

Product Strategy Apple for Breaking Into the Japanese Smartphone Market

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Product Strategy Apple for Breaking Into the Japanese Smartphone Market

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Abstract. Apple's strategy to enter the Japanese smartphone market was one of its most successful historical moves. One of the critical reasons for Apple's success in Japan was its strategic cooperation with Softbank, one of the country's largest mobile service providers. Softbank was instrumental in bringing the iPhone to Japan and introducing it to Japanese consumers. This collaboration gave Apple access to Softbank's extensive distribution network and powerful promotion, significantly increasing the appeal of iPhones among smartphone users in Japan. This innovation, highlighted by the high product quality and elegant design, makes the iPhone stand out compared to its competitors. More recently, Apple has gained popularity by providing exceptional customer service. Customer loyalty has been extreme in the consumer community due to efficient customer service, consistent user experience, and a well-integrated product ecosystem (such as iCloud and antenna interoperability systems). In addition to outstanding innovation and service, Apple has positioned the iPhone at a competitive pricing point in Japan. While the iPhone is sometimes regarded as a premium product with a high price tag in many areas, Apple can offer a lower price tag in Japan than specific domestic and international competitors. This makes the iPhone more appealing to Japanese consumers, who want higher-value things.

Keywords: Apple, iPhone, Japanese Smartphone Market.

1. INTRODUCTION

Apple is a technological business headquartered in Cupertino, California. Apple creates, develops, and sells electricity gadgets, software, etc. Apple's hardware products include the iPhone, iPad, Mac, iPod, Apple Watch, Apple TV, and HomePod, and its software comprises macOS, iOS, Safari, and others.

Apple focuses on attractive design and a smooth user experience. Apple devices are noted for their beautiful and luxurious appearance and durability due to using high-quality materials such as aluminium and glass. Besides aesthetics, Apple promotes optimal performance through proper hardware and software integration.

Apple ensures that its products are user-friendly by providing a simple interface. Despite intense competition in the technology business, Apple continues to innovate and maintain its market leadership. However, demand for the iPhone plummeted by more than 10% in the first three months of the year, with sales declining in almost every region except Europe. Apple's revenue plummeted 4% to \$90.8 billion, the most significant drop over a year.

Huawei, Xiaomi, Oppo, and Vivo are gaining market share by offering smartphones with advanced features at cheap costs. However, demand for Apple products remains high due to their continual innovation and quality. Apple is renowned for its outstanding camera, performance and design. The iPhone camera employs innovative technology to produce high-

quality photographs, while the combination of hardware and software assures quick and responsive performance. The minimalist and elegant design is also a big draw, with attention to detail that mixes aesthetics and functionality.

One of Apple's obstacles when entering the Japanese market is ethnocentrism because Japanese people value local items more than international products. This attitude stems from a deep love of their culture that began in childhood (Ratna Maharani, 2015). Japan strives to preserve its national character, even in the economy, by preferring kanji-labeled products in all industries, such as electronics, automobiles, and cuisine. Japanese people have been taught to choose local items, even if they are more expensive, because purchasing foreign products is detrimental to their national economy.

This has been shown by the lack of interest in low-cost Chinese products, which are scarcely sold in traditional markets (Infodesa, 2014). Smartphones are widely used in Japan for various purposes, including communication, employment, and education. Japan is renowned as a global technological pioneer, with significant corporations such as Sony, Panasonic, and Toshiba influencing its industry. To enter the Japanese market, you must first comprehend the country's rigorous regulations and bureaucracy.

Apple, Samsung, and Sony dominate Japan's smartphone market, one of the biggest and most advanced. In March 2023, Apple was the leading brand with the highest market share, followed by Huawei. Local businesses such as Sharp, Fujitsu, and Panasonic are also active in the market, selling phones with features targeted to the needs of Japanese consumers.

The popularity of mobile payments like PayPay and Line Pay and the extensive use of NFC technology distinguishes the Japanese market. Furthermore, the trend toward larger screen sizes and superior cameras is gaining popularity. 5G technology is also fast evolving, with NTT Docomo and SoftBank leading the charge (Spherical, 2023).

