalisation process of a company has been analysed from the perspective of entering (or a sequence of entries on) a foreign market. In this context, the analysis of foreign expansion forms and selection of target expansion markets, and in particular their change in time, are especially important (Fonfara, 2012). In accordance with the initial version of the Uppsala model (Johanson & Wiedersheim, 1975; Johanson & Vahlne, 1977), a company goes through certain stages in the internationalisation process. Initially, it chooses simple entry forms (indirect export). A gradual increase in expansion forms consequently leads to opening production branches on foreign markets (Dymitrowski *et al.*, 2012). Selecting target markets, a company initially decides to enter markets of countries with a low psychic distance and subsequently enters markets, which are more culturally distant. Causes for such actions result from the will to reduce risks. The initial lack of knowledge about foreign markets as well as about the expansion process itself conditions the selection of relatively simple forms of entry and markets, which are culturally similar. With the development of knowledge, risks related to foreign expansion decrease, which leads to choosing more advanced forms and markets with a higher psychic distance. Despite some criticism (Anderson, 1993; Axinn & Matthyssens, 2001), the Uppsala model, as the prototype of stage models of internationalisation, has been developed and within such developments various numbers and natures of stages in the internationalisation process of a company are presented (e.g. Cavusgil, 1980; Reid, 1981).

Currently, the internationalisation process of a company is often analysed within the so-called network models. Such models take into account the impact of the business relationships developed by a company with various actors (both local and international). At the same time, the process of entry is not understood as a process of entering a foreign market, but a process of entering a network of business relationships on a foreign market. Business relationships determine the selection of target markets, forms of entry and actions undertaken by a company (Coviello & Munro, 1997; Hohenthal *et al.*, 2014; Fonfara, 2012). In accordance with the revised version of the Uppsala model (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009), also in this approach one can distinguish certain stages within foreign activities related to the reduction of business risks. However, such risk reduction has a different nature. In the revised model, markets are considered to be networks of relationships. Insidership in such networks is necessary for successful internationalisation. Being an insider in the network means having a certain position in the network. The network position and knowledge stemming from it allow for the identification of opportunities, which may lead to decisions to increase commitment in the relationships in the foreign network. A higher degree of commitment increases learning and trust-building, which in the end strengthen the company's initial network position. Thus, internationalisation is an incremental, objective process, connected with learning and increasing

knowledge about foreign networks of business relationships, a gradual increase in commitment to foreign relationships and strengthening the network position (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009).

The position in the network of relationships changes independently of the actions undertaken by a company as a result of activities carried out on a foreign market and interactions with other actors. An interesting issue is the scope in which a company can consciously change their position in the network undertaking specific thought-through actions. Taking it into account, the goal of the paper is to identify based on a pilot study the possible way of building network position on foreign markets by Polish food companies. The intention of the authors was to diagnose the activities of the company, which was successful in the process of foreign expansion and an attempt to indicate on their basis recommendations for other companies in the food industry.

The article has the following structure. Firstly, based on available literature, interpretations of the networks of relationships occurring in the research practice will be presented. Then, the authors will provide considerations about the network position, methods of its measurement and benefits from various identified network positions. Further, the methodology of the conducted studies and their results will be presented. The paper will be completed with recommendations for further, in-depth research.

## **Interpretation of networks of business relationships**

In literature, two general interpretations of networks of business relationships can be identified – emergent business network and strategic networks. The first one assumes that business network is created as a result of interactions between independent entities (actors) building long-term relationships, with no original plan as to the network structure (Håkansson *et al.*, 2009). Two specific approaches to analysing business networks can be identified within it. The first specific approach assumes that network of self-forming business relationships, by definition, have no limits and conceives the entire market as a network of business relationships (e.g. Johanson & Mattson, 1988). The second specific approach assumes a spontaneous formation of business relationships; however, it accepts the existence of a certain boundary of a business network – a network horizon (Holmen & Pedersen, 2003; Kawa, 2017), network picture (Abrahamsen *et al.*, 2016) or network context (Anderson *et al.*, 1994).

Interpretation of the market as a network of business relationships is a dominating research concept within the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group (IMP Group). It is particularly clearly underlined in elaborations discussing the internationalisation process of a company. Johanson and Mattson (1988) demonstrated that the degree of network internationalisation (national

market or its part) is one of the factors determining the behaviour of a company in the internationalisation process. According to the authors, a high degree of network internationalisation means that between particular national networks, there are numerous strong relations. Johanson and Vahlne (2009, p. 1412) also assume that “markets are networks of relationships in which firms are linked to each other in various, complex and, to a considerable extent, invisible pattern”. This assumption is explicit and implicit for most researchers gathered within the IMP Group. Although their research often does not discuss the matters of the internationalisation of a company, conclusions made are universal for local and international markets (Ratajczak-Mrozek, 2017). As Johanson and Vahlne stated (2009, p. 1423), “networks are borderless, the distinction between entry and expansion in the foreign market is less relevant [than strengthening network position]”.

