

Being Customer-oriented Entrepreneurial Firm: Tactical Business Practices for Thai SMEs in Entering Global Market

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ABSTRACT

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are competing under an increasingly turbulent and global business environment. Products made in any global corner can easily be transferred and sold in other parts of the world. Nowadays, the term global market is no longer restricted to large or multinational firms. The competition is open to all types of firms. Nevertheless, SMEs normally have limited business resources to compete under a global scenario compared to their larger counterparts, especially for Thai SMEs. In this paper, the author argues that SMEs need to be creative, innovative, and have unique strategy to enter the global market successfully. Thai SMEs should enthusiastically apply customer and entrepreneurial orientations to their business at individual and organizational level. Several tactical business practices discussed will help Thai SMEs become customer-oriented entrepreneurial firms. Further it is stressed that, the higher the firm's pursuit of customer and entrepreneurial orientations, the better will be the firm business performance.

Key words: customer-oriented entrepreneurial firm, global market

INTRODUCTION

One of challenged tasks today is how to remain competitive advantage in complex business environment. Globalization has its impact on the way of doing business. It is possible nowadays to sell products and services from anywhere in the world. This means that a company not only competes with its local rivals but also with the international rivals. The number of business players usually increases rapidly in profitable areas. A diversity of products and services are regularly launched to the marketplace and this makes difficult for a company to remain its competitive advantage. In addition, the buying

loyalty of customers generally decreases when the customers have more choice of buying products and services. As a consequence, the nature of competition and customer buying behavior is changed by the impact of globalization. This condition forces a company to seek for creative, innovative, and unique strategies in order to survive in this complex and dynamic business environment.

It is said that the term global market is no longer limited to large firms or multinational firms. The competition is opened to all sizes of firms. Many governments in several countries have encouraged local firms to go global especially the small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). For example, in

Thailand, a number of governmental agencies have been established to facilitate local SMEs to become international SMEs. The examples of governmental agencies that established to support SMEs including Department of Export Promotion (DEP), Office of Small and Medium Enterprises Promotion (OSMEP), Small and Medium Enterprise Development Bank (SMEBANK), and Institute for Small and Medium Enterprises Development (ISMED). Moreover, there are a number of private firms who enthusiastically provide valuable services to SMEs.

Generally speaking, when a company decides to compete in a global basis, there are some basic barriers that a company needs to take into consideration. Those basic barriers can be listed as the following.

- International trade agreement barrier – there are several economic integrations around the world. Well-known economic integrations include NAFTA, OPEC, APEC, EU, and ASEAN. The international cooperation usually has an agreement on tariff or quota that can be either a threat or an opportunity to a company depending on whether or not the host government of the company is in the agreement. Typically, local government will provide this information to its local enterprises.

- Cultural barrier – this includes values, norms, beliefs, languages, religion, customs and more. This is probably one of the first things to think about if a company wants to go global. It is essential to learn and understand the differences in one culture from another.

- Political and legal barriers – political system and stability also affect the way a company function to become a global player. Some nations welcome foreign business investment, but others do everything they can to discourage competition from foreign companies. So, a company who wants to go global needs to have a clear understanding of the potential countries' political and legal system.

- Financial barrier – the currency value and exchange rate should be stable or at least moving in an acceptable range so that the company can handle the risk. The trend of inflation and deflation

can also affect the way the company manipulate its financial transaction.

- Competition barrier – this includes the number of existing players, the strengths and weaknesses of the competitors, what marketing activities are being used, and the trend of competition. How hard for a new player to get into the competition? How many local and global competitors? Who is currently the market leader?

Firms of all sizes who want to be a global player have to conquer the above mentioned barriers. In general, larger firms have a tendency to overcome these barriers easier than SMEs because they have more available resources to support their business activities. However, there is still a room for SMEs in global market competition. What SMEs need to have is a proper business strategy and tactical practice in entering the global market.

