

Achieving customer satisfaction through sustainable marketing strategies: A Qualitative analysis of three bread industries in Abakaliki Ebonyi State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT:- This research focused on exploring how marketing strategy influences achieving profitability and customer satisfaction in an organization. In this study, three bread industries in Abakaliki Ebonyi State Nigeria were visited and interviewed. These industries include; Vegas Bakery, Roban Stores, and Best Life Bread. This investigation was aimed at: ascertaining the marketing strategy practiced in the selected bread industries; determining how they motivate their consumers; and analyzing how the consumers improve on the marginal utility of their product. This is a qualitative research and the three (3) Managers, (3) supervisors and 6 workers of the three (3) selected bread industries in Abakaliki were interviewed. Their responses were recorded and analyzed using content analysis method. The study revealed that media advertising, peak price reduction, sales representation, and sales promotion are major marketing plans in the bread industries; packaging, discounting, customer income sensitivity and customer relationship are strategies employed in customer motivation. The implication is that the industries still depend on traditional marketing strategies. Hence, it was recommended that: they should utilize the social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram among others. The study recommends that there is need for the bread industries to consider home delivery strategy in their marketing options for optimum customer satisfaction and productivity.

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the years, consumer satisfaction has been recognized as key strategy for productivity in organizations. It is equally known (Bowen and Chen, 2001) that some positive relationship exist between customer loyalty due to satisfaction and productivity. It therefore implies that organizations of businesses and services need to develop appropriate means of satisfying their customers. Determining what helps in the improvement of customer satisfaction within a firm has long been seen as key to such improvements. Hence, researchers (Roland and Zahorik, 1993) tried to understand the customer satisfaction element that had greater impact on customer satisfaction so that such elements can be improved upon. On the other hand, Farris, Neil, Phillip and David (2010) observed that in any organization, consumer satisfaction is seen as a key performance indicator within business and is often part of a balanced scorecard. As competition in customer retention is increasing, in rather what we know as 'competitive marketplace' what will serve as a differentiator of customer loyalty could be evident in the customer satisfaction index of competitive organizations.

Customer satisfaction provides a leading indicator of consumer purchase intentions and loyalty as earlier noted. In this regards, Morgeson, and Petrescu (2011) asserted that customer satisfaction data are among the most frequently collected indicators of market perceptions. According to them, their principal use is two-folds. Firstly, within organizations, the collection, analysis and dissemination of these data send a message about the importance of attending to customers and ensuring that they have a positive experience with the company's goods and services. Secondly, although sales or market share can indicate how well a firm is performing currently, satisfaction is perhaps the best indicator of how likely it is that the firm's customers will make further purchases in the future (Morgeson and Petrescu. 2011).

II. INDUSTRY DESCRIPTION

In this study, three bread industries in Abakaliki Ebonyi State South-Eastern Nigeria were visited and interviewed. These industries include; Vegas Bakery, Roban Stores, and Best Life Bread.

Vegas Restaurant and Bakery is located along Ogoja Road, beside MTN Office, Azuiyi Udene, Abakaliki, Nigeria. Vegas Restaurants and Bakery started on the 14th February, 2016. The firm produces meat pie, scotch eggs, donuts, and hamburger, bread, cakes, and so on. Vegas also prepare various kinds of dishes, such as: Continental dishes, African dishes and Chinese dishes, respectively. The firm has various sections

which include bakery units, shawama section, store section, barbeque section, kitchen section, pestering, account units, and utility section. Roban Stores is located at Mile 50 Junction, Kpiri Kpiri, Abakaliki, Ebonyi State Nigeria. It was launched on Thursday, December 14, 2017. Best Life Bread is located along Ogoja Road, Abakaliki and it is a very old bread industry that has stood the test of time in the midst of much extinction of bread industries in the region.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This investigation was aimed at:

1. Ascertaining the marketing strategy practiced in the selected bread industries;
2. Determining how they motivate their consumers, and
3. Analyzing how their consumers improve on their marginal utility of their product.

