NOVATEUR PUBLICATIONS
JournalNX- A Multidisciplinary Peer Reviewed Journal
ISSN No: 2581 - 4230
VOLUME 2, ISSUE 8, Aug. -2016

RESOURCE LEVERAGING AND CUSTOMER RETENTION IN UPSCALE RESTAURANTS IN PORT HARCOURT, RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

Lawrence Amadi
Department of Marketing Ignatius AjuruUniversity of Education,
Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.
amalaw2004@yahoo.com

Ekeke John Ndubueze
Department of Hospitality Management & Tourism, Faculty of Management Sciences,
University of Port Harcourt, Choba, Rivers State, Nigeria.

*Author for correspondence Email: john.ekeke@uniport.edu.ngORCID ID: orcid.org/0000-0002-9067-3780.

ABSTRACT:

The study investigated the relationship between resource leveraging and customer retention in upscale restaurants in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. The specific objectives were to determine the relationship between resource leveraging and the three measures of customer retention: low customer defection, repeat purchase and high referrals respectively. The study adopted quasi-experimental design which employed survey approach gathered data from 144 senior employees in the 24 upscale restaurants in Port Harcourt. A well-structured questionnaire containing 19 items, inclusive of three demographic items was used to elicit primary data from the respondents. The inferential statistical analysis was conducted with the help of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The result of the inferential statistical analysis showed that resource leveraging had positive and significant relationship with low customer defection(very high), repeat purchase (moderate) and high referrals (weak) respectively. The study concluded that the ability by organizational managers to do more with little resources at their disposal is of strategic imperative to organizational success through customer retention. It was therefore recommended that organizational managers should develop skills in effective resource utilization for enhanced firm performance.

Keywords: Resource Leveraging. Upscale Restaurants. Low Customer Defection. Repeat Purchase. Referrals.

INTRODUCTION:

Some scholars (Jones, Motherbaugh & Beatty, 2000; Stewart & Kinsella, 1996) have shown that a firm's most important asset is its existing customer base. It is therefore important for firms to keep their existing customers and to make sure these customers do not defect to competitors. Customer retention refers to the longevity of a customer's relationship with a product/or service providing firm (Menon and O'Connor, 2007). A firm with effective customer retention convinces the customers to stay with the firm (Bruhn & Georgi, 2006). If a fast food firm embarks on marketing activities that are very effective in retaining customers, the existing customers of the firm might not want to switch to another fast food firm. It therefore implies that customer retention relates to a firm's ability to keep existing customers and ensuring that they do not switch to competitors. As observed by Reichheld and Sasser (1990), customer defections have a surprisingly powerful and thus negative impact on the "bottom line" or profits of a firm. It is a known fact that acquiring a "new" customer cost more than retaining an existing one (Brink & Berndt, 2008). Farguhar (2003) indicates that customer retention can improve revenue by decreasing the cost incurred in acquiring new customers.

However, there is need for firms such as upscale restaurants to appreciate the fact that the positive effect of entrepreneurial marketing on customer retention in real especially in the fast food industry where competition is rife. This implies that the importance of entrepreneurial marketing in retaining customers cannot be underestimated. It is imperative to note that at the tactical level, entrepreneurial marketing does not fit in the 4P's model because entrepreneurs usually adopt an interactive marketing approach, given their preference for direct and personal contact with customers. They interact with customers during personal selling and relationship marketing activities which are usually enhanced by word-of-mouth, thereby generating referrals. The implication is that entrepreneurial marketing is suitable for the operational effectiveness of marketing in upscale restaurants.

The term entrepreneurial marketing is used as an umbrella to capture the conceptualization of marketing as an innovative, risk-taking, proactive area of managerial responsibility. Entrepreneurial marketing can be considered as a proactive, innovative, risk-taking approach to the identification and exploitation of opportunities for attracting and keeping profitable customers. This implies that entrepreneurial marketing represents an opportunistic perspective, with the marketer not simply responsible for communication activities, but also for continually discovering new sources of value for customers and new markets for the firm. This suggests that entrepreneurial marketing represents a different approach to envisioning the business itself, its relationship with the market place, and the role of marketing function within the firm.

