

PERSONAL SELLING SKILLS AND BUSINESS PERFORMANCE OF BOUTIQUE OWNERS IN PORT HARCOURT

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ABSTRACT

This study critically analyzed the relationship between Personal Selling Skills and Business Performance of Boutique Owners in Port Harcourt. The analysis was carried out with the help of two (2) research questions and two (2) hypotheses formulated to guide the paper in addition to the correlation research design which was chosen for thorough research. Furthermore the study obtained effective response from sixty (60) registered boutique owners in Port Harcourt which made up the entire population of the study. The census approach was also adopted. The data collected through primary source (the questionnaire) was critically analyzed and Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) was employed to test the hypotheses formulated through the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software version 26. The result was that Empathy had significant and positive relationship with Sales Volume Growth and Customer Satisfaction. In conclusion, the positive relationship between Personal Selling Skills and Business Performance suggests that boutique owners who actively engage clients with personal selling skills are better positioned to enhance their service offerings. Recommendations include; Boutique owners should establish or adopt formal systems for relating, analysing, and acting on personal selling skills. There should be a system of utilizing customer feedback on daily basis which will improve customer satisfaction, builds trust, and help increase brand awareness. Investment should be made into comprehensive training programs for all employees, focusing on the importance of personal selling skills and customer service excellence.

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study:

Considering the intense competitive environment of the contemporary business world, which the clothing industry is not exempted from, making a 'good sale' is not as easy as it sounds 'very good' in our eardrum. It may require the extra-mile principle, honing the interpersonal skills of the salespeople to be able to win the acceptance and patronage of a target audience with some persuasive approach through an individual-to-individual interaction and much more, hence some salespersons have recorded more success than others in achieving targets. Observed by Marunde, (2010) sales activities are present in every company's routine, they have been seen as something ordinary, but in a more aggressive business-ecosystem they present a series of challenges, which one of them is acquiring and using essential selling skills to achieve excellent marketing performance. Stating categorically Schrage, (2004) said in business, performance often refers to the achievement of desired goals, which is usually tied to the investments that management makes in 'human capital' and other 'assets'. Personal selling capability is a process that incorporates both the ability to sell and to develop customer relationships through account management, which necessitates the development of salespersons to be able to exhibit

interpersonal skills at all levels (Rentz, et., al 2002). Hence boutique owners need to deploy personal selling skills daily which will ensure they have a handle on long-term relationships with their customers. To establish this relationship, Sparks, et., al (2002) argue that business performance is related to attraction, retention, satisfaction and customer loyalty.

If an organization is firmly committed to constantly developing its sales capabilities, it will not only achieve better sales on short-term basis, but establish a more sustainable customer relationship strategy based on a broader value creation process (Weitz, B.; Cateberry, S.; Tanner, J., 2007). The bottom line of the argument is that when a company understands and develops sales capabilities based on well-processed market information, this can greatly lead to better customer and business performance. It's no doubt that customers desire to have business dealings with people they know, and can trust, which is why interpersonal skills cannot be overemphasized as highly essential techniques in sales and business. There are many different types of personal selling, including retail sales, business-to-business sales, and telemarketing. Personal selling is especially effective with high-end products like cars and homes but is just effective with smaller purchases, especially for repeat sales and sales referrals. There is interpersonal influence process involving a seller's promotional presentation conducted on a person-to-person basis with the buyer. The modern day professional salespeople are problem solvers who seek to develop long-term relationships with current and potential customers (Sharma 2016). To further simplify it, personal selling is what organizations do when they adopt the method of using sales force to sell their goods or services by meeting the customer face-to-face. Therefore the sales force team is the one saddled with the sole responsibility of advertising the products and the company they represent through their talents or skills, starting with manner of approach or attitude, appearance, and in-depth knowledge of the product. Thus personal selling is an interactive form of selling, which helps in building customer-relationship beyond the marketplace-connection via personal attention that makes individuals to feel valued; and with a detailed explanation as well as follow-up on individuals, which the multimedia strategies don't offer anyone (Boohne, et., al 2012).

