Segmenting Corporate Exporting Activities: Sporadic versus Regular Exporters

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The primary focus of this study is an examination of differences between characteristics and activities of sporadic and regular exporters. This mode of classifying exporting firms, which has not previously been studied in a rigorous fashion is shown to be valid and has important policy implications. This classification is robust, with a high degree of convergent and internal validity. The two groups are shown to be similar along several key dimensions of exporting behavior such as size, age, and size of export orders. However, there are distinct differences with regard to such factors as initial market entry influences, export profit margins, export distribution channels, and information use. These critical differences relate to dynamism and level of export marketing activities undertaken. Conceptual, practical, and policy implications are discussed.

The internationalization process in exporting firms has been a primary area of interest in many studies of export behavior (e.g., Cavusgil 1984; Czinkota and Johnston 1981; Johanson and Vahlne 1977; Joynt and Welch 1985; Kaynak 1982; Piercy 1981; Steimann et al. 1980). Interest in understanding export development is motivated by a variety of factors. If this process can be successfully modelled, this allows for prediction of export behavior. At the same time, the critical variables determining the direction, rate, and success of export development can be isolated.

In the export literature, many conceptualizations of the export development process have been proposed. Most assume incremental development along a continuum through multiple stages defined using a wide variety of differing criteria. Therefore, the stages of export involvement vary depending on how researchers have defined them (Miesenbock 1988). It is also generally assumed that the process is evolutionary in nature (e.g., Bilkey and Tesar 1977; Johanson and Wiedersheim-Paul 1975).

The classification scheme used in this study, sporadic and regular exporters, as described in the section on Dependent Measure, does not assume evolutionary development and provides a perspective which allows for the exploration of a number of important questions that have not been sufficiently addressed in export research. The differences between sporadic and regular exporters are potentially important and the analysis undertaken in this study complements the existing body of knowledge and offers an alternative perspective for export management and public policy recommendations which commonly assume incremental, evolutionary export development.1

The underlying premise, providing the rationale for the research, is that the transition from sporadic exporting to a situation where management sees exporting as a regular part of the firm's activities is a crucial development with important implications for export operations. Unlike most of the "stages of development" taxonomies presented in the literature, the sporadic-regular classification does not assume any tendency to automatic progression along a continuum of varying degrees of export development. Sporadic exporting is, in our view, a stable and viable ongoing activity in many firms and is not necessarily the first stage in a process of further export commitment.2 If this conceptualization is valid, then sporadic exporters may not constitute the best target group for expending scarce export promotion resources and, insofar as they are targeted, innovative non-traditional approaches may be needed. Additionally, sound national export policies should include increasing the export proportion of sales among regular exporters.
The primary focus in this paper, therefore, is to explore a number of potential differences between sporadic and regular exporters and then evaluate the implications of these differences. Along with general characteristics, such as firm size and extent of export activity, the major areas of interest examined are export marketing and information gathering policies and perceived need for export assistance.

THE EXPORT DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Although much of the export literature is characterized by inconsistent and sometimes contradictory findings (Bilkey 1978; Miesenbock 1988), there has been some degree of consensus regarding the nature of export development (Thomas and Aray 1985). The mainstream view is that export involvement is best conceptualized as a process of evolutionary, incremental international involvement and that most firms tend to move through a number of distinct export development stages. However, there is considerable disagreement as to the number and nature of these stages and the most appropriate criteria to use when measuring the degree of export development.

Underlying most of the “stages of export development” frameworks is the notion that the acquisition and evaluation of knowledge, especially experiential know-how, plays a vital role in the internationalization process. In this perspective, export development is essentially a phased process of organizational learning. Work by a number of researchers at the University of Uppsala during the 1970s was particularly influential in fostering this orientation (Carlson 1975; Johanson and Wiedersheim-Paul 1975). A central idea is the “establishment chain,” a conceptualization of the development of overseas operations in terms of mode of foreign market entry. Thus firms are seen to develop through the stages of “no regular export, export using an agent, export with a sales subsidiary, and overseas production” (Johanson and Vahlne 1977).

The level of export activity was used by Pavord and Bogart (1975) to delineate four stages of export development. They distinguish between “no activity, passive activity, minor activity, and aggressive activity.” Wiedersheim-Paul et al. (1978) focus on pre-export behavior, identifying “domestic, passive, and active” stages in terms of criteria concerning managerial willingness to start exporting and information gathering and transmission activity.

Using criteria relating to both managerial interest in exporting and level of export activity, Bilkey and Tesar (1977) identify six stages of pre-export and export level of activity ranging from “unwilling to export” to “experienced exporter exploring additional markets”. Czinkota and Johnston (1981) use multiple criteria relating primarily to level of export activity to delineate six stages ranging from “unwilling” to “experienced larger scale”.

Managerial export attitudes and perceptions figure very prominently in other conceptual models. Reid (1981) proposes a five stage schematic framework in which exporting is conceptualized as an innovation-adoption process. The critical criteria used to identify the stages, which range from “export awareness” to “export acceptance”, are management decision maker characteristics regarding export experience, attitude, expectations, and motivation. Cavusgil (1984) has also focused on a stage of internationalization framework which emphasizes management perceptions and behavior as the key criteria when distinguishing between “experimental, active, and committed” export involvement. Management perceptions of the firm’s competitive advantage were also used by Czinkota and Johnston (1981) to distinguish between proactive and reactive exporters.