In term of foreign direct investment (FDI) issue, UNCTAD (2005) has done a survey concerning the most attractive business location for FDI. In Asia, the top five FDI prospective countries consist of China, India, Thailand, Vietnam, and South Korea respectively. Thailand was ranked #3 in Asia and #9 in world overall. When looking specifically to South East Asia (SEA), it appears that Thailand was ranked #1. It is said that Thailand is one of the fast growing countries in Asia. The country is rich in natural resources and has the potential to be one of the major suppliers in the global market. The economic is growing and the government is heading the country to be the business hub of SEA. Since the majority of enterprises in Thailand is SMEs, the government has actively started and implemented a series of national plans and activities to facilitate SMEs to survive in both local and global markets. Based on the several encouragements, it can be said that Thai SMEs have a capacity to compete in the global market. However, the number of Thai SMEs who enter to the global market successfully is still low as compared to other countries. Thus, more tactical business practices are needed to strengthen SMEs' position in the global competition.

This paper intends to present the attitudes and characteristics needed for Thai SMEs when deciding to compete in a global level. The marketing concept specifically to customer orientation will be discussed and integrated with the concept of entrepreneurial orientation. The contribution of this paper is to propose the essential tactical business practices for Thai SMEs that would strengthen the competitive position of Thai SMEs in global market competition.

Customer orientation

It has been long discussed that the firms who focus on their customers' needs and wants are in a better position to achieve long term success than those do not (Jaworski and Kohli, 1993; Levitt, 1960; Webster, 1988; Kotler, 2000). A number of empirical researches has been done and demonstrated the positive relationship between customer orientation and business performance (Narver and Slater, 1990; Baker and Sinkula, 1999; Matsuno and Mentzer, 2000). The term customer orientation is interchangeably used with customer-centric (Sheth *et al.*, 2000), customer-focused (Vandermerwe, 2004), and market orientation (Desphande *et al.*, 1993). Even a diversity of terminology has been proposed, the fundamental idea is similar or the same in the way that a company should fulfill the needs and wants of customers. Customer perspective is one of the important perspectives for performance measurement as extensively professed by Kaplan and Norton (1996).

Literatures in the context of customer orientation have been extensively researched in both organizational and individual levels. The work at

organizational level that widespread cited was done by Narver and Slater (1990). They proposed the concept of marketing orientation that consists of three behavioral components: Customer orientation, competitor orientation, and interfunctional coordination. Customer orientation is just one part of their model and defined as "the sufficient understanding of one's target buyers to be able to create superior value for them continuously" (Narver and Slater, 1990). The elements of customer orientation proposed by Narver and Slater (1990) are presented in Table 1.

The works that target at individual level usually concern the personality trait of individuals. One of seminal articles was done by Saxe and Weitz (1982) who developed selling orientation-customer orientation (SOCO) to measure the salesperson performance in regarding to the degree of customer orientation of each salesperson. Later researches have examined the relationship between customer oriented salespeople and other related variables such as customer satisfaction (Reynierse and Harker, 1992), job satisfaction (Hoffman and Ingram, 1992; Brown and Peterson, 1993), commitment to the firm (Pettijohn *et al.*, 2002). In this research stream, Brown *et al.* (2002) define customer orientation as an "employee's tendency or predisposition to meet customer needs in an on-the-job context." They found that customer orientation is influenced by deeper personality traits that will impact worker performance. Recent study of Donavan *et al.* (2004) views customer orientation as a personal characteristic. They develop a four-dimension conceptualization of

Table 1 Element of customer orientation.

Organizational level	Individual level
Narver and Slater (1990)	Donavan <i>et al.</i> (2004)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer commitment • Create customer value • Understand customer needs • Customer satisfaction objectives • Measure customer satisfaction • After-sales service 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to pamper the customer • Need to read the customer's needs • Need for personal relationship • Need to deliver the service required

customer orientation to test if service-worker customer orientation affects the job responses. The four dimensions of their model are presented in Table 1.

It is clearly seen that the concept of customer orientation can be applied to the firms or employees inside the firms. The business competition today is dominated by customers' demand. It is wise to follow what customers' wants and needs. Webster (1988) suggests the five basic requirements for the firms to be a customer-oriented firm. They are:

- Customer-oriented values and beliefs must be supported by top management
- The firm should integrate market and customer focus into the strategic-planning process
- The development of strong marketing managers and programs
- The creation of market-based measures of performance
- The development of customer commitment throughout the organization

As many scholars have recommended that there is nothing more important than customers, all types of companies need to seek the best way to attract new customers and retain the existing customers. The concept of customer orientation should be employed in all kinds of businesses. However, there are other factors that influence the business performance. As indicated in the work of Narver and Slater (1990), customer orientation is just a part of a bigger model (market orientation). There are also other business directions that a company can choose such as innovation orientation, product orientation, competitor orientation, service orientation, technological orientation, entrepreneurial orientation, etc. In general, the type of business will determine what direction the firm should focus to. To compete effectively and build sustainable competitive advantage, the manager or key decision maker is recommended to choose or equilibrate the focus of the company.