Statement of Problems:

The fashion industry is well-known and well-embraced by members of the elite. Yet, one of the major challenges facing the boutique owners in Port Harcourt is the case of low sales and the inability to achieve customer growth, which can be traceable to lack of empathy. Even though other challenges exist such as constraints in technological advancement, environmental and ethical factors, etc, the biggest part of the problem seems to be embedded in lack of the appropriate emotional intelligence, especially because customers are seeking emotional relationships with a brand rather than a transactional relationship that results in emotional disconnect with the business owner. Though colours, patterns and styles are said to convey our emotions and thoughts, what makes the most impression in the heart is empathy. It enables marketers to increasingly distinguish themselves in reaching out to win apathetic customers amidst the ever-changing and highly competitive market. In this retail environment, fashion dealers need to develop new strategies to grab consumers' attention by speaking to their heart. To address this need, marketers employ personal selling skills with central focus on empathy

as a way to engage their customers, appealing to their needs, aspirations, dreams and ego.

While personal selling skills are recognized as crucial requirement for business growth, the specific dynamic influencing the relationship between these skills and sales outcomes in small enterprises remain inadequately explored. Hence this research endeavours to find out the influence of workplace empathy on business performance, which is a key factor for emotional connect in business and other aspects of life. In many markets, a company's sales are a function of both advertising and personal selling efforts, but despite the important role of personal selling which has generated sales behavior and great results to marketers, when it comes to the clothing industry, empathic communication is a selling skill that has not really been fairly represented by previous research especially with regards to boutique owners in Port Harcourt, thereby creating significant deficiencies in current literatures that provide only but general overviews of the impact of personal selling on business performance.

Conceptual / Operational framework

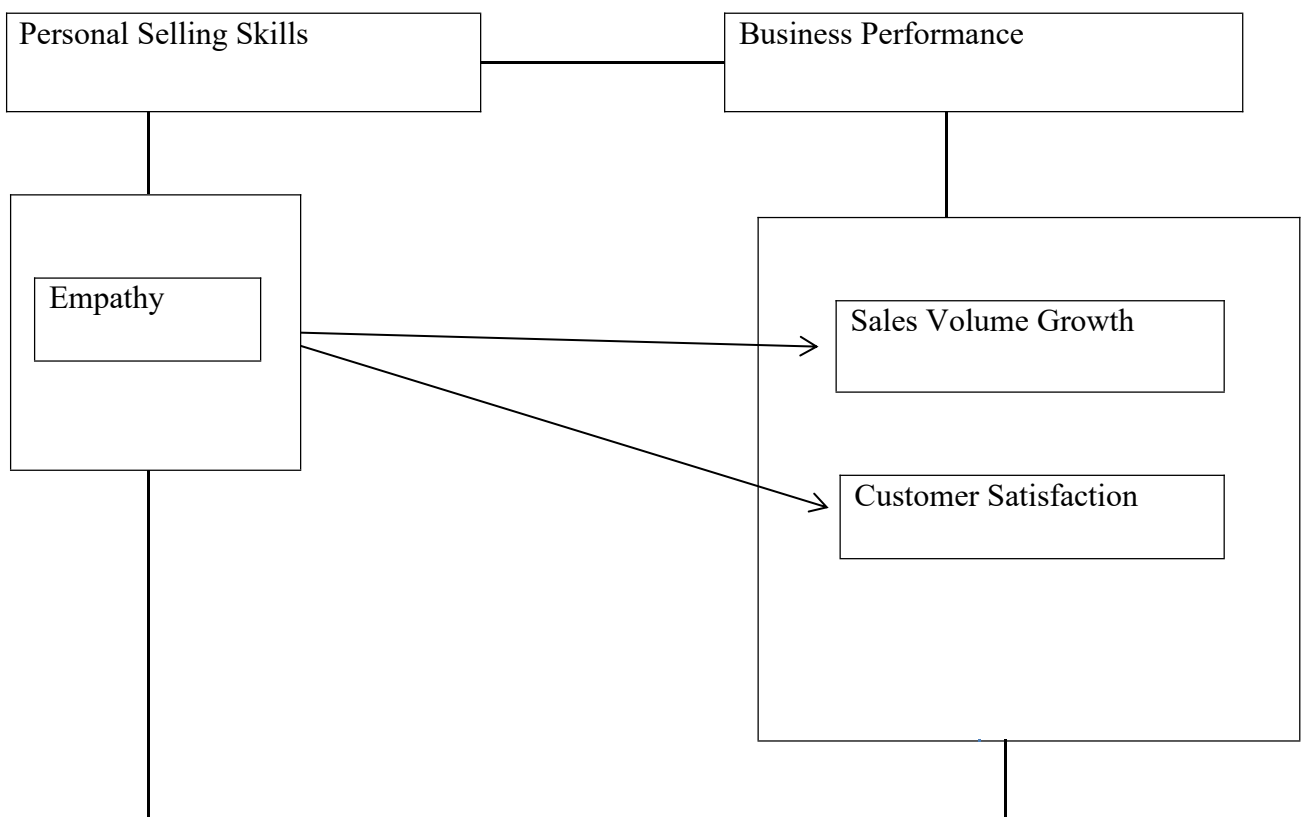


Figure 1.1: Conceptual / Operational Framework of Personal Selling Skills and Business Performance of Boutique owners in Port Harcourt.