Apple is attempting to break into the notoriously challenging Japanese market as a worldwide firm. Significant hurdles include competition from local companies such as Sony and Sharp and Japanese society's ethnocentrism favouring native products. However, the Japanese market remains potentially profitable, so Apple must develop the appropriate approach to flourish there.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Competitive Advantage

A company's ability to outperform rivals in the same industry in terms of profits is known as its competitive advantage. Cost leadership, differentiation, and focus are the three general strategies businesses can use to gain a competitive advantage. Michael Porter first presented this idea in his 1980 book "Competitive Strategy" and expanded on it in his 1985 book "Competitive Advantage." The ability of the business to comprehend market dynamics and select the best course of action is directly tied to its competitive advantage.

Besides that, Hoffman (2000) introduced the concept of sustainable competitive advantage (SCA), which refers to the long-term benefits of a distinct value-creation strategy that competitors cannot easily replicate. This competitive advantage enables companies to outperform competitors in the same industry but is challenging to replicate. Thus, competitive advantage is the foundation of a company's performance in a competitive market, and implementing the right strategy is critical to its success.

Agreeing with Porter (1991), four critical issues must be clarified in the strategy hypothesis:

1. The relationship between the company and the outside environment:

The technique must clarify the company's relationship with the environment that impacts it since outside imperatives and impacts influence results.

2. Reaction to outside changes:

The procedure must permit the company to adjust to outside changes such as advertising needs, innovation, and inputs. Technique choices must be adaptable since conditions that are fruitful at one time may fall flat at another.

3. Advancement and inventiveness:

The methodology must open up openings to make something modern, permitting companies to discover inventive arrangements that are unfair to existing choices.

4. The part of good fortune:

The luckiness figure regularly impacts competitive success, even though financial analysts frequently rearrange it. The significance of luckiness must be considered when creating technique theory.

Porter, too, emphasizes that an effective operational technique is not a genuine strategy. Situating procedures, to be specific, and making a competitive position are the keys to managing changes within the trade environment. Porter contends that companies must enhance and upgrade forms like the esteem chain to form an economic, competitive advantage in

expansion. Porter's proposed industrial clusters bolster industrial improvement and have been received by governments of developed nations to fortify their businesses. Eventually, an excellent methodology must relate to environmental changes and corporate behaviour to attain competitive advertising results.

Entry Mode Strategy

Export

Exports are one way for companies to enter the international market, particularly for start-ups. Exports do not require huge ventures and are relatively low risk. Exporting benefits for companies include serving remote markets, expanding deals, keeping up cost competitiveness, and adjusting the request cycle. Exports are divided into two types, specifically indirect trades and direct send out:

a. Indirect Export:

They are carried out through mediators, making it less demanding for companies that do not have worldwide encounters. There are a few sorts of middle people in circuitous sends, such as trade specialists (who offer for the sake of producers), send-out administration companies, or worldwide dealers. Even though less demanding, roundabout sends have impediments such as commission costs and the potential for losing clients if the exporter chooses another item.

b. Direct Export:

The company straightforwardly controls the send-out handle and can select between utilizing inside employees or middle people within the goal nation. Coordinating trades requires higher mastery and dissemination costs but gives more prominent control over export operations. Intermediaries in direct exports include producer operators, merchants, retailers, and substantial exchange companies. Companies that are effective in indirect exports frequently turn to direct exports to optimize universal market potential and increment control over the dispersion of their items.

Licensing

Licensing allows a company (the licensor) to enter a market by agreeing with another company (the licensee). In that marketThe licensing company pays a certain fee and receives the right to use the licensor's intellectual property, such as technology, trademarks, or business processes.

However, many companies hesitate to license, fearing that when the agreement expires, the licensee will produce a similar product under its brand and become a strong competitor. Furthermore, a special form of licensing, franchising, exists in the service sector.

In franchising, the franchisor grants the franchisee the right to sell a product or service following a strict system that includes the brand, technology, and established marketing procedures. Franchises are commonly used in food, hotels, fitness, beauty, and business services industries.

