Al Junaid industrial group: exploring business development strategies during COVID-19 pandemic

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Case synopsis

Al Junaid Industrial group is a small to medium-sized heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) manufacturing company created over 12 years ago, in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It has a production line company in the Sharjah industrial area with a capacity of 5000 ft. The company not only manufactures air conditioning and its accessories but also provides installation and maintenance services. As for its international connections, it imports raw materials such as aluminum and exports air conditioning grills and accessories, offering installation services to many destinations, including Kazakhstan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The company has recently suffered a setback due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020 its net revenue and profits decreased by an average of 40%. As a result, Al Junaid Industrial group currently faces several internal and external challenges affecting its business performance such as high operating expenses, low market demand and stiff competition. Due to these challenges, this case study argues that Mr. Obaid Al Junaid, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), should develop a new marketing strategy aimed at raising revenues to levels closer to those observed before the onset of the epidemic.

Background on Al Junaid industrial group

Al Junaid Industrial group started its operations in 2008, helped by the Sharjah Entrepreneurship Foundation “Ruwad” program, which aims at supporting local enterprises in the UAE, originally a small-to-medium company, it grew by establishing local and overseas links in the GCC countries, as well as in Kazakhstan, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. The main factory is located in Sharjah Industrial area No. 13. Sharjah is one of the largest industrial areas in the UAE and a hub for companies providing products and services in HVAC. Figure 1 shows some of the products and accessories offered by the company.

In 2012 the company won the bronze medal in the Sharjah Projects competition, which had a positive impact in advertising Al Junaid Industrial group in the region. The company is now one of the leading manufacturers of central air conditioning, air outlets, ducting, dampers and accessories in the UAE. Al Junaid Industrial group’s assets include a headquarter office, production line, several cars, pickups and light trucks with trailers. To deliver undamaged goods, the whole production process is covered by an insurance policy. The group is also an official member of local organizations including as follows:

Disclaimer. This case is written solely for educational purposes and is not intended to represent successful or unsuccessful managerial decision-making. The authors may have disguised names; financial and other recognisable information to protect confidentiality.

Figure 1 Al Junaid industrial group products

Source: Developed by the authors

- Sharjah Chamber of Commerce and Industry.
- Dubai Chamber of Commerce.

Organization and personnel

Overview

Al Junaid Industrial group is characterized by a network of manufacturer's representatives and wholesale distribution in local and GCC countries.

Figure 2 shows the structure of the company. The group's management structure consists of Mohamed Shwaqi as the General Manager and three other managers. Mohamed Shwaqi is responsible for establishing a company strategy, monitoring overall operations and managing the staff's day-to-day work. He also led the necessary resources such as assets, software and capital, to keep the company functioning efficiently. Also, he meets new clients and handles new deals.

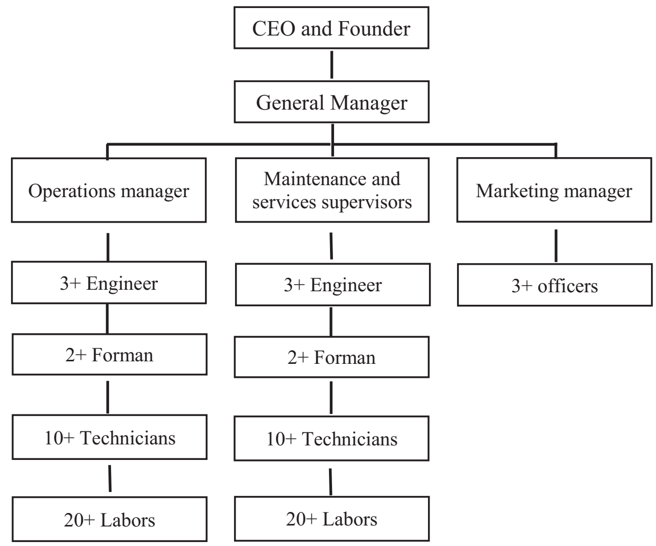
Approximately 73 employees are working at the production line and provide services in the requested location to install HVAC systems and accessories. This number includes operations staff, engineers, technicians, labors, marketing officers, drivers and sales representatives.

There are three main teams in the Al Junaid Industrial group. These include preparations, maintenance and service supervisor and marketing.

