



Strategic Management for SMEs: *A K2Telecom merger with Airtel*
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Abstract

The report seeks to critically evaluate K2 Telecom's external and internal environment, after which strategic improvement recommendations are made based on research made during the critical evaluations. The essay takes an in-depth look at the relevance of strategic management for small and medium enterprises, thereby critically analysing and apprising K2 Telecom's strategic direction, its external and internal components, as well as the evaluation of the expectations of the stakeholders with the intent to come up with new and sustainable growth strategies.

1.0 Introduction

The telecom industry in Uganda has experienced slow growth, with many of the telecoms failing to break even due to the poor fixed-line infrastructure. Moreover, voice and data services provided by mobile networks has dominated the industry. The recent introduction of LTE technologies has paved the way for more competition in broadband services. New entrants like K2 Telecom have continued to struggle. Eventually in May 2018, K2 telecom was closed due to failure to pay taxes worth 95million shillings. The current changes in legislation such as introduction of Sim card registration, upgrade to LTE technology by the major competitors has warranted for K2 telecom to form a merger with Airtel which is one of the major telecoms in the industry. Therefore, this report seeks to critically appraise K2 telecom's merger with Airtel, by examining both the external and internal environments of K2 Telecom. The report evaluates the markets' expectations with the aim of establishing and developing strategies for sustainable grow of the company.

2.0 Background

K2 Telecom, a Buganda kingdom owned telecom, was established in 2013 operating under the code "0730". The new entrant focused on the provision of voice and Short message services to its customers, predominantly the people of the Buganda kingdom as the name K2 telecom was intentionally derived from the Buganda king's title "Kabaka." K2 initially targeted the 6million Baganda, who constitute 16.9% of the entire country's population, making them the largest ethnic group in Uganda. Within the first week, the kingdom had registered 60,000subscribers owing to the Baganda's loyalty to their king, and by the end of that month, K2 had 82,000 subscribers.

However, as Johnson *etal* (2017) suggest that the strategy of business forms the very embodiment of innovation, growth, and change in an organisation. Therefore just like Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven (1990) argue, without benchmarking its self on the industry's structural qualities, it would be impossible for SMEs like K2 telecom to grow or compete in an industry driven by latest 3G/4G technology supplemented with a variety of competitive services such as Data, mobile money, Voice over IP and many more value-added services. Hence by May 2018, K2 telecom was closed by the Uganda revenue authority owing to the failure to pay taxes worth 95million shillings. Limitations in the network coverage, products, marketing in a rapidly changing industry would make it impossible for K2 telecom to compete favourably. So K2 sought to form a merger with Airtel to be able to survive in the Ugandan telecommunications industry.

K2 telecom senior management partners with airtel, to reposition the K2 telecom brand in the telecom industry. This move would be considered as a strategic choice to ensure the growth of the organisation as denoted by Hambrick and Mason (1984), involving a course of action

to reallocate resources to meet the organisation's long-term goal (Chandler, 1963). This merger would mean that K2's 100,000 customers would have to switch to airtel sim cards starting with code "0708" to access the more extensive 3G/4G network coverage, data/internet and voice services, roaming and mobile money transfer services. Such coverage would give K2 telecom a unique competitive advantage over other players in the telecom industry and consequently value proposition as per Porter (1996).

Airtel is known to have entered the Ugandan telecom industry through the acquisition of Zain Uganda telecom in 2010 and later bought off the 2.8 million Warid telecom subscribers as it took over this acquisition in 2013 increasing its market share by 39% and customer base to 7.4 million customers out of the 16million telecom industry customers in Uganda at the time.

3.0 K2 current strategic direction

Taking on Johnson and Scholes (1997) argument, K2 Telecom strategy would involve the scope and direction of the company with a focus on achieving competitive advantage by configuring resources to counter customer's needs and expectations of stakeholders in the changing telecom industry. In addition, K2 Telecom's corporate strategy should encourage decisions and not only determine but also reveals the objectives and goals through planning and implementing policies which depict a variety of business engagements for the company, the human and economic organisation it is, as well as both economic and sustainable contributions to the company's stake holders as posited by (Analoui and Karami, 2003 pp.18-19).

Vision and mission

K2 Telecom would like to be the main provider of voice and broadband services to all the people in Uganda and make it possible for their customers to benefit the telecom. K2 Telecom intends to expand their network throughout east Africa facilitate growth of business and ensure livelihoods of their customers.