SMEs are naturally limited with internal resources compared to their larger counterparts. In global market competition, we cannot avoid that larger firms or SMEs in other developed countries

have higher resources to manipulate known and unknown barriers as compared to Thai SMEs. What SMEs have done successfully will be easily counterattacked by larger firms. Larger firms are in a position to response faster, provide a better service or value to customers than SMEs do. Thus, SMEs need to be careful on whatever they do in global market competition. The author argues that focusing on customer orientation is not sufficient for Thai SMEs if they want to succeed in global business competition. The author would argue that whatever Thai SMEs want to do needs to be highly creative, innovative, and unique to prevent the attack from other firms from other countries. As a consequence, the concept of entrepreneurial orientation may be helpful for Thai SMEs. The details of entrepreneurial orientation are discussed in the next section.

Entrepreneurial orientation

The concept of entrepreneurship has been extensively emphasized by Schumpeter (1934), an Austrian economist. Schumpeter (1934) views entrepreneur as an innovator who implements change within markets through the carrying out of new combinations. The carrying out of new combinations can take several forms; (1) the introduction of a new good or quality thereof, (2) the introduction of a new method of production, (3) the opening of a new market, (4) the conquest of a new source of supply of new materials or parts, and (5) the carrying out of the new organization of any industry. The concept of *innovation* is the most important component in Schumpeter's definition. He proposes that the entrepreneur will eventually move the market away from equilibrium.

On the other hand, Kirzner (1979) states that the entrepreneur will move the market toward equilibrium. He views entrepreneur as the one who recognizes and acts upon market opportunities. In addition, entrepreneurship has been widespread studied and defined by several scholars. For example, entrepreneurship is the creation of new organizations (Gartner, 1988), is an active process of creating

incremental wealth (Ronstadt, 1984), and is concerned maximizing opportunities through doing different things (Drucker, 1954). Although entrepreneurship has been defined in several ways, entrepreneurs seem to share some characteristics in general. Chell *et al.* (1991) describe certain behavioural characteristic of entrepreneurs that they are likely to:

(1) have a propensity to create business organizations

(2) proactively search for new business opportunities

(3) seek innovative solutions to found problems and opportunities

(4) take an autonomous and strategic role in identifying and manipulating resources to convert opportunities into marketable products or services

(5) vigorously strive to achieve profit and business growth

(6) be willing to bear the risk associated with this behaviour

Many studies have been done that lead to the dimensions of entrepreneurial orientation. The study

in this context can be divided into two approaches; behavioural approach and trait approach. The behavioural approach views entrepreneur as a set of activities concerned in organization creation, while the trait approach views entrepreneur as a set of personality traits and characteristics. Gartner (1988) argues that behavioural approach will be more productive perspective for future research in entrepreneurship. In a seminal work, Miller (1983) states the three dimensions of entrepreneurial orientation: innovativeness, risk-taking, and proactiveness. This concept has been subsequently adopted and extended by several studies (e.g. Covin and Slevin, 1991; Lumpkin and Dess, 1996). Two additional dimensions of competitive aggressiveness and autonomy have been added to entrepreneurial orientation by Lumpkin and Dess (1996). Collectively, this five-dimension of entrepreneurial orientation is extensively referred in the study of entrepreneurship field. The five-dimension of entrepreneurial orientation is summarised in Table 2.

A number of studies have suggested that

Table 2 Dimensions of entrepreneurial orientation.

Dimension	Definition
Autonomy	- Independent action by an individual or team aimed at bringing forth a business concept or vision and carrying it through to completion.
Innovativeness	- A willingness to introduce newness and novelty through experimentation and creative process aimed at developing new products and services, as well as new process.
Proactiveness	- A forward-looking perspective characteristic of a marketplace leader that has the foresight to seize opportunities in anticipation of future demand.
Competitive aggressiveness	- An intense effort to outperform industry rivals. It is characterized by a combative posture or an aggressive response aimed at improving position or overcoming a threat in a competitive marketplace.
Risk-taking	- Making decisions and taking action without certain knowledge of probable outcomes; some understandings may also involve making substantial resource commitments in the process of venturing forward.