Each team fulfils specific functions as listed below:

- Operations: manufacturing of products and providing packing and removal for relocation services. It handles the packing of the ready shipments and supervises its transportation to the requested area.
- Maintenance and services: installation of the HVAC manufactured accessories and provides door-to-door overland services to the UAE clients. Besides this, they offer maintenance services such as routine observations and replacing HVAC system accessories if needed.
- Marketing team: to get clients' attention by promoting the company's products and services. They focus on research and advertising for the group.

Figure 2 Al Junaid industrial group organization structure



Source: Al Junaid industrial group – retrieved from http://www.aljunaidgroup.com/

According to Obaid Al Junaid, *The structure of Al Junaid Industrial group is clear; the department is divided specifically into particular tasks and the different departments work together.*

Entrepreneurs are involved in getting new ventures started up. Often this can take some effort and can be relatively risky (Gilmore *et al.*, 2004). Many entrepreneurs fail in the early stages of business development, as it is difficult to move from a business idea to actually creating a tangible fully operating business. Initially, entrepreneurs need to seek funding for their business ideas. They may approach banks for a loan but are not always successful so it may take some time to search around for suitable and available capital. In the early days of a business, entrepreneurs often work alone and will probably not have a team around them. Also, they may not have developed much-needed networking skills or marketing competence at this stage and so they may suffer from lack of expertize, particularly in relation to running a business.

A small to medium-sized enterprises (SME) owner/manager may or may not be entrepreneurial. He or she is the person who owns and manages the business and they may have started the business themselves. Often they are involved in the day-to-day running of the business and four may get caught-up in operational activities. They may have less time to plan than they need and overall may be perceived as managers rather than entrepreneurs.

However, entrepreneurs and SME owner/managers need to do marketing in a way that suits a small and/or growing firm that does not have the resources or operational structure of a large company. Understanding entrepreneurial marketing is based on knowing how SME owner/managers or entrepreneurs actually do business and how they make decisions, deliver their market offering in the market place within the constraints of limited resources, expertize, impact and size (Gilmore and Carson, 2007).

For the remainder of this paper, the term entrepreneur will be used as a generic term for the person who makes marketing decisions in growing firms. Entrepreneurs are involved in getting new ventures started up. Often this can take some effort and can be relatively risky (Gilmore *et al.*, 2004). Many entrepreneurs fail in the early stages of business development, as it is difficult to move from a business idea to actually creating a tangible fully operating business. Initially, entrepreneurs need to seek funding for their business ideas. They may approach banks for a loan but are not always successful so it may take some time to search around for suitable and available capital. In the early days of a business, entrepreneurs often work alone and will probably not have a team around them. Also, they may not have developed much-needed networking skills or marketing competence at this stage and so they may suffer from lack of expertize, particularly in relation to running a business.

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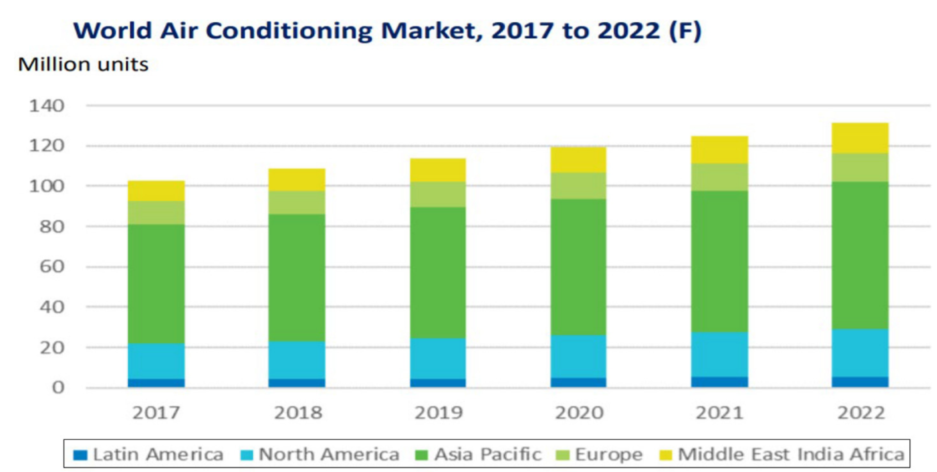
Market conditions: the global air conditioning market and the COVID-19 pandemic

At global level, the air conditioning market has been showing steady growth (Figure 3). There were 100 million units produced in 2017 and the demand was expected to increase to 125 million in 2022. In the UAE, the air conditioning market is growing at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 5%, with a total valuation of US$109bn in 2018 (HVAC R Expo, 2018). Due to a rise in the disposable income of the inhabitants of UAE and the hot

Figure 3 Growth of global air conditioning industry



Source: HVAC R Expo (2018)

climate conditions, there is a high demand for HVAC products in the GCC countries (Al-Azba, Cen, Remond and Ahzi, 2020).

