BEING INNOVATIVE AND CUSTOMER RETENTION IN UPSCALE RESTAURANTS IN PORT HARCOURT, RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT:

The study examined the relationship between being innovative and customer retention in upscale restaurants in the hospitality industry in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. The specific objectives were to determine the relationship between being innovative and low customer defection, repeat purchase and high referrals. The study adopted quasi-experimental design which employed survey approach gathered data from 144senior employees who work in 24 upscale restaurants in Port Harcourt. The research instrument containing 26 items, with 3 demographic items was used to elicit primary data from the respondents. After data editing, and reliability analysis of the instrument, inferential statistics was conducted with the help of Statistical Package For Social Sciences (SPSS). The inferential statistical analysis provided that following results: being innovative had positive and significant relationship with the three measures of customer retention (low customer defection, repeat purchase and high referrals respectively). The study concluded that innovativeness provides the platform to satisfy customers and hence achieve customer loyalty. It is therefore recommended that organizational managers in upscale restaurants should focus more on innovation in terms of new products and services in order to provide superior value to customers than competitors do.

Keywords: Being Innovative. Upscale Restaurants. Low Customer Defection. Referrals. Repeat Purchase.

INTRODUCTION:

Some scholars (Jones, Motherbaugh and Beatty, 2000; Stewart and 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 and 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 and Berndt, 2008). Farguhar (2003) indicates that customer retention can improve revenue by decreasing the cost incurred in acquiring new customers.

Owing to the relevance of customer retention to the growth and survival of firms, there have been previous studies that examined its relationship with other concepts and constructs. Kefah (2010) looked at relationship management and customer retention. Ang and Buttle (2005) investigated the association between customer retention and a number of management processes. Petzer, Steyn and Mostert (2009) examined customer retention practices of small, medium and large hotels in South Africa. Omotayo and Joachim (2008) examined the relationship between customer service and retention of mobile phone users in Nigeria. It is evident that from the list of existing literature on customer retention, ever since the mid-1990s, the area of customer retention has been the focus of much research efforts. However, there is no work linking customer retention with entrepreneurial marketing in Fast Food Industry in any state in Nigeria. Therefore, there is a gap in the literature which has necessitated our study of entrepreneurial marketing and customer retention in fast food industry in Rivers state. This is an important area of study which previous researches have not considered. There is need for firms to understand the effect of entrepreneurial marketing on customer retention in fast food industry in Rivers State. The importance of entrepreneurial marketing in retaining customers cannot be underestimated.

Extant literature documents that entrepreneurial practices are common in both real business practice and in academic research. Results of empirical studies show that entrepreneurial marketing is practiced by entrepreneurial firms consisting of small firms, especially start-ups (Kocak, 2004; Morris et al, 2002). However, there is no empirical evidence to show that studies have not been conducted within the context of upscale restaurants in Rivers State. This current study the seeks to fill the gap by establishing a link between entrepreneurial marketing and customer retention in the upscale restaurants (fast food firms) in Rivers State. The specific objectives were to examine the relationship between being innovative and low customer defection, repeat purchase and high referrals respectively.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Theoretical Foundation:

Resource-Advantage (R-A) Theory: Organisational managers are aware that in the business world, competition is an ongoing struggle among firms to achieve a comparative advantage in resources that will ultimately produce a sustainable competitive edge in the marketplace. The source of advantage derives from innovation, which is viewed as endogenous to competition. Specifically, it is believed that superior financial returns flow to those firms that are able to create value more efficiently for customers. This underscores the need for entrepreneurial behaviour. In R-A theory, competition is defined as knowledge discovery process. Recall that the competitive interplay of firms results in marketplace positions that reflect the relative efficiency and effectiveness of each entrant, which in turn allows firms in disadvantaged positions to learn where they need to acquire additional resources or to use existing resources more efficiently/effectively. The firms therefore are motivated to "neutralize and/or leapfrog advantaged competitors by better managing existing resources and/or by acquisition, imitation, substitution, or major innovation" (Hunt & Morgan, 1997). The R-A theory places great emphasis on innovation as a means to achieving organizational performance.

Being Innovative:

In the views of Lumpkin and Dess (1996), being innovative is the propensity of a firm to engage in and support novelty, new ideas, creative processes and experimentations, which lead to new products, services or technological processes. A strategic innovative approach increases the chances of an organization to become aware of the advantages in being first and capitalize market opportunities. Innovativeness entails fostering a spirit of creativity, supporting research and development, introducing new products/services and being technological leader (Lumpkin & Dess, 2001). Innovative processes provide the advantage of low cost, rapid production, better quality and improved customer services.