Contract Manufacturing

It is a method that allows manufacturers to enter southeastern Asia and extend contracts to both countries. This agreement grants the manufacturer in the home country the rights to use technology, machinery, branding, and production processes to produce various products purchased from the manufacturer.

Joint Ventures

A joint venture is a direct investment in a target country that forms a joint venture with a) a local company, b) a state-owned company, c) another foreign company, d) a Short-term partnership with national and international corporations. The collaborative entry mode has many advantages, including reduced risk and competition, improved economics, and compliance with local government participation regulations (Maria C. Widiastuti & Salfiliani Anghiani, 2021)

RESEARCH METHOD

The study assumes a descriptive survey to clarify Apple's approach to the Japanese smartphone market. The main focus of this study is Apple's smartphone product strategy in the market. Data is secondary and obtained from literature research, online journals, and related books. The approach to collecting data involves library research, which collects information through different mediums such as books and academic journals. Additionally, they use electronic media for reading and writing. Qualitative analysis is the process of combining data with other relevant data to analyze the research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Apple smartphone products

Steve Jobs revolutionized the technology industry in 2007 when he introduced the first iPhone, which combined a phone, iPod, and Internet device into one product. The iPhone was

five years ahead of its time and was thought to mark the beginning of a new era in mobile technology.

With a 3.5-inch touchscreen, 2-megapixel camera, and intuitive interface, the iPhone was unlike any other smartphone. The introduction of the App Store in 2008 further cemented its status as a revolutionary device.

Each generation of iPhone brought essential innovations, including 3G connectivity on the iPhone 3G, Retina display technology on the iPhone 4, and the Touch ID sensor on the iPhone 5S. iPhone 6 became one of the best-selling phones of all time thanks to its thin design and large screen, while the iPhone X introduced an OLED display and Face ID technology in 2017.

The 2023 iPhone 15 will feature Titanium, an A17 Pro chip, a 120Hz OLED ProMotion display for the Pro variant, and an improved camera system, highlighting Apple's continued commitment to delivering cutting-edge technology. iPhone 15 offers higher performance with improved power efficiency, augmented reality (AR) support, and fast charging and wireless charging capabilities.

Smartphone Market in Japan

Japan is one of the world's largest and most innovative smartphone markets. In 1999, NTT DoCoMo introduced the first smartphone with email capabilities, followed by other innovations such as 3G networks. Despite being technologically advanced, Japanese mobile phones have not been able to penetrate overseas markets. This is due to the "Galapagos syndrome," which leads to product development that is too isolated from the global market.

Apple entered the Japanese market in 2008 with the first iPhone. However, it initially attracted little attention because it lacked essential features for Japanese consumers, such as an infrared port and a QR code scanner. Apple's success in Japan was ultimately due to an aggressive marketing campaign by SoftBank and the adaptation of Apple's products to the needs of the Japanese market. Currently, the iPhone consistently tops the rankings of Japan's best-selling smartphones. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of digital technology in demand for smartphones that support communication and productivity in the era of social distancing. Japan's smartphone sales increased 5.9% in 2020, with Apple, Sharp, Samsung, Sony, and Fujitsu leading the market.

Apple led the market with 15.637 million devices shipped, thanks to its elegant design, technological innovation, and robust ecosystem. Sharp, which boasts high-quality local products and competitive prices, and Samsung, which offers cutting-edge technology and premium design, also have significant market shares.

Sony, with its focus on camera quality and multimedia, and Fujitsu, with its focus on the business and senior segments, continue to maintain their positions such as the introduction of 5G, improving camera quality, and integration of digital services are key drivers of market growth, spurring manufacturers to innovate further. Manufacturers that can quickly adapt to changing trends and consumer needs are more likely to succeed in Japan's dynamic and competitive smartphone market.

Apple's Product Strategy for Entering the Japanese Smartphone Market

Apple's Partnership with SoftBank Corp.

The partnership between Apple Inc. and SoftBank Corp was announced on June 9, 2008. It was a significant strategic move with a major impact on the Japanese smartphone market. It gave Apple access to the large and growing Japanese mobile market and enabled SoftBank to offer its customers more innovative products and services.