Those favorable conditions, however, have rapidly changed. In March 2020, General Manager Mohamed Shwaqi requested meeting the founder, Obaid Al Junaid, at the factory. He was surprised to find out that a large number of orders were canceled while shipments were returned to the factory. Due the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a significant decrease in operations, sales and net revenue. The current facilities also cannot physically accommodate the large number of returned items. Furthermore, Al Junaid Industrial group participates in the Waffer *Program* this is a governmental initiative promoting special discounts to the staff of the government of Sharjah. As a result, Al Junaid Industrial group offers 25% discounts to Sharjah Government employees. However, the offering of discounts increased to the amount of orders received, which also increased the returned shipments locally.

Local air-conditioning market

HVAC are important systems for cooling and heating residential, industrial and commercial buildings. The local market of HVAC of UAE can attain the size of almost US$1.4bn by 2024. The market is progressing at almost 6.4% CAGR during this period. Based on the transportation sector the driving factors of the market are increasing. Moreover, the ventilation category may predict the quickest CAGR during a forecast era in the UAE Moreover, the ventilation category may predict the quickest CAGR during a forecast era in UAE. HVAC market owns the market expansion such as shopping malls, hotels and metro projects. Nowadays, ventilation systems are important.

The HVAC UAE market is categorized into room air conditioners, split units, chillers, variable refrigerator flow (VRF) and ducted packaged/split units. VRF may experience quick growth in the local market of the UAE. This is because the country has more green buildings than before which increasing the demands for a high-quality VRF system. An increasing number of building projects in the UAE is beneficial for the HVAC market as that would, in turn, would provide large investments in the future. In GCC regions, air conditioner market is in the maturity phase. Economic diversification is possible to achieve. New tourism-related infrastructure, hospitals, museums, resorts and hotels will need air conditioners.

Financial impact on the Al Junaid industrial group

The Al Junaid group showed steady growth in the years 2016–2019, resulting in an increase in the net revenue of the company. However, in 2020 a decrease by 40% occurred due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. In the previous years, the company had often received monthly orders for HVAC ducts, grills and dampers for a whole building with seven stories and sometimes the group would supply equipment for three building projects at once. However, in March 2020 the company had fully packed a shipment of 8 containers, 3 of them heading to the port for international shipment to Kazakhstan, 4 of them planned to be installed in a building in the Emirate of Ras Al Khaimah and one heading to the border of Saudi Arabia. All the mentioned products were stopped from moving internally and externally from the production line due to the Movement restriction that the UAE announced, which lasted for four months. This in turn resulted in returning the shipments to the storage area. The area could unfortunately not accommodate such a large number product. Due to high temperatures, inadequate temporary storage may result in damage to equipment, which poses the company with the additional challenge of deciding how to provide and how much to invest in suitable storage exactly at a time where revenues are low. As a result, strategies adopted by the company must be evaluated not only in the light of long-term trends in the air conditioning industry but also of current challenges posed by the global pandemics.

What is special about United Arab Emirates?

The UAE is the fastest booming e-commerce market all around the world. The worth of the UAE is in billions of dollars. Undoubtedly, this number will increase in the future. The UAE is transformed into a digital hub and facilitating its citizens with high-speed internet. This market has gone through several changes. From friendly regulations and laws to the increasing popularity of e-commerce and online shopping principles, several factors are accountable for quick growth in different areas. The e-commerce also has a potential impact upon UAE's business scenario. In the HVAC industry, they have found the options of technological upgradation along with the growing interest of the consumers upon the global market through the option of e-commerce. Therefore, UAE has been found to be a booming or emerging industry for the HVAC products.

Undoubtedly, several factors are behind the emerging market of UAE. These factors are the major reasons for the inclination of the population to online stores over physical stores. The UAE is famous as the fastest-growing economy of the world and it is regarded as a shopping hub. Dubai is famous for its lifestyle products, fashion accessories, food and electronics. All these factors are making the e-commerce market of the UAE. The potential increase in their disposable income along with the faster-growing economy of the country can also be reflective upon the employment quotient that has been visibly increased with the opportunity to flourish themselves in the long run.

