

# Success Factors in Sales and Marketing for Luxury Car Brands in China

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**ABSTRACT**— *China's car market is one of the most important car markets in the world. With its two-digit growth a rate in 2013 it increased far above average and is expected to keep growing in 2014 and the upcoming years, too. For this reason, China is a promising market for luxury car manufacturers. These facts lead to the question, whether there are specific characteristics, which distinguish the Chinese car market from other car markets in the world. The investigation has been done from a sales and marketing perspective. Primarily, the authors are concerned with unique marketing challenges for German luxury car brands to succeed in the growing Chinese market. Based on observations in two dealerships in Beijing, success factors for sustainability in sales for premium car dealerships in the evolving car market in China are identified and serve as practical contribution.*

**Keywords**—China, auto market, retail car market, marketing & sales, competition

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

China's strong economic growth of the last years has led to a significant increase in its purchasing power (1)(2). This is especially true for the rich eastern regions of China such as the provinces of Shanghai, Beijing, Zhejiang, Guangdong, Jiangsu and Tianjin (3)(4). The increased buying power allows the fulfillment of consumer desires, such as free mobility by a car. The improved financial prospects as well as the desire for mobility and prestige have also led to a rapid increase of the sales figures of German car manufacturers within the last few years (5). Due to these facts, the Chinese automobile market became more and more important for the German automobile manufacturers, not only in terms of revenue, but also in terms of profit. Compared to other countries, many cars of the premium segment are sold especially in the rich regions of China. These regions usually have a higher margin and thus significantly contribute to a positive business outcome (6). The number of premium cars sold first exceeded one million in 2011, making China the second largest market in the world. The Chinese market is even expected to become the the largest premium car market worldwide, overtaking the United States by 2016 (7)

China's economic growth is, compared to other industrialized countries, still large, however, flattening may be observed. Thus, the automotive industry anticipates a large growth potential especially in the western regions of the country. In China's highly developed regions, economic growth compared to Europe is still high. Nevertheless, the increasing competition as well as environmental and infrastructural problems may challenge future prospects (8). The streets of Beijing, for example, are characterized by heavy traffic and pollution, as well as difficult parking situations. This has prompted the government to limit the monthly car registrations. Currently, to buy a new car in Beijing, the Chinese have to win a car registration in a lottery before they can buy a new car (9)(10)(11). Of course, this limitation leads to a rearrangement of the regional car market and reduces sales opportunities for new premium cars. It may be suspected that other heavily populated regions of China could take similar movements. The consequences of this development for the local car dealers in these regions are currently difficult to predict, but it is obvious that the business environment is getting more and more challenging.

## 2. RESEARCH QUESTION

Car dealers in China are facing an extremely promising but fragile market environment with both, high market opportunities and challenges, especially in the major cities. However, for car dealers the freedom of action is very limited in this particular market environment. This is on the one hand caused by very strict government regulations, on the other hand the car dealers have to comply to the standards of the original car manufacturers. This very interesting

general framework leads us to the following research question: Which are the success factors in marketing and sales for car dealers in China’s major cities?

### 3. MARKETING THEORIES

As this paper takes a marketing and sales perspective to the car market in China, some of the most important marketing theories will be presented in this chapter in order to being able to identify general success factors in sales and marketing. The theories will afterwards serve to analyse the collected data.

#### Competitive Strategy

The competitive strategy describes how a company should choose its position within a market and in relation to its environment. The definition includes every action which is aimed at gaining competitive advantage over its competitors in the respective market as well as creating a defensive position in a market and generating a superior Return on Investment (ROI). Especially in highly developed industrial countries, it is important for every company to either foster or defend their market position with respective strategies to reach competitive advantages. To reach these aims, a company should choose one out of those four possible competitive strategies without any compromise (12)(13). According to Michael Porter (14), competitive strategy is devised into 4 types, as shown in the graphic below:

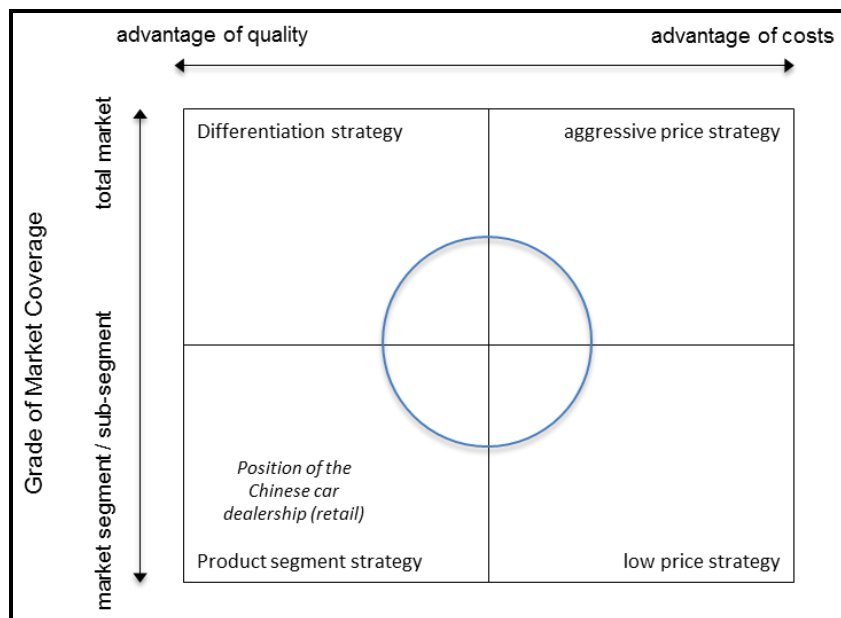


Figure 1: Competitive strategies according to Porter (14)

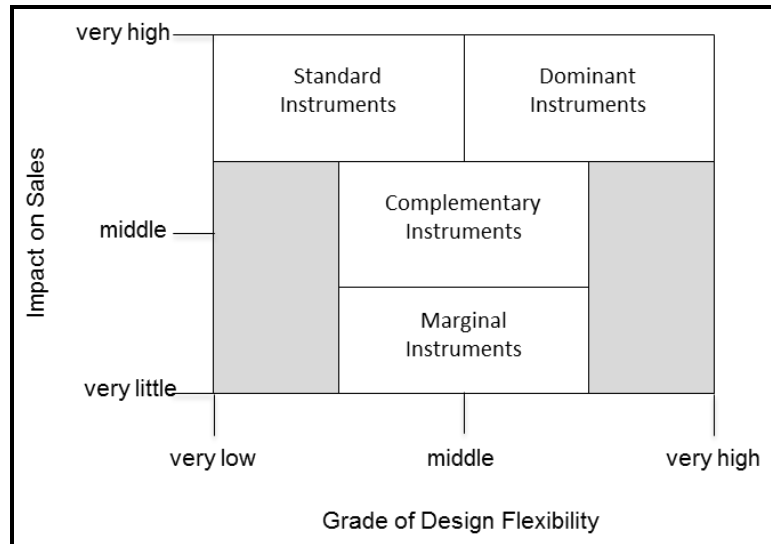
Within the competitive strategy, the main attention is directed at the competitors in the market to adjust the own company’s strategy according to their business objectives and the target position in the market. The stated aim of such a strategy adjustment is to foster the established position in the specific industry and market.

#### Marketing Mix

The basic marketing idea is to bring the entire company consequently in line with the markets’ needs and business objectives, aiming to influence the state of knowledge (information) and behavior (action) of market participants, especially customers, to create a market demand for the products offered. These market strategies are to be realized by using a certain mix of the four marketing instruments: Product, Price, Place and Promotion (‘4 Ps of Marketing’) (15)(16)(17). The combination of the “4 Ps” is also known as the ‘Marketing Mix’, which is a crucial tool in determining a product’s offering from a particular company to the customer. Within the specific marketing mix of a company, there are various interdependences between the four marketing instruments which can either foster or weaken each other. These interdependences can be either competing, substituting, complementary or conditional. Therefore, it is necessary to adjust the particular measures within the marketing mix very carefully.