In the assumptions of the market as a network of relationships, it is stated that a business network is created as a result of interactions between independent actors building long-term relationships. In the process of interactions, actors adjust, create cooperation standards, build trust and other relational values (Leszczyński & Zieliński, 2013). A business network is created in an evolutionary and unplanned manner. No actor has a dominating role. In accordance with this concept, a business network results from the interactions of actors and the history of the cooperation (Ford *et al.*, 2011, p. 18, 175; Håkansson *et al.* 2009; Håkansson & Snehota, 2017). A business network created in an evolutionary manner is not a result of a strategic plan of any of the companies included in the network. Actors become participants of such a network in an unintended manner, often accidental. Structures and quasi-organisational forms are created independently of the will and active consciousness of network participants. Such a network is usually deprived of a clear centre (dominating company); however, particular companies can have stronger positions than others. It shows that defining the boundaries and structure of such a network can be problematic.

Some researchers are trying to determine the boundaries of emergent business networks. The main assumptions regarding the emergence, development and interaction of the business network coincide with those presented above. The only difference is the attempt to mark a certain network limit. This concept is expressed in the terms: *network horizon*, which determines the scope of the network perspective of a given actor (Holmen & Pedersen, 2003; Kawa, 2017), *network picture*, in which boundaries are determined by the researcher (Abrahamsen *et al.*, 2016; Czakon, 2017) or *network context*, which points entities influencing the operations of the company (Anderson *et al.*, 1994). The boundaries may depend on the company’s experience, characteristics of a given network or a specific purpose of the analysis. They are also subject to change over time, which results from running business activity.

The second general interpretation of networks of business relationships refers to strategic networks. In strategic networks business relationships are

created purposefully by the dominating actor. The literature points to the number of specific forms which strategic networks may take (see Ikpen & Tsang, 2005; Schary & Skjøtt-Larse, 2002; Gulati *et al.*, 2012). Yet, they all share some general features.

Determining the structure and boundaries is much easier in the case of strategic networks. Jarillo (1988) defines strategic networks as long-term agreements between different but connected companies that enable them to gain a competitive advantage over competitors outside the network. They are consciously created by the network leader as a result of a chosen strategy. The main company of such a network (*focal company, hub firm*) specialises in the areas of the value chain within which it has the greatest competencies, which consequently allow it to gain a competitive advantage. The remaining necessary resources are obtained from other actors on the basis of subcontracting or outsourcing. The network leader imposes a strategy on other actors, consciously creates connections and influences the emergence of connections between other members of the network, coordinates the flow of goods, information and knowledge. Connections in such a network are usually of a permanent and formalised nature. Co-operators are selected in terms of their abilities to effectively achieve the goals set. During the cooperation, the participants of the strategic network adapt their behaviour to the behaviour of other partners, expanding the area of cooperation to informal relationships (Möller *et al.*, 2005; Jarillo, 1988, p. 31-41). Connections occurring in a strategic network are usually formalised in nature and may take the form of strategic alliances, joint venture and long-term buy-sell relationships (Gulati *et al.*, 2000, p. 203). Examples of strategic networks include supply chains (see e.g. Lambert & Cooper 2000; Giannakis *et al.* 2012; Green *et al.*, 2012), value networks (Möller & Halinen, 1999), extended companies (e.g. Dyer, 2000), and also clusters (e.g., Lin *et al.*, 2012).

Certainly, building (or strengthening) network positions can take various forms and activities depending on the assumed interpretation of the network. Interpreting the market as a network of connections favours analysis and (in business practice) strengthening of diadic business relationships. It is manifested in publications of the IMP Group. The question as to how much a company can consciously change its position in such a network seems to be open. Determination of boundaries of the emergent business network allows for a more precise analysis of the position occupied in the broader context of the existing market connections. However, such a perspective may be insufficient in the case of analysing the company's internationalisation process. The issue of building a position in the strategic network depends on the ability to coordinate and build connections, select partners, manage the information flow, so taking on the role of a network leader (Hedberg *et al.*, 1997).

## Network position

The issue of the company's position in a business network is raised by a number of researchers. However, it is difficult to find a direct definition of the term *network position*. Definitely more often, one can find the concept definition through the adopted measures of the position in a network or through its description.