Impact of COVID-19 on e-commerce in the United Arab Emirates

The latest situation of coronavirus has impacted the global economy and several things are in favor of the e-commerce market. The businesses are identifying different strategies and measures to manage the continuity of businesses during economic and social hardships. Nowadays, you can see virtual stores in Dubai to increase flexibility for consumers of the UAE to shop from different brands during the unparalleled time.

High use of internet along with penetration of smartphone is an important driving force for the UAE emerging market growth. An important advancement in technology is increasing the number of mobile internet users dramatically in the UAE. A huge number of people prefer the use of mobile phones and the internet over tablets or desktops. The e-commerce market is dramatically booming in the UAE and has attracted major players of e-commerce from different corners of the world.

The local regulations and laws are the reason for the rapid growth of the e-commerce market in the UAE and this growth will be consistent in the future. Other than convenience, the business cost in this country is low; therefore, international companies find it easy to operate in the market. The market welcomes both large and small businesses. E-commerce businesses of the UAE are constantly experimenting with the technology. It proves helpful to transform the online shopping culture of the UAE. In different cities such as Dubai, pioneering technology has successfully taken over the entire online shopping world. Technological advancements gave rise to the growth of different native apps such as digital concierge services. Undoubtedly, technology is playing an important role and the UAE market has numerous chances of growth at an exceptional rate.

No doubt, the e-commerce market of the UAE is frequently growing and the present analysis of the market is worth almost US$5.3bn. The emerging marketing sector is frequently leading to electronics sale. Online shopping trends have taken over the whole country. There is a significant increase in e-commerce companies offering different products at a discounted rate. These factors are increasing the fame of online shopping among UAE citizens. Some famous online shopping portals are dbsoup.com, jadopado.com, souq.com. These stores can boast a collection of products from fashion to electronic items. Several companies from all over the world are taking an interest in this country to discuss the e-commerce prospects in the country. During the pandemic scenario, the lowered import and export capabilities have potentially reflected the firm's operation with the increased barriers of their international supply chain and operations. This has caused adverse production capability of the firm beginning with manufacture to the enrichment of business opportunities in UAE's operational grounds.

From local companies to international brands, everyone is expending in different UAE regions. These firms are using an omni-channel approach and advanced tools for the best user experience in online shopping. Several e-commerce companies in the future will offer mobile-friendly services. Online shopping is becoming a tradition because it is safe and hassle-free. The shopping culture is evolving in the UAE and other parts of the world. During the pandemic, their strategic move toward digitization along with the e-commerce opportunity has also been potential to maintain their key chain of operation in the long run. The emerging market of e-commerce in the UAE is competitive because online stores lure customers with quick delivery options and amazing deals. In the future, e-commerce companies will make a splash in the e-commerce market of the UAE. The environment of UAE, including Dubai, is business-friendly to attract new companies from several developed companies such as the UK and USA.

Al Junaid industrial group marketing mix strategy (products, price, place and promotion)

Mr. Obaid Al Junaid requested Mohamed Shwaqi to apply the traditional marketing mix theory to develop a new marketing plan. He believed that the company should have a back plan in case of unexpected events such as a global health pandemic. Therefore, Mohamed Shwaqi led the creation of a new marketing plan to increase net revenue and to prevent the returning and canceling of shipments. The new marketing plan, based on the marketing mix theory, uses the 4Ps for combining four key elements as follows: products, price, place and promotion. Each of the four elements is discussed below.

Product strategy

Al Junaid Industrial group faces many competitors, and to deliver high-quality HVAC products and services, the company aims to offer as follows:

- High quality manufactured HVAC products and services;
- Timeous delivery; and
- Cost-effectiveness.

The company has been ISO 9001:2008 and certified for many years. The company also conducts an annual survey to measure client satisfaction. Moreover, Mr. Mohamed encouraged the team to visit clients regularly to discuss any issues and to resolve problems in a timely fashion. The company reports a high satisfaction rating by clients.

Compared with other companies, Al Junaid Industrial group may offer the following advantages:

- Over 12 years of extensive experience in the field.
- Offering diverse products and services, such HVAC grills, ducts, dampers and other accessories provides transportation, storage, packing and custom contract services.
- Provide great deals for maintaining and servicing the manufactured products.
- Owning different utilities such as head office, trucks, cars and warehouses to meet the business requirements.
- Offering a variety of warranties and long-term contracts on the products.