Davis et al (1991) pointed out that entrepreneurship plays an important role not only in products and services, but also in finding creative and unique solutions including developing new technologies. Miles and Darroch (2006) submitted that entrepreneurial marketing's innovativeness contributes to creating superior value. Entrepreneurs must be creative thinkers who identify innovative business opportunities and be able to adapt to changing and uncertain environments (Timmons and Spinelli, 2004).

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 a situation whereby customers repeatedly purchase from the same firm and avoids switching brands.

According to Oliver (1997), the outcomes of customer retention includes; low customer defection, repeat purchase, high referrals, cross-selling, low price/cost sensitive, and increase in value of a customer. However, for this current study, the following measures were adopted: low customer defection, repeat purchase, and high referrals.

Low Customer Defection:

Low level of customer defection or decreased migration rate of customers to competitors describes where customers hardly defect from purchasing a particular brand of product from a particular firm. 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.

Repeat Purchase:

Repeat purchase describes a situation whereby 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) opined 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 the advantages accruable to a firm due to customer retention to include the enjoyment of free of charge referrals of new customers from existing customers. The author noted that the absence of referrals is usually costly for firms in terms of commissions or introductory fees.

Being Innovative and Customer Retention:

Customer retention demands that firms must constantly offer to the customer goods and services that have superior value. Miles and Darroch (2006) expressed that entrepreneurial marketing plays a unique role through its innovativeness dimension in creating superior value for customers. Covin and Slevin (1991) reasoned in this direction when they pointed out that innovation is of great importance for success in business and competitiveness.

Recall that being innovative relates to the seeking creative, unusual, or novel solutions to problems and needs. It includes the development of new products and services, as well as new processes and technologies for performing organizational functions. This implies that the business is viewed as an “innovation factory”, where all departments and functions are defined in terms of an internal value chain and have an ongoing responsibility for identifying new sources of value for the customer. Through innovation, the firm leads customers as opposed to reacting to or following them.

Innovativeness increases the chances of an organization to become aware of the advantages in being first and capitalize market opportunities. Innovative processes provide the advantage of low cost, rapid production, better quality and improved customer services which will in turn enhance customer retention. Innovation is an applied creativity. Business operators must be creative thinkers who identify innovative business opportunities and be able to adapt to changes in their environment. Therefore, innovativeness is necessary for business organizations in their efforts towards customer retention. Innovation remains the only solution to survive and thrive in increasingly hyper competitive market where customer defection is on the increase (Kim and Maubourgne, 2005).

Considering that customers like assets depreciate if not maintained, innovation helps in addressing possible reasons for customer defection. Martin and Young (2006) state that defection can stem from poor product knowledge, inconveniences such as long waiting times, competition etc. These and other customer related challenges can be addressed through innovativeness which entails propensity to engage in and support novelty, new ideas, creative processes, etc, thereby improving customer retention.

We therefore state from the above that:

HO1: There is no significant relationship between being innovative and low customer defection.

HO2: There is no significant relationship between being innovative and repeat purchase.

HO3: There is no significant relationship between being innovative 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 research instrument was purposively administered to senior employees in each of the twenty –four (24) Fast Food Firms registered at the rate of six per upscale restaurants.

Area of the Study:

The target industry is the fast food sector in Rivers State. Specifically, the study concentrated on fast food firms operating in Rivers State and are 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, II and III) capturing independent, dependent and moderating variables respectively. A total of 16 items elicited data about Entrepreneurial Marketing (independent variable). Specifically, items 10-14 elicited data on being innovative. Also, a total of 10 items elicited data about low customer defection, repeat purchase and high referrals as measures of customer retention (dependent variable).

Operational Measures of Variables:

In this study, the independent variable was measured in terms of being innovative. On the other hand, Customer Retention (CR) which is 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 subjected to expert checking for face and content validity. Thereafter, a pilot study was conducted to pre-test the questionnaire. 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 (0.923) 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 independent and dependent variables 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. A total of four copies (4) (2.8&) were bad and could not be used.

Demographic Analysis:

Data on the analysis of age of the respondents reveals that 68 (or 56.7%) 20-29 years; 44 (or 36.7) 30-39 years and 8(or 6.7%) 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 (10%) holders of diploma(s)/Certificate(s); 92 (or 76.7%) holders of first degree while 8(6.7%) 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. The analysis the category of the respondents reveals that 28 (or 23.3%) of the respondents are managers. Also, 28(or 23.3%) of them were assistant managers; 60 (or 50%) were supervisors while 4 (or 3.3%) represented others.

Bivariate Analysis:

Tests of Hypotheses:

The Spearman's rank correlation analysis with the aid of SPSS version 17.0 was used to test the hypotheses. In all the hypotheses, two- tailed test was used and the significant level was 0.01.

Decision Rule:

Reject the null hypothesis (H_o) 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 being innovation and low customer defection.