As has been seen, a number of the taxonomies discussed delineate an “experimental” export stage which, at first sight, appears to be analogous to sporadic exporting. However, there is an important difference between experimental and sporadic exporters. Experimenters are usually defined as firms that are evaluating the viability of exporting. As such, this is inherently a transitory phase. After some period of time, the experimenter will either drop exporting or become more heavily committed. In the case of sporadic exporters, however, there is nothing implied that firms will be likely to evolve either forward or backward. Indeed, there are good reasons to expect that many sporadic exporters are in a “steady-state” situation.

Most proponents of “export stages” models are unlikely to take the position that firms will always follow the road to export development prescribed in their particular model. In addition, there is no agreement as to which model(s) are best suited for classifying exporters. Miesenbock (1988), for example, lists 11 classification schemes that are intuitively sound, but are arbitrary in that they are based on ex post facto analyses. Nevertheless, the importance of contextual differences within and external to the firm, and of variance in management motivations and perceptions is generally recognized. To the extent that these factors vary, then this will undermine mechanistic descriptions and some differences in patterns of development are likely within the prescribed framework.

An important element of most of the classification schemes reviewed above is an explicit or implicit acceptance of the notion of incremental export development. However, there is evidence to support the view that many sporadic exporters are unlikely to “develop” further along a continuum of evolutionary stages. In studies in the U.S. and U.K. respectively, both Kothari (1978) and Cannon (1979) found scant evidence in many firms of any natural progression to more active export involvement. At the same time, there is evidence that, in some firms, overseas market entry proceeds in a more direct and faster manner than is implied by theories of gradual, stepwise internationalization (Giddy 1978; Hedlund and Kvernland 1985).

Specific objections to the stages of development orientation are that it does not take sufficient account of variance in the external and internal contingencies making up the specific environmental context faced by individual firms; that much research in this area is based upon ex post facto analysis; that insufficient account is taken of the complex interaction of environmental, organizational, and strategic variables; that most models do not readily accommodate the reality of reversals in the direction of change; and that insufficient attention is given to transition phases, from one stage to another, when instability is likely to be high (Strandskov 1985; Turnbull 1987). It should be noted that this critique
does not demonstrate that the “stages” view of export development is necessarily redundant. However, it is important in that a rationale is provided for the argument that many export development models are too simplistic and that the underlying notion of inherent momentum towards evolutionary development may be suspect.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

The preceding discussion provides the foundation for our view that many firms engaged in sporadic exporting are in a stable situation with respect to their overseas operations, and are unlikely to change their pattern of export behavior in the absence of major changes in their situation. In short, our argument is that sporadic exporting is frequently a “steady state,” rational form of behavior with a fairly high degree of stability and that “progression” from this form of exporting will often have to overcome a high degree of inertia.

Discussion of the specific reasons to expect stability rather than evolution on the part of many sporadic exporters is best prefaced by a brief review of determinants of corporate export behavior. Most discussions of determinants distinguish between factors internal and external to the firm. Cavusgil and Nevin (1981) focus on internal variables, highlighting managerial goals and expectations regarding exporting, the firm’s differential advantage, and level of organizational commitment to exporting. Welch (1983) discusses influences on initial export involvement. Pre-export activity, latent influences, such as the history and characteristics of the firm, decision maker characteristics, and internal and external direct stimuli are identified as key variables.

Once the firm is actually exporting, the critical determinants of future export behavior are likely to include the goals and export orientation of decision makers in the firm, and other internal factors such as resource availability, utilization levels, and product and process innovation. Features of the external environment, such as conditions in domestic and overseas markets, competitive pressures and availability of export incentives and support, are also important.

It is likely that managerial characteristics, perceptions, and objectives, will often tend to be relatively stable over long periods of time. This is particularly plausible regarding management’s export orientation in many sporadic exporters. Often direct exposure to exporting is minimal among key decision makers in such firms because of limited export interest and extensive use of external facilitators and channel members to manage export marketing. Top management frequently perceive exporting as a marginal activity that has value when domestic demand is depressed or when prices overseas are high. In such an environment, the notion of significant in-house export learning is academic, and it is unlikely that export resource commitment or organizational structures will be given a high priority.

The development of competitive advantages from product and process innovation and from greater efficiency provides a platform for export success. However, in some firms the opportunity cost of exporting, in terms of exploiting domestic business, is seen to be high. It should also be noted that innovations that provide very significant competitive advantages are not very common. For example, most “new” products are not very different from competing products, and many product changes are primarily cosmetic in nature.

Change in the external environment will affect export behavior. Thus a downturn in domestic demand or higher prices in foreign markets may cause firms to look into or place more emphasis on exporting. Often these forces are of temporary duration, and changed circumstances can just as readily result in lower export activity and interest. These changes in the balance of market forces at home and abroad often account for the fluctuating export interest and activity that are characteristic in many sporadic exporters.

The implication of this analysis is that, as regards to such key determinants of export behavior as managerial attitudes, R&D activity, and external environmental factors, one is not able to rely on evolutionary forces to provide the impetus toward more export involvement and commitment. It thus becomes particularly important to focus on differences between sporadic and regular exporters. This is necessary in order to better understand what needs to occur for firms to become regular exporters.

Size and Related Differences

There is a high degree of agreement that the characteristics of management in a firm on such dimensions as export perceptions, motivations, and goals play a key role in accounting for the level of corporate export interest and activity (e.g., Bilkey 1978; Thomas and Araujo 1985). Given this consensus, the thrust in this study is to focus on other differences between sporadic and regular exporters.

Initially, attention is focused on the proportion of sales accounted for by exports, export volume, the size of the firm, the size of average export orders, and the length of time the firm has been in business. The initial hypothesis is that regular exporting will lead to higher relative export sales. Also, it is anticipated that the volume of exports is greater for regular exporters. If this is not the case, then the rationale for seeking to encourage firms to engage in regular exporting becomes debatable.