- Having skilled and dedicated staff. Staff members regularly attended training courses and workshops to enhance their technical skills and to be capable of delivering requested services.
- Having international deals with different countries such as (India and China), in importing raw materials required for HVAC manufacturing.

Based on the product strategy, Mr. Mohamed looked for more unique services to compete with rivals in the HVAC Industries field. For example, he considered looking for more convenient prices of raw materials from different countries. He also considered subdividing the warehouses into different sections, equipping them with more levels. Mr. Mohamed believed that adding new services to the company's portfolio would lead to diversified services, to an expanded market share and to enhanced competitive abilities. However, there was a risk that a change in strategy might divert the focus of the salespeople from the previously profitable services to the new services, which could result in lower service quality and reduced profits.

Pricing strategy

Prices in the HVAC Manufacturing business were not fixed and differed for each individual client based on the level of services requested. Moreover, prices were unstable and depended on the raw materials and their origin. The pricing strategy considered several elements such as follows:

- importing raw materials from overseas;
- shipping mode (air, sea, land and multimodal);
- manufacturing process;
- HVAC accessories installation;
- maintenance services; and
- internal of external shipments.

Al Junaid Industrial group's pricing strategy offered special discounts for regular clients. The strategy also allowed customers to pay later. However, the deferred payments put the company at risk of delayed or unpaid services. Mr. Mohamed Shwaqi believed that Al Junaid Industrial group's prices were reasonable for the quality of the services provided. However, he thought it necessary to improve the pricing strategy and to offer different pricing schemes to attract more clients and projects. For example, they decided to charge lower prices for services to clients who paid immediately rather than deferring payment or providing additional services to loyal clients at no extra cost. Mr. Mohamed thought the new adjustments to the pricing strategy would be easy to implement and encourage clients to pay immediately. On the one hand, giving additional services to loyal customers would enhance their satisfaction. Customers who chose deferred payments would be subject to higher prices than for immediate payment and, as a result, their loyalty and satisfaction levels would be reduced.

Place strategy

The primary manufacturing unit located at Sharjah Industrial area No. 13 is near strategic locations, providing shorter travel times and easier access. For example, the production line is less than 20 min from Al Sharjah International Airport and 35 min away from Khaled Port, where most of the sea and air shipments for the UAE were delivered. Mr. Mohamed believed there was a need to expand more, both locally and internationally and to increase

Al Junaid Industrial group's production line, through opening a new production line in different cities.

Promotion strategy

Al Junaid Industrial group had a skilled marketing manager and a sales force that focused on identifying target customers, promoting Al Junaid Industrial group's services via various media and working to meet monthly revenue targets. The target clients were construction companies building houses or compounds locally and internationally. Other target customers were government offices, universities, hospitals and airports. The company had international clients such as general electric, Dell and car dealers. The company also reached out to new customers by direct contact and by indirect means such as telesales, which involved contacting clients over the phone and by email. Direct-selling sales staff met with customers and gave presentations to new potential clients, either through individual networking, events or exhibitions to sell the company's services.

Al Junaid Industrial group had no advertising programs promoting their services on traditional mass media such as television, radio or newspapers. It had its own website, with general information about the company's background and services. However, the site was very basic, with few updates or details about rates and routes. Mr. Mohamed thought it necessary to pay more attention to the promotion strategy. This included developing the website to attract more customers, creating a company presence on social media such as Twitter and Facebook, to share the latest news about company activities, success stories, news on the HVAC manufacturing industry and special offers and discounts. Moreover, the promotion of the company on social media would be creative, easy and inexpensive and allow the company to reach customers locally and internationally. However, the biggest disadvantage of social media marketing was the ever-changing landscape and the need for the staff to develop proper communication skills to engage with the customers on a daily basis. Another challenge of social media was the need to make the feedback public. If a client had a bad experience with Al Junaid Industrial group's products and services and they shared the experience on the social network profile, it had the potential to damage the company's reputation. Therefore, the company had to be prepared to handle negative feedback immediately.

Al Junaid industrial market share strategy

The 4Ps analysis provided the basis for the formulation of a strategy to expand the group's market share. The decision was that expansion should occur as a result of entering new geographic areas, providing new services or upgrading current services. In terms of geographic expansion, the company had a plan to open a new production line in Abu Dhabi. Mr. Mohamed believed that integrating several marketing theories would assist in increasing the market share. For example, the relationship marketing theory could be integrated with the alliance network model to increase the market share. The company also believed it could take advantage of being a member of the Sharjah and Dubai Chamber of Commerce and Industry and attempt to expand the range of services provided to governmental and private companies. Moreover, Al Junaid Industrial group had a worldwide network of agents under non-exclusive agency agreements, serving as partners by providing HVAC manufacturing and installation services for more than 50 destinations in 10 countries around the world. The business agreement with those agents might be used to further increase market share internationally.