Values

The driving force behind the K2 Telecom vision is the use of integrity, humanity, humility, and innovation to ensure growth of the business. This is the approach applied in every aspect of the business, be it recruitment, and product development.

K2 Telecom's strategic direction involves a decision making concept that is strategic in nature as described in the competitive edge model in figure 2 below clearly stating the big picture in the vision and mission of the company, not forgetting the competition, global economic developments, and their effect on the business. The management develop forecast customer behaviors and analyse their projected impact on the business as it stands today. This affects the company's planning and what actions to be taken, making the competitive edge model strategies as feasible as credible and this increasing the company's growth rate (Crook *etal.*, 2003).

4.0 K2 internal environment evaluation

To carry out an internal evaluation into K2 Telecom's business environment, the leading framework used is the SWOT analysis, capitalising on the Strengths and weaknesses, mainly auditing the resources and capabilities as denoted by Helms & Nixon (2010), to identify the gaps and core competencies required for K2 Telecom's success. However, it is crucial to keep in mind the notion that some internal strengths appear as weaknesses by the customers. Moreover, conducting a value chain analysis to examine K2 Telecom's internal activities and identify the most valuable ones to determine if the activities leading to the desired profit

margins, as suggested by Bensoussan and Fleisher (2012), is inevitable. Furthermore, the value chain analysis with establishing the nature and sustainability of K2Telecom's resources and capabilities, specifically the nonexciting resources and capabilities required to make K2 Telecom more competitive.

Strength-technology and recent signing of a contract with sea com, a fibre optic cable company that enables K2 to transmit over long distance with the use of E1 dedicated lines, the brand name is a strength on its own as most people in the CBD respect and love the Kabaka(King) from which the name K2 Telecom was derived.

K2 Telecom's customers' loyalty should be bench marked on the satisfaction that comes from the customers. Building long lasting brands and customer relationships that are profitable comes from mitigating weaknesses as sociated with customer. How ever costly it may be, it is still inevitable for the success of K2 Telecom to ensure customer satisfaction as posited by (Anderson et al., 2004).

Weakness in the human resources department affects the success of the business as the hired employees are the main representatives of the company according to (Becker et al., 2001) and therefore poor human resources have a significant impact on K2 Telecom's performance. Negative customers experience and lack of talented employees are leading to customers dissatisfaction. The high employee turnover rate especially in the company's top management leads to mismanagement of company resources, conflict of interest and collusion, illegal dealings, and weak annual audits.

Although opportunities keep coming up from time to time, the company's effectiveness in sensing threats and opportunity (agility) is a necessary core competence to have Nafei (2016). The telecommunications industry is often affected by technological changes and thus a quick response to these changes is an inevitable core competence that K2 Telecom should have to counter the threat of competition as Ghezzi et al (2015) recommends.

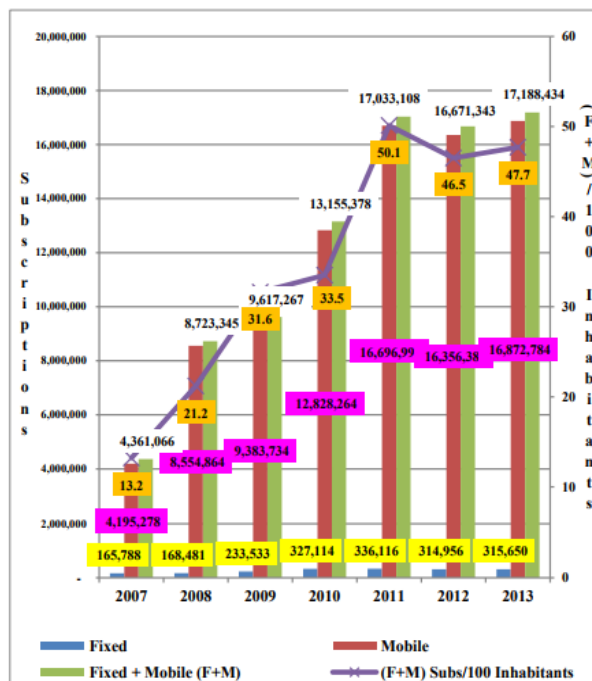
The high-top management turnover rate at K2 Telecom affects the direct control of the company. As Lambert (2016) suggests, corporate governance comprises of a set of relations, processes, and mechanisms that determine the direction and control of the organisation by top management. This is supported by Charan (2011)'s argument that corporate performance is enhanced by good governance this has an impact on the performance of the organisation. One of the required variables for good governance include Board diversity which in the case of K2 Telecom is lacking as the board is barely dominated by a few highly respected individuals within the Buganda kingdom as opposed to highly skilled people.