METHOD

The study is designed as a qualitative research and in-depth interview was conducted on three (3) Managers, (3) supervisors and 6 workers of the three (3) selected bread industries in Abakaliki: Vegas Bread, Robans Stores, and Best Life Bread. Their responses were recorded and analyzed using content analysis.

DATA PRESENTATION

The data presented in this section comprise of results of the interview sessions with the managers, the supervisors and workers of the three visited bread industries in Abakaliki. The data is presented below under the various emerging themes:

VEGAS BAKERY ABAKALIKI

Result of the interview session with the general Manager, the supervisors and workers of Vegas Bakeries and Restaurant Abakaliki is presented in accordance with the common theme that emerged in the responses of the all the participants.

Theme ONE: How their industry designed a marketing plan that is appealing to their consumers

From the responses emerging from this theme as seen in the narratives of the manager, supervisors and workers, they revealed that the industry has a comprehensive marketing strategy aimed at ensuring effective and efficient customer satisfaction in the industry. They highlighted the marketing strategies to include:

Discounting: Discounting of the products selling prices to encourage bulk buying. This according to them is because; the discounts are given only when a certain quantity of each item/product is being purchased.

Packaging: The idea of improving the products packages is also aimed at making the customer have more interests.

Customer Income Sensitivity: the differentiation of their bread sizes according to the individual income levels such as N500, N400, N300, enables the customers to easily make their choices based on their income capacity.

Customers-Staff Cordial Relationship: this marketing strategy is also geared towards improving their customer's appeals. Here, customers are well attended to and their complaints and contributions effectively handled as their responses revealed.

Hygiene: In their industry, they are committed to improving on the neatness of their Staff and the company's environment is so appealing to the company's customers.

Theme TWO: Customers channel for providing feedback on the kind of satisfaction they get from consuming their products

In their responses, the participants revealed that the industry has effective feedback mechanism for customers to provide feedback on the kind of satisfaction they get from consuming their products. Their responses revealed the feedback mechanism for customers in the industry to include: Making the management's contacts freely available to customers, availing the customers the opportunity to complain and discuss with any staff they could reach and provision of company suggestion boxes at some strategic positions within the company's premises.

Theme THREE: The strategies that their company adopts in improving sales of their products

Their responses revealed that the industry has a comprehensive strategy aimed at improving sales of products and ensuring effective and efficient customer satisfaction in the industry. In their responses, the major strategy their company adopted in improving sales of products is 'cost reduction strategy. According to them, cost reduction is the process/technique designed to save the unit cost of a product/services, without compromising its quality. As responses from the participants revealed, the quantity of the products may reduce, while the quality and price remain the same such that their customers buy without much noise.

Theme FOUR: Whether consumers are satisfied with using their products

As their responses revealed, they feel that their customers are satisfied with their products; most of them patronize them on daily/weekly basis, not minding side-talks. They maintained that their consumers tend to be more knowledgeable and also have higher expectations on their product, than ever before, something they do everything as a company to retain. Although they still feel that for the attainment of success, it was imperative for their company to have a standard plan in place to be able to adequately manage consumers' expectations, at all times.

Theme FIVE: Regarding the kind of relationship they have with their consumers

The responses of the participants evidenced that the industry maintains a friendly, courtesy and cordial relationship with her customers. According to one of them, *"most of our customers perceive us as the best in the industry because we value the satisfaction of our customers in return"*

ROBAN STORES

Result of the interview session with the Manager, supervisor and workers in this firm revealed as following emerging themes;

Theme ONE: On what ways has their industry designed a marketing plan that is appealing to their consumers

In their responses, the participants here revealed that they were aware that their marketing plan is a business overall game plan for reaching people and turning them into customers of the product and service that they give to them. They confirmed that their company has documents that lay out the types and timing of marketing activities, how the business will get across messages, the platforms, the creativity, the timing, which they use as working tool in marketing their products.

They further revealed that their company has over the years, set out comprehensive marketing strategy for optimum customer satisfaction. Some of their marketing plans include:

Peak Price Reduction: In their words, the industry embarks on price reduction during the time of optimum sales and seasons, and festive periods. As such, they give about 5% reduction in the price of product at such moments.

