



# Market orientation and communication methods in international strategic alliances<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This article discusses factors affecting the success of international strategic alliances, specifically market orientation and communication methods. The study empirically compares market orientation and methods of communication with strategically allied SMEs (small and medium enterprises) in countries with different cultural values (i.e., United States and Korea). The findings indicate that market orientation and communication methods in an international strategic alliance between US and Korean SMEs have distinct differences. For example, the results show that market orientation and communication methods differ according to the number of foreign partners within an alliance and the duration of an alliance. The article highlights some managerial implications that might occur due to the differences between American and Korean SMEs operating an international strategic alliance.

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## 1. Introduction

A strategic alliance is a collaboration between two or more companies wanting to establish and maintain a cooperative relationship due to complementary capabilities based on core competencies and various activities (Thomas and Trevino, 1993). A recent increase in such partnerships between multinational companies is a notable phenomenon, especially in the area of international business (Kim, 2008).

Various factors need consideration to deeply understand how partners' characteristics and specific market conditions impact these alliances due to cross-cultural relationships. In particular, communication methods play a key role in providing products and services while accurately identifying the mutual demands and benefits (Mohr and Nevin, 1990); both activities are very important when a strategic alliance merges across countries. The degree to which a company is market oriented impacts the communication within or between firms as well. Such firms that create strategic alliances depend on market information pertaining to present and future customer needs to be successful (Jaworski and Kohli, 2000). For that, a study is necessary to address the questions of how to manage different factors within an international strategic alliance. Despite the importance of market orientation and communication methods, very few strategic alliance studies focus on these issues.

Research on international strategic alliances includes both theoretical and empirical studies. However, most empirical studies in this stream of research utilize case studies to examine what factors influence the outcome of a strategic alliance. These studies suggest management implications on creating successful alliances through applying the factors (Brouthers et al., 1995; Douma et al., 2000; Graebner, 2004; Stiles, 1994; Voss et al., 2006). However one limitation of case studies includes the inability of clearly verify relationship effects between variables. More sophisticated empirical analysis is necessary to provide evidence on how factors can affect such alliances.

This article compares and analyzes strategic alliances between small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the US and Korea verifying the differences in their market orientation and communication methods. Some firms favor a strategic alliance as a core alternative in the era of infinite competition (Wiklund and Shepherd, 2009), but such alliances are not an alternative that solves every corporate issue. Many strategic alliances fail due to mismanagement and partner conflicts stemming from corporate culture differences and management's lack of clear understanding regarding such differences. And while a clear understanding makes a difference, the number of strategic partners and the duration of the alliance relationships can also impact international strategic alliances.

Problems result from such culture differences between companies, however almost no prior studies present details of possible resolutions of the issues arising from the number of alliance partners or the duration of the alliance. The purpose of this study, then, is to compare market orientation and communication methods in international strategic alliances involving substantial cultural differences based on the number of partners within the alliance and the duration of a strategic alliance.

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The focus of this study is on non-capital strategic alliances rather than capital alliances because market orientations and communication methods are more important in the former when it comes to overseas market transactions (Kang et al., 2000). Accordingly, the importance of the study is not only to compare factors that affect the outcome of these alliances but also to highlight managerial implications for alliances between companies by going beyond its obvious necessity and effect.

## 2. Theoretical hypotheses

Market orientation is the creation, distribution, and application of market information throughout the organization reflecting present and future customer needs (Jaworski and Kohli, 1993). The focus of market orientation is mainly on the use and flow of information. The factors that constitute a market orientation structure include intelligence generation, intelligence dissemination, and intelligence responsiveness. In intelligence generation, the information includes not only the explicit needs of customers already under consideration but also the future needs and external factors that affect such customers. This perspective is a starting point for market orientation and includes present and future customer needs, competitor information, and market data (Narver and Slater, 1995). Intelligence dissemination refers to the sharing of market information with every constituent of the organization. Intelligence responsiveness refers to how organizational constituents individually make decisions based on the shared market information and actively use it in their activities. A market orientation focuses on the process coordinating and integrating market information into the functional, operational activities based on the information (Jaworski and Kohli, 2000).