4.1 K2 telecom's external environment

The Ugandan telecommunications market is one of the markets experiencing low growth rates and decreasing ARPU (Average Revenue Per User) in voices services. Competition continues to increase with the exploding applications and data volumes although revenues have proved to be stagnant. Internet services providers are constantly seeking new avenues of increasing their revenue through value added and enterprise services while others opt for cloud computing.

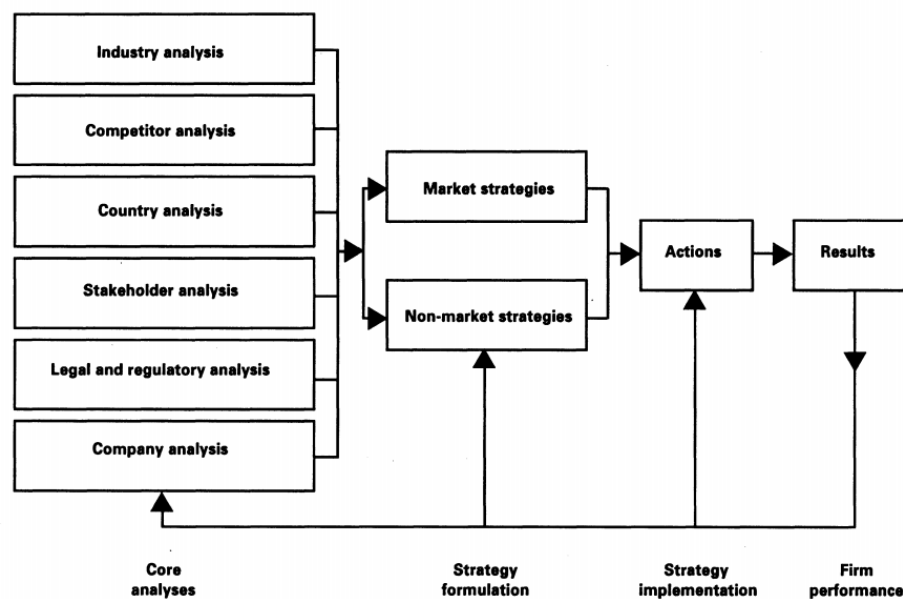
The telecommunications industry in Africa as a region has seen significant changes for the last three decades. The world trade organization recommended implementation of reforms such as privatization and establishment of regulatory institutions, instigating competition among services providers. Regulatory incentives, governance, competition, political stability, ownership determine the telecommunications sectors performance (Alemu, 2018). See below for an illustration of the telecommunications subscription.

Figure 1. Telecommunications subscriptions in Uganda



Adongu (2014)

From a population of thirty four million subscribers only seven million are subscribed to mobile services such as e-payment, e-banking, and mobile money services. A mobile penetration of forty seven which is way below the african average of sixty three. With very low simcard registration. Regulation requiring simcard registration has made customers to stop using their simcards. Stiff competition and reduced profits on voice services has prompted service providers to re-strategise in order to get competitive advantage (Adongu, 2014). Figure 2. The Competitive Edge Model

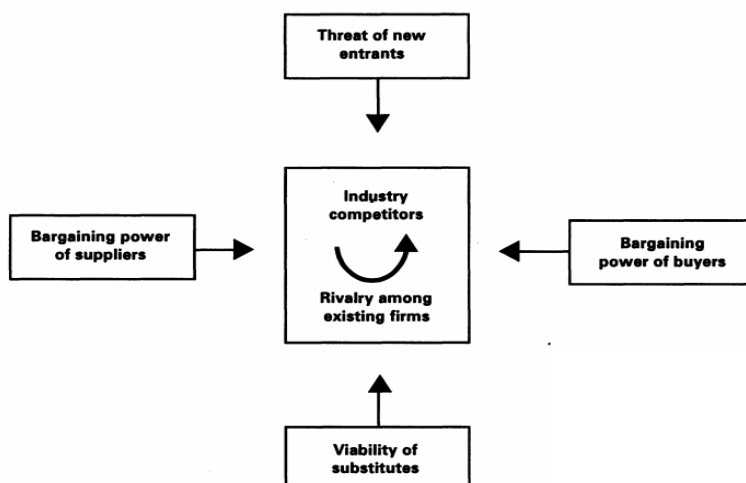


(Crook *et al.*, 2003)

4.2 Microenvironment evaluation using Porter's five forces

K2 Telecom applies the competitive edge model by conducting an industry analysis to get a clear understanding of the effect of the external factors on the company's operation and thus performance. To do this, K2 Telecom applies Porter's five forces model to analyse the power of rivalry, buyer's power, supplier's power, threat of new entrants, power of substitutes.