From: Asturi et., al (2019), Hadjimonalis et., al (2002), Pecenka et., al (2022)

Research Questions:

In attempt to achieve the purpose of this research, it is expedient to seek answers for the following questions:

- i. What is the relationship between empathy and sales volume growth of boutique owners in Port Harcourt?
- ii. What is the relationship between empathy and customer satisfaction of boutique owners in Port Harcourt?

Research Hypothesis:

For the purpose of ensuring accuracy of result, the following null hypotheses are considered as follows:

- a) There is no significant relationship between empathy and sales volume growth of boutique owners in Port Harcourt.
- b) There is no significant relationship between empathy and customer satisfaction of boutique owners in Port Harcourt.

Literature Review:

Personal Selling Skills:

In the business world, selling is identified as one of the hardest jobs which all industries are facing. This can be attributed to the competitiveness and peculiarity of the contemporary trends in marketing which makes salesperson to suffer rejection over and over again because of the sells targets that must be completed as at when due. Sales professionals are known for using a combination of personal selling skills which helps them to become friendly people who are able to connect to their customers until they convert them by persuasion and conviction to purchase their products or services. The skills according to Kumar, et., al (2013) may include ability to educate buyers, good understanding of the product, active listening, tenacity, overcoming rejection, self-motivation, organizational ability, collaboration ability, good communication, etc. To further explain, we will briefly consider some points below:

1. Prospect education skill: It is one thing to have good understanding of something, and it is another thing to effectively communicate that knowledge to others. A salesperson needs to cultivate educative skill, which is the ability to successfully teach or train prospective buyers about the application, or values and features of the product he is offering them. This can give them a change of perspective and a sense of appreciation for the product. A salesperson with this skill can offer his prospects the value they didn't find in using alternative products, and with a display of transparency it's easy to build trust and rapport (Sharma, 2016).

2. Active listening: This skill is an essential aspect of effective communication and it requires a great deal of patience as well as the ability to understand client's point of view. Effective listening means while paying attention to what a customer or potential client is saying, you are connecting to understand and process the observation, complaint or information, and simultaneously planning or formulating a better strategy to close the sale. Kollat, (2011) a salesperson may not be able to appeal to prospective buyers until he allows them to express their needs and concerns, and thereafter he takes time to address their worries and fears with assurance of a better experience with the product he's offering them.

3. Follow up: This skill implies having the decency of character to keep in touch with potential or active customers. It means the activity that continues something that has already started. When it comes to selling high value product that involves customers stacking so much to acquire, they may never immediately take a decision on that. But by

constantly calling or sending message to update them of new inventory, best qualities, or of an upcoming exhibition, it is most likely that out of courtesy itself, they will choose to buy your goods.

4. Persuasive skills: This is having the smooth-tongued ability to compel or the power to induce action. Without great persuasive selling skills, customers may never be convinced on why your product or service is worth their financial investment. Persuasive skills enable a salesperson to be able to turn negatives into positives, assess prospective buyers' needs while focusing on the end goal of solving the customers' problem (Homburg, et., al 2009).

5. Collaboration skills: The salesperson needs to demonstrate the ability to collaborate with potential customers. This is an essential skill to get together with people; to join-forces for a specific purpose. It avails clients the opportunity to be part of the decision-making process of selling or of providing solution to their challenges in a way they feel valued. Also collaboration is about cooperating with fellow sales reps to learn essential selling strategies that are helpful in career personal development (Kotler, 2013).

6. Self-motivating skills: This skill speaks of the internal drive to achieve success in life and keep moving forward despite all odds. When you have a sense of purpose and embrace self-evaluation, you will be lively and full of energy, communicating hope to customers.

7. Negotiation skills: This skill is essential especially when sales representatives remember they are surrounded by an increasing number of competitors who are seeking to dominate the market. Negotiation is an invaluable part of sales in today's business world, and this skill is the ability to engage in a discussion that sometimes involves a trade-off on the side of the management with the intention to come to terms with each client on a common ground with a win-win result.

