

Competition in Vietnamese E-Marketplace: A Case Study of Alibaba in Vietnam

Nguyen Thi Tuyet MAI

Graduate School of International Development and Cooperation

Hiroshima University

1-5-1 Kagamiyama, Higashi-Hiroshima

739-8529, Japan

Nham Phong TUAN

Faculty of Business Administration

University of Economics and Business, Vietnam National University

E4, 144 XuanThuy road, CauGiaydist

Hanoi, Vietnam

Abstract

Since more and more Vietnamese enterprises have recognized the benefits of joining e-marketplaces, the competition among e-marketplaces in Vietnam is becoming stronger, especially the enrolment of the giant Alibaba has triggered the rush race in this field. This study emphasized on the e-commerce application and enrolment in e-marketplace of Vietnamese enterprises. In addition, taking Alibaba as a case study was to see from foreign investors view about opportunities and challenges. The study also explored the evaluation of Vietnamese e-marketplace members and staffs of Vietnamese e-marketplaces about the appearance of Alibaba in Vietnam. Based on the data analysis, some implications for practitioners were recommended.

Key words: e-marketplace; Alibaba; competition; Vietnam

1. Introduction

Since Vietnam has become the member of WTO in 2006, more opportunities and challenges forced Vietnamese enterprises to enhance the competitiveness and pay more attention to advertising as well as finding new partners. Building website and joining e-marketplaces are the good ways to get access the customer and create new chances. Since 2006, the number of e-marketplaces in Vietnam has been increasing. According to Report of Vietnamese e-commerce (2006, 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010), there were more than thirty e-marketplaces divided into two groups: the first one included the e-marketplaces that were established by private enterprises; the second one consisted of the e-marketplaces that belonged to public entities or were invested by the share of the government capital. The amount of enterprises taking part in e-marketplaces was rising. In table 1, the percentage of enterprises enrolling e-marketplaces in Vietnam increased from 7.9% in 2006 to 10.2% in 2007. After going up to 12% in 2008, the figure kept constant until 2009 and then soared to 14% in 2010.

However, the more important thing is that whether joining e-marketplace can bring benefits for enterprises. Due to joining e-marketplaces, 63% members in 2007 could find partners and signed 19 contracts on average (The value of contracts was from 300,000 VND (equal 15\$) to 9,600,000,000 VND (equal 450,000\$)). Another significant point needs to be mentioned is that 17.2% of e-marketplace members worked in the field of the information technology and e-commerce service; mechanical, chemical and constructional enterprises, accounted for 14.1%; garment counterparts occupied 8.1%. In 2008, the rate of enterprises that might sign contracts via e-marketplaces was 69.7%. The interesting thing is that the number of smaller enterprises joined the e-marketplaces more than that of larger ones. More specifically, the enterprises had less than 21 workers accounting for 34% whereas the enterprises having from 21 to 50, from 51 to 100 and from 101 to 200 employees occupied 19.3%, 13.3% and 10% respectively; 11.4% and 12% were the enterprises employing from 201 to 500 and more than 501 staffs.

In terms of areas, 19% out of enterprises in Hanoi city joined e-marketplaces in comparison with only 10% and 7% out of counterparts in Ho Chi Minh city and in other regions, respectively. On the other hand, 64% of e-marketplace joiners had staffs taking responsibility of e-commerce versus 29% of enterprises had not joined. In 2010, 72% of e-marketplace members thought virtual marketplaces worked efficiently.

In general, it seemed that the number of members of e-marketplaces was increasing significantly.

Table 1: The percentage of enterprises joining e-marketplaces in Vietnam in period of 2006-2010

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Enterprises joining e-marketplace (%)	7.9	10.2	12	12	14
E-marketplace members have contracts through e-marketplace (%)	-	63	69.7	91	72

Source: Report of Vietnamese e-commerce 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010

In the sense of developing e-marketplaces in Vietnam, the global giant Alibaba paid more attention to penetrating the destination. In June 2009, Alibaba contacted with OSB Investment and Technology Joint Stock Company as their Vietnamese representative and helped them organize many activities such as consulting and training for small and medium enterprises, taking part in many fairs, etc. Therefore, the appearance of Alibaba raised more competition among e-marketplaces in Vietnam.