Product Description by Sales Representatives: in their reaction, the industry through her effective sales representation, describes the product, its content, value and benefits to customers in order to increase patronage. Furthermore, they asserted that every business needs a consistent voice; hence, they define their primary targets to their customers. They develop clear and compelling messages that can be delivered consistently across all touch points. That according to them was to ensure that they get everyone in the business on the same page.

Courteous approach to customers: according to the participants, the industry ensures courteous approach to customers' needs and complaints. This plan has to a large extent built in confidence among the customers of their company.

Media Advertising: the responses of the participants show that one of the most effective marketing plans the industry has used over the years is the use of media advertising. In their words *"we advertise Robans Stores products and services on the radio, television, newspapers, bulletin and brochures"*. This according to them is aimed at improving customer awareness of the industries products and services.

Sales Promotion Strategy: responses revealed that one of the marketing plans that have yielded optimum result overtime has been the use of sales promotion. In his their words *"sometimes, we offer special prices and discounts to customers to increase their patronage"*. This according to them has proved to be an effective strategy.

Theme TWO: Whether customers have a channel for providing feedback on the kind of satisfaction they get from consuming their products

Reacting to the above theme, the participants of Robans Stores revealed that the company in a bit to provide channel for feedback from customers, engages in radio and television channels. In their words, *"the industry provides feedback mechanism through radio stations and designing a radio programme for customers to call and give their feedback and also send their feedback through their social media page"*.

Moreover as the manager said, *"There is no product without a brand name, label that show the name, product, colour and write up of Robans Stores are provided to the customers"*. More so, as their responses revealed, phone contacts are made available whereby customers call the service number to either criticize or pour encomium on the products.

Theme THREE: the strategies that their company adopts in improving sales of their product

Reacting to the question above, participants had a common theme that the industry has several strategies adopted in order to improve the sales of our products. For instance, they make known their products to people by the way of advertisement such as the radio stations, television stations, bill box, social and electronic media,

printing of flyers and engaging the help of a sales man to go for door-to-door canvassing. Their responses also revealed that the industry engages in discounting for large quantities and promotions in order to improve sales.

Theme FOUR: On whether they feel that their consumers are satisfied with using their products

As their responses revealed, Products availability is always guaranteed, so there is more production above demand. They also said that their business is always open, customers have assurance that the company does not go on a holiday except on Sundays only and they also maintained that they always have availability of fresh/hot products.

Theme FIVE: Describing the kind of relationship they have with their consumers

Participants' reaction shows that they have cordial relationship with their customers. As their responses revealed, customer satisfaction has been their priority and as such, they have always been conscious of their customers' varying demands. Hence, they said they do not have regular negative comments from their customers in relation to their customer- organization relationships.

BEST LIFE BREAD

Result of the interview sessions with the Manager, the supervisors and the workers revealed some common themes which weaved their responses. This is presented below.

Theme ONE: How the industry designed a marketing plan that is appealing to your consumers

Reacting to the theme above, the respondents informed that the company has a marketing plan targeted at improving sales and customer satisfaction. In their responses, the manager said that *"the industry uses bonanza giving to give gifts or extra products for example; for every 10 loafs of bread you buy, you gain one loaf". Giving periodic gifts like Christmas or Easter bonus, Mini party to appreciate their patronage. "More so, we reach out to our customers and ask them how they feel about our product and services".* As their responses revealed, through constant contact with their consumers, the company finds out the choice of the customers and switch to their customers preference which may be based on the taste, quality and packaging.

Theme TWO: Whether customers have a channel for providing feedback on the kind of satisfaction they get from consuming their products

In their responses, the respondents informed that they always call their customers to know what areas they need to improve based on, their product and service offering. Just as the manager stated: *"yes, phone contacts are made available whereby customers call the service number to either criticize or appreciate our products and we call them too"*. The industry according to them sometimes evaluates the feelings and wishes of her customers in order to understand areas that need improvement.