Figure 3. Porter's five forces



Porter (1998)

The low telecommunications' industry growth in Uganda has greatly contributed the increased rivalry among telecommunications companies. This has made it easy for customers to switch between telecommunications companies with majority of the customers leaving K2 Telecom for bigger telecommunications companies offering value added services. In addition, the low telecommunications' industry growth in Uganda has greatly contributed the increased rivalry among telecommunications companies. This has made it easy for customers to switch between telecommunications companies with majority of the customers leaving K2 Telecom for bigger telecommunications companies offering value added services.

The low telecommunications' industry growth in Uganda has greatly contributed the increased rivalry among telecommunications companies. This has made it easy for customers to switch between telecommunications companies with majority of the customers leaving K2 Telecom for bigger telecommunications companies offering value added services. Furthermore, new market entrants in the Ugandan telecommunications industry are eroding the industry profits by reducing the average revenue per unit generated from K2 Telecom customers. Low capital requirements have made the telecommunication industry circulated with a variety of telecommunication services distribution channels, but also this has been due to a limitation in restrictive regulations from the government coupled with large economies of scale.

Finally, the power of substitutes due to circulation of the market with the same products and services offered by rival telecommunication companies is making it very hard for K2 Telecom to compete in the Ugandan telecommunications industry. The rival telecoms are making it hard for K2 Telecom to compete on price and quality when it comes to services provision. This situation calls for K2 Telecom to constantly monitor the actions of its rival

telecommunications companies so that it can adapt to the changes in real time to minimise losses.

4.3 Macro environment evaluation using PESTEL analysis

Based on the competitive edge model, K2 telecom is expected to conduct a competitor analysis in response to the actions of the competing telecoms. This analysis creates cause for K2 Telecom to make strategic moves based on competitor intelligence obtained from strategic groups which divide and group the competition into clusters of telecommunication companies with similar characteristics.

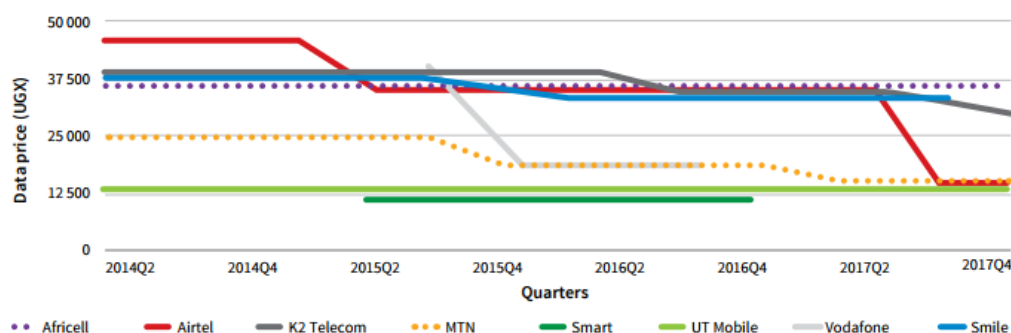
Country analysis should be carried out to assess the receptibility of international markets to K2 Telecom's products and services. The results from this analysis can be fundamental in maintaining the growth and profitability of the company. However, to carry out a country analysis, it is important to consider a series of factors, some of which may range from highly unreliable to reliable data quality. K2Telecom, must analyse cultural, economic, legal, and political data in order to identify the markets with high potential.

Political factors such as high levels of corruption and lack of transparency affects the licencing of telecommunication companies in Uganda. This coupled with heavy taxes levied on telecommunications companies with no breaks or tax holidays to facilitate growth and more investment into the telecommuting industry. Heavy taxation policies affect the costing of K2 Telecom products and services making it hard the business to compete with substitute products from rival telecommunication companies that are big enough to enjoy economies of scale.

The introduction of social media and mobile money taxes in 2018 has slow down internet and mobile money services usage. Social medica sites have been the favourable substitute for the costly voice and text services. This has socially affected communications and networking especially among millennials who are the main user of social media. David (2003) posits that business act as consumers in the purchase of good and services. Being able to purchase good and services on a large scale creates room for K2 Telecom to enjoy economies of scale. For K2 Telecom to enhance its power aswell as prestige such as having an upper hand during negotiations with distributers, and supplier or any other significant groups, it should be able to get access to the proper credit resources.