Table 1 Correlations Analysis showing the Relationship between Being Innovative and Low Customer Defection

Correlations

Type	Variables1	Statistics	Being Innovative	Low Customer Defection
Spearman's rho	Being Innovative	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.608**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	120	120
	Low Customer Defection	Correlation Coefficient	.608**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	120	120

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

The analysis in Table 1 above reports on the correlation analysis showing the relationship between being innovative and low customer defection. It shows that the correlation coefficient (r) is 0.608. This implies that there is a strong relationship between being innovative and low customer defection. The sign of the estimated value of (r) is positive while the P value is 0.000 < 0.01. Therefore, we drop the null hypothesis and conclude that there is a significant positive relationship between being proactive and low customer defection.

Test of Hypothesis 2

H02: There is no significant relationship between being innovative and repeat purchase

Table 2 Correlations Analysis showing the Relationship between Being Innovative and Repeat Purchase

Correlations

Type	Variables1	Statistics	Being Innovative	Repeat Purchase
Spearman's rho	Being Innovative	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.485**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	120	120
	Repeat Purchase	Correlation Coefficient	.485**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	120	120

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

As revealed in Table 2 above, the estimated value of the coefficient of correlation is 0.485. This indicates a moderate positive relationship between being innovative and repeat purchase. The P value of 0.000 < 0.01, further implies that the said relationship is significant thereby supporting the rejection of the null hypothesis and concluding that there is a statistical significant relationship between being innovative and repeat purchase.

Test of Hypothesis 3

H03: There is no significant relationship between being innovation and high referrals

Table 3 Correlations Analysis showing the Relationship between Being Innovative and High Referrals

Correlations

Type	Variables1	Statistics	Being Innovative	High Referrals
Spearman's rho	Being Innovative	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.440**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	120	120
	High Referrals	Correlation Coefficient	.440**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	120	120

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

The correlation analysis as shown in Table 3 above indicates that the correlation coefficient (r) = 0.440. This implies that a moderate relationship exists between being innovative and high referrals. The direction of the relationship as indicated by the sign of the correlation coefficient is positive, suggesting that the more innovative a fast food firm becomes, the higher the level of referrals from retained customers. Also, the significant/probability value (PV) = 0.000 < 0.01, therefore, we conclude that there is a significant relationship between being innovative and high referrals.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS:

Being innovative has significant positive relationships with the dimensions of customer retention (low customer defection, repeat purchase and high referrals). This finding resulted from the tests of hypotheses HO1, HO2, and HO3. In testing H01, being innovative attracted significant positive correlation coefficient (0.608, P < 0.01) implying strong positive relationship between being innovative and low customer defection. In terms of H02, the result shows that being innovative also attracts significant positive relationship as indicated by the significant correlation coefficient (0.485, P < 0.01) indicating also that both variables move in the same direction. That is, increase in innovative approach commands increase in repeat purchase. The test of H03, revealed a significant positive correlation coefficient (0.440, P < 0.01) which also confirms that a significant positive relationship exists between being innovative and high referrals.

From the foregoing, it is evident that being innovative has a significant positive relationship with customer retention in terms of low customer defection, repeat purchase and high referrals. This implies that being innovative enables fast food firms to retain their customers in any competitive market. This finding agrees with the submission of Kim and Maudborgne (2005) who asserted that “in order to survive and thrive in increasingly hyper competitive market, innovation is the only solution”. Recall that no firm survives without reasonable customer base. Some authors have acknowledged the fact that innovation has the capacity to promote stronger competitiveness which will lead to increase in customer retention because innovative firms will capitalize on emerging market opportunities to serve customers better than competitors that are not innovative (Mursali, 2007; Zahra & Garvis, 2000). Recall that customer retention demands that firms must constantly offer to the customer goods and services that have superior value. Miles and Darroch (2006) further confirmed the relationship between innovativeness as a dimension of EM and customer retention when they observed that EM plays a unique role through its innovativeness dimension in creating superior customer value. It should be noted that superior customer value commands customer retention.

Managerial Implications:

The findings of this study suggests that only firms that provide superior value to customers can command the loyalty of its customers and reduce customer defection. To achieve this laudable goals, grounded change agents like entrepreneurial marketing consultants, marketing experts with track records in customer retention strategies are urgently needed to give operators in the fast food industry the requisite orientation as to the demands of retaining customers through entrepreneurial marketing approach.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

Based on the findings this study, it could be concluded that innovativeness provides the platform to satisfy customers and hence achieve customer loyalty. It is therefore recommended that organizational managers in upscale restaurants should focus more on innovation in order to provide superior value to customers than competitors do.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Studies:

The issue of the generalization of our findings comes into play given that it may not automatically apply to every setting (locale) and facets of firms or industries. It should be kept in mind that the findings of this study are limited to fast food firms operating in Rivers State. Therefore, further research should be conducted in other states and regions as well as industries in order to confirm or contradict our findings.

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