Source: (Dess and Lumpkin, 2005).

entrepreneurial orientation leads to positive business performance (Miller, 1983; Drucker, 1985; Covin and Slevin, 1989; Lumpkin and Dess, 1996; Barringer and Bluedorn, 1999). The concept, as similar to customer orientation concept, can be applied to both individual and organizational level. At individual level, entrepreneur can be individual who seek opportunities to establish his or her own business. At organizational level, the term corporate entrepreneurship is commonly used. It refers to the process whereby an individual or a group of individual, in association with an existing organization, create a new organization, or instigate renewal or innovation within that organization (Sharma and Chrisman, 1999). The entrepreneur in existing organization is also called intrapreneur by Pinchot (1985). The manager or key decision maker in each firm may attempt to create and foster intrapreneur inside the firm in order to build a creative, innovative and unique strategy that lead the firm to have sustainable competitive advantage. As recommended by Drucker (1985), the strengthening of entrepreneurship is an imperative objective for any enterprise that is building its responsiveness to a globalized and changing environment. Today's enterprises will not even survive in this time of rapid mutation and innovation if they do not maintain an entrepreneur's proficiency.

For Thai SMEs, being entrepreneurial oriented firm could help the firms overcome some resource constraints since the nature of entrepreneur described above is to seek for business opportunities and to make a creative and innovative strategy regardless the firm's resource constraints. Furthermore, if Thai SMEs want to compete in a global basis, the concept of entrepreneurial orientation is highly recommended because it is hard to win in global market competition and even harder to remain competitive advantage. The concept of entrepreneurial orientation could be one way to lengthen the success of Thai SMEs in this complex business environment. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier that there is nothing more important than customers, the firms should also focus on what

the customers' wants and needs. Therefore, the concept of customer orientation and entrepreneurial orientation should be integrated into Thai SMEs in order to increase the possibility to achieve a strong position in global market competition. The next section both orientations are integrated and discussed concerning the possible tactical business practices to apply both concepts into the firms.

Integration of customer orientation and entrepreneurial orientation

Evidences from various sources suggest that both customer and entrepreneurial orientations could conduce to better business performance. So, Thai SMEs should put more efforts to apply both concepts into the firms. Nonetheless, Thai SMEs may already have both concepts but they might not realize and probably do not know how to stimulate employees to be more customer and entrepreneurial oriented. There are several ways for manager or key decision maker of Thai SMEs to make the firm become both customer and entrepreneurial oriented. The possible tactical business practices to achieve this goal are discussed as the following.

Global vision

Globalization is growing and concerning consumers, producers, suppliers, and governments in different countries all over the world. Whether SMEs are interested to participate in global market, their products or services are not only competing with local rivals but also international rivals. So, it makes sense to have a global vision even the company may not currently have an intention to go global. SMEs should prepare to grow up in this fast changing environment and position themselves as one of global players.

Global strategic plan

The global vision needs to be incorporated with actual plan. The strategic plan should be flexible and can be applied to both local and global competition. Strategic plan is the plan that the firms

intend to do involving the challenges and opportunities caused by business environment, considering the stakeholders requirements. The concepts of customer and entrepreneurial orientations have to be added into this global strategic plan. All the firm's business activities should concentrate to customers' and other stakeholders' need and wants both locally and globally. The dimensions of entrepreneurial orientation could help the firm to create a creative and innovative global strategic plan.

Management encouragement

A number of studies indicates that the business direction of SMEs usually relies on the management knowledge and experience. The success and failure of SMEs are usually driven by the competence of management. The manager him/herself should more or less have entrepreneurial characteristics. In addition, the manager should also encourage employees to be more entrepreneurial oriented. Even being entrepreneur may lead the company to uncertain situation, but the expected outcome is generally greater than doing business in a conventional or secure way. The company may have to take some risks in order to move forward and this should be encouraged by the management.

Empowerment

Management encouragement is not a policy on the table but it must be practical. The encouragement may come in a form of empowerment. A certain level of independence and authority should be assigned to each related employee. This will lead to employees' autonomy which will make the working environment more flexible. The manager and subordinates should agree together concerning the level of independence and authority each party has. Nevertheless, in unexpected situation, related staff should be empowered to act immediately to solve the problems. For the company that usually assigns a single person or team to take care company's projects, that person or team must know beforehand the level of independence and authority they will have to handle each project.