Entrepreneurial marketing, though an emerging field, has gained rapid attention from marketing, entrepreneurship and management scholars as a relatively new area of research, which has attempted to link two closely related disciplines- entrepreneurship and marketing (Hoy, 2008). The marketing management school of thought has been criticized for taking a reactive, static approach despite often volatile business environments. Entrepreneurial marketing has emerged as an alternative marketing approach that is dynamic, market-driven and proactive in its approach, and is more suitable for highly competitive and hostile business environments (Miles & Darroch, 2006).

Evidences of entrepreneurial practices are documented in both real business practice and in academic research. Researchers frequently find that entrepreneurial marketing is practiced by entrepreneurial firms constituting of small firms and young firms; especially start-ups (Kocak, 2004; Morris et al, 2002). The point of departure in this current study therefore is to fill the gap by establishing a link between resource leveraging which is a dimension of entrepreneurial marketing and customer retention in the upscale restaurants (fast food firms) in Port Harcourt, Rivers State. The specific objectives were to ascertain the relationship between resource leveraging and the three measures of customer retention: low customer defection, repeat purchase and high referrals respectively.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Theoretical Foundation:

Resource-Advantage (R-A) Theory:

R-A theory is considered in this study as providing platform for entrepreneurial marketing in view of the fact that it clearly allows both for conventional approaches to marketing and for entrepreneurial approach to marketing. Consistent with the dynamics of competition under R-A theory, marketing can facilitate the ability of firms, to create new resources and greatly enhance the productivity of current resources through resource leveraging, innovativeness etc. Sustainable innovation which stems from entrepreneurial behaviour lies at the heart of the R-A theory of competition, and this implies a role for marketing in providing both leadership and support for an innovation portfolio within the firm. Such a portfolio includes an array of product, service and process innovations reflecting different degrees of innovativeness and risk taking. Again, entrepreneurial marketing plays a role in the development of a culture of customer-centricity (i.e being customer focus or developing a culture of customer intensity) and organizational competencies. It is argued that such development is instrumental in the creation of comparative advantage (Morris et al, 2001).

Conceptual Review:

Resource Leveraging:

Leveraging simply refers to doing more with less. Considering the base word "Lever", acting as a lever, a metal rod enables an individual to dislodge an object that could not otherwise be moved. In a similar vein, entrepreneurial marketers are brilliant leveragers of resources. This implies that they are not constrained by the resources they currently control or have at their disposal. Hills et al (2008) suggest that enterprises with entrepreneurial marketing professionals are able to turn to adaptable strategies with a smaller budget.

Customer Retention:

A wide variety of business strategies vie for the attention and support of management as they seek ways to improve corporate profitability. Aggressive advertising and promotions, streamlining operations, cost cutting, outsourcing, acquisitions, and divestitures are all viable strategies that will enhance profitability. The problem with these strategies is that they often overlook a company's most valuable profit generating asset -its current customer. Some strategies like cutting costs by outsourcing service centers off-shore or providing discounts for services to attract new business while maintaining high prices for current customers, may actually accelerate defections of the company's most profitable customers. To be successful and to generate the maximum benefit, any profitability enhancing strategy must include a current customer focus. Regardless of whatever strategies or tactics it uses to enhance profitability, a company must focus on maintaining its current customer base.

Customer retention could be defined as the a situation whereby customers repeatedly purchase from the same firm and avoids switching brands Customer retention can be seen as the mirror image of customer defection, where a high retention rate has the same significance as a low defection rate. Blattberg et at (2001) state that customer retention is taking place when a customer keeps on buying the same market offering from the same product or service provider over a long period of time. For products with short purchase cycles, they define customer retention as occurring when "the customer continues to purchase the product or service over a specified time period". For products with long purchase cycles, they define customer retention as taking place when the customer indicates the intention to purchase the product or service at the next purchase occasion. Payne (2000) defines customer retention rate as "the percentage of customers at the beginning of the period who still remain customers at the end of the period".

In this study, three measures of customer retention identified by Oliver (1997) which he captured as outcomes of customer retention were adopted: low customer defection, repeat purchase, and high referrals.