### **Dominant Standard Model**

The "Dominant Standard Model" by Richard Kühn (18) classifies the various marketing instruments regarding to their impact on sales results and their freedom of scope (,grade of design flexibility'). The marketing instruments can be distinguished in dominant, standard, complementary and marginal instruments. Since the ,standard instruments' are more or less determined by a specific market situation and therefore cannot be appropriate to make a company's offer unique, the ,dominant instruments' can be individually designed and have hereby a high impact on the company's sales success. "Complementary instruments" take a supportive effect on both, standard and dominant instruments, and show a certain impact on the sales results, too. In contrast, the ,marginal instruments' are less important and don't show too much impact on sales figures. The classification of the different instruments is carried out according to the following scheme.



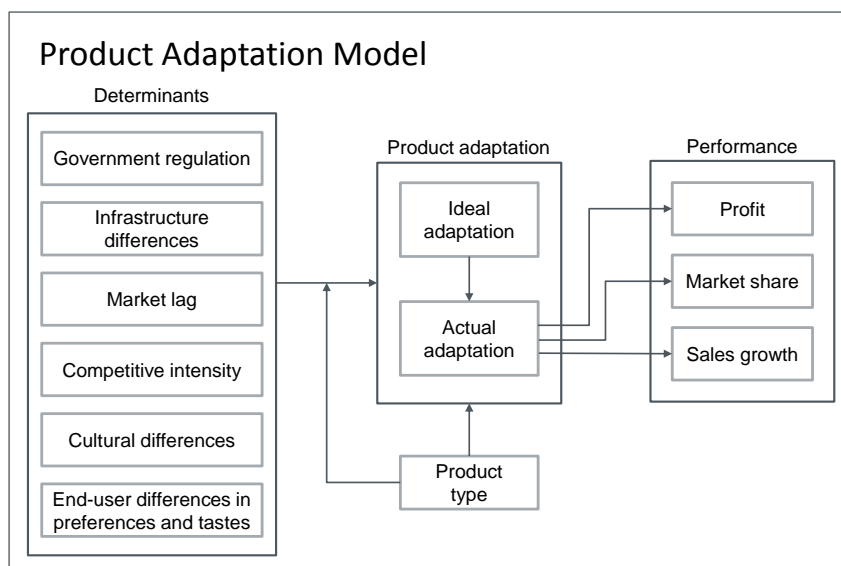
**Figure 2:** Scheme of the marketing instruments within the marketing mix according to Kühn (18)

Within the investigation work of the research team, one of the targets among others was to find out, which of the "4Ps of Marketing" (see above) was used by the car dealerships as a standard, dominant, complementary or marginal instrument to reach the company's business targets.

### **Standardization and Adaptation**

Relating to internationalization, one of the most challenging decisions that a company may face is the degree of standardization or adaptation in its operations. Since 'product standardization' describes the process of setting generally uniform characteristics for a particular good or service, the 'product adaptation' strategy of a follower defines new products based on modifications of existing or competing products.

The question of standardization or adaptation affects all avenues of a business' operations, such as research and development (R&D), finance, production, organizational structure, procurement, and the marketing mix. Whether a company should choose to adopt standardization or adaptation in its international marketing strategy is an eternal debate and requires a comparison of the models with its specific benefits and drawbacks very carefully (19)(20). An overview of possible determinants for or against an adaptation of a specific product is shown in the graphic below.



**Figure 3:** Product Adaptation Model (19)(20)

Relating to this 'Product Adaptation Model', the responsiveness of the car dealer with respect to the different Chinese local car markets could be an important success factor. The term 'responsiveness' in this context includes three key elements: recognition, adaptation and optimization.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

To answer the research question, the researchers visited two dealerships of an established and successful medium-sized Chinese car dealer with approximately 2,000 employees in Beijing. The car dealer is specialized in distribution of imported cars of different German premium car manufacturers.