Sufficient empowerment is needed to create entrepreneurial firm.

Training

The author believes that the concept of customer and entrepreneurial orientations is '*learn-to-be*' type not '*born-to-be*' type. They are behaviour that can be taught and learned. This is evidenced by a number of marketing and entrepreneurship courses in many leading universities in the world. It appears that entrepreneurship course is one of popular courses among managers as same as marketing courses. Thai SMEs may have internal training program taught by the manager or the one who has knowledge in both concepts. If it is impossible to have internal training program, the company can invite guest speaker from consultant companies or universities or send employees to take some marketing and entrepreneurship courses available in many business schools. The important thing is the manager should first analyze whether employees are customer and entrepreneurial oriented. Then, decide what kind of training will be appropriate for employees.

Partnership

As mentioned earlier that SMEs usually have limited resources to compete in a global basis as compared to their larger counterparts, especially for Thai SMEs. Nonetheless, SMEs can improve their necessary resources by seeking partnership. Finding partners who have competency that the firm is lacking will help the firm to have a better position to compete with larger firms. The partnership agreement needed to be *win-win* situation. The business partner can be either Thai SMEs or international SMEs from other countries depending on the capability of management in seeking for a partnership. For example, let's say that your company is manufacturing SMEs exporting products to European market. The company has a good distribution network that leads to competency in this market. The company wants to expand the business in Latin America market where the company has no

prior knowledge, connection, and experience before. So, the author would suggest the manager to find other manufacturing SMEs who are successfully exporting to Latin America market. Then, make an offer that you will do the marketing in European market for them and asking them to do the same in Latin America market for you. Consequently, both parties can export to European and Latin America markets even though both are SMEs. By doing this, both companies could increase sales, profit, market share, and their business performance. This is a *win-win* agreement and can be seen as customer-oriented entrepreneurial strategy to grow business.

By keeping the concept of customer and entrepreneurial orientations in mind and combining both concepts through tactical business practices discussed above, it is expected that the firm will become customer-oriented entrepreneur at both individual and organizational levels. The whole idea discussed in this paper is summarized in Figure 1.

Being customer-oriented entrepreneurial SMEs

The characteristics of customer and entrepreneurial orientations could apply to this new type of firm which the author calls *customer-oriented entrepreneurial firm*. Within the firm, there will be employees called *customer-oriented intrapreneur*. At individual level, the employees will have a certain level of independence and risk-taking to work in the firm. Their job will be more flexible but whatever they do needs to be customer-oriented. This means '*think for customers first*' before '*think for themselves*'.

The more customer-oriented intrapreneur the firm is, the more customer-oriented entrepreneurial firm the firm will be. At organizational level, customer-oriented entrepreneurial firm is the firm that is driven by internal entrepreneurs (intrapreneurs) and apply all entrepreneurship dimension into its business activities with emphasizing on customers' needs and wants.

For Thai SMEs, by applying the concept proposed in this paper, it is believed that the firm could achieve a better position in global market. All

the firm's business activities will be driven by internal entrepreneurs who emphasize on customers' needs and wants. As stated earlier that there are several barriers when deciding to actively participate in global market such as international trade agreement, cultural differences, political and legal issues, financial barrier, and competition barrier. The author would argue that being customer-oriented entrepreneurial firm will help Thai SMEs overcome those barriers and could lead Thai SMEs to have a creative, innovative and unique business strategy to compete with other global players.

Potential advantages

Researches that focus on customer-oriented and entrepreneurial-oriented firms have shown that these concepts lead to positive business performance. The advantages of both concepts can be applied here. The author would argue that the higher the firm's pursuit of customer and entrepreneurial orientations, the more likely the firm is to have a better business performance. The potential advantages of being this type of firm can be listed as follows.