In order to understand competition situation in e-marketplaces in Vietnam, this study aimed to firstly investigate the e-commerce application and enrolment in e-marketplace of Vietnamese enterprises in general; secondly impact of the penetration into Vietnam by foreign enterprises on Vietnamese e-marketplaces and on their own business. Alibaba would be our case study for second purpose. By doing these objectives, this study was expected to make some implications for practitioners who plan to invest into Vietnamese e-marketplace.

Apart from the introduction session, in the next parts, we will present the case study of Alibaba with their penetration into Vietnamese e-marketplace. After that, methodology and data analyses are described in detail. Finally, some discussions, implications and limitation will be provided in the study.

2. Alibaba and the penetration into Vietnamese e-marketplace

According to the website Alibaba.com, Alibaba Group is a Chinese investment holding company. It was established in Hangzhou (the capital and largest city of Zhejiang Province in Eastern China) by Jack Ma in 1999. The Group has more than 25,000 employees in some 70 cities in Greater China, India, Japan, Korea, the United Kingdom and the United States. The Group operates as the Internet-based business company including activities related to international commerce, business-to-customer (B2C), business-to-business (B2B) marketplaces, online transaction, computing service and others.

At first, the Alibaba Group worked as B2B model through website www.alibaba.com for international enterprises and www.china.alibaba.com for Chinese ones. After e-commerce crisis in 2000-2001, Jack Ma created new online auction website www.taobao.com to compete with eBay when the company tried to get access the Chinese market. Until now, the Alibaba Group has 7 affiliated entities including: alibaba.com, taobao.com, tmall.com, etao.com, aliyun.com, yahoo.com.cn, alipay.com (please see more detail in annex 1)

Alibaba.com is an online commercial gate for everyone. Besides, it also provides other activities such as information supply, report statistic, forum, research, payment service, transport, etc. Currently, Alibaba has more than five thousand kinds of products in 40 fields such as agriculture; apparel; automobile and motorcycles; business services; chemicals; computer hardware and software; beauty and personal care; construction and real estate; consumer electronics; electronic components and supplies; etc.

Alibaba.com has more than forty million members from two hundred forty countries. Alibaba.com specifies members into four kinds: free member, TrustPass, Gold Supplier Basic and Gold Supplier. Initially the Gold Supplier kind was supplied for Chinese enterprises and the TrustPass kind was for international ones. However, from 2009 to 2010 Alibaba removed the TrustPass kind and supplied the Gold Supplier Basic for international enterprises. And then from 2010 Alibaba supplies only two kinds of member: free member and Gold Supplier.

From June 2009, Alibaba appeared in Vietnam via **OSB Investment and Technology Joint Stock Company (OSB JSC)** - Vietnamese representative. OSB JSC is a Vietnamese company, working in the field of satellite and wireless communication, information technology and investment.

According to website www.osbholding.com, Alibaba and OSB JSC have organized many activities in Vietnam as follows.

Regarding consulting and training for small and medium enterprises (SME), every week and every month Alibaba.com and OSB guide and introduce for non-fee members as well as help Gold Suppliers members to exploit all tools and functions of virtual stores in the websites.

Alibaba and OSB JSC also have invested in many events involving e-commerce of Ministry of Trade and Industry and Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI). Alibaba and OSB JSC cooperated with other organizations to hold the large training programs in Hanoi city, Ho Chi Minh city and Can Tho province for exporting companies.

Alibaba and OSB JSC have contact with Information Technology for Business (ITB) of VCCI to hold the program named “Supporting Vietnamese enterprises to export to APEC and Africa via e-commerce” from January 2010. The goal of the program is to enhance the business activities among Vietnam and APEC and Africa, encourage promoting e-commerce in Vietnamese enterprises. One hundred enterprises are selected to support in utilizing Gold Supplier services on Alibaba to introduce their products, find partners in APEC and Africa. In the future plan, Alibaba and OSB JSC intend to give more opportunities for other Vietnamese enterprises.

Moreover, Alibaba and OSB JSC also took part in many fairs hold in Hanoi city and Ho Chi Minh City. For example, in September 2010 Alibaba and OSB JSC had a booth in HanoiExpo Fair that attracted many attentions of enterprises in Hanoi and Northern areas.