Social factors such as the conditions of the Ugandan labour market have a negative effect on the performance of the company due to shortage of enough skilled labour to man K2 Telecom's operations. Besides this, limitations in the online freedom of expression despite the fact that the Ugandan constitution advocates for every individual's freedom to express themselves, there still exists a number of internet users who do not share the view that they are free to express them selves freely online. This affect the internet usage in all telecommunication companies in Uganda with the smaller telecommunications companies baring most part of the effect. See figure 4 for companies with the cheapest and lowest data prices the Ugandan industry.

Figure 4. Data prices of telecommunication companies in Uganda



Source: RAMP Index (2017)

As shown in figure 4 above all telecommunications company v es in Uganda are competing favourably on prices. However, issues such as internet freedom of expression, social media and mobile money taxes are causing smaller telecommunication company to struggle in maintaining the price range that is good enough to keep the company afloat.

When it comes to technology different companies are using different technologies to compete in the telecommunication's industry. Table 1 below shows the main competitors and the type of technology they are using.

Table1. Technology platforms used in the various telecommunications companies in Uganda

Technology Platform	Providers	No
4G/LTE	Smile, MTN	2
2G/GPRS/EDGE,CDMA,3G	UTL, MTN, Airtel / Warid, Orange, K2, I-Tel, Sure Telecom	7
Fiber, xDSL	UTL, MTN, Kampala City Cable, Infocom, Roke Telecom, Google, Government/NITAU, UETCL, EASSY, Seacom,	10
POTs, ISDN, Leased Lines	UTL, MTN	2
VSAT	Afsat, Africa Online, UTL, MTN, Infocom, Maisha Networks, Spidd Africa	7
Other Wireless including WiMAX	UTL, MTN, Orange, Airtel / Warid, Foris Telecom, Tangerine, Datanet, One Solution, Augere, Infocom, TMP	11

(Adongu,2014)

As shown in the table above, K2 Telecom is currently using 3G technology. This type pf technology has lots of limitations in terms of speed especially when it comes to data. And yet this is the most sought after value added service. For K2 Telecom to be able to compete favourably, there is an urgent need for an upgrade to LTE tehcnology as this is the latest and the best in the industry at the moment.

Legal changes in the regulatory authorities such as the Uganda Communications Commission and Uganda Revenue Authority have constantly made it hard for K2 telecom to expand her distribution channels as pay phone kiosks, and other dealers are required to get authorisation even after they have already acquired a licence to trade in other goods and services which are primarily their means of survival. This appears like they are being taxed twice. However the government should work out a plan whereby they give tax holidays to investors like K2 Telecom until they are able to break even.

5.0 K2 Telecom stake holder evaluation.

Grimble & Wellard (1997) argue that the success of the stakeholder analysis is benchmarked on the progress exhibited in the demonstration of society's ideals in a democratic way as opposed to merely maintaining environmentally sustainable and equitable developments. Therefore in situations where management is not able to make commitments to stakeholders, one needs to take a different look to ensure that proper stakeholder salience is assessed in line with the company's sustainability. This may include defining stakeholder identification parameters beside the many steps to take.

5.1 Mapping and analyzing stakeholders based on their interest and power

Differentiating and categorizing stakeholders is of vital importance. Secondary and primary grouping of stakeholders enables business to understand which stakeholders to capitalize on and which ones are more influential to the organisation Clarkson (1995). As posited by Savage et al (1991) it is inevitable for K2 Telecom to classify the company stakeholders depending on potential in form of threat and cooperation. The management should put an emphasis on stakeholder analysis to ensure that the different needs of the stakeholders are met in order to manage their influence over the management. K2 Telecom shall adopt the stakeholder mapping and classification shown below to analyse and manage the stakeholders.