Differences in the size of firms have been proposed as an important variable affecting export behavior. Although the empirical findings are not conclusive, some studies indicate that firm size is significant (e.g., Burton and Schlegelmilch 1987; Reid 1982). The usual argument is that some important inputs needed for exporting, such as specialized managerial resources, are indivisible and that economies of scale favor larger firms. For these reasons it is expected that regular exporters would be larger than sporadic exporters. It is also believed that larger orders, which result in economies of scale in order processing and output, will motivate regular exporting. Furthermore, firms which have been in business longer will be more likely to have exploited domestic opportunities to the full, and thus be more likely to engage in regular exporting as a means for achieving corporate objectives.

It is generally believed that firms typically begin exporting activities when they receive unsolicited foreign orders. It is of critical importance to determine whether export market entry influences vary between the two groups. For pub-
lic policy formulation, for example, it is useful to know the degree to which firms in each group depend on their own initiative to enter the exporting business. In addition, a distinction must be made between the nature of business of foreign buyers, i.e., whether they are end-users or distributors. Past research has not made a distinction in this regard.

In light of this discussion, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1.1: The proportion of export sales in sporadic exporters is smaller than in regular exporters.
H1.2: The volume of exports in sporadic exporters is smaller than in regular exporters.
H2: Sporadic exporters are smaller in size than regular exporters.
H3: The average size of export orders is smaller in sporadic exporting firms than in regular exporters.
H4: Sporadic exporters have been in operation for a shorter time period than regular exporters.
H5: Initial export market-entry stimuli are different in sporadic and regular exporters.

Export Marketing and Information Gathering Activities

The basic proposition forwarded is that regular exporters undertake more marketing activity and export data acquisition than sporadic exporters. This expectation is in line with empirical evidence that, as compared to other exporters, less committed exporting firms often perceive more barriers to exporting, do not establish export specific organizations and are more dependent on external organizations for export information, marketing, and distribution (Bilkey and Tesar 1977; Brasch and Lee 1978; Cannon 1979; Cavusgil 1984). Export marketing and information gathering activity is also seen to be both a cause and effect of regular export involvement. In other words, regular export activity, which implies some degree of export success, is generally likely to be a function of, amongst other things, export marketing activity. At the same time, continuing export activity is also likely to be, to some degree, a condition for investment in the resources necessary for overseas marketing activity. It is, for example, more difficult to justify funding for export-related positions when little or no regular overseas business is being generated, even though slack foreign sales may be due to insufficient marketing. Thus sporadic exporters are expected to place more emphasis on the use of secondary sources of export information and, accordingly, rate them as being more helpful than regular exporters.

The following hypotheses are proposed:

H6: Regular exporters are more likely to adopt market-oriented pricing policies in export markets than sporadic exporters.
H7: Patterns of usage of export channel intermediaries differ in regular and sporadic exporters.

H8: A higher proportion of sporadic exporters use one or more secondary export information sources than regular exporters.
H9: Regular exporters have attended more export training seminars than sporadic exporters.
H10: Sporadic exporters access a greater number of sources of secondary export information than regular exporters.
H11: Sporadic exporters will tend to use different information sources than those utilized by regular exporters.
H12: Sporadic exporters perceive secondary export information to be more helpful than do regular exporters.
H13: The forms of assistance needed by sporadic exporters differs from that needed by regular exporters.

METHODOLOGY

Overview

Primary data for this study were collected through a mail survey. The survey was designed to gather basic information regarding export activity of firms and to assess export market entry influences, methods of market contact, information sources, as well as corporate characteristics such as product type(s), size, age, etc. A questionnaire was designed and pretested using exporting specialists. After several iterations, the revised questionnaire was pretested again using a small sample of exporters. Based on their responses, slight modifications were made to the research instrument.

A random sampling procedure was used to select 1,800 firms from two lists provided by the State Development agency and the U.S. Department of Commerce in a Southeastern state. These lists are compiled over a period of years and regularly updated and the combined listing provided the sampling frame for this study. Given the original nature of the construct under investigation, this sampling frame was thought to be appropriate for examining a broad range of exporters and export activities. Prior to the selection process, the mailing lists were screened for duplicates. Questionnaires were mailed to the top executives of firms with two possible incentives at their discretion: (1) a summary of the results, and (2) an offer to be contacted by a state or Federal official to discuss their exporting needs and potentials. It should be noted that the questionnaires were anonymous and did not require that respondents identify themselves. An attempt was made to purge the mailing list of non-manufacturing firms that were not candidates for exporting. However, there was no a priori knowledge that firms selected actually engaged in exporting.

A total of 274 responses were received, a response rate of 15.2 percent. Of this number, 28 firms manufactured products inappropriate for exporting and another 24 were not interested in exporting. Of the remaining 222 firms, 91 had
not previously engaged in exporting and were excluded from further analysis. It is expected that the response rate to this survey was greatly influenced by the self-selection criterion with the greater likelihood for exporters to respond. The response rate in the present study is in line with other large scale surveys of executives and managers (e.g., Achrol and Stern 1988; Anderson et al. 1987; Dwyer and Welsh 1985). Analysis of responses by industry affiliation, using two-digit SIC codes, indicates no difference between the original sample and those responding to the questionnaire. Although this is not an assurance of the absence of non-response bias, it is an important measure and an indication of some level of equivalence between the original sample and the responses received. Also, the number of responses is in the same range as other exporting studies. Over 85 percent of respondents were CEOs, presidents, vice presidents, and owners. The remainder were completed by individuals holding various managerial positions.