In 2011, Alibaba and OSB JSC managed “Big buyer event” in Vietnam. Some large importers on Alibaba went to Vietnam and met directly Vietnamese enterprises.

Currently, the strong competitors of Alibaba and OSB JSC in Vietnam are the Vnemart e-marketplace of Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the ECVN e-marketplace of Ministry of Industry and Trade, and e-marketplaces of private enterprises including Gophatdat, Thuongmaivietmy, Export, Mekongsources, Evnb2b, Vnet, etc. Among Vietnamese e-marketplaces, ECVN has been highly appreciated and played an important role because it was supported by Ministry of Industry and Trade to support Vietnamese enterprises in the e-commerce field. However, the penetration of Alibaba.com and OSB JSC had attracted more Vietnamese enterprises, thus raising the completion among e-marketplaces.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Data collection

Firstly, we conducted the survey that evaluated the e-commerce application and enrolment in e-marketplace of Vietnamese enterprises. The survey was implemented from September 2009 to November 2009. The questionnaire was designed as five-point Likert scales based on Report of Vietnamese e-commerce (2006, 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010) and distributed to the staff taking responsibilities in e-commerce fields in the enterprises by mail. The questionnaire included three main parts. The first one asked the general information about enterprises. The second part was for the enterprises that joined e-marketplaces to understand about the benefits they could get as the members. The third part was for the enterprises that had not joined e-marketplaces to know what barriers were.

There were 450 responses. A total of 42 were invalid, incomplete or gave the same rating for all items; these were eliminated, and thus 408 questionnaires were retained for analysis. Table 2 shows some characteristics of respondents in the study.

Table 2: Demographic profile (N=408)

Characteristics	Statistics
<i>Geography</i>	
Hanoi city	238 (58.3%)
Ho Chi Minh city	170 (41.7%)
<i>Scale</i>	
Enterprises have less than 50 employees	254 (62.26%)
Enterprises have 50-300 employees	115 (28.19%)
Enterprises have more than 300 employees	39 (9.55%)
<i>The field of enterprises</i>	
Trade	176 (43%)
Production	106 (31%)
Service	126 (26%)
<i>Capital of enterprises</i>	
Less than 500 million VND (25,000\$)	37 (9%)
From 500 million VND (25,000\$) to 1 billion VND (50,000\$)	38 (9.31%)
From 1 billion VND (50,000\$) to 5 billion VND (250,000\$)	115 (28.19%)
From 5 billion VND (250,000\$) to 10 billion VND (500,000\$)	96 (23.6%)
More than 10 billion VND (500,000\$)	122 (29.9%)

Source: authors

In the next step, we implemented some interviews to find out the advantages and disadvantage of Alibaba in the penetration process into Vietnam e-marketplace as well as its effect on the business of Vietnamese enterprises.

The first interview was in January 2010 to measure the satisfaction of 15 Vietnamese enterprises which had joined Alibaba e-marketplace (12 Gold Supplier members and 3 free members). As well as interviewing Alibaba e-marketplace members, we also had the talk with the leaders of Alibaba and OSB JSC: Mr Tran DinhToan–Vice Director, and Mr David Tan - Senior Manager of Global Alibaba to find out their advantages and difficulties in Vietnam.

The second interview was done with the responsible staffs of ECVN marketplace and gophatdat marketplace in an effort to know their estimation about Alibaba.

3.2 Data analysis

Questionnaire analysis

Data analysis involved descriptive statistics. It could be seen that many enterprises recognized the benefits of marketing through websites (69.7% enterprises having websites). However, many websites almost could not do transaction but just introduced products and services of enterprises, therefore all deals still were done by the traditional methods (71.47% websites did not do any transactions, 28.53% sometimes had tractions). Moreover, because of limited human and financial resources, enterprises did not have the specific e-commerce staffs, some employees from marketing or business sectors had to take responsible for e-commerce issues.