Theme THREE: The strategies their company adopts in improving sales of their product

In response to the above theme, respondents informed that they try to improve sales through pricing. As some of their responses revealed *"The price is based on the size"*, they stated. Also, they package the same quality and taste of the big loaf and produce it in a small quantity, just to make it affordable and to increase sales rate. The respondents further informed that they have other means of improving sales as they said: *"we make known our products to people by the way of advertisement such as the radio stations, television stations, bill box, social and electronic media, printing of flyers and engaging the help of a sales man to go for door to door canvassing"*.

Theme Four: whether they feel that your consumers are satisfied with using their products

On the above theme, respondents were optimistic about their product because they felt that their customers were satisfied with their products. The manager in his reasons affirmed that the industry has been witnessing high patronage which is an indicator that the customers are satisfied with their products.

Theme FIVE: The kind of relationship they have with your consumers

With regards to the theme above, their responses echoed a very optimistic view about how satisfied their customers were. For example the manager revealed that the industry places customer satisfaction at the fore front when he said *"....as such, we maintain close relationship and attachment with the customers"*

III. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Marketing Strategy in the Selected Bread Industries in Abakaliki

Results of the interview obtained from the three bread industries as presented above revealed that the three bread industries have similar marketing strategy. The managers and supervisors observed that their industries have over the years, set out comprehensive marketing strategies for optimum customer satisfaction. Available marketing plans in the industries as the respondents revealed include:

Media Advertising: the respondents from the bread industries interviewed in this study maintained that one of the most effective marketing plans the industries have used over the years is the use of media advertising. They all affirmed that they advertise their products and services on the radio, television, newspapers, bulletin and brochures aimed at improving customer awareness of the industries' products and services. Of course digital

advertising as Truong, McColl and Kitchen (2010) noted is set to become a serious challenger within the rapidly changing media landscape. This strategy therefore, needs to be made a more effective marketing plan in this modern day of science and technology. By implication, social media which have not been effectively utilized in their marketing plans have negative consequences on customer awareness and satisfaction.

Peak Price Reduction/Discounting: As findings reveal, the industries embark on price reduction during the time of optimum sales, seasons and festive periods. As such, they give out discounts in the price of product at such moments when customers purchased in larger quantities. This plan therefore, is an effective strategy to improve customer satisfaction and patronage in any corporate organization especially the bread industries under study. Also considering that there are competitions in consumption, price reduction and pricing behaviour becomes important. Just as Lloyd, Morgan, McCorrison and Zgovu (2009, p.1) has observed that “Pricing behaviour of firms is also important from an industrial organization perspective in understanding the dynamics of competition in highly concentrated markets” Bread market in Abakaliki is highly concentrated because there are several bread companies outside Abakaliki that supplies bread to retailers on daily basis. Thus, it is important that the indigenous bread industries use price reduction to remain in business.

Sales Representation: It was observed from the data collected in this study that these industries use sales representation to describe their products, its content, value and benefits to customers in order to increase patronage. Every business needs a consistent voice; hence, they define their primary targets to their customers. They develop clear and compelling messages that can be delivered consistently across all touch points. Although this was considered as a short term activity due to the changing nature of their business line, it is however important to understand that there is no legitimate reason for ignoring the strategic implications of managing the sales process (Osion, Cravens and Slater, 2001).

Sales Promotion Strategy: sales promotion strategies are important tools for customer retention. But the information should be presented in a manner that it reveals what rhetorical strategies are used in order to obtain compliance by a given readership in a given culture (Vergaro, 2004). The respondents revealed that one of the marketing plans that have yielded optimum result overtime has been the use of sales promotion. In their words, the respondents of Vegas Bakery asserted that sometimes, they offer special prices and discounts to customers to increase their patronage. This was similar to the responses of the respondents of Robans Stores and Best Life Bread.