Johanson and Vahlne (2009, p. 1415) indicate that a company that does not have a position in the network is an "outsider" in relation to such a network, while a company with a position in the network is an "insider". This perception of the network position is identical to having at least one tie connecting a given company to a business network. However, the authors indicate that entering the foreign market should be analysed from the perspective of the "position-building process in a foreign market network" (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009, p. 1415). They also state that "internationalisation is seen as the outcome of firm actions to strengthen network position" (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009, p. 1423). Strengthening the network position is perceived through the prism of commitment to the individual relationships (partners in relationships), which allows knowledge to be built and consequently opportunities to be discovered or/and created (Deszczyński *et al.*, 2017). Following Morgan and Hunt (1994), they also admit that a high level of trust is essential in strong business relationships. Thus, the authors perceive the process of building the network position as strengthening key relationships based on increasing the level of trust and decisions regarding the growth of commitment to these relationships. Such activities should allow opportunities to be noticed and, as a result, the competitive advantage of the partners to be increased.

In the context of commitment-building decisions, Johanson and Vahlne (2009, p. 1424, 1425) indicate that they may concern only particular relationships, but also the network in its entirety. In such a case, they are related to the creation of new ties in a business network, within which a company has a determined position or relations connecting a given company with other business networks.

Another approach to understanding the network position is reflected in its measurements assumed by some researchers (compare: Dolfisma & van der Eijk, 2016). The network position is often measured by its centrality, reflected by the number of ties maintained in the network. It is assumed that companies with more relations obtain more important market and technological information, which affects the possibility to introduce innovations (Dymitrowski, 2014). In this context, it is important to have relations with various types of actors, also non-business actors (e.g. relationships with scientific units, influential bodies). This results in a diversification of the obtained information. At the same time, it is indicated that the strength of the maintained relationships is less significant than their number.

The two approaches to building the network position described above reflect two theoretical bases to explain it: the theory of strong ties (Coleman, 1988) and the strength of weak ties theory (Granovetter, 1977, 1985). According to the first one, a strong position in the business network is related to having strong business relationships characterised by a high level of trust, commitment (expressed in readiness to make specific investments in a relationship) and low transactional costs. Having such relationships gives access to important information and therefore, accumulation of knowledge. In compliance with this theory, the network position is also determined by the position in a business network of actors with which strong relationships are maintained. The stronger the position in the network of such actors, the more valuable information can be obtained by the analysed company, which affects the possibility to identify and use emerging opportunities (Li & Borgatti, 2009).

The second theory, the strength of weak ties theory, indicates that the position in a business network is determined by the maintenance of a large number of loose distant ties and a relatively small number of strong ties. A large number of weak ties is supposed to provide the company with access to unique and rare knowledge other actors in the business network do not have (Granovetter, 1977, 1985). The company occupying such a network position may use it to bridge the structural holes and act as an intermediary between unrelated parties (Burt, 1992).

## Research methodology

The aim of the study was to identify based on a pilot study the possible way of building network position on foreign markets by Polish food company. In particular, the authors wanted to examine if the company follows the assumptions of the theory of strong ties or the strength of weak ties theory.

The qualitative research was carried out in the form of in-depth standardised interview (Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2011). The interview was conducted with key informants from a deliberately selected food company to which the authors of the paper had direct access gained in previous studies. The company was selected based on 3 criteria: the headquarter of the company located in Poland (1), owned completely by the Polish capital (2) and sell products in at least one foreign market (3). The key informants were representatives of management in charge of international expansion – one of them was a director responsible for export activities, the other one was a manager responsible for operations on German market.

Prior to the survey, key informants were contacted by telephone to explain the aims and scope of the study. This was done to persuade them to take part in the interviews, as well as to prepare and collect all the necessary information.

In the interview, the company's operations on one selected foreign market were discussed. The market was selected before the meeting as a result of the analysis of the company's foreign operations, telephone conversations with the director responsible for export activities.

The interview was conducted personally in October 2016. It was recorded with the key informants' consent. Transcripts of the recordings were also prepared.

The standardised interview form contained open-ended questions, making it possible to explore and clarify the issues covered by the study. In the first place, key informants were asked to discuss the process of expansion for a selected foreign market. In particular, the questions concerned the form of entry (and their changes in time) and motives for entering the foreign market. Next, the key informants were asked to indicate the actors with whom they cooperated during the process of entering and developing the activity on the foreign market. A special attention was put to the changes of actors with whom the companies cooperated and the nature of the cooperation itself. Researches attempted to explore the strength of particular ties and the role of companies in building it.