49 out of 408 responses joined e-marketplaces, accounting for 12.01%. However, only 42.86 % of them signed contracts via e-marketplaces in comparison with 57.14% that could not find the partners. So the questions of which functions of e-marketplaces were explored by members were raised. 25 members thought they used searching functions mainly in comparison with 11 members that wanted to market their enterprises. Finding partners are the aims of 9 whereas only 1 answered that the enterprises explored all functions of its e-marketplace. From the figures, it seems that the e-marketplaces just helped members introduce the information about their enterprises, products and services but another important function of e-marketplaces, connecting the sellers and the buyers as well as enhancing the transactions, was not carried out. It can be clearly seen through measuring the benefits of joining e-marketplaces that the members got as follows (Table 3).

Table 3: Measuring the benefits of enrolling e-marketplaces of 49 members

	Ability to find partners	Effects of conducting business plans via e-marketplaces	Help to reduce costs	Ability to make profits
Very low possibility	3 (6.12%)	6 (12.24%)	8 (16.32%)	5 (10.2%)
Low possibility	3(6.12%)	12 (24.48%)	1(2.04%)	5 (10.2%)
Neutral	10 (20.42%)	21(42.86%)	18 (36.73%)	20 (40.82%)
High possibility	21(42.86%)	8 (16.32%)	13(26.53%)	12(24.48%)
Very high possibility	12 (24.48%)	2(4.1%)	9(18.38%)	7 (14.3%)
Mean	3.80	2.76	3.29	3.22

Source: authors

The repliers were asked about the benefits they could get from the e-marketplaces. As can be seen through Table 3, e-marketplaces helped enterprises find the partners, somehow decrease costs and might bring profits in the near futures. The significant thing was that 24.48% enterprises highly appreciated e-marketplaces in displaying much information in different categories that supported them to search and choose partners easily. In contrast, many responses were not satisfied with the ability of implementing business plans thanks to e-marketplaces (12.24% and 24.48% enterprises very lowly estimated and low estimated, respectively).

In terms of enterprises that had not entered e-marketplaces, some five-point Likert scale questions of why they still hesitated were raised.

Table 4: Barriers of e-market enrolment of 359 enterprises

	More sellers than buyers	The trust of e-marketplace members	High e-marketplace fee	Small number of contracts	Facing difficulties in using functions	Limited finance
Mean	3.32	3.59	1.71	3.63	3.13	1.41

Source: authors

It seems that the most constraint in 6 barriers mentioned was small number of contracts. When the enterprises joined e-marketplaces, the thing they hoped that they could find good partners, sign contracts and brought profits in the coming time. Therefore, if enterprises could not see the possibilities of having the contracts, it would be the big barrier for the decision of enrolling e-marketplaces. Besides, the trust of e-marketplace members was also the big question that enterprises wondered. High fee and limited finance were not the main reasons, enterprises were willing to pay high fee, as long as e-marketplaces might bring many advantages.

Interview analysis

The first interview was with 15 Alibaba and OSB JSC members and the senior managers of Alibaba and OSB JSC. In terms of 15 Alibaba and OSB JSC members, the range of questions of satisfaction of the e-marketplace was raised.

Table 5: The satisfaction of 15 members about the Alibaba and OSB JSC services

	Member fee	Supporting member services	Connecting customers
Highly dissatisfied	2 (13.33%)	1 (6.68%)	1 (6.68%)
Dissatisfied	2 (13.33%)	2 (13.33%)	2 (13.33%)
Neutral	4 (26.67%)	5 (33.33%)	5 (33.33%)
Satisfied	4 (26.67%)	5(33.33%)	5(33.33%)
Highly satisfied	3 (20%)	2 (13.33%)	2 (13.33%)

Source: authors

Major members felt the fee was reasonable. Even though they had to pay high fee to become Gold Supplier but they received good supporting member services and the e-marketplace helped to connect customers (80% interviewers could sign contracts via the e-marketplace). Alibaba and OSB JSC could have high satisfaction thanks to ensuring five main functions in the e-marketplace: marketing; connecting; supporting; training; creating the forum.