##### *Design and approach*

We use qualitative data from one case study (24) as primary source of empirical evidence to better understand the factors that distinguish the Chinese car market from other car markets in the world. A Chinese car dealer of premium cars serves as revelatory single case (24) and shall help to explore challenges for German luxury car brands to succeed in the growing Chinese car market. Data has been collected at two days in September 2013. Each of the two subsidiaries has been visited once and included a four-hour visit which all of us attended. This approach allowed us to investigate differences and similarities between the subsidiaries of one dealership regarding sales rooms and services. As all of us attended the visits, objectivity and reliability are guaranteed.

##### *Multiple sources of evidence*

We used multiple sources of evidence to assure data triangulation (24). We conducted two in-depth interviews with the top managers of the dealerships. Each interview took around 90 minutes and was semi-structured in advance. In order to being able to capture the attitudes, moods and impressions from the middle managers, we also conducted a small survey. We received 30 questionnaires from middle managers of the car dealerships. Results of the survey are depicted for example in figures 4 and 5. Direct observations in the dealerships were also helpful to get an impression of the differences and similarities between the two subsidiaries. We took photographs of the dealerships to memorize our observations.

#### 5. RESULTS

The investigated company is a car dealer and in this case a retailer. It is expected that the success of the company is very dependent on its marketing and sales activities. Hence, the marketing activities will be presented in the following section, according to the marketing theories presented in the previous chapter.

Considering Porter (13), there are generally two dimensions of a company's strategy. The first dimension is the type of competitive advantage - quality or cost advantage. The second dimension is the level of market coverage (see Figure 1).

Is the company represented in the entire market or only in one part of the market? - Due to the specialization of the replication car dealer in the distribution of German import cars of the premium segment, the car dealer has decided to concentrate its activities on the market niche of luxury cars. This is also reflected in the locations of the dealerships of this car dealer, which are mainly located in the rich regions of China such as Tianjin, Beijing, Zhejiang, Jiangsu. Within these regions, the dealerships of premium car manufacturers are located in the premium districts in proximity to their customers. Because of the aim of selling premium cars, which are sold with a strong focus on an extensive customer service, the car dealer also tries to realize a differentiation strategy to reach competitive advantages. It was also noticeable that the premium car dealer offers all the services together in one place. Therefore the offering of sales, showrooms, services and spare parts together at one place is called the '4 S model' (21). This exceptionally comprehensive and high quality service can be recognized by the customer, for example, by very friendly and well trained staff, good technical equipment of the workshops, short repairing times and comfortable customer lounges with internet access and massage chairs or a separate Drivers Club.

The marketing strategy based on a quality advantage in a market segment is also known as product segment specialization strategy. This strategy seems particularly well chosen for China. Firstly, China is already one of the biggest markets of premium cars worldwide (6)(7) and economic growth continues to be high, so that it could be expected that the market for premium cars will keep on growing in the future. Secondly, the specialization in selling German import cars has further advantages, since already three out of four sold premium cars are from the German brands Audi, BMW, Mercedes or Porsche (7). Our small survey of the sales personnel of the car dealer has revealed that German car brands are highly recognized in China especially for their excellent quality (see Figure 3). Also the brand image and strong brand name are extremely important to Chinese customers. These two attributes of the products can be aligned very well with the product segment specialization strategy of the car dealer. This would be also perceived by its customers as a premium provider, which is characterized by high quality. High quality, again, is therefore a feature that legitimates higher margins and thus positively contributes to business success.

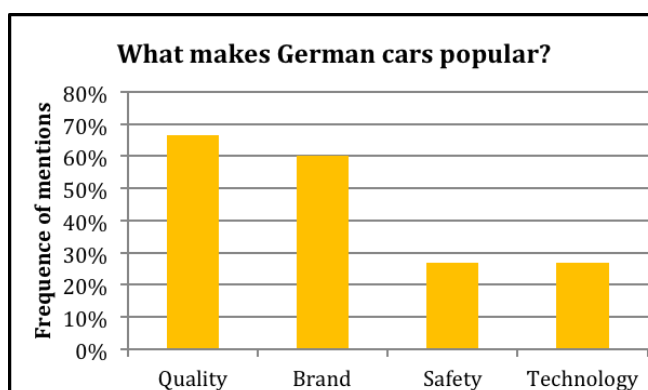


Figure 4: What makes German cars popular?