Communication plays a critical role in providing products and services, accurately identifying mutual demands, and recognizing mutual benefits in transaction relationships between alliance partners. Open and clear communication between partners improves the accuracy of identifying the transaction environment, obtaining mutual satisfaction, understanding mutual needs, and correctly delivering those intentions (Gray and Laidlaw, 2004). Therefore, effective communication between alliance partners is essential in realizing a stable transaction.

Marketing communications is the formal and informal sharing of meaningful and timely information regarding customers between firms either domestically or internationally (Mohr and Nevin, 1990). Every firm has a formal communication system to provide information about the firm to its customers and other stakeholders using a variety of media. Generally, companies document pieces of information through either the formal communication network, or also using company reports, meetings and conferences, official letters, and/or notices. The better a company documents information, many argue the less opportunity for immediate change if need. In contrast, nearly all the information in an informal communication structure is not well-documented and opens the door for change and interpretation through the network. Some companies consider formal or official communication (e.g., periodic meetings or letters/document exchanges) more important, while other companies prefer informal or unofficial communication methods (e.g., non-periodic meetings or phone conversations). Determining the best communication method is essential to assist in accomplishing goal unity and mutual trust between the alliance partners, as well as achieving a more cooperative relationship between them (Arino et al., 2005). Marketing communications between companies in different countries present additional challenges due to possible cultural difference that exist.

Communication differences between partners of two countries can lead to cultural incompatibility (Meschi and Roger, 1994) which will impact the success of a strategic alliance, especially from market orientation and communication methods. An international strategic alliance requires cooperation between partners from different countries, and this need for cooperation raises the issue of how

partners with different national cultural values interact with each other (Steensma et al., 2000).

Market orientation and communication methods differ along culturally embedded managerial practices. SMEs in the US tend to play a leading role in exchanging market information with their partners. Managers of these SMEs collect intelligence as much as possible being an active partner making the best use of market information. In contrast, SMEs in Korea are likely to share market information with their alliance partners only in response to their partners' needs in each market believing this will maintain a relationship over the long run (Klopf and Park, 1997). In the case of communication methods, SMEs in Korea have more formal and formalized communication than informal because of bureaucracy (Hwang, 1998), while SMEs in the US have less formal communication. Thus, the market orientation and communication method between global strategic alliance partners may differ by culture and national disposition. Such differences lead to the first two hypotheses.

**H1.** Market orientation (intelligence generation/dissemination/responsiveness) in an international strategic alliance between US and Korean SMEs have distinct differences.

**H2.** Communication methods (formal/informal communication) in an international strategic alliance between US and Korean SMEs have distinct differences.

While market orientation and communication methods are important, the impact of these factors is complicated by other variables within the alliance. For example, past research indicates that as the number of partners in a strategic alliance impacts the performance of the alliance from the viewpoint of creating value and lowering cost (Piva et al., 2010). Primarily, a strategic alliance is a prominent way to secure complementary resources in which partners mutually need (Kim and Song, 1998). In an international strategic alliance, this combination of mutually complementary resources, such as a market orientation, is critical to create the value of synergy across countries and to maintain a successful business relationship with partners (Beamish and Banks, 1987; Madhok, 2006).

Firms struggling to create synergies across boundaries attempt to enter an international strategic alliance in hopes of combining its own resources with mutually complementary ones of a foreign alliance partner.

**H3.** Market orientation (intelligence generation/ dissemination/responsiveness) in an international strategic alliance of SMEs differs as the number of foreign partners increases.

From the viewpoint of transaction cost theory, coordination becomes a problem if the costs of aligning actions of different partners in a transaction escalate. Even when interests are aligned, coordination problems arise due to lack of shared and accurate knowledge about the decision rules to be used by the partners in a cooperative agreement (Jung, 1999). Costs are likely to be lower when primary uncertainty increases, as unexpected future contingencies put greater demand on the joint decision-making capability of the partners in the alliance (Madhok, 2006).

