6
The Imitation Game

6.1 Pursuit strategies: players and types

The success achieved by a firm that starts a Movement Game, be it low- or high-impact, spurs the competition to pursue the innovator, thus activating the second game: imitation.

Imitators, in general, can be:

a) Newcomers: These firms, previously extraneous to the competitive confrontation, like the innovator, sense the significance of the revolution. They enter the new competitive arena, launching their pursuit maneuver or flanking attack on the first mover’s as yet-unprotected market. In Italy, for example, Lino’s Coffee was a newcomer in the breakfast market, in an Imitation Game modeled after the American company Starbucks, which does not currently operate in the Italian market. Newcomer imitators can most often be found in the wake of a diversified Movement Game. Think, for example, of Samsung entering the new digital cameras’ market: the Korean company, following a diversification strategy, was a newcomer for that market. b) Incumbents: Feeling threatened by innovations in their market, incumbents may either imitate immediately, or do so after first (unsuccessfully) attempting to thwart imitators by strenuously defending their original technology (confrontational phase). Nikon, for example, was an incumbent that belatedly imitated the Movement Game set off by newcomer Sony with digital photography. (The Sony Mavica was launched in 1981, while Nikon’s Coolpix debuted in 1997, almost a year after Canon’s PowerShot.) c) Retailers: Often big organized distribution (BOD), these organizations increasingly use their own tangible and
intangible resources to imitate the best-selling branded products. Among the numerous examples are Costco’s or Carrefour’s ready-made starter meals, following Findus’ Movement Game that we referred have to previously.

By analyzing the phenomenon in more detail, we can make a further distinction among imitators, particularly with reference to new product launches. The generic “imitator” label applies to three different types of firm:¹

1. The pioneering imitator (or early-entrant imitator), who by exploiting its own skills imitates an innovator who is still testing the technology or the market. This imitator may even succeed in pre-empting the commercial launch of the product in question, and by so doing, emerge as the actual pioneer.

2. The follower imitator (or later-entrant imitator), who enters the market after the innovator and employs a maneuver that is more or less imitative, as described in the cases below (pure or marginal imitation).

3. The innovative imitator (also called follower innovator), who takes a competitive innovation as the benchmark and tries to overtake it by introducing innovative improvements. (See also the incremental and creative imitation cases described in the next section.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Innovator</th>
<th>Imitator</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Pioneer</strong></td>
<td>The firm that innovates in a technological field and first commercializes the resulting products and services</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Follower</strong></td>
<td>The challenger firm (early or later entrant) that attempts to overtake the innovator by incrementally improving the innovator’s products or services</td>
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Figure 6.1  Innovators, imitators, pioneers, and followers