However, Although the market share of Al Junaid Industrial group had expanded in 2020, the company did not generate the expected earnings and profits. After a thorough investigation of the issue, the company management concluded that the low performance was due to three serious challenges discussed in detail in the following sections:

- Stiff competition from known HVAC manufacturing companies at home and abroad;
- Low market demand for HVAC services; and
- High operating expenses.

Challenge 1: stiff competition

The development of HVAC industries in the UAE attracted many local and international firms to this field in the UAE, which made competition in the domestic market fiercer. In addition, small to medium-sized HVAC manufacturing companies cannot as easily offer rates below products costs and shift large quantities of products on credit as larger companies.

Some of Al Junaid Industrial group’s rivals were as follows:

- Trosten Industries Company LLC: established in 2004. The company is ISO 9001:2015 certified from TUV-SUD, specialized in manufacturing of central air conditioning and kitchen ventilation equipment. It provides HVAC equipment for residential, commercial, industrial and hygiene applications.
- Beta Industrial LLC: a company specialized in manufacturing HVAC products and is a member company of Beta group of companies. It was founded in 1977 and started its operations with electrical contracting. Today, it has expanded to six companies with branches in Abu Dhabi, Riyadh and Jeddah and has over 800 employees. The company has established a reputation in the local market for being fast and reliable. It boasted an experienced staff, provided total support and had an extensive network and agents. Beta group consists of Beta Industrial LLC, Beta Information Technology LLC, Dar Beta Information Technology, Precision Industries, Beta Industrial Businesses and M.M. Al Daour Factory.
- KAD air conditioning: specializes in manufacturing Centralized Air Conditioning Duct Equipment the Firm is ISO accredited and has been integrated with Bin Dasmal Group.

As seen, some competitors present advantages relative to the Al Junaid Industrial group such as more experience in the market due to earlier foundation, larger size and international presence.

Challenge 2: low market demand

The demand for HVAC products and services in the market is seasonal; for example, in summer the demand for new products and services increases. In addition to seasonality, demand is now currently affected by the economic slowdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is anticipated that EXPO 2020, which will be held in 2021 due to the COVI-19 pandemic in Dubai, would boost trade, logistics and HVAC products and services for new projects and buildings. Mr. Mohamed was very optimistic that the market demand for HVAC products and maintenance services may increase in the near future.

Challenge 3: high operating expenses

Another challenge the company has faced is an increase in several operating expenses such as follows:

- Rental of land, additional offices and bonded warehouses increased by 10% on an annual basis.
- Fuel prices for trucks, cars and motorbikes fluctuated with oil prices.
- Maintenance of the production line machines and

- Maintenance and repair costs for trucks, trailers and pickups increased, especially as the vehicles depreciated. There was also an increase in the maintenance expenses of the headquarters office and the warehouse.

As a response, the company management considered selling one or two of the old trucks and buying newer ones. Moreover, Mr. Mohamed considered signing service contracts for the other automobiles to maintain them in good condition, to reduce the rate of breakdowns and to extend their life cycle.

Next steps

The company has recently faced various challenges due to the pandemic, but in this case study, Obaid highlighted the returned shipments and the orders that have been canceled from different clients as the main challenges. The strengths and weaknesses are the internal factors that affect the company performance. In the meanwhile, the impact of COVID-19 pandemic does not seem to dwindle and though businesses have started opening up in UAE and the rest of the world, the rate of infections continues to rise. Should Obaid wait for the economy to pick up and businesses to resume complete operations or should he be selling off his inventory to book losses? The company's investor meet is next week, and Obaid has to inform the key investors and company Board of Directors about his decision and strategy of the company moving forward.

What are the next steps that the Al Junaid Industrial group should take to store-returned shipments and canceled orders? How can they ensure that the situation does not occur again in the future? The company's high-quality products require appropriate storage. Should they invest in a larger storage area for future occurrences or will the investment be wasted? How much will it cost? These are the main point Mr. Obaid should consider when making future decisions and developments.

Keywords:
Competitive strategy, Business development, Strategic management/ planning, Strategy, Sustainability

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