A rising number of partners require an expansion in combining complementary resources, increasing potential synergy, and facilitating market orientation. In addition, more partners call for better management of systematic communications (Maltz, 2000). Systematic communication methods are more formalized communications, meaning connecting partner organizations in a structured and routine manner (Goris et al., 2002).

**H4.** Communication methods (formal/informal communication) in an international strategic alliance of SMEs differ as number of partners increases.

Heide and John (1990) insist that the length of time in a relationship is an important factor that significantly improves the expected future exchanges. Bucklin and Sengupta (1993) find that alliances, having survived "some test of time," are more likely to succeed the longer their existence. Adequate use of market orientation and communication is a key role for understanding partners' needs and perceiving mutual benefits in an international strategic alliance (Blesa and Bigne, 2005). In other words, supplying product information and market conditions to alliance partners leads to a more accurate business environment and reciprocal satisfaction. An efficient use of market orientation and communication methods is very important for strengthening business relations over the long-term (Das and Teng, 2000).

Dussauge and Garrette (1995) argue that alliances are strategic activities two or more firms engage in because of mutual or overlapping objectives. The authors argue that performance is verified by maintaining each partner's alliance terms and demonstrating that the longer the terms are maintained, the greater the trust and commitment. Any long-term relationship with an alliance partner creates transaction-specific assets that the firm cannot easily switch to another partner due to unique management styles in the partner's condition (Brouthers and Nakos, 2004). As trust and commitment grow, marketing orientation becomes more likely due to the ease of exchanging information with the partners. In addition, long-term relationships assist to simplify communications which become more informal due to higher level of trust and commitment.

**H5.** Market orientation (intelligence generation/dissemination/responsiveness) in an international strategic alliance of SMEs differs as the duration of the alliance extends over time.

**H6.** Communication methods (formal/informal communication) in an international strategic alliance of SMEs differ as the duration of the alliance extends over time.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Data collection

Data were collected from SMEs in Korea and the US – two countries in different regions of the world with distinctly different cultures – in order to increase the generalizability of the findings. No lists of SMEs involved in international alliances were available; therefore lists of exporting firms were used. The lists included firms that have (1) international experience and (2) some form of non-equity based alliances through which they sold their products/services in foreign markets. The sample of Korean SMEs was determined from a list of exporting firms obtained from the Korean chamber of commerce. The American Export Register lists a total of 42,000 companies that served as the sampling frame for US firms. Together the lists identified 2500 companies that maintained export and/or import sales volumes of more than US\$5 million in a given year. Of these, 1500 firms, representing ten different industry groups, were randomly selected to receive the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was translated from English to Korean (the language of the managing directors of the SMEs), then back-translated into English by an independent translator to ensure validity. Afterwards, the survey was also pre-tested to prevent mistranslations. The questionnaire was mailed to senior executives such as CEOs, marketing managers, general managers, and managing directors who were knowledgeable about their firms' international marketing activities. Most of the firms operated in traditional manufacturing industries such as textiles, chemicals, food processing, and building material manufacturing; they had more than three hundred employees, and at least US \$21 million of annual sales. Out of the 1500 firms chosen, 235 usable surveys were received, for a response rate of 15.66%. This response rate is comparable to many industrial surveys, as suggested by Hart (1987). The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS Ver. 15.0E) was used

to evaluate the collected data through descriptive static, reliability, validity analysis, and T-tests. At the beginning of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to choose whether their firm had equity or non-equity based alliance. The advantage of this approach was to obtain purer and more focused information (Wong and Merrilees, 2007).

#### 3.2. Operational definitions

The survey instrument measured the variables of interest by using previously developed scales. The primary constructs of interest were: intelligence generation, intelligence dissemination, intelligence responsiveness, formal communication and informal communications. Using a 7-point Likert type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) as recommended by Schumacker and Lomax (1996), each respondent was asked to indicate their level of agreement with all items.