- *Creative and unique strategy* – the characteristics of entrepreneur help Thai SMEs to seek for business opportunities in the world market regardless the firm's limitation. This strategy could help Thai SMEs penetrate market share from other global players in marketplace.
- *Innovative products or services* – this help Thai SMEs to differentiate their products/services to existing products/services.
- *Better customer value proposition* – business activities are driven by customers' needs and wants which lead to better customer value proposition.
- *Sustainable competitive advantages* – with the above advantages, the firm has a propensity to remain its sustainable competitive advantages.
- *Increased revenues and profitability* – the firm's business performance would increase when customers are satisfied.
- *Competency in niche market* – Thai

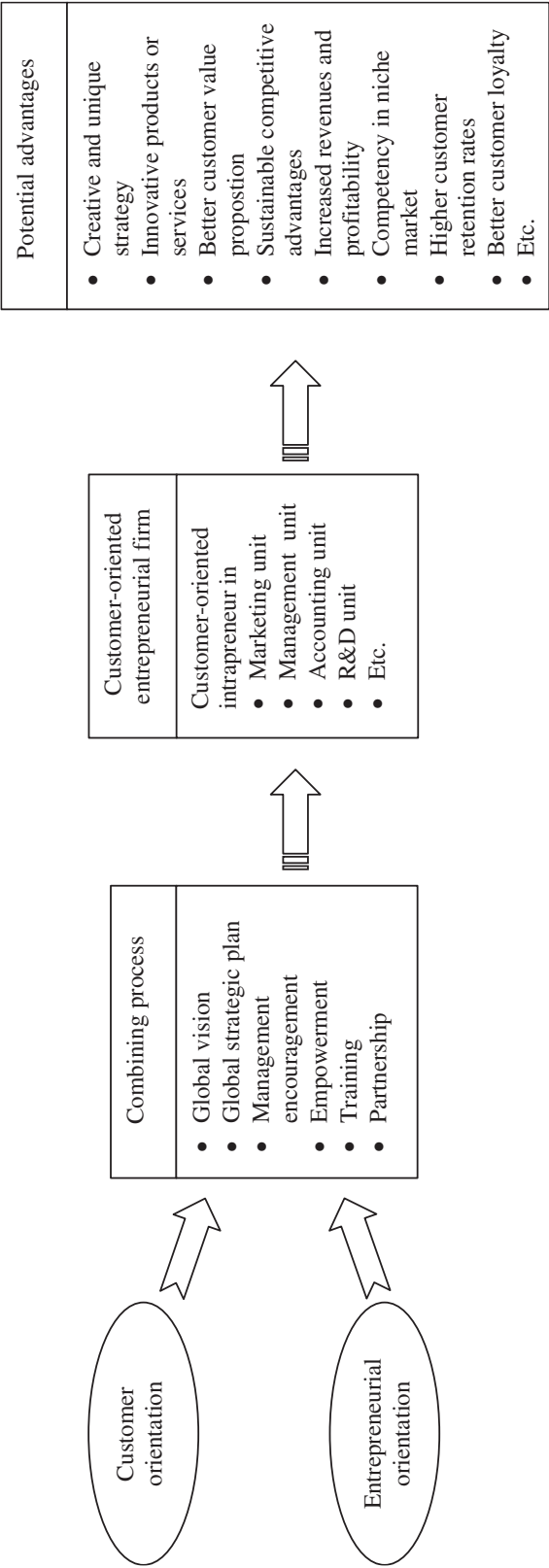


Figure 1 The integration of customer orientation and entrepreneurial orientation.

SMEs can position themselves to be specialist in some specific niche markets from the whole global market.

- *Higher customer retention rates* – generally speaking, customers keep coming back to the firm that satisfies them the most. This is one of objectives of being customer-oriented entrepreneurial firm.
- *Better customer loyalty* – with the higher customer retention rates, it is believed that the customer loyalty will also increase.
- and more

CONCLUSION

SMEs today are competing in turbulent business environment. This is the result of globalization. The geographical boundaries between countries are no longer barrier for the firms who want to be a player in global market. Products made in one place can be easily transferred to be sold in other areas all over the world. Therefore, Thai SMEs not only compete with their domestic rivals but also with their international rivals. In order to compete more effectively, Thai SMEs need to have the right strategy. This paper has proposed tactical business practices that Thai SMEs should enthusiastically apply customer and entrepreneurial orientations into their firm both at individual and organizational level. The management should encourage employees in all business units to be customer-oriented intrapreneur. Consequently, there are several potential advantages that could help Thai SMEs to enter global market. The author concludes that the more customer-oriented intrapreneur the firm is, the more likely the firm is going to be successful.

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