Low customer Defection:

Customer retention results in low level of customer defection or decreased migration rate of customers to competitors. Just as assets depreciate if not maintained, so do customers through defection to competitors. Martin and Young (2006) state that defection can stem from a bad experience such as a core service failure, poor product knowledge, inconveniences such as long waiting times etc. Customer retention serves a veritable tool through which minimal level of customer defection can be achieved.

Repeat Purchase:

Another outcome of customer retention is repeat purchase. The more positive the relationship between the customer and the company is, the more often the customer buys products from the company which in turn influences the company's turnover positively. This is in tandem with sales-adjusted retention rate suggested as measure of customer retention by Buttle (2004).

High Referrals:

In his view, Oliver (1997) submitted that positive word-of mouth recommendation is an outcome of customer retention. He maintained that customers who are satisfied with the service of a company will not only stay with the company, but will become apostles as well as advocates of the company, thereby recommending the company to other people. Buttle and Ahmad (2001) noted that through customer retention, companies enjoy free of charge referrals of new customers from existing customers which would otherwise be costly in terms of commissions or introductory fees.

Resource Leveraging and Customer Retention

Creative and developmental approach to internal resource utilization demands special attention to improvement of staff and other organizations' resources which would have a direct effect on the quality of service rendered to the customer. Morris et al (2004) state that entrepreneurial marketing professionals are not limited to resources that are currently controlled or already at their service. Resource leveraging suggests an in-ward look at the firm in order to provide an understanding of what makes a firm uniquely capable of achieving and sustaining competitive advantage. Supporters of resource leveraging see firms as bundles of resources heterogeneously distributed across firm (Wemerfelt, 1984; Eisenbardt and Martin, 2000). Resource is regarded as anything which could be thought of as a strength or weakness of a given firm; those tangible and intangible assets at the disposal of the firm (Wemerfelt, 1984; Gilbert, 2005).

It is believed that each firm in the marketplace has at least some resources such as financial (e.g. cash), physical (e.g. plant), legal (e.g. trademarks, licenses), human (e.g. skills and knowledge of employees), informational (e.g. knowledge from consumers), relational (e.g. relationship with suppliers and customers) etc. The uniqueness of these resources could constitute a comparative advantage that could lead to position advantage in terms of customers thereby giving the firm a long-term competitive advantage in the market place. The attendant comparative advantage a firm gains by possessing unique resources that can be leveraged on, makes it possible to embark on market offerings that are not only superior to competitors but also create value for firm's current customers and hence minimizes customer defection.

The fundamental imperative of resource- based strategy (resource leveraging) is that, to achieve competitive advantage in terms of retaining customers and thereby having superior financial performance, firms should seek resources that are valuable, rare, imitable, imperfectly mobile and non-substitutable (Conner, 1991). A resource is valuable when it contributes to a firm's ability to efficiently and/or effectively produce a market offering that has value that can provide edge when competing for a market's continued patronage. Hunt (1999) added that such resources that must be leveraged on as to retain customers must be unsurpassable and hence allow a firm to persistently occupy positions of competitive advantage. To this end, we therefore state that:

HO1: There is no significant relationship between resource leveraging and low customer defection.

HO2: There is no significant relationship between resource leveraging and repeat purchase

HO3: There is no significant relationship between resource leveraging and high referrals.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

Research Design:

The study adopted quasi-experimental design which employed survey approach. Sullivan (2001) asserts that a survey "is a data collection technique in which information is gathered from individuals by having them respond to questions or statements".

Research Population:

A research population is an identifiable group or aggregation of elements (e.g. people, products, organizations, physical entities etc) that are of interest to the researcher (Hair et al, 2000). The population for this study consisted of all twenty – four (24) Fast Food Firms registered with Association of Fast Food Confectioneries of Nigeria (AFFCON), Rivers State Chapter as at April, 2013.

The researcher purposively administered six (6) copies of questionnaire to senior employees in each of the twenty –four (24) Fast Food Firms registered with Rivers State chapter of Association of Fast Food Confectioneries of Nigeria (AFFCON). With total of One Hundred and forty – four (144) copies there was no need for sample size determination.

Area of the Study:

The target industry is the fast food sector in Rivers State. Specifically, the study concentrated on upscale restaurants (fast food firms) operating in Rivers State and were registered with Association of Fast Food Confectioneries of Nigeria (AFFCON), Rivers State chapter.