8. Questioning skills: An effective questioning skill says 'sell by asking, not by telling'. Have different questions for different selling situations. When a salesperson engages in asking 'qualifying' questions; this has a way of keeping him in control of the situation. It enables him find out what the prospective buyers want, rather than immediately giving them a bunch of information that may or may not be useful to them.

Empathy:

This is a business skill that enables marketers to detect, understand and share the emotions of another person without disrespecting or insulting them. There are conflicting situations to overcome in dealing with customers that are less-than-compatible personalities in the business world, which without empathy it is difficult to have effective workplace negotiations that result in greater productivity and profitability at last. Boohne, et., al (2012) says companies are no longer being assessed as totally profit-making machines. Rather people see them as part of the community and have high expectations for their behaviors as a brand. Both employees and customers select companies based on the organizations values *and* actions, of which empathy ranks top in the list. Being skillful at how to show empathy often reveals the difference between keeping relationships and losing them. This is with regards to people's personal or private life as well as their workplace or professional relationship.

Empathy is simply the ability to understand and enter into other people's feelings (Cropanzano, et., al 2005). This quality is what boutique owners must exploit to have special understanding of their customers and be sensitive to each buyer's unique

perspective, choices, and ideas. Empathy leads to customer patronage, loyalty, and retention. Being a major part of emotional intelligence, empathy provides some support for organizational staff when in need. Thus it is the act of understanding and allowing oneself to share the experiences of others in a dignified way. It enhances the atmosphere of success in a workplace ecosystem by making certain practices possible, such as excellent collaboration, conflict management, respecting and valuing others, engagement and retention as well as connecting with old and new customers. Lastly it's important to understand that empathy is a powerful tool to staying in command of your emotions when overcoming a sales rejection, because overcoming sales rejection is actually the ultimate secret of making the sales.

Business Performance:

Kotler, (2009) business performance refers to the ability of a company to make a recognized accomplishment by following a strategic process to achieve organizational objectives and make profits with its minimal resources. A performance is said to occur when a firm is carrying out its project successfully, ensuring strategic alignment across the different units of the organization and identifying areas of improvement, which is made possible by sound application of knowledge, rather than a mere possession of knowledge. Some scholars have helped to define business performance of a company as the operational ability to satisfy the desires of the company's major stakeholders, which is a subset of the total concept of the firm's effectiveness (Bagram M. M. & Khan, S. 2012). Considered very essential to companies, business performance is a great concept that enables organizations to determine or measure their accomplishment, it is a key factor with which to gauge the functional roles of different departments, develop winning strategies and be effectively innovative; ever relevant in a challenging and changing environment. According to Akinyi, (2011) performance is a particular result obtained in management, economic, marketing, business, etc, which has the features of competitiveness, efficiency and effectiveness of the organization and its procedural and structural components. Boutique owners can understand and analyze business performance by paying attention to the desired business behaviour and the valuable outcomes of those behaviours. This is because behaviours are made up of the observable actions and or mental processes of the people concerned (either those who perform the job or those who purchase the goods).

Berry, (1995) shows that business performance must be assessed to achieve organizational goals by measuring success or failure, and can be defined in several ways, such as subjective or objective, financial or non-financial, which is considered as an important tool for businesses to analyze how effective management is at achieving business goals. There are major Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for measuring company's achievement chosen by different organizations, which includes amongst others; profitability, productivity, sales employment growth, customer satisfaction ratings, improving market share, etc. But for the boutique owners, the most relevant Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are profitability and revenue, focusing on financial returns, customer's satisfaction and employee's fulfillment. It is necessary to measure business performance to understand whether a business is achieving its organizational goals or not. In his opinion, Sharma (2016) there are two major factors amongst others that affect business performance; namely "effective leadership" and "organizational culture". Considering effective leadership, which works alongside innovativeness, it has significant

consequences on business performance. Therefore it is imperative for leaders to study their employees and learn how to motivate them to collectively achieve business objectives. Furthermore, organizational culture which has to do with the shared values and belief system of the working environment, when it is toxic, can negatively impact on business performance, and when it is positive, can be advantageous to the business beyond expectation.