In terms of disadvantages, the reply mentioned two matters: authenticating business unclearly whereas there were many foreign enterprises; giving Chinese enterprise some biases. For the first matter, the respondents explained that besides taking many opportunities from foreign enterprise members, they were facing challenges also, especially authentic problems because of oversea partners. If the members wanted to have the authentication, they had to register their business licenses and telephone numbers to Global Authentication Company. After authenticating processes, Global Authentication Company would mark TrustPass symbols on the information of the names of enterprises, the owners' names, address and telephone number that displayed on the stalls of Alibaba. Despite having the support from Global Authentication Company, Vietnamese enterprises still worried about the risks. Regarding the second matter, the interviewees answered that Alibaba always gave the priority policy for displaying Chinese enterprises. For example, Chinese products of Chinese were arranged in the first pages or the most favorable positions; other things were that Chinese enterprises had more templates, so they could upload video and multi-dimensional images and had priorities in getting access to big importers; if foreign enterprises buy products from Chinese enterprises, Alibaba allows them to use the online safe payment via Alipay.

Regarding the senior managers of Alibaba and OSB JSC, according to them, Alibaba just entered Vietnamese e-marketplaces in June 2009 but the number of members was almost 100,000. The reason why Alibaba and OSB JSC could attract many enterprises was that it brought the necessary benefits to members such as: helping members designing the online booths; asking Global Authentication Company for ensuring the trust of members; holding fairs, etc. In the near future, they had some plan to explore Vietnam e-marketplaces more through their advantages about branch, finance and benefits for members. However, the cautions of enterprises with online markets as well as incompletely built e-commerce policies were the difficulties facing Alibaba and OSB JSC in the next period.

The second interview was for the responsible staff of ECVN and gophatdat marketplaces. They also confirmed that Alibaba and OSB JSC were their strong competitors because of global corporation and financial resource. In the coming time, they needed to improve their e-marketplaces, supply more functions supporting users. They also agreed that if Vietnamese e-marketplaces did not improve quickly, they would be defeated by the global giants.

4. Discussion

The emergence of the Internet and the necessity of marketing the images of enterprises, many enterprises established their websites and joined e-marketplaces. The important thing was that the e-marketplaces supported members in displaying the images about enterprises well; however members were not satisfied totally with the ability of connecting among members and enhancing transactions of e-marketplaces. When the members signed contracts and had transactions, they still followed the traditional methods. It was understandable when the development of the online payment system did not accompany with the growth of e-commerce, thus leading to the disharmony in transactions. As the results, although the members could search partners thanks to the information displayed in the e-marketplaces, they still had to deal with orders by traditional ways.

Another interesting point mentioned was that many enterprises hesitated to take part in e-marketplaces because of two main reasons. Firstly, e-marketplaces did not work effectively; therefore the possibility of bringing profits for members was not high. Enterprises were willing to pay high member fees, but it seems that investing in e-marketplaces was not the good choice and needed to be considered carefully. Secondly, the uncertainty was also the big barriers of enterprises, so the authentication needed to be enhanced.

Regarding penetration into Vietnam e-marketplaces, Alibaba had advantages of global branch, huge financial resources, experiences, and good services that attracted almost 100,000 members and made them satisfied after one year of the process. In other hand, it was necessary to consider the authentication of members and avoid bias with Chinese enterprises. They can require Global Authentication Company to tighten the authentication process or ask another company to support.

5. Conclusion

Our study provided the clearer view of the e-commerce application and enrolment in e-marketplaces of Vietnamese enterprises. Without Alibaba, Vietnamese e-marketplace competitiveness was strong. Now when the giant came, the event pushed the competitiveness even more increasingly. Vietnamese e-marketplaces needed to adapt their services with the demands of members, and to create the unique to exist in the online competitive market.

Another issue was that the policies of e-commerce and payment systems should be improved faster to accompany with the development of e-commerce and e-marketplaces. It would result in the trust of customers and facilitated the online transactions. In terms of limitation, our study should research more about the satisfaction of members through estimating their use of the functions of Alibaba and OSB JSC e-marketplace. The number of members to investigate needed to be increased to raise the reliability of the information.

Vietnamese e-marketplace was potential and competitive also. In order to confirm the footholds in such market, all enterprises should improve their services to increase members' satisfaction and attract more joiners. Moreover, the supports from the government were essential in remaining feasibly legal corridors. Future researchers and e-marketplace investors would find our research as the background for further refinement and development to understand about Vietnamese e-marketplaces.