The partnership was significant because Japan is one of the largest and most competitive smartphone markets in the world, and the success of the partnership demonstrates the importance of sales and marketing strategies when entering a new market part of the partnership; Apple granted SoftBank exclusive rights to sell the iPhone in Japan under a license agreement.

As a licensee, SoftBank used Apple's brand and technology to sell the iPhone and, in return, paid royalties and sales revenue to Apple. This partnership allowed Apple to enter the Japanese market without building an extensive distribution infrastructure. By leveraging SoftBank's strong sales network and customer base, it could quickly introduce the iPhone to Japan. SoftBank focused on customer service infrastructure as well as advertising. In collaboration with Apple, the company developed a service package tailored to the needs of the Japanese market, including competitive data plans and mobile services that fit the lifestyle of Japanese consumers.

SoftBank expanded its sales network, making the iPhone available nationwide, not just in big cities but also in remote areas. This was an essential strategy because Japanese consumers are more likely to purchase devices in physical stores where they can try products before they buy. This partnership had a significant positive impact on Apple. When the iPhone was first released in Japan in 2008, Apple's market share was only around 5%. However, this market share increased rapidly in the following years, and by 2014, the iPhone was the most popular mobile product in Japan, with a market share of over 50%

This increased market share was essential to Apple because Japan is one of the largest mobile markets in the world, and success in this market contributed to increased sales and

profits for Apple. The partnership with SoftBank also enabled Apple to increase brand awareness in Japan. The iPhone became a top-rated product, which allowed Apple to become even more well-known in Japan.

This increased brand awareness was essential for attracting new customers and increasing sales. SoftBank also offered subsidy packages for devices such as the iPhone, a key strategy in the mobile industry to attract new customers and increase market penetration. Apple's partnership with SoftBank reflects the importance of marketing, sales, and customer service strategies when entering new markets, especially in a highly competitive market like Japan.

SoftBank brings robust infrastructure and networks, while Apple brings groundbreaking product innovation. This alliance will increase Apple's market share and strengthen SoftBank's position as an innovative company in the telecommunications industry. This partnership is a success story that shows how the right strategy can impact global markets and increase product success in a demanding and competitive market.

However, in 2018, Japanese regulators criticized Apple's marketing policies toward major telecommunications providers such as NTT Docomo, KDDI, and Softbank. Apple has been accused of forcing vendors to pay large subsidies and sell iPhones at lower prices, reducing the competitiveness of other smartphone brands.

Japan's Fair Trade Commission (FTC) noted that Apple's actions may have violated Japan's antimonopoly law because Apple used its position to pressure vendors to pay large subsidies and limit advertising for other brands of devices. The policies were deemed anticompetitive and harmful to consumers, strengthening Apple's market power.

¹⁶ The concept of competitive advantage, introduced by Michael Porter in his book *Competitive Strategy* (1980) and explained in *Competitive Advantage* (1985), focuses on how companies achieve and sustain competitive advantage. Apple has implemented this strategy with the iPhone, which has become one of the most successful technology products since its launch in 2007. The combination of differentiation and focus strategies has enabled the iPhone to create a competitive advantage over other products in the Japanese smartphone market. Here are the implicit differences between Apple products

Innovation in iPhone

The launch of the iPhone in Japan in 2008 marked a significant milestone in Apple's global expansion strategy. At the time, Japan was a highly competitive mobile phone market

dominated by domestic brands such as Sony, Sharp, and NEC, as well as foreign companies such as Nokia and BlackBerry, and faced a significant challenge from Apple.

However, the iPhone was successfully launched and brought several innovations that redefined the smartphone industry. One of the iPhone's most significant innovations was its fully capacitive touchscreen, which replaced the standard resistive touchscreen technology at the time.

With its capacitive touchscreen, users can perform multiple gestures simultaneously and experience faster responsiveness and intuitive operation. Additionally, the device introduced multi-touch functionality.

Zooming in or out on an image The technology quickly became the standard in the smartphone industry and changed how people interacted with their devices. Another innovation was the introduction of the App Store in 2008, which revolutionized how users downloaded and installed apps.