The product segment specialization strategy with a focus on the premium segment is, in contrast to a low-price strategy, assessed as more robust. Premium cars usually have higher margins. This enables the car dealer to earn more profit with a lower absolute number of sales compared to car dealers in the low price segment. This is especially in the urban areas of China a matter of particular interest, because in some places the car registrations are limited due to the highly busy traffic in the streets. Thus, the registration is done by lottery in Beijing. In Shanghai, car registrations are even auctioned off (22)(23). At an auction of car registrations, the advantage of focusing on the premium segment is even more obvious. Here, it is expected that mainly wealthy individuals bid on a car license. These are afterwards likely to buy a car in the premium segment, since the price of it is not an actual purchase criterion as we learned from our expert interviews. Due to the limitation of car registrations it is also expected that the aftersales activities concerning registered cars, such as the care and maintenance of the cars, will be of more importance in the future. In this case, it is considered to be profitable to offer customized services to wealthy customers, which then again have corresponding high margins. In this respect, the assumption that the product segment specialization strategy is considered to be more robust was confirmed by the majority of the managers of the car dealership: 20 survey participants agreed with this statement. 8 respondents did not want to give any assessment regarding this matter while only 2 did not agree at all.

The implementation of a marketing strategy is in practice carried out with a particular marketing mix, which can be subdivided referring to McCarthy into price, product, place and promotion policies ("4 Ps") (16)(17). Within the

marketing mix, the respective policies concerning the “4 Ps” are substantial parts of the marketing measures. The product and service policy, for example, describes the company’s product and service mix (‘product’) in its entirety and includes the decisions concerning product innovation and variation, quality policies, standardization or adaptation, brand strategies and product design. An essential element of a company’s product and service policy is the product innovation management. The product innovation term describes the creation of a new product, which was not offered by the supplier so far. This new product can also be a combination of various existing products or services.

The sales and distribution policy (‘place’) includes all the decisions and activities that are useful to bring the product in time to the end user. The communication policy is to ensure anchoring the products in the customer perception, to create a certain demand for the product and service as well as to ensure a customer loyalty lest they buy products from other competitors. The communication policy has mainly the following objectives:

1. *Increase awareness level of the product and / or the company*  
The customer should consider the company in the purchase decision.
2. *Image-building / profiling*  
The customer should associate positive characteristics with the product or the seller. In addition, the product should be highlighted using the communication policy against competing products.
3. *Influencing behavior*  
The customer’s buying behavior should be influenced in favor of the company’s offered product range.
4. *Confirmation of the purchase decision*  
The customer should be confirmed in his own buying decision after purchasing the product or service. Thus, the probability for a repeated purchase should be increased.

An example of a communication policy measure would be called consumer promotion. For instance, consumer promotions try to convey a message due to product demonstrations at the point of sale in order to stimulate the buyer for purchase.

The last element of the marketing mix refers to pricing. The pricing policy has the task to determine the price of a product or service. This includes all decisions on discounts, delivery-, payment- and credit conditions. The price of a product is the reward of the customer for the full service that was provided in the form of product, communication measures and sales activities.

The most important marketing element in the marketing mix is called the ‘key instrument’ or, according to Kühn, (18) also ‘dominant marketing tool’ (see Figure 2). The most important marketing tool for the car dealer is the communication policy, which can also be seen as a ‘dominant instrument’ within their marketing mix. This has both a high degree of design freedom of scope and a high significance for revenue. This is also confirmed by the survey results and the high ranking of the term ‘sales approach’ (see Figure 5). Thus, the revenue and customer loyalty can be increased for example with targeted consumer promotions. The latter is assessed to be very important for the long-term success in the strictly regulated car markets such as Beijing and Shanghai. Especially the confirmation of the purchase decision is extremely relevant aiming on a higher chance for a repeated purchase, since the number of new customers is very limited due to the regulating environment. Caring about the existing customers can be achieved by measures such as an organized car club and/or an extremely good customer service. The consistent implementation of this marketing instrument is certainly a success factor for the business success of the investigated car dealer.