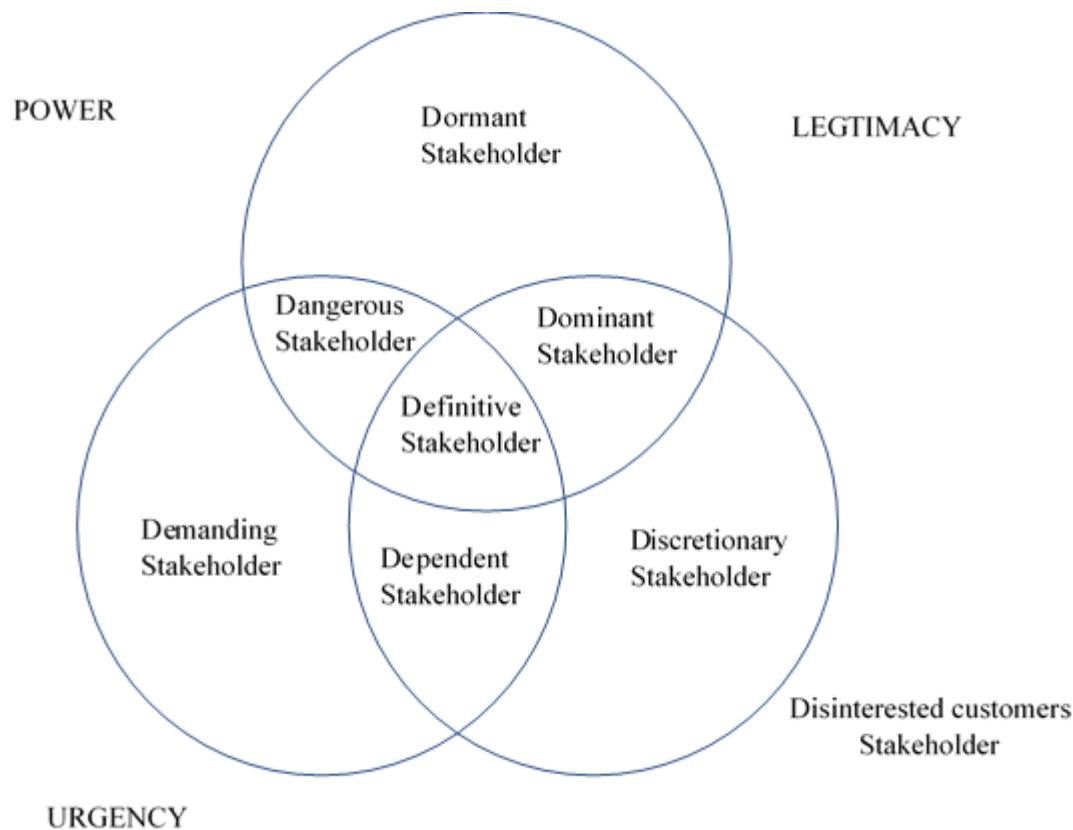
Figure 5 Stakeholder identification typology, classification, and attributes.

Attributes	Classification of Stakeholders	Identification Typology
Power	Latent Stakeholders	Dormant Stakeholders—while holding power, they lack legitimacy and urgency, therefore power is often unused
Legitimacy		Discretionary Stakeholder—holding no power or urgency to influence the organization
Urgency		Demanding Stakeholder—holding urgent claims yet lack the power or legitimacy to influence the organization
Power and Legitimacy	Expectant Stakeholders	Dominant Stakeholders—they have legitimate claims and the ability to act upon these claims by the power they hold
Power and Urgency		Dangerous Stakeholder—lack legitimacy yet has the power and urgency to influence the organization
Legitimacy and Urgency		Dependent Stakeholder—lack the power to carry out their urgent legitimate claims and therefore have to rely on others power to influence the organization
Power, Legitimacy and Urgency	Definitive Stakeholder	Definitive Stakeholder—Holding all three attributes the stakeholders has the ability to influence the organization in the immediate future

Adopted from Mitchell *et al* (1997).

5.2 Stake holder configuration for K2 Telecom

Figure 5 stake holder typology and salience



Adopted from Mitchell *etal* (1997)

As seen in figure 6 above, the K2 Telecom stake holders are to be classified based on their type (typology) which indicates the stake holder's salience or importance using the circles that overlap each other according to Mitchell *etal* (1997). The Definitive stake holders are the most important ones with the highest possibility of influencing management decisions. The Definitive stake holders are the majority stake holders in K2 Telecom, and these include, the government, products distributors, customers among many other stake holders. The dependent, dominant, and dangerous stake holder are clustered into two sets. The stake holders in these categories possess less salience compared to the definitive stake holders. These stake holders include government agencies like PPDA, URA, the KCCA and environmental groups such as NEMA.

Furthermore, as suggested by Mitchell *etal* (1997), K2 Telecom's latent stake holders would be those stake holders with the lowest level of salience of importance. These stakeholders are however divided into demanding stake holders and the discretionary stake holders. The discretionary stake holders include some local government agencies and those stake holders concerned with local recreation. The stake holders who do not influence the feasibility of K2 Telecom are placed outside the concentric circles and are also referred to as the non-interested stake holders.