In addition to providing easy access to thousands of apps, the App Store introduced new business models, such as in-app purchases and subscriptions, which were later adopted by other platforms, such as the Google Play Store.

The App Store also built an ecosystem that supported app development, making the iPhone a multi-functional device that could be customized to suit the individual needs of its users. In addition to its elegant exterior design, the performance of the iPhone is also awe-inspiring.

The Apple Bionic chipset, like the A15 Bionic in the iPhone 13 Pro Max, offers fast performance and power efficiency that rivals the best chipsets on the Android market. The combination of an advanced chipset, a smooth iOS operating system, and high-quality hardware ensures stable, responsive performance even after years of use. The iPhone's camera is one of its flagship features, and photo and video quality are considered the industry standard. Apple has focused on optimizing the sensor and software to deliver sharp images, accurate colour, and excellent low-light performance. This makes the iPhone ideal for everyday and professional use, such as social media and video content creation.

Its minimalistic and user-friendly design is a critical factor in the success of the iPhone, said to be at least one of its most important selling points. The original design, which used the principles of skeuomorphism and has since transitioned to a more contemporary style, still focuses on simplicity and ease of use. Natural touch gestures and easy navigation make working with the device smooth, enjoyable and easy for novice and experienced users.

Finally, there is Apple Pay. Apple Pay is heavily influenced by its tight integration with the Apple ecosystem, which includes devices such as iOS, macOS, and Apple Watch

integration with Siri for quick payments. It also strengthens the adoption of the service. Pay has expanded into various sectors, including retail, restaurants, hospitality and public transportation, facilitating transactions for users and businesses.

However, significant privacy and data security challenges remain due to the risk of data leaks and security attacks that could impact user trust.

Additionally, Apple Pay faces challenges from various global financial regulations and standards. The expansion of financial services such as Apple Cash and the adoption of digital payments reflect societal trends toward cashless electronic transactions. To remain relevant and sustainable in the future, Apple Pay must constantly evolve and adapt to new technologies, regulations, and customer preferences.

Putting Buyers First

Apple's success depends not only on product innovation and compelling design but also on its ability to enrich customers' lives through profound, meaningful experiences.

Steve Jobs' philosophy of delivering a "truly great" experience is reflected in every aspect of Apple's products and services, creating a deep emotional connection with customers.

Apple understands that technology should be more than just a tool. It should improve quality of life and become essential to users' daily lives. Apple's elegant product design, intuitive user interface, and seamless device integration are part of this philosophy.

Apple Stores are designed to provide a ²⁴ unique shopping experience where customers can experience Apple technology and get expert support. Although Apple did not initially follow the industry trend of using social media for customer service, it eventually used platforms like X to provide real-time support, increasing customer satisfaction and strengthening long-term relationships.

Leveraging consumer behaviour data, Apple can understand user preferences and needs, refine its marketing strategy, and continuously innovate. Customer services like Apple Support provide fast resolution of technical issues, Apple ID account assistance, and Apple Pay support, adding value to customers and increasing loyalty. Research shows that nearly 92% of iPhone users intend to continue purchasing Apple products, indicating high levels of loyalty thanks to an integrated ecosystem that offers convenience and continuous innovation. Apple is also paying attention to consumer colour preferences, as shown by the deep purple colour trend of the iPhone 14. This shows Apple's commitment to keeping up with the market and responding to the changing needs of consumers. Apple's success depends on its ability to deliver cutting-edge products and create a consistent, innovative and satisfying user experience.

Competitive Pricing

Apple's success in selling the iPhone at a lower price in Japan than in other countries results from several interrelated strategic and economic factors. First, the currency exchange rate plays a significant role in determining the price of products in the global market.

The solid and stable Japanese yen (JPY) contributes to lower iPhone prices in Japan, as the favourable exchange rate allows Apple to sell the device at a lower price without sacrificing significant profit margins. This results in the iPhone being priced 20 per cent lower in Japan than the global average, giving Apple a competitive advantage in the Japanese market.

In addition to currency fluctuations, subsidies from local mobile operators, such as SoftBank, are another contributing factor. The subsidy practice allows SoftBank to offer the iPhone at a discount or even free as part of a mobile service subscription package.