Data Collection Instrument Design:

The questionnaire is structured into sections **A** and **B.** Section A dealt with the demographics (3-items)of the respondents, while section B dealt with the study variables with the questions structured using five-point likert scale which solicited information from senior employees such as managers, assistant managers, supervisors etc. of fast food firms chosen for the study. Section B which elicited information about the study variables was sub-divided into three (I and II) capturing independent and dependent respectively. A total of 6 items elicited data about resource leveraging (independent variable). A total of 10 items elicited data about customer retention (dependent variable): 26-29 elicited data on low

NOVATEUR PUBLICATIONS
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ISSN No: 2581 - 4230
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customer defection(4 items), repeat purchase (3 items) and high referrals(3 items).

Operational Measures of Variables:

In this study, the independent variable was measured in terms of resource leveraging. On the other hand, Customer Retention (CR) as the dependent variable was measured with low customer defection, repeat purchase and high referrals. The measurement scale was the 5–point Likert Scale.

Validity and Reliability of Instrument:

The questionnaire was evaluated through expert checking for face and content validity. Thereafter, a pilot study was conducted to pre-test the questionnaire. The aim of the pilot testing was to detect weakness in the design of the instrument and address issue of ambiguity as to restructure the instrument in line with observations before executing the full study. A Cronbach's Alpha test was also conducted on the measurement items to determine the reliability of the study instrument. The SPSS output showed that the instruments used in this study were reliable since their coefficient levels (0.823) surpass the benchmark of 0.7 (Nunnally, 1978).

Methods of Data Analysis:

A combination of descriptive and inferential statistical tools with Statistical Package For Social Sciences (SPSS) version 17.0 were adopted to facilitate the analysis. Frequency tables, means, as well as percentages constituted the descriptive statistical tools. These were employed to conduct the necessary demographic and univariate analysis. Bivariate analyses as well was carried out through an inferential statistical tools – Spearman's correlation analysis.

The Spearman's (rho) correlation was used to analyze the relationship between resource leveraging and measures of customer retention at $P < 0.01$ (two – tailed test). Although, data collected were mainly ordinal, SPSS has a procedure through which ordinal data can be converted to interval data to allow for the use of multiple regressions (Rubin & Babbie, 2001; Aczel & Sounderpanian, 2002; Hair et al, 2000).

Descriptive Statistical Analysis:

Questionnaire Administration and Responses:

From a total of 144 copies of the questionnaire distributed, 124 were retrieved while 120 (83.3%) were useful and used for statistical analysis. The remaining 20 copies were not retrieved.

Demographic Analysis:

Data on the analysis of age of the respondents reveals that 68 (or 56.7%) were within the age range of 20-29 years; 44 (36.7) were within 30-39 years and 8(6.7%) are 40 years and above. On the educational qualification of the respondents, the analysis shows that 8(6.7%) of the respondents were holders of WAEC/SSCE/NCE; 12(or 10%) of them were holders of diploma(s)/Certificate(s); 92 (or 76.7%) of the respondents were holders of first degree while 8(or 6.7%) were holders of postgraduate Degree. Analysis on how long the respondents have been with their companies shows as follows; 16 (13.3%) of the respondents worked for less than one year, 56(46.7%) of them had worked for 1-3 years, 32(26.7%) had worked for 4-6 years while 16 (13.3%) had worked for more than 6 years.

Bivariate Analysis:

Tests of Hypotheses:

Decision Rule:

Reject the null hypothesis (H_0) if $PV < 0.01$ for 2 –tailed test and conclude that significant relationship exists

Test of Hypothesis 1

HO1: There is no significant relationship between resource leveraging and low customer defection.

Table 1 Correlations Analysis showing the Relationship between Resource Leveraging and Low Customer Defection

Type	Variables1	Statistics	Resource Leveraging	Low Customer Defection
Spearman's rho	Resource Leveraging	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.096
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.296
		N	120	120
	Low Customer Defection	Correlation Coefficient	.096	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.296	.
		N	120	120

The analysis in Table 1 above shows that the strength of the relationship between resource leveraging and low customer defection is very weak given that the correlation coefficient (r) = 0.096. However, the direction of the relationship is positive. The result also reveals that there is no significant relationship since the probability value (PV) = 0.296 > 0.01. This validates the stated null hypothesis and we conclude that no significant relationship exists between resource leveraging and low customer defection.