Dependent Measure

Definition of the dependent variable, i.e., sporadic and regular exporters, presented a research design challenge similar to those encountered in “stages of export development studies,” i.e., lack of a priori guidelines for discriminating between the two types of exporters. Prior exporter classification studies have used either objective or subjective criteria in delineating exporting firms. The problem associated with the use of objective criteria is that the validity of both, the criteria used for classification and their cut-off points, are highly debatable and open to challenge. It can be argued that many criteria are derived ex post facto, and that arbitrary decisions are made regarding cut-off points. Czinkota and Johnston (1981), for example, have developed a six-stage export activity model using nine classification criteria and rigorously defined quantitative cut-off values. However, the validity of certain criteria, such as number of export transactions, and the rationale for critical measures, such as five percent export sales and $100,000 of export volume requirements are not unimpeachable. This is particularly critical since various researchers use different criteria and cut-off values.

The use of more subjective criteria that are not as easily measurable, such as management perceptions, raises similar problems. However, such an approach has the advantage that the impact of the researcher’s a priori assumptions is reduced.

An objective of this study was to measure the dependent variable without a priori assumption(s). Since empirical evidence suggests a strong relationship between managerial attitudes and perceptions regarding exporting and export behavior (e.g., Pavord and Bogart 1975; Reid 1981), a meaningful way of measuring exporting behavior is to ask respondents to classify themselves as “sporadic” or “regular” exporters. This approach allows for the exploration of potential differences which are automatically assumed in other classification schemes and reflects the importance of managerial perceptions.

Convergent validity of the construct under study was tested by using a ten percent cut-off point for export proportion of sales to delineate exporters. Ten percent is approximately one standard deviation above the mean for sporadic exporters and one standard deviation below the mean for regular exporters. This resulted in a satisfactory Phi and contingency coefficients, .648 and .544 (with an upper limit of .707), respectively. Furthermore, this approach led to a 73 percent agreement with the dependent variable. The internal validity of the dependent measure is assessed by comparing export proportion of sales of sporadic and regular exporters. As shown in Table 1, the mean values for the two groups are significantly different.

RESULTS

Characteristics of Exporting Firms

A comparison of the characteristics of 69 sporadic and 62 regular exporters is shown in Table 1. The export proportion of sales is significantly higher for regular exporters. Whereas regular exporters on the average rely on export sales for 33 percent of their revenues, sporadic exporters rely on export sales for less than five percent of their revenues. Also, the volume of exports is significantly lower in sporadic exporters (p < .0001). Therefore, hypotheses 1.1 and 1.2 are supported.

In this study size is defined in terms of the number of full-time employees and annual sales. The results indicate that, for both measures, size does not discriminate between regular and sporadic exporters. Therefore, the second hypothesis of this study is not supported.

The data indicate that although the average export order is higher for regular exporters, the difference is not statistically significant. Hence, the third hypothesis of this study is not supported. However, a larger proportion of sporadic exporters had export transactions that were less than $10,000. The typical export order size of some 56 percent of sporadic exporters fall into this category versus 34 percent of regular exporters.

| Characteristics                          | Regular | Sporadic | p<  
|------------------------------------------|---------|----------|-----  
| Export proportion of sales               | 33.4%   | 4.7%     | .0001  
| Firm size$1$                            |         |          |      
| Number of employees                      | 521     | 434      | .3   
| Annual sales                             | $1–$5m  | $1–$5m   | .6   
| Average export order size                | $10–$25k | $10–$25k | .16  
| Number of years in business              | 29.2    | 28.4     | .86  
| Dependence on export manager or export department$2$ | 25.8%   | 16.8%    | .13  
| Industry affiliation                     |         |          | ns$3$ 

$1$Categorical data were used for measuring annual sales and export order size.

$2$The dependence measure reflects the weight respondents in each group allocated to export managers and departments.

$3$Distributions of two-digit SIC codes are not different at .05 level of significance.
If the process of internationalization occurs in a series of stages, then one would generally expect sporadic exporters to have been in business for a shorter period of time. The results of the present study, however, do not support this notion. The two groups of firms are not significantly different from one another with regard to their age (i.e., 28.4 versus 29.2). Therefore, the fourth hypothesis of this study is not supported.

A much larger proportion of regular exporters reported the presence of export managers or departments than sporadic exporters (53 versus 19 percent), and this difference is significant (p < .001). However, as noted in Table 1, when export departments and export managers are present, there is no significant difference between regular and sporadic groups in their dependence on export managers and export departments.

The distributions of industry affiliations of sporadic and regular exporters are not significantly different. To the extent that industry affiliation reflects export product offerings by responding firms, this is noteworthy. The finding suggests that generally speaking, sporadic and regular exporters are competing in the same industries. However, two-digit SIC codes are not specific enough to allow for a definitive conclusion.

**Initial Market Entry Influences**

Respondents were asked to indicate how they first became involved in exporting by dividing 100 points among twelve possible entry influences. In this research, a distinction was made between foreign middlemen and end-user contacts. This is a critical distinction since it may signify different levels of reliance on resellers as market entry influences. This is in contrast to previous research which does not differentiate between sources of foreign order, labeling both as an unsolicited foreign order. Results indicate that three categories, namely firm’s own initiative, contact from foreign end-users, and contact from foreign middlemen are the most important stimuli. Regular and sporadic exporters allocated 86 percent and 76 percent of the points, respectively, to these market entry influences. Initial market entry stimuli for regular and sporadic exporters are reflected in the mean scores shown in Table 2.

The firm’s own initiative is the most influential factor for the initial export market entry decision in both groups of firms. However, it is more important in the case of regular exporters, and this difference is statistically significant. In the case of sporadic exporters, the firms’ own initiative is about twice as important as the next influence. Thus, to the extent that this influence reflects management’s international or export orientation, sporadic exporters rate reasonably high along this dimension too.