Intelligence generation encompasses all activities undertaken by a firm in order to create export market information. Following Akyol and Akehurst (2003), intelligence generation was measured using three questions addressing "delivering necessary information to each other," "having a give-and-take relationship," and "fairly exchanging resources." Intelligence dissemination is the process and extent of export market information exchange within a given firm (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990). This construct was also measured by three questions addressing "sharing a lot of market information," "exchanging a great deal of market orientation," and "cooperating in transferring necessary information." Intelligence responsiveness, which encompasses the design and implementation of all responses to the intelligence that has been generated and disseminated within the firm, was addressed by three questions developed by Lukas and Ferrell (2000): "efficiently allocating alliance resources," "implementing strategies with partner," and "well-coordinated in effectively using alliance resources."

Responses on formal communication, which connect with alliance partners in a structured, routine manner, were measured in three questions addressing "exchange of information frequently in formal meetings," "having a formal meeting with the partner firm," and "frequently occurring extensive formal communications." Informal communication, which is personalized and spontaneous, was measured using questions developed by Ruekert and Walker (1987): "having an informal meeting with the partner firm," "frequently occurring extensive informal communication," and "exchange of information frequently in an informal way."

#### 3.3. Analysis and results

The study verified reliability of the items in each construct using Cronbach's alpha coefficient and conducted a factor analysis for verification of validity. Table 1 indicates the factor loadings and reliability for construct items used: intelligence generation (3 items), intelligence dissemination (3 items), intelligence responsiveness (2 items), formal communication (3 items), and informal communication (2 items). Exploratory factor analysis using varimax rotation sorted out five factors. Cronbach's alpha value was more than the suggested 0.7 for all items. In addition, eigen value of each factor was more than 1 and factor loading higher than 0.6, indicating that the scales has a satisfactory and acceptable level of reliability and validity.

H1 proposes that market orientation (intelligence generation/dissemination/responsiveness) in international strategic alliances will differ between US and Korean SMEs. T-tests results indicate significant differences between the US and Korea in market orientation, supporting H1 (see Table 2). The results also highlight US SMEs generate more intelligence than the Korean organizations. However, as seen from analyzing intelligence generation and responsiveness, SMEs in Korea disseminate and respond to more intelligence than their counterparts in the US. US firms tend to focus on collecting market information from

**Table 1**  
Reliability and validity.

Construct (Cronbach's $\alpha$ )	Item	Factor				
		1	2	3	4	5
Intelligence generation (.86)	Delivering necessary information to each other	.16	.29	<b>.80</b>	.18	.15
	Having a give-and-take relationship	.26	.26	<b>.79</b>	.07	.16
	Fairly exchanging resources	.29	.27	<b>.72</b>	.16	.28
Intelligence dissemination (.91)	Sharing a lot of market information	.36	.13	.17	<b>.88</b>	.13
	Exchanging a great deal of market orientation	.45	.15	.17	<b>.84</b>	.11
Intelligence responsiveness (.94)	Efficiently allocating alliance resources	<b>.84</b>	.07	.21	.30	.17
	Implementing strategies with partner	<b>.84</b>	.12	.22	.27	.17
	Well coordinated in effectively using alliance resources	<b>.85</b>	.13	.23	.24	.15
Formal communication (.74)	Exchange of information frequently in formal meetings	.15	.18	.20	.17	<b>.83</b>
	Having a formal meeting with the partner firm	.21	.26	.19	.04	<b>.81</b>
	Frequently occurring extensive formal communications	.16	.25	.19	.11	<b>.79</b>
Informal communication (.76)	Having an informal meeting with the partner firm	.01	<b>.80</b>	.29	.14	.15
	Frequently occurring extensive informal communications	.12	<b>.83</b>	.20	.04	.11
Eigen values		2.73	2.35	2.22	1.81	1.66
% of variance		21.02	18.11	17.14	13.97	12.83

their partners, while Korean firms tend to only exchange information fairly and respond to partners' needs and wants.

Communication methods between Korean and US SMEs are also compared by using T-tests (see Table 3). The results indicate some differences between the two countries, such as the US firms using both formal and informal communication with their partners more frequently than in Korea. However, Korean firms tended to have more formal communication when working with partners. Accordingly, SME communication methods in international strategic alliances differ between countries, supporting H2.