Apart from the company’s communication policy, the product policy has a high revenue importance, too. This is also plausible because the sold car brand is extremely important for the sales figures of the car dealer. In a rapidly changing and strong regional affected market environment, which is the case in many parts of the country, it is also essential to respond quickly to local market changes or even to foresee these changes and immediately provide new products which fit to the new market needs. Thus, it is essential for survival to respond to the limitation of the registration figures by the government in a way that the own product portfolio is getting adjusted or expanded. However, it is also clear that the core product of a car dealer is the car itself. This product will be defined by the car manufacturer and cannot be influenced by the car dealer, so that the freedom of scope of the product is rather low due to the car dealer. In conclusion, in this case the product policy is a standard marketing instrument. Nevertheless, it seems to be a benefit for a car dealer to use the very small leeway in this highly restricted freedom of scope and create a competitive advantage by generating new product combinations.

The new products or services have to be offered quickly and have to be inexpensively produced with lean business processes. Possible alternative products would be an extension of the after sales product portfolio or the expansion of the activities in the used car trade. The latter may currently in China not being run by private individuals, so that in this young market monopolistic environment results in a favorable situation for the car dealer. In addition, the used car has to be rechecked and certified by the car dealer to ensure a good used car quality for the customer. This is an additional service of the car dealer, which brings also additional revenues.

All these assumptions and observations mentioned above, are also reflected and confirmed by the results of the survey: several elements of the car dealer’s communication and product policies, such as management, sales approach and service, are ranked among the ‘top five answers’, whilst others, which cannot be influenced by the car dealers themselves, due to the set standards of the German car manufacturers, are ranked far behind, e.g. price, quality, continuous improvement (see figure 5).

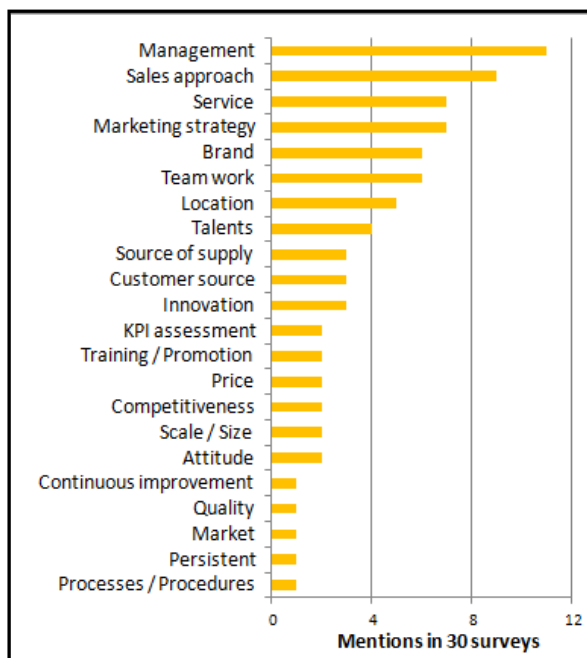


Figure 5: Success factors in marketing and sales (car retailers in China)

Another question regarding the product policy is, for example, how to react as a car dealer to the difficult parking situation in China's metropolises. Would it in this context make sense to push the sale of small city-friendly cars with relatively low margins? The decisions that have to be made at this stage are of great importance for the sales figures and the company's success. This is probably the reason why the management quality at the car dealer survey is assessed to be extremely high for the company's success (see Figure 5).