Foreign middlemen and end-users are equally influential in terms of the sporadic exporters’ initial entry decision. However, reliance on foreign middlemen is significantly greater for sporadic exporters than regular exporters. The influence of foreign end-users is about the same for both groups of firms. Thus, there is partial support for hypothesis five, and these findings support and complement prior studies. Previous research is supported in that foreign orders (middlemen plus end-users) appear to be the most influential reason for initial export market entry in sporadic exporters. It also complements previous findings in that these sources were not nearly as influential in the initial market entry decision by regular exporters. In fact, regular exporters’ own initiative is over twice as important as contact by foreign customers. Another complementary finding of the present study is that although contacts by end-users play an equal role for the initial market entry decision of both groups, foreign middlemen play a less significant role in the regular exporters’ decision to enter the market.

**Export Marketing Activities**

Regular and sporadic exporters were compared with regard to their export marketing activities. Two areas of marketing policy were of particular interest. First, the issue of export versus domestic profit margins is a very important consideration in the firm’s export marketing plan as well as its overall strategy. Export profit margins depend on export prices as well as costs, both of which significantly influence competitive position in international markets. Second, method of market contact, which is another important consideration in exporters’ distribution strategy, is examined. The results are shown in Table 3.

Respondents were asked whether their export profit margins are the same, lower, or higher than their domestic margins. The data indicate that export profit margins of sporadic exporters are more likely to be similar to their

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3</th>
<th>Export Marketing Activity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marketing Activity</td>
<td>Regular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Export versus domestic margins</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Equal1</td>
<td>53.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Export margins higher by2</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Export margins lower by2</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method of market contact3</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Regular sales force</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Export department or manager</td>
<td>29.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Export trading and export</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>management companies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign distributors and agents</td>
<td>35.1</td>
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1Percentage of each group using a similar margin for domestic and export markets.
2Mean difference (higher or lower) in export profit margins as compared to domestic profit margins.
3Using a constant-sum scale where 100 points were divided among various alternatives.
domestic profit margins than is the case for regular exporters. In some 78 percent of sporadic exporting firms, export profit margins are the same as in the domestic market. This is indicative of a tendency on the part of sporadic exporters to engage in cost-plus export pricing. Given that exporting invariably increases costs, particularly for those with a smaller export base, it may be assumed that higher prices are being charged by sporadic exporters.9 In contrast, only 54 percent of regular exporters have similar margins for both markets. This finding indicates that regular exporters are more likely to adjust export margins to local market conditions and, therefore, the sixth hypothesis of this study is supported.

Regular exporters, because they rely more on exporting and must remain competitive in the host markets, face repeated export pricing decisions, and the findings indicate a more flexible export pricing behavior on their part. Since only a handful of sporadic exporters are likely to apply different export and domestic profit margins, statistical testing of differences in the level of export profit margins of the two groups is not possible. However, the data on cases of “higher” export margins indicate that the export profit margins of regular exporters exceed those of sporadic exporters by two percent (eleven percent and nine percent more than their domestic margins, respectively). On the other hand, the data on cases of “lower” export profit margins indicate that sporadic exporters are more likely to have lower margins than regular exporters (24 percent and 14 percent less than their domestic margins, respectively).

Therefore, the pricing policies of sporadic exporters who adjust their margins according to market conditions appear to be as flexible as regular exporters. This is not the case for smaller firms10 in this data base, only 19 percent of which are shown to be market oriented. When small, market-oriented firms are considered, their deviation from their domestic margins is considerably smaller than that observed with sporadic exporters.

Sporadic exporters rely most heavily on their domestic sales force for contacting export markets. Domestic facilitating middlemen (i.e., export management and export trading companies) and foreign distributors and agents are almost equal in importance for sporadic exporters. The results also indicate that as compared to regular exporters, sporadic firms rely significantly more on regular domestic sales people to expedite export sales. Furthermore, there is more reliance on facilitating middlemen by sporadic exporters than by regular exporters. However, this relationship is not very strong. The data also show that regular exporters rely significantly more on foreign distributors and agents.

These differences in patterns of utilization of export channel intermediaries generally support hypothesis seven. It would appear from the findings that although foreign middlemen are not particularly influential in the initial export market entry decision of regular exporters, they play a very significant role in providing routine market access. Emphasis on foreign middlemen is twice as great for regular exporters as compared to sporadic exporters. It is also noteworthy that foreign middlemen’s influence upon export market entry by sporadic exporters is nearly the same as their market access influence.

Information Needs and Assistance

Sporadic exporters, with their limited exposure and penetration in export markets, are expected to benefit to a greater degree from secondary sources of information than regular exporters.11 Furthermore, in the absence of greater involvement in export markets, acquiring primary information may not be economically justifiable. Therefore, it was expected that a greater proportion of sporadic exporters would be using secondary sources of information. Information regarding the usage of secondary sources of export data is shown in Table 4. Channels of distribution are considered a primary information source and, hence, not included. Another category, “other,” was included, but only a handful of responses were received under this heading.

It is apparent that a much larger proportion of regular exporters utilize various sources of information. The data suggest that regular exporters are significantly more likely to use various secondary sources of information listed in Table 4. Some 77 percent of regular exporters use one or more secondary sources of information in exporting, as compared to about 52 percent of sporadic exporters (see Table 5). The eighth hypothesis is, therefore, not supported. This finding is in line with the findings of previous studies which show a strong relationship between involvement in exporting and greater use of information.13

Business publications such as periodicals, newspapers, and reports are the most common export information source utilized by both groups of firms. However, such sources are used in exporting more than twice as frequently by regular exporters. Country reports are used by nearly eight times as many regular exporters as sporadic exporters. Other than country reports, utilization of various forms of secondary data by regular exporters exceeds that of sporadic exporters by a factor of over two to one. It would appear that, regardless of firms’ dependence on primary data, their use of secondary sources increases with greater involvement in exporting.