H3 posits that market orientation differs depending on the number of international alliance partners. Table 4 shows no difference between the two groups (i.e., one partner or more than two partners), indicating that the number of partners does not affect the exchange of market information for alliances. H4 proposes that alliance communication methods would differ according to the number of partners. As shown in Table 5, again, there is no difference in the communication method between groups. Therefore, the findings do not support H3 and do not support H4.

Table 6 shows results for H5, which proposes that market orientation in international SME alliances would differ according to the duration of

**Table 2**  
T-test result for verifying H1.

Dependent variables	Country	Sample size	Mean	S.D.	T-value	F-value	P-value
Intelligence generation	US	124	5.05	1.20	5.55	6.63	0.000
	Korea	107	4.23	1.01			
Intelligence dissemination	US	124	3.89	1.48	-3.38	11.80	0.001
	Korea	107	4.47	1.06			
Intelligence responsiveness	US	124	4.35	1.26	-2.02	1.83	0.044
	Korea	107	4.66	1.07			

**Table 3**  
T-test result for verifying H2.

Dependent Variables	Country	Sample size	Mean	S.D.	T-value	F-value	P-value
Formal Communication	US	124	4.75	1.20	3.49	1.40	0.001
	Korea	107	4.24	0.10			
Informal Communication	US	124	4.95	1.30	5.41	7.29	0.000
	Korea	107	4.11	1.03			

the alliance. There are no differences in intelligence generation, but intelligence dissemination and responsiveness occurred more often between partners who enjoy a five-year or longer relationship. As a result, one can argue that actively sharing and responding to market information may be necessary to maintain long-term relationships with alliance partners. Finally, Table 7 details the results supporting H6 on whether communication methods differ by alliance duration or not. As the results show, there are no differences between the two communication methods according to alliance terms.

#### 4. Discussion and implications

This study highlights an important set of conditions deriving from market orientation and communication methods that influence the behavior and performance of SMEs in international strategic alliances. The findings demonstrate how factors influence alliance creation, maintenance, and success. Not many researchers to date examine international strategic alliances by focusing on different conditions between alliance partners, however as this study shows better understanding different conditions provide important key insight into some of the key current issues for strategic alliances. Understanding these different conditions provides both opportunities and constraints for firms making alliance decisions (i.e., with whom to enter and how often) and improvements on current partner relationships.

SMEs in the US focus more on the collection of market information, tending to lead by generating that information. However, these US firms do not consider maintaining the relationship in the long run by sharing and responding to partners' needs and wants. On the other hand, SMEs in Korea likely foster such relationships by keeping an ear to their partners' needs and being concerned about understanding the wants and needs, thereby maintaining more long-term relationships.

Communication methods also differ significantly between Korean and US SMEs. Firms in the US communicate more frequently with their partners, whereas Korea firms prefer formal and formalized communication over informal communication because of cultural differences. Korea still is bureaucratic and considers courtesy a process in business circumstances.

The results of this study also show that market orientation and communication methods differ by duration of alliance. Firms can have long-term relationships with their alliance partners based on high trust and commitment through exchanging information. Trust and commitment occur when firms engage fully in an alliance. The process

**Table 4**  
T-test result results for verifying H3.

Dependent variables	Number of partner	Sample size	Mean	S.D.	T-value	F-value	P-value
Intelligence generation	1	115	4.75	1.25	1.06	0.26	0.293
	More than 2	101	4.57	1.16			
Intelligence dissemination	1	115	4.02	1.44	-1.68	2.95	0.005
	More than 2	101	4.32	1.19			
Intelligence responsiveness	1	115	4.42	1.24	-1.07	0.75	0.287
	More than 2	101	4.60	1.15			



**Table 5**  
T-test result for verifying H4.

Dependent variables	Number of partner	Sample size	Mean	S.D.	T-value	F-value	P-value
Formal communication	1	115	4.62	1.23	1.31	0.79	0.193
	More than 2	101	4.42	1.07			
Informal communication	1	115	4.67	1.33	1.34	2.45	0.182
	More than 2	101	4.44	1.19			

of actual commitment begins when organizations share beliefs and provide valuable benefits to each party in the long run.