How Consumers are Motivated in the Three Bread Industries

From the result of the interview, it is observed that the three bread industries have similar strategies for motivating their customers as presented earlier. These strategies are as follows:

Packaging: The idea of improving the products packaging is aimed at making the customers have more interests in the unique nature and features of the product. The industries in this study have unique packaging for their products and as such, customers are motivated by these unique features. There is no doubt that the packaging styles of product influences buyers decision to buy just as findings from the study of Wells, Farley and Armstrong (2007) clearly indicate that purchase decision was strongly associated with packaging. This was evident to the point that over 73 per cent of the consumers they interviewed revealed that during decision making process to purchase a product, they relied on packaging (Wells, Farley and Armstrong, 2007).

Discounting: The industries in this study all embark on discounting of the products selling prices to encourage bulk buying. This is because discounts are given only when a certain quantity of each item/product is being purchased. The strategies these industries use may be considered as a volume promotion and as Gendall, Hoek, Pope and Young (2006) saw in their research, when an industry is using a volume promotion strategy of “buy x get one free” is likely to be more effective than “y for the price of x”.

Consumer Income Sensitivity: the differentiation of their bread sizes according to the individual income levels such as N500, N400, N300, N200 and N100 product, enables the customers to easily make their choices based on their income capacity. This makes it possible for customers to afford their products irrespective of income level. This producer behaviour is apt because Wakefield and Inman (2003) in their research noticed that consumer income moderates the effect of price sensitivity and social consumption. It is thus worthy that attention is given to the point that consumers have differing income capacities, and product pricing should be targeting these various income groups.

Customer-Staff Cordial Relationship: this marketing strategy is also geared towards improving customer’s appeals. Here, customers are well attended to and their complaints and contributions effectively handled. With this strategy, customers feel valued in the industries and as such improve patronage. It is already known that no business can exist without customers and any profit-oriented business must see the customers as the “live wire” for survival (Onabanji, 2015). Therefore, the need to ensure that both the customers and the company staff have a cordial relationship cannot be overemphasized.

Consumer Marginal Utility of Products improvement in Vegas Bakery, Roban Stores and Best Life Bread Industries

From the result of the interview, it was observed that the three bread industries have similar customer marginal utility of their products. For instance; in his response, a Manager in the Roban Stores, maintained that *“our customers are satisfied with our products; most of them patronize us on daily/weekly basis, not minding their side-talks”*. This is similar to the Responses from the respondents of Vegas and Best Life respectively. The following reasons were highlighted to justify their feelings: products availability is guaranteed, there is always more production above demand; business is always open so customers increasingly patronize on daily, weekly and monthly basis; and customers have assurance that the company does not go on a holiday.

However, in Best Life Bread, the manager complained that they are not totally satisfied with the level of patronage because there are periods when they have left over breads. This implies that production is above demand. Again this could also arise from the point that the industry is relatively old when compared to Roban Stores and Vegas Bakery and people in this area are more interested in trying out new industries and their products. Customer loyalty and patronage can be improved using the strategies the three industries studied in this paper adopted. However, as Oliver (1999) has noted, patronage and consumer loyalty might result from the synergistic effects of product superiority, personal fortitude and social bonding. The customers of the three bread industries in Abakaliki studied in this research might have achieved those three as a reason for their continuous patronage and loyalty

IV. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that there are environment and consumer-oriented marketing strategy and consumer satisfaction in the three bread industries. This is justifiable since customers patronize these companies on daily/weekly basis. For instance, Vegas bread is one of the most consumed bread brand in Abakaliki. It is found in every supermarket, store and restaurant. The same thing applies to the Robans bread. However, in Best Life Bread, the respondents complained that they are not totally satisfied with the level of patronage since they sometimes have left over breads. This implies that production is above demand and again as earlier noted this could be because the other two were recently opened and bread consumers are trying something new.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are therefore made:

1. There is need for bread industries to consider home delivery strategy in their marketing strategy for improved customer satisfaction and productivity.
2. There is need for effective discounting system to ensure adequate customer motivation among the industries since discounting has been an effective strategy organizations use to improve sales and customer satisfaction.
3. The companies also need to move into aggressive online marketing and sales of their bread since the world has become a digital commonplace such that most consumers prefer to purchase their products virtually at the comfort of the devices without going to the physical outlets

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