## Research results

ABC<sup>2</sup> is a production and trade company operating in the sector of chocolate products. Their assortment includes chocolates, chocolate bars, pralines, but also hard candies, fudge, marshmallows and jelly beans. The company was established in 1982 and it is owned by Polish capital. The internationalisation process began five years after the commencement of business activities and it was directed to eastern European markets, especially Russia. Currently, the company operates on sixty foreign markets. The value of sales on foreign markets in total sales is approximately 60%. Purchasers of ABC products on foreign markets are distributors; however, direct cooperation with large retail networks is established with an increasing frequency.

In 2006, responding to an initiative of a commercial partner, the company commenced foreign expansion into the German market. At the beginning, nearly all sales on the German market were carried out by one distributor. The relationship with that distributor was described by the key informants as very strong, characterised by a high level of trust. The company made certain adaptations to facilitate cooperation. The key informants pointed to the high knowledge transfer between ABC and the distributor. After the introduction of the company's products on the market and increasing interest, ABC entered into other relations with several other companies, which were competitors of the main distributor at that time. However, from the perspective of the company they were not relations the company was strongly committed to.

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<sup>2</sup> Upon request of the company, the name has been changed.

The turning point was the bankruptcy of the main distributor on the German market in 2011. This fact resulted in the need to find new importers and to further penetrate the market. Currently, the company cooperates with a larger number of distributors who are competitors at least to some extent. The relationships with them are weaker, compared to the relationships with main distributor before 2011. The company also points to the development of relationships with different types of distributors on German market (wholesalers and retail chains, some of them international). Thus, ABC strives to build a position in the business network by adopting a strategy for the diversification of connections. This applies to types of actors and the number of actors of a given type with which they interact. According to management's declarations, current relationships with distributors are not as strong as the relationship with one distributor maintained by the company until 2011. Additionally, a decrease in the commitment in particular relationships and in readiness of ABC to adapt is observed. However, it should be highlighted that this applies to individual relationships and not the business network in its entirety. According to the key informants, the level of openness to communication understood as the readiness to share confidential information with particular distributors also decreased. On the other hand, openness to create new ties in the business network increased. The level of trust in business relationships has not changed.

The success achieved by ABC on the German market was reflected in the overall competitive advantage of the company, increasing its recognition. The fact of carrying out effective business activities on the German market positively affects the perception of ABC by potential commercial partners, which, in the case of commercial networks from other countries, is particularly important.

To conclude, the company was following both of the identified theories when developing a network position on a German market. At the early stages of its operations on the market, ABC was building its network position according to the theory of strong ties. A major event, which was a bankruptcy of the main business partner on the market, encouraged ABC to change the strategy. Currently, it is following the strength of weak ties theory principles. The company was operating within emergent business network throughout the entire analysed period.

## Conclusions

Based on the conducted study, it can be concluded that both of the identified strategies of building the position in a business network – strengthening selected ties and diversification of ties – was successfully used in the foreign expansion by a Polish food company. However, it must be emphasised, that since the study was limited to one company it is not representative for the entire industry. It was intended that a pilot study carried out can be an impulse to design further, in-depth research concerning Polish food industry.

The analysed company seem to consciously implement and adjust selected strategies to build its network position. At the beginning of the operations on the German market, ABC was developing very strong relationships with one selected partner. The management of ABC decided to diversify ties on the market and maintain their relatively small (or average) strength after the bankruptcy of the partner. It must be underlined that the company decided to change its strategy of building network position using recognition of the ABC company on the market and the position it already had. The actions of the company were guided by deliberate decisions, but it reacted to an important event. The strategies assumed to build the network position are objective in nature – they were “imposed” on the company through a combination of circumstances. However, within the strategies, the companies behave in a though-through manner, trying to consciously strengthen its network position.

The presented conclusions demonstrate a possibility for further studies. Firstly, it should be verified how common is the observed behaviour in the internationalisation process for food market companies and is it specific for the food market. Secondly, it is worth exploring if the behaviour is dependent on certain company characteristics (e.g. size, experience in international business). Thirdly, the antecedents of observed behaviour, that is application of the strategies and the change of the strategy after major event (e.g. willingness of risk limitation, lack of knowledge) should be clarified. Finally, a future quantitative study may give an answer to the question whether any of the strategies lead to a better company’s performance, especially in a longer period of time.

Except for the listed above, some additional research possibilities may be mentioned. It is worth verifying whether companies for which foreign expansion has a spontaneous and unplanned nature also try to strengthen their position in international business networks in a conscious manner, or whether they remain inactive minor actors in them. It is also worth exploring how non-relational activities (e.g. market share, strong brands) influence a network position of the company.

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