Market orientation includes three elements with regard to intelligence: its generation, dissemination, and responsiveness. The first two specifically focus on the mutual exchange of pertinent information. While such exchanges may occur frequently, these elements address only obtaining the information to achieve the potential competitive advantage. Intelligence generation and dissemination likely reflect the notion of open communication, which focuses on the sharing of timely information and mutual disclosure. The role of information is to facilitate the exchange process; hence, its value lies in how efficiently and effectively the partners structure and utilize its content. A key point regarding information exchange is that sharing critical information is not restricted to a select few individuals. Rather, pertinent operational information is available to all individuals who request and require the information to execute their daily activities.

The other element, responsiveness, entails the capability and willingness of organizations and individuals to adapt according to the information provided whether expected or unexpected. The authors refer to this condition as influence acceptance, or the degree to which an alliance partner voluntarily changes strategies or behaviors to accommodate the desires of other(s). The ability to be responsive implies significant adaptability. In an alliance, responsiveness reflects both speed of interaction and precision such that problems or requests are handled quickly and accurately. In other words, if an organization is responsive to a problem then that partner implements a corrective action immediately ensuring a solution to the problem and minimizing the potential for recurrence. Responsiveness also indicates a willingness to fulfill a partner's special request. Responsiveness is more likely to occur when two partners commit to a long-term relationship. Contributing to overall network performance is important for nurturing international alliances.

Implications of this study expand into new research areas, offering managerial suggestions for practitioners wanting to manage a strategic alliance with multinational partners. The intent of the paper is to compare different factors of international alliances through an empirical study to better understand managerial strategies for creating and maintaining international strategic alliances. For instance, the dynamics of market orientation and communication methods influence the formation of new alliances providing insights for managers. Yet the communication process appears to bring

**Table 6**  
T-test result for verifying H5.

Dependent variables	Duration of alliance	Sample size	Mean	S.D.	T-value	F-value	P-value
Intelligence generation	less than 5 yrs.	124	4.62	1.12	−0.57	5.19	0.570
	over 5 yrs.	91	4.71	1.31			
Intelligence dissemination	less than 5 yrs.	124	3.86	1.33	−3.44	0.04	0.001
	over 5 yrs.	91	4.48	1.29			
Intelligence responsiveness	less than 5 yrs.	124	4.23	1.20	−3.40	0.00	0.001
	over 5 yrs.	91	4.78	1.15			

**Table 7**  
T-test result for verifying H6.

Dependent variables	Duration of alliance	Sample size	Mean	S.D.	T-value	F-value	P-value
Formal communication	Less than 5 years.	124	4.40	1.11	−1.49	0.89	0.139
	Over 5 years.	91	4.63	1.18			
Informal communication	Less than 5 years.	124	4.48	1.22	−0.74	1.34	0.458
	Over 5 years.	91	4.61	1.32			

constraints due to current relationships that lock managers into certain courses of action.

Some choose to anticipate such concerns and initiate selective communication methods that enhance their informational capabilities. Thus, companies proactively design their marketing strategies and consider the ramifications on their future choices of each new tie they form. Ultimately, this study can contribute by helping marketing managers think about different success factors and consider how to manage individual partners within alliance strategies. For these reasons, this study bridges the chasm between theory and practice translating some important insights for managers.

This paper represents a first attempt to understanding the differences of market orientation and communication methods in international strategic alliances. As with most research, the findings in this study are evaluated in light of certain key limitations. The sample frame does not consider other countries, only alliances involving organizations in Korea and the United States. In addition, the sample analyzes only small and medium-sized firms (SMEs) meaning the results cannot be universally applicable.

Thus, future research should examine several different countries through replication studies. Another limitation involves the variables of choice. This research, by far, does not include all factors impacting international strategic alliances. Further studies should consider additional factors affecting the success of strategic alliances. The authors hope this article will stimulate further research in this domain.

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