The pricing policy is compared with the communication and product policy, of less importance. This is mainly because a premium product is normally not bought because it is cheap, but because of its high quality. However, the price is expected to become more and more important, if someone likes to sell smaller cars beside expensive premium cars. Presently, the financing options are more important than the price. So currently in Beijing only 20 percent of the customers use financing option rather than pay in cash, although they could in many cases even save money due to saving taxes via financing. For cultural reasons, this type of car financing is currently less popular than in Europe or the US where more than 80 percent of customers make use of financing options. The type of financing such as leasing provides the car dealers in the future the possibility to offer various financial products and make extra revenues beside the car sale. The freedom of scope regarding the price policy is certainly present for the car dealer, especially in designing the financing options. However, a retailer has in contrast to a producer regarding the pricing in general not too much leeway, so that this marketing tool consequently is assigned as a complementary marketing tool.

The distribution policy is of less importance for the car dealer. This is mainly caused by the fact that the delivery time is primarily determined by the car manufacturer. The freedom of scope is very limited and also the revenue importance is to be considered as quite low. This coincides with the fact that the point "source of supply" was ranked in the managers' survey at medium level (see Figure 4). Thus, the distribution policy is merely a marginal marketing tool.

## 6. PRACTICAL CONTRIBUTION

This paper has already indicated that it is extremely important to adapt the marketing strategy to the continuously changing market conditions as well as to the different regional cultural driven market needs. Applying the three key

elements (recognition, adaptation and optimization) to the concept of the marketing mix could lead to the following success factors in marketing and sales (see Figure 3) (19)(20).

1. *Recognition*

Recognition means in this context the identification of a relevant regional market change. Thereby this change could for example be caused by a change of the customer needs or by new government regulations.

2. *Adaptation of marketing element (product and communication)*

The car dealer has to respond on this relevant market change with the two marketing tools product and communication policy. To be more specific, this means that specific adaptations of the product range or the service have to be made. Additionally, this has to be supported by unique consumer promotions, which are adjusted to the regional and cultural market needs.

3. *Optimization*

Optimization is then the last step of this process. This involves, in particular, to simplify the new company's processes very quickly in order to reduce costs by the creation of new products or services.

## 7. SUMMARY

In this study, four theoretical marketing concepts have been applied to interpret our observations. The main focus and objective was to find out the success factors in marketing and sales for the long-term success of a Chinese car dealer. These success factors can be summarized as follows: Firstly, focusing on the premium segment in the Chinese market seems to be promising. Secondly, the Chinese car market cannot be regarded as a homogenous one. China is a big country, which consists of many different regions. Due to the strong economic growth and the corresponding changes in the local market needs, these regional markets' demands keep changing continuously. For business success, it is therefore extremely important to recognize these changing needs of the regional car markets resulting in adapting its own products and services, including its marketing strategy. In the next step, the production of the new products has to be optimized to save further costs. Special attention should therefore be paid to the marketing tools product and communication policy. The company should be structured in a way that it can realize and optimize these changes in product and communication policy very quickly. Additionally, for a long-term business success in the metropolitan areas in particular such as Beijing, it seems, beside the responsiveness, to be important to take care of the already existing customers, as it will become increasingly difficult to get new customers.

## 8. LIMITATIONS

The results of this study are mainly based on data from two expert interviews and a survey of 30 managers of a medium-sized Chinese car dealer with approximately 2,000 employees. In addition, results of a literature review and personal observations were used for the interpretation of the data. It is obvious that the results are not representative because of the relatively small number of surveyed participants. However, the obtained data of the survey are in line with the statements of the expert interview as well as with the observations in the car dealerships. In spite of the study limitations, this work helps to understand the marketing strategy and challenges of a mid-sized Chinese car dealer and allows drawing plausible conclusions about its success factors in marketing and sales.

## 9. OUTLOOK

A more extensive investigation of the importance of the process "recognition-adaptation-optimization" for the business success of various Chinese car dealers seems to be very promising. This study should also be carried out with a larger number of car dealers from different car brands in different regions of China. Therefore the presumption that successful car dealers are experts in the process 'recognition-adaptation-optimization' is confirmed.

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