Sales Volume Growth:

“Sales volume growth” is largely referred to the increase in sales of a product or service over an established period of time that runs as the company’s calendar system. It measures the extent to which a business performs either poorly or greatly in the sales of each product line of the company (Homburg, et. al, 2009). Looking at the field of marketing, studies have shown that some easily adopted metric systems by companies for evaluating their business’s sales performance are net-income, gross profit, conversion rate, length of the sales cycle, etc. But the most effective or recommended one seems to be the sales volume growth, even though it is has been largely overlooked as a measuring tool, yet the benefits can’t be ignored. With the advent of modern business operations, many entrepreneurs believe that no matter what success looks like in business, if it is not commonly measured in sales volume, it is not worth investing in.

Coelho, et. al, (2012) the simple way of putting it is that sales volume refers to the aggregate number of units of goods or services sold over a specific time period. A company can improve its sales volume by being strategic in activities such as focusing on customers’ needs, increasing marketing and advertising efforts, product development and presentation (quality designs, packaging, etc), excellent customer service, giving incentives to sales reps, rewarding loyal clients, or implementing sales promotional packages. Note that ‘sales volume’ and ‘total sales’ are two different things (Bagram, et., al 2012). Therefore it’s important to understand that sales volume alone does not necessarily indicate a company’s overall success, but it helps in determining the company’s best and worst performing products and to improve total sales across all product lines. Whereas total sales provide a general view into the company’s overall business performance, but on the other hand it doesn’t show us which product is bringing in the most sales to the company. In other words, total sales do not break down the company’s sales revenue from the product sales. When there is an increase in the volume, this indicates the company is expanding its horizon; gaining more market share in the industry, reaching newer customers on regular basis, or successfully promoting its products and services at higher levels. Likewise on the contrary, when there is a decrease in sales volume, this simply reveals a decline in demand of that particular product, maybe as a result of increased competition or some issues associated with product or marketing strategy. According to Hague, et. al, (2016) sales volume growth is a system of measurement that is most effective when carried out within some short period, like a month, a quarter or a year depending on what the company decides and the level of sales volume they are seeking to analyze. It’s of great essence because investors currently and thoroughly research the intending business’s sales volume to examine how healthy the company or business is before investing their wealth there.

Sales are known as the units of product sold by a business organization. Thus to increase sales implies growing the number of items or services both in units and monetary value simultaneously. According to Marunde, (2010) the overall goal of any company or

business is to increase both sales and revenue, which is a high priority for most organizations. By implication it means the company is not only selling more units to customers but also commanding higher prices at acceptable rates for them. But Zhen, et., al (2007) argued that the key to improving sales is to shift your focus from making profits to increasing sales performance and creating an amazing experience for your customers. The salient points are not farfetched from building a customer based company; by reaching more customers, convincing customers to regularly buy more of the goods, improving its marketing strategy, offering attractive prices to the market well as well as maintaining quality relationships with customers. In his study Brink, et., al (2008) found that current customers are the best point of consideration to start with towards increasing sales, which implies the necessity to boost customer retention as the focus of sales and marketing efforts. By the attitude of existing customers, you see how they trust the company enough to purchase their products or services on regular basis. If management provides them with a special package like “customer-delight-level” of service which gives them an unexpectedly pleasant experience, they are more likely to show positive attitude and make extra purchases as well as referring others, which will automatically lead to increasing the number of sales (Coelho, et. al, 2012).

As cited by Abdullah, (2012) in ecommerce and retail businesses, sales volume has a correlation with pricing strategy. The company’s pricing decision for their goods and services can greatly influence its sales volume. A simple analysis shows that if a company sets the prices of its products very high, customers will turn away from them, which will automatically result in decrease in sales. But when the prices are low, more customers are attracted to the products, there will be more sales but at the expense of profit margins. Therefore a company’s overall success is determined not just by sales volume growth measurement, but by also considering other factors such as profit margins, customer retention, and brand reputation, without which it is difficult to find out a business’s overall health and growth potential.

However there are many benefits of sales volume as observed by Aaker (2013) which includes the following: (1) Sales volume is important for inventory management. Companies can effectively plan for sufficient inventory to satisfy the demands of customers by accurately forecasting sales volume. (2) It enables marketing management to have deep insight into customer behaviour and preferences. (3) It is a major driver of revenue. When sales volume increases, revenue increases and vice versa. (4) Understanding the relationship between sales volume and pricing, helps companies determine the optimal price point and have a refined pricing plan. By lowering prices you can take market share away from your competitors, which automatically leads to increase in sales.