6.0 Sustainable growth strategies for K2 Telecom

Empowering female customers

Women in low developing countries are often vulnerable to exploitation. Professional training and education for economic prosperity are the key avenues that women have left for them to enhance their status (Abena,1991).Telecommunications technology provided by K2 Telecom enables women in Uganda to invest in small dealership kiosks where customers by airtime and thus raise money to educate and empower theme selves.

Human resource practices

K2 Telecom has contributed to the labour market in Uganda but not so much as it has only been inexistence for a short while. However, the recent merger with Airtel will guarantee many jobs ranging from contractor and subcontractors to services providers. Many people stand to get jobs through the K2 dealership shops. The direct employee base of K2 Telecom is now mixed of both local and expatriates creating a pull of multi skilled individuals to ensure that successful running of the organisation. Unlike other multinational telecommunication companies whose management is dominated by expatriates, K2 Telecom's merger is comprised of both local and expatriates which makes the process of awarding of contracts to sub-contractors fairly balanced since the decisions regarding awarding of contracts is not entirely decided by one side of the team.

This presents an opportunity for highly skilled nationals to acquire jobs and contribute towards changing the economic environment of Uganda. This also reduces the racial discontent and tensions among and it is a sign of good governance.

Governance

The transparent and effective management of economic resources in a company is referred to as governance. Governance concerns the exercise of power when it comes to management of social, economic resources for purposes of sustainable development. Without good governance it is nearly impossible to balance equality and order in the community, efficient good and services delivery, human rights protection, calling power to accountability and establishment of a corporate frame work that is organised to enable Ugandans to come up with solutions for basic problems as posited by the Commonwealth Association for Corporate Governance (CACG,200). K2 Telecom's recent merger with Airtel now makes it answerable to a joint board of shareholders. It is important that all K2 telecom employees uphold the governance in the right way by avoiding corrupt tendencies and adhering to the set code of conduct stipulated by management to boost transparency within the company.

Human resources are managed in a way that creates a flatform to settle all grievances among employees and a clearly defined system of escalation of the grievances is made available for all employees to access. However sometimes it is difficult to follow the available system to the maximum employee performance since most of the employees still choose to deal with grievances amongst themselves using the set framework. None the less K2 Telecom maintains an open-door policy where staff can access any members of management from the top to the bottom when the need arises. Decisions regarding corporate social responsibilities are decided upon by the top management but communication is passed on from the top to the bottom with uttermost transparency.

Social relations and corporate citizenship

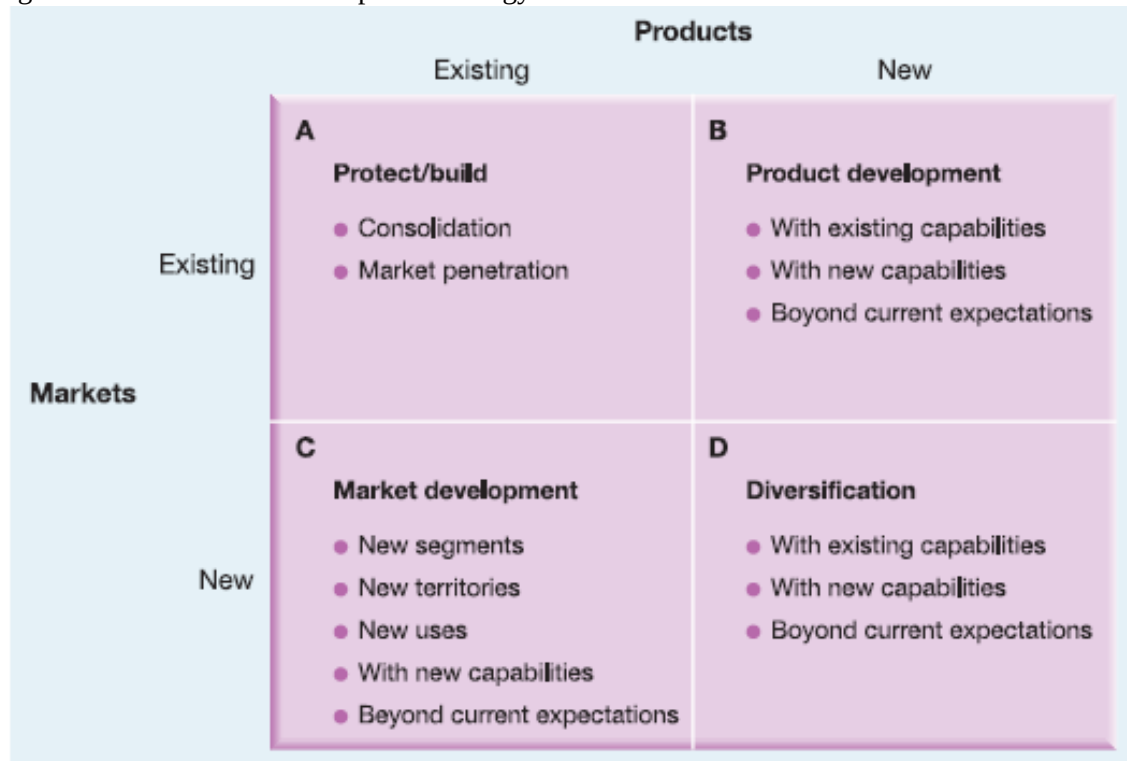
Creating shareholder value in a country like Uganda is a very risky business. It requires K2 Telecom to work prudently to expand the market and create a competitive advantage. K2 Telecom is obliged to comply with the laws as well as the fiscal policies and responsibilities of running an operation like K2 Telecom. The company has the duty to comply with all government regulations and tax laws stipulated in the licence given to them by the Ugandan communications commission.