Regular exporters, because of their higher level of involvement in export trade, use information gathered through export training seminars much more than sporadic exporters. Forty-three percent of regular exporters reported that they used this source of information in their exporting activities as compared to 15 percent of sporadic exporters. It is noteworthy, however, that a larger proportion from both groups have attended exporting seminars intended to provide a basic background on exporting. Over 58 percent of regular exporters have attended such seminars as compared to 31 percent for sporadic exporters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information source</th>
<th>Regular</th>
<th>Sporadic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business publications</td>
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<td>Country reports</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>State agencies</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chamber of Commerce</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Secondary Information Use by Source

This finding is in line with the findings of previous studies which show a strong relationship between involvement in exporting and greater use of information.
to only 32 percent of sporadic exporters. This difference is statistically significant ($p < .01$), and the ninth hypothesis of this study is supported. It is also apparent that exporting seminars fall short of expectations of both groups of exporters, although regular exporters have been able to make better use of the information gathered through this medium.

When all respondents are considered, regular exporters on the average use more than twice as many sources of secondary data as sporadic exporters. Regular exporters use 2.6 sources in their exporting activities as compared to 1.1 sources for sporadic exporters and this difference is statistically significant.

If only those exporters that do use any secondary source of information are considered, the margin between the average number of sources utilized by both groups narrows considerably. In this case, regular exporters, on the average, rely on 3.7 sources, whereas sporadic exporters rely on 2.7 sources. This difference is not statistically significant ($p < .10$). However, since sporadic exporters as a group use significantly fewer sources of information, hypothesis ten is not supported.

The distributions of the types of secondary sources used by the two groups in the present study are not significantly different from one another. Hypothesis eleven, therefore, is not supported.

In accordance with our hypothesis sporadic exporters’ they were expected to value secondary sources more than regular exporters. As shown in Table 5, sporadic exporters do consider sources listed in Table 5 as being more helpful than regular exporters. However, the degree of difference is not statistically significant. The only exception is the information received through state agencies which are perceived as being significantly more helpful by sporadic exporters. Since the level of helpfulness of six other secondary sources is not perceived differently by the two groups, hypothesis twelve is not supported. This finding is in contrast to our expectation that sporadic exporters, because of their limited exporting activity, would rely significantly more on the more readily available, cost efficient sources of data.

It is noteworthy that regular exporters, despite their lower perception of the helpfulness levels of secondary sources, utilize them significantly more than sporadic exporters. This is likely to be due to the regular exporters’ position on the export learning curve, where the incremental value of additional information is less than is the case for sporadic exporters. Yet, since they are involved in more export transactions, they naturally have more opportunities to access secondary sources.

It was expected that sporadic exporters, because of their limited knowledge and experience in international markets would need different forms of assistance than regular exporters. Respondents were asked to indicate the types of assistance they need for expanding their export business using a constant-sum scale. Categories of assistance used are shown in Table 6. The results indicate that sporadic exporters exhibit a greater need for individual consulting than do regular exporters. However, there was no statistical difference between the two groups with regard to their need for other forms of assistance. Hence, the thirteenth hypothesis is not supported.

It is noteworthy that some 45 percent of all exporters have attended exporting seminars and, as noted earlier, significantly more regular exporters have attended such seminars. Demand for exporting seminars as a form of assistance, however, is not significantly different by group. The data also indicate that both groups of firms perceive greater access to foreign contacts as their most important assistance need. For both groups, providing foreign contacts is about three times more important than the next type of assistance desired. Other than foreign contacts and consulting, sporadic exporters place about the same weight on the types of assistance listed in Table 6.

### Classification of Exporters

Based on the above analysis, it is apparent that sporadic and regular exporters vary along several key dimensions. Further examination of these variables using a classification scheme is desirable for three reasons. First, inasmuch as two-group, univariate tests have been used to establish these differences, it is important to examine their simultaneous influence. Second, discriminant validity of the construct under investigation can be established if exporters are successfully classified. Third, to determine the linear combination of independent variables that can account for group membership.

Therefore, multiple discriminant analysis was used to examine the joint effect of independent variables and to predict group membership. Export proportion of sales and export volume were set aside for this analysis. Nine independent variables that distinguished between sporadic and regular exporters were simultaneously used to generate the

### TABLE 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information Use</th>
<th>Regular</th>
<th>Sporadic</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use of export information $^1$</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of sources used</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types of sources used</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of helpfulness $^3$</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^1$Percentage of firms using one or more information sources.

$^2$The distribution of raw data tested using chi-square; proportions are shown in Table 4.

$^3$Weighted average of responses to the level of helpfulness of various secondary export sources measured on a five-point scale where 1 = not helpful and 5 = very helpful.

$^4$Sporadic exporters consider state agencies more helpful ($p < .001$).

### TABLE 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Mean Value</th>
<th>Regular</th>
<th>Sporadic</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Names of potential foreign contacts</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market feasibility studies</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information source references</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Export management seminars</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Export documentation training</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consulting</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is noteworthy that some 45 percent of all exporters have attended exporting seminars and, as noted earlier, significantly more regular exporters have attended such seminars. Demand for exporting seminars as a form of assistance, however, is not significantly different by group. The data also indicate that both groups of firms perceive greater access to foreign contacts as their most important assistance need. For both groups, providing foreign contacts is about three times more important than the next type of assistance desired. Other than foreign contacts and consulting, sporadic exporters place about the same weight on the types of assistance listed in Table 6.
discriminant function. The difference in the centroids of the resultant model, i.e., Mahalonobis' $D^2$, is statistically significant ($p < .0001$). The variables included in the model and their corresponding standardized coefficients are shown in Table 7.