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Annex 1

History & Milestones of Alibaba Group

1999	Alibaba Group is officially established by its 18 founders, led by Jack Ma, working out of a Hangzhou apartment.
1999-2000	Alibaba Group raises US\$25 million from Softbank, Goldman Sachs, Fidelity, and other institutions.
2002	Alibaba.com becomes profitable.
2003	Consumer e-commerce website Taobao is founded, again in Jack Ma's apartment.
2004	Online payment system Alipay is launched.
2005	Alibaba Group forms a strategic partnership with Yahoo! Inc. and takes over the operation of China Yahoo!.
2006	Alibaba Group makes a strategic investment in Koubei.com.
2007	Internet-based business software company Alisoft is launched. (January) Alibaba.com Limited lists on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange. (November) Alibaba Group launches Alimama, an online advertising exchange company. (November)
2008	Taobao Mall, a dedicated B2C platform, is introduced to complement Taobao's C2C marketplace. (April) Koubei.com is merged with China Yahoo! to form Yahoo! Koubei. (June) Alimama is integrated with Taobao. (September) Alibaba Group R&D Institute is established. (September)
2009	Alisoft is merged with Alibaba Group R&D Institute. (July) Alisoft's Business Management Software division is injected into Alibaba.com. (August) Koubei.com is injected into Taobao as part of the "Big Taobao" strategy, which positions Taobao as a one-stop e-commerce service provider to promote wider use of e-commerce among consumers. (August) Alibaba Cloud Computing is established in conjunction with AlibabaGroup's 10th anniversary celebration. (September)
2010	Alibaba Group creates a cross-business team comprising senior managers from Taobao, Alipay, Alibaba Cloud Computing and China Yahoo! to execute a full-scale roll-out of the "Big Taobao" strategy. (March) Alibaba Group announces that it will begin in 2010 to earmark 0.3 percent of annual revenues to fund efforts designed to spur environmental awareness and conservation in China and around the world. (May) Taobao Mall launches a new independent web domain, Tmall.com. (November)
2011	Alibaba Group announces its plan to build a network of warehouses across China and, together with its partners, drive major investment in logistics development in the country. (January) Alibaba Group reorganizes Taobao into three separate companies, Taobao Marketplace, Taobao Mall and eTao, to capture the Chinese consumer e-commerce opportunities. (June)

Source: www.Alibaba.com

Annex 2**Items employed****A. General information**

1. Name:
2. Address:
3. Scale: Enterprises have less than 50 employees
 Enterprises have 50-300 employees
 Enterprises have more than 300 employees
4. The field of enterprises: Trade Production Service
5. Capital: Less than 500 million VND (25,000\$)
 From 500 million VND (25,000\$) to 1 billion VND (50,000\$)
 From 1 billion VND (50,000\$) to 5 billion VND (250,000\$)
 From 5 billion VND (250,000\$) to 10 billion VND (500,000\$)
 More than 10 billion VND (500,000\$)
6. Does the enterprise have the specific e-commerce staffs? Yes No
If no, what departments take responsible for e-commerce issues?
7. The website (if have):
If have, does enterprise have transactions from the website? Yes No
8. Does the enterprise join any e-marketplace? Yes No

B. For enterprises joined e-marketplaces

1. Could the enterprise find the partners or signed contracts via e-marketplaces?
 Yes No
2. Which functions of e-marketplaces does the enterprise explore?
 Searching Marketing Finding partners
3. What are the benefits that the enterprises could get from the e-marketplaces?
(1-Very low possibility; 2-Low possibility; 3- Neutral; 4- High possibility; 5- Very high possibility)
 - Ability to find partners 1 2 3 4 5
 - Effects of conducting business plans via e-marketplaces 1 2 3 4 5
 - Help to reduce costs 1 2 3 4 5
 - Ability to make profits 1 2 3 4 5

C. For enterprises had not joined any e-marketplaces

Why does the enterprise hesitate to join e-marketplaces?

- (1-Very low possibility; 2-Low possibility; 3- Neutral; 4- High possibility; 5- Very high possibility)
 - More sellers than buyers 1 2 3 4 5
 - The trust of e-marketplace members 1 2 3 4 5
 - High e-marketplace fee 1 2 3 4 5
 - Small number of contracts 1 2 3 4 5
 - Facing difficulties in using functions 1 2 3 4 5
 - Limited finance 1 2 3 4 5