Economic instability in Uganda requires that any telecommunications company trading in Uganda should not repatriate all the profits back to its home country and for K2 telecom, this means that, the recent merger with airtel requires them to carefully scrutinise the profits repatriation issue since Airtel is a foreign owned business. The K2 Telecom and Airtel merger has required a substantial investment in infrastructure with low short-term return expectations. This kind of investment requires skills transfer onto the locals there by developing the communities in Uganda and ensuring that all benefits from the company are shared between both the national and international stake holders. However, K2 Telecom now needs to donate more to charities within the community not only to generate good public relations but to also foster community growth.

7.0 Recommendations

Strategic development of a company is largely benchmarked on four main areas as indicated in figure 7 below. Based on the Ansoff matrix, K2 telecom would be able to grow by implementing the most appropriate growth strategies. These include, market penetration, market development, product development and or diversification.

Figure 7. Ansoff matrix for corporate strategy.



Ansoff (1988)

To retain customers, [Gustafsson et al \(2005\)](#) advises that a company like K2 Telecom should focus on improving the quality of services which Ansoff refers to product development and maintain a fair pricing strategy for their customers. K2 telecom could engage in market penetration by upgrading the

network to improve on the transmittions speed El-Darwiche *etal* (2017). Perhaps K2 Telecom could invest in net work technologies such as 5G and fibre optic, which will give K2 Telecom a competing edge in terms of infrastructure and flexible enough to emphasize multiple income stream for the company. At this present moment, acquisitions, and mergers as advised by Verma and Sharma (2017) would be the preferred choice of strategy for an emerging market like the Ugandan telecommunications industry. Mergers and acquisitions will help K2 Telecom to restructure itself financially.

However. application of market intelligence to know what is happening in the company's external environment and at the same time get the required competitive advantage to compete in the sector. It would be idea for the Ugandan government to establish and environment which is favourable to the telecommunications service provides inform of new service obligation, low prices. and low taxes.

8.0 Conclusion

Several metrics were used to understand the performance inside and outside the telecommunications companies in the Uganda. Some of the metrics looked at were new customer acquisitions, average revenue per user, customer loyalty and churn rate. Many factors were found to profoundly affected by telecommunications services provision. Internal and external factors such as competitive prices being uncontrollable, availability and inflation of disposable income, limited transparency as well as corruption. Transfer of high costs to the customers due to heavy taxation by the government leading to expensive services provided by K2 Telecom, religious, political, and environmental regulation are prevailing salient features. Recommendations have been made for strategies to improve the performance of K2 Telecom, such as market and analysis regulation. Stake holder analysis was carried out to determine their orientation using the main attributes such as legitimacy, power, and urgency. These attributes are necessary to ensure that proper communication is carried out between stakeholders, making it possible to discuss issues arising in time. At a practical level, systematic stake holder analysis breaks barriers between stake holders. The presence and absence of the three attributes in the stakeholder determines their salient levels, as well as clearly defined lines between stake holders and disinterested stake holders. Finally, the company is able to use a model which bases on informed predictions, valuable to the company feasibility study.

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