Test of Hypothesis 2

H02: There is no significant relationship between resource leveraging and repeat purchase.

Table 2 Correlations Analysis showing the Relationship between Resource Leveraging and Repeat Purchase

Correlations

Type	Variables1	Statistics	Resource Leveraging	Repeat Purchase
Spearman's rho	Resource Leveraging	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.461**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	120	120
	Repeat Purchase	Correlation Coefficient	.461**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	120	120

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2 above shows that the strength of the relationship between resource leveraging and repeat purchase is moderate since the correlation coefficient (r) = 0.461. The direction of the relationship as determined using the sign of the correlation coefficient (r) is positive. This implies that better resource leveraging leads to increase in repeat purchase. The significant/probability value (PV) = 0.000 < 0.01,we therefore conclude that a significant relationship exists between resource leveraging and repeat purchase.

Test of Hypothesis 3

HO3: There is no significant relationship between resource leveraging and high referrals.

Table 3 Correlations Analysis showing the Relationship between Resource Leveraging and High Referrals

Correlations

Type	Variables1	Statistics	High Referrals	Resource Leveraging
Spearman's rho	High Referrals	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.359**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	120	120
	Resource Leveraging	Correlation Coefficient	.359**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	120	120

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3 above reports that although the direction of the relationship between resource leveraging and high referrals is positive, the strength of the relationship is weak since the correlation coefficient (r) value is 0.359. However, given that the probability value (PV) = 0.000 < 0.01, this implies that the established relationship between resource leveraging and high referrals is statistically significant.

Discussion of Findings:

Resource leveraging has insignificant relationship with Repeat Purchase and High Referrals but an insignificant positive relationship with low customer defection. This finding as stated above, resulted from the outcome of the tests of hypotheses HO1, revealed that resource leveraging attracted a weak and insignificant correlation coefficient (r = 0.096, P = 0296 > 0.01) on low customer defection, indicating that as efforts directed at resource leveraging increases, its effect on low customer defection decreases by 0.253 (i.e. 25. 3%).

Apart from the case of low customer defection, resource leveraging as a dimension of EM has significant positive relationship with the other two measures of customer retention. The result of test of HO2, revealed that resource leveraging has a moderate significant positive relationship with repeat purchase as shown by its correlation coefficient (r = 0.461, P = 0.000 < 0.01). Similarly, the test of H03, shows that resource leveraging has positive significant relationship with high referrals as revealed by the significant correlation coefficient (r = 0.359, P = 0.000 <0.01).

The study finding as revealed by testing HO2, and HO3, which affirms that a significant positive relationship exist between resource leveraging and repeat purchase as well as high referrals is in agreement with popular views in literature. Wemerfelt (1984) and Gilbert (2005) noted that through resource leveraging, firms achieve unique capability that enable them attain sustainable competitive advantage which reflects through number of customers willing to remain in business with such firms. Hunt (1999) added that resource leveraging increases a firm chance of retaining customers as such resources are unsurpassable thereby allowing firms to persistently occupy positions of competitive advantage. The finding in relations to the test of H_{07}, is contrary to the views of the authors cited above. Increase in customer defection instead of a decrease may be occasioned by wrong application of resource leveraging strategy. Morris et al (2001) noted that leveraging philosophy is not about cutting resources or squeezing them as much as possible in an attempt to increase productivity. This approach to resource leveraging will lead to increase in customer defection rather than the desired low customer defection.

CONCLUSIONS:

The evidence from this research reveals that resource leveraging is a dimension of Entrepreneurial Marketing (EM) that is an important strategy in enhancing Customer retention (CR) in upscale restaurants (fast food industry). It is therefore safe to conclude that the ability by organizational managers to do more with little resources at their disposal is of strategic imperative to organizational success through customer retention.

Recommendations:

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, it is recommended that organizational managers should develop skills in effective resource utilization for enhanced firm performance.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Studies:

It should be kept in mind that the findings of this study are limited to the relationship between resource leveraging and customer retention in upscale restaurants operating in Rivers State. Therefore, further research should be conducted in other sectors of the economy such as public transportation.

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