Although consumers pay a monthly fee for mobile service, which is used to pay off the device subsidy, the affordable starting price attracts many customers. This is an effective sales strategy for mobile operators and benefits consumers through lower device prices.

Japan's stable economic environment and sound fiscal policy also support more competitive pricing. Apple was able to leverage these favourable economic conditions to offer products at lower prices, strengthening its position in the Japanese market. A stable fiscal policy gave international companies the confidence to invest and set more competitive prices. The price difference between Japan and other countries, such as India, shows how significant economic factors and subsidies affect selling prices. For example, the price of the iPhone 11 in Japan is much lower than in India, with a price difference of more than USD 200

This difference reflects how pricing strategies and local economic conditions can affect the final price of a product. Through this approach, Apple has strengthened its position in the Japanese market and created a new dynamic in the smartphone industry. Low prices allow Apple to attract more customers, expand its market share, and compete more effectively against competition from other brands. It also forces competitors to adapt strategies, benefiting customers through competitive prices and a more comprehensive product selection. Apple uses this marketing strategy by utilizing exchange rates, mobile carrier subsidies, and local economic conditions to promote its products at lower prices in Japan.

It shows that success in global markets depends not only on product innovation but also on a deep understanding of local market conditions and effective pricing strategies to continue adapting to dynamic market environments and remain relevant and competitive

worldwide. This success could also serve as a model for Apple's strategy in other markets in the future, highlighting the importance of flexibility and local understanding for global success.

CONCLUSION

Apple's ability to offer the iPhone at a lower price in Japan than in other countries results from a multidimensional strategy that includes product innovation, economic reasons, and a meticulous marketing strategy. The introduction of the first iPhone in 2007 altered the face of the technology sector by merging many tasks into one device, putting it five years ahead of the curve. Each following version of the iPhone included vital innovations, such as capacitive touchscreens and Face ID technology, which continue to change smartphone standards.

Apple has a significant challenge in Japan, a market recognized for technological progress and tough rivalry. Japan already has a vibrant smartphone ecosystem, which includes homegrown brands such as Sony, Sharp, and NEC, as well as international heavyweights like Nokia. Apple entered this market due to a strategic relationship with SoftBank Corp., which was revealed in 2008. The collaboration enabled Apple to use SoftBank's distribution network and marketing strength to help the iPhone acquire traction in the previously difficult-to-reach Japanese market.

The currency conversion rate has a significant impact on the pricing of the iPhone in Japan. The strong Japanese yen enables Apple to charge a lower price for the iPhone in Japan than in other nations. With advantageous exchange rates, Apple can offer iPhones at 20% lower pricing than the global average while maintaining profit margins. In addition, subsidies from mobile operators such as SoftBank play an essential role. SoftBank provides iPhones at reduced or even free pricing as part of mobile service packages, making them more affordable to users and encouraging them to purchase iPhones.

Japan's stable economic environment and supporting fiscal policies also help to boost competitive pricing. Apple can take advantage of current economic difficulties to provide items at lower prices, thereby boosting its position in the Japanese market. The price differential between the iPhone in Japan and other countries, such as India, demonstrates the importance of economic considerations and subsidies in influencing product pricing. Apple's success in Japan exemplifies how a corporation may enter and dominate a competitive global market by implementing a well-integrated strategy. This strategy not only boosts Apple's market dominance but also forces competitors to change their strategies, which benefits consumers by providing more competitive prices and product options.

This achievement demonstrates that ongoing product innovation, a thorough awareness of local market conditions, and a compelling price strategy are essential for worldwide success. Apple has continued to adapt to market realities, paving the way for future international expansion tactics.

While ethnocentrism in Japan encourages people to buy local items, the iPhone's success highlights this philosophy's limitations. While being a foreign product, the iPhone is immensely popular in Japan, proving that Japanese consumers continue to favour international items that provide higher quality, innovation, and technology. This implies that the quality and worth of a product can transcend ethnocentrism, mainly when there is no local counterpart. The iPhone's popularity in Japan demonstrates that Japanese consumers respect innovation and quality, even if they are foreign.

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