The model is quite effective in classifying both sporadic and regular exporters. Overall, a hit rate of 76 percent is obtained. However, the discriminant model correctly classifies over 79 percent of sporadic exporters as compared with 71 percent of regular exporters. In contrast, in a two-group case prior probabilities are 50 percent, and in this study, maximum chance criterion is 52 percent and proportional chance criterion is nominally over 50 percent. Thus, the model is more successful in classifying sporadic exporters. Given the nature of independent variables in this study, the proportion of correctly classified cases is a strong support for the discriminant validity and robustness of the dependent variable. Since predicting group membership was not our main objective in this analysis, a classification test on a hold-out sample was not performed.

### DISCUSSION

The results of this study are summarized in Table 8. It is apparent from the findings of this study that with regard to many firm characteristics, sporadic exporters are not very different from regular exporters.

The findings indicate that regular exporters derive a much higher proportion of their revenues in international markets than is the case for sporadic exporters. Although this is what one would expect, the sharp difference between the two groups, i.e., 33.4 percent versus 4.7 percent, was not anticipated. However, with regard to other important general characteristics, i.e., size of the firm, the size of export orders, the number of years in business, and emphasis on export manager or export department, significant differences between sporadic and regular exporters were not observed.

In the case of both groups of exporters, the firm's own initiative is the single most influential factor contributing to their decision to enter exporting. In addition, foreign end-users are equally influential in affecting export entry in both groups of firms.

With regard to their export marketing activities, there are sharp differences in patterns of behavior between regular and sporadic exporters. Regular exporters exhibit a pattern of greater management involvement and activities in export marketing. Thus regular exporters are more likely to maintain a flexible and market-oriented pricing scheme, are more likely to participate in export seminars, make less use of domestic channel intermediaries and facilitators, and are thus more likely to exercise greater direct control over foreign marketing and distribution. Some differences in the patterns of information usage are also observed. The propensity to use secondary export information sources by regular exporters is greater. However, the number of sources accessed and the types of sources sought by the two groups are not statistically different.

These findings have important implication in several ways. First, from a conceptual point of view, it is apparent that our taxonomy offers a new and relevant perspective for analyzing the export behavior of firms. Second, the findings regarding the lack of significant differences between sporadic and regular exporters on the dimensions of age, size, and utilization of export department indicate that many sporadic exporters, for a variety of reasons, may maintain their status indefinitely and do not follow a pattern of natural progression to becoming regular exporters. Resources expended to convince this segment of exporters to become more active are, therefore, likely to be ineffective unless this is taken into account. Third, since regular exporters sell a much higher proportion of their output in other countries, to the extent that industry and firm conditions permit, it is very desirable to target sporadic exporters in an effort to stimulate regular involvement.

The fact that a great majority (75 percent) of sporadic exporters asked for some form of assistance is a positive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Similar</th>
<th>Dissimilar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Firm size</td>
<td></td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in operation</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Export proportion of sales</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Export volume</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Export order size</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry affiliation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on export manager/dept.</td>
<td></td>
<td>*1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of export manager/dept.</td>
<td></td>
<td>*2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Export market entry influence</td>
<td>*1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method of contacting export market</td>
<td>*2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market-oriented pricing</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exporting seminar attendance</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of secondary information</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of sources used</td>
<td>*3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types of sources used</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of information value</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for assistance</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1Partially supported.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2Use of regular sales force and foreign distributors were significantly different and the use of facilitating middlemen was mildly significant. See Table 3.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3Not significantly different if only information users are considered.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**TABLE 7**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Standardized Coefficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial export market entry influence</td>
<td>.2606</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firm's own initiative</td>
<td>-.5101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence of foreign middlemen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Export market contact</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular sales force</td>
<td>.2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign distributors or agents</td>
<td>.6501</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMCS or ETCs</td>
<td>.2143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Export profit margins equal to domestic</td>
<td>.2666</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of secondary sources used</td>
<td>.4834</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of export manager/dept.</td>
<td>-.0453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exporting seminar attendance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Dummy variable.
signal. Although one cannot be certain about the implications of this request for assistance upon export performance, effective aid is likely to lead to an improved export proportion of sales for sporadic exporters. Written comments by a number of respondents from the sporadic group provide some support for this and hence the possibility of becoming a regular exporter. In a mature industry, on the other hand, such a transition may be very difficult regardless of firm conditions and management orientation. In any event, resources aimed at increasing exports should be allocated between the two groups with consideration of their potential to produce long-term exporting activity.

A critical issue concerns the types of assistance needed by sporadic exporters. It is apparent that in terms of the types of aid considered, the needs of sporadic and regular exporters are not significantly different in many respects. However, there is evidence that sporadic exporters are particularly interested in acquiring experiential knowledge. Thus, they exhibit greater need for consulting assistance. In contrast, other studies have argued the needs of exporters differ sharply by stage of export development. Clearly, certain critical needs, such as names of foreign contacts, appear to be characteristic in both groups of exporters. This is not to say that a different approach is not desirable when seeking to assist these two groups of exporters. Our results indicate that a critical factor is the level of export marketing activity and commitment of sporadic exporters. Measures that impact on these aspects of export-related activities are particularly desirable.

The evidence from this study, therefore, indicates that such factors as limited size, small export orders, and limited experience are not very important as barriers to regular export activity. Differences in the levels of exporting of sporadic and regular exporting firms are more likely to be due to the orientation of management, suitability and adaptability of products for international markets, and export marketing programs. The findings of this study indicate that sporadic exporters tend to use a different approach in distributing their products and are not export-market-oriented with regard to their profit margins and pricing. It is also plausible that their products are not sufficiently suitable for international markets to gain broader market acceptance and attract large numbers of orders. This implies that some sporadic exporters could be transformed into regular exporters given a change in or modification of these elements.

Future research should focus on not only overcoming the limitations of the present study, but also by examining important aspects of exporting not included in this study. From a methodological viewpoint, selection-history (or maturation) interactions is an inherent problem associated with prior research (Crano and Brewer 1973). That is, if the process of export development is evolutionary as some have suggested, then the data collected from the more experienced firms will be biased by the virtue of their greater experience in export market. For example, it is quite likely that executives and managers responding to the questionnaire may have been on the job for a relatively short period whereas the firm may have entered export markets long ago. Thus, if age were a delineating factor, respondents may not be able to accurately reflect initial influences that got them started in export business. In the present study, age was not a discriminating factor. Although responses by older firms are subject to the same limitations as other studies, since sporadic and regular exporters are not distinguishable by age, selection-history or maturation effects play lesser roles in the final results.

More in-depth evaluation of export marketing operations and management characteristics and commitment to exporting in sporadic and regular exporters is needed. It is desirable to examine specific product lines and product characteristics of these exporters using larger samples. Attention should also be given to examining the scope and impact of exporting in both groups of firms on such dimensions as level of export profits, and number and nature of export product lines and international markets served. An in-depth focus on forces influencing export development and countervailing factors inhibiting such growth in sporadic exporters is also appropriate. Ultimately, the development of a theory or a conceptual framework intended to segment export behavior of firms is dependent on longitudinal measures of firms and their exporting activities. Furthermore, the universal applicability of such a theory or framework will have to be tested through comparative studies of exporting firms in several countries.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors gratefully acknowledge helpful comments by Professor Kendall J. Roth, The University of South Carolina, during the manuscript preparation stage, as well as the assistance of Professor Frank L. DuBois, The American University, during the data collection phase of this study.

NOTES

1. It is noteworthy that this assumption is based on one-shot studies and has not been empirically supported through data-based longitudinal studies.

2. On-going sporadic exporting can be the result of many influences. Three possible scenarios may explain the phenomenon. First, sporadic exporting activity does not necessarily suggest stagnant domestic and/or export sales. However, export proportion of sales may stay the same or even decline. Second, in mature industries, such as wire and cable or automobile tire, where sales are stagnant, many export markets with high potential are likely to have acquired manufacturing capability for such products, and there is little real or perceived technological advancement. Thus attainment of differential advantage over other brands is often very difficult and profit margins are frequently low due to intense competition. In order to remain competitive, the production costs of the exporting firm must be sufficiently low to cover additional costs associated with transportation, tariffs, and frequently lower distribution channels, and also to overcome perceived exporting risks. A third possibility is that sporadic exporters may be engaged in exporting as a way of using excess capacity or unloading periodic production overruns.

3. Only 24 percent of 105 published exporting studies referenced by Miesenbock (1988) had a greater number of responses. In fact, 38 percent had fewer than 100 responses, 67 percent fewer than 200, 84 percent fewer than 300 responses, and 94 percent fewer than 500 responses.

4. The volume of exports was computed by multiplying the responding firms' export proportion of sales by their sales volume.
5. Five classes of export order sizes ranging from less than $10,000 to over $100,000 were listed. Chi-square analysis of the two order size distributions also showed no difference between the two groups of exporters.

6. The presence of export managers and departments is a simple frequency count, i.e., a nominal measure. In contrast, the dependence measure reflects the weight respondents allocated to export managers and departments using a constant-sum scale.

7. The initial export market entry influence of foreign middlemen includes the possibility of such long-term arrangements as exclusive distributorship or extended sales contract to end-users and are not limited to one-shot unsolicited orders.

8. In fact the weights allocated to most other categories were negligible. The data show that the Chamber of Commerce, Small Business Administration, and state agencies were not influential sources of export market contact for regular exporters. Other categories included consultants, export management companies, industry associations, and the Department of Commerce.

9. The sources of higher costs are numerous and may be both manufacturing and transaction-based. Product and packaging changes may be necessary, transportation and tariffs, export information and insurance, and longer distribution channels are among elements that increase costs. However, appropriate assessment of such costs were not an objective of this study. Generally, it is expected that regular exporters generally reduce such costs because of their more active involvement in export markets.

10. Firms with fewer than 100 employees.

11. Primary source is defined as any source that originates data (Churchill 1987). Therefore all other sources, including DOC Country Desks and export training seminars which rely significantly on secondary sources of information, are considered secondary. As such, the distribution channel is considered a primary source and is not included in this study.

12. Since the examination of primary sources was not an objective of this study, one cannot be certain of the level of their usage by regular exporters. Findings by Cavusgil (1984) clearly show that marketing research is much more likely to be formalized by “committed” exporters, but their most important sources of data are secondary in nature and are not different from those used by “experimental” and “active” exporters. Cavusgil indicates that “committed” exporters rely marginally more on “other firms,” presumably including channel members, as sources of information, but whether or not this is a source of primary or secondary data is not known.

13. Since our data does not address primary data usage pattern, each group’s level of usage of this type of information is not known. However, we expect that because of the time and cost associated with the collection of primary sources of information, its intense use by sporadic exporters is not anticipated.

14. Information in Table 4 pertains to export training only. Seminar attendance figures presented here are somewhat higher because they include various types of exporting seminars.

REFERENCES


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