Customer Satisfaction:

Belás, et. al (2016) defines customer satisfaction as a measurement that determines how happy customers are with a company’s products, services, and capabilities. But without understanding the voice of the customer, it is difficult to achieve this goal. Hence companies must learn to use focused-group strategy, survey and ratings method to gain the necessary insights into customer behaviours or reactions. According to Coelho, et. al, (2012). customer satisfaction is a reflection of the good health of an organization by showing how well their goods or services resonate with buyers. Adding that one thing is certain; which is high customer satisfaction, means customers are happy and business is

booming. Every business owner intending to go mega has a responsibility to identify both satisfied and unsatisfied customers and respond to them accordingly to prevent churn. When there are negative customer reviews, these usually come from unhappy customers whose expectations were not met by the brand.

Regarding the benefits of customer satisfaction, it is a proven fact by research that high satisfaction often results in further or greater customer satisfaction, as well as leading to a longer customer lifetime value and a stronger brand reputation. When a customer is not satisfied with the product, that customer's lifetime value is low, indicating the company has missed potential revenue opportunity (Grigoroudis, et. al, 2010).

Furthermore, customer satisfaction is beneficial in showing the performance of your support team. It is also a key driver of customer loyalty. This describes customers' steadfastness in binding themselves to the use of a particular product, out of hundreds of others in the market, they can pay high price or travel a far distance to get it. When it's not readily available for purchase, they can place a special order for it and wait patiently for it, the secret is satisfaction.

Also by tracking customer satisfaction, which can be done through customer feedback, companies can understand where they excel or fail, and know the area to improve in. it maybe the design and packaging, the customer service strategy or the use of latest technology that aligns with the experiences they desire (Hague, et. al, 2016)..

Customer satisfaction enhances customer retention and advocacy: they will naturally and personally engage in word-of-mouth marketing, recommending and arguing and urging others to purchase the same goods or services without any pay from the company.

Customer satisfaction enables company executives to have product update and forecast into the future, working proactively. When business organizations have negative customer reviews, this indicates danger alert that enables the management to know when a particular goods or service has a problem that requires to be solved.

Studying different businesses, Kollat (2011) said most companies don't see growth as merely optional but intentional. A business that is building reputation of a mega industry cannot afford to downplay on customer satisfaction, otherwise it will remain a local champion within its immediate orbit, especially as the marketplace is becoming highly competitive on daily basis. Being driven with such aspiration, the management understands customer growth to be a function of meeting the expectations of customers, which enables the company to attract, engage, and retain more customers over time. Abdullah, (2012) it is important for business owners to understand the difference between increasing sales and customer satisfaction, because without satisfaction, the customer may never return again. "Sales" is simply as the name sounds - just making a sale; a particular instance or many instances of selling. While on the other hand customer satisfaction is about knowing and meeting the needs of your customers, which gives them the reason to fall in love with the business and your brand. Customer satisfaction creates a state in which the current loyal customers start referring and bringing new customers of their own to have the same experience they are enjoying with the company or the brand. In his own view Tao, (2014) says customer satisfaction can best be defined as "the number of customers or percentage of total customers, whose reported experience with a firm, its products, or its services (ratings) exceeds specified satisfaction goals". It is a metric system in marketing that enables a business manager to quantify the degree to which a customer is happy with a product, service, or experience related to the business or company.

There are factors or actions that ensure customer satisfaction, and they include the following: (1) the availability of company's goods or services. (2) The purchasing process. (3) What happens after purchase? (4) The timely response of the team towards resolving issues. For instance, considering a local retail business, like a Boutique owner in Port Harcourt, customer satisfaction can be achieved by evaluating customer experience, which is a measure of how products and services supplied meet or surpass customer expectation. This automatically leads to growth by expanding the number of regulars who frequently visit the store, or the types of customer the business wishes to attract in the neighborhood (Abdullah, 2012).

Theoretical Framework:

The theory that underpinned this paper is the theory of generic competitive strategies. The theory was discussed below as follows:

Developed by a Harvard Professor, Michael Porter in 1985, the theory of generic competitive strategies are essential tools that can help organizations with managerial function, growth and profitability of their business to have a sustainable competitive advantage in the market. The theory shows the different choices made by companies regarding both the type of competitive advantage and their scope of operation. The emphasis comes on the need for companies to perform their activities in such a way to distinct themselves from competitors and gain a competitive advantage in the market (Porter, 1985). The critical aspect of these strategies is for a company to stand out among the crowd by how it provides its services, which can be by generating offensive or defensive positions in its industry (Porter, 1980).

According to Porter, the strategies are divided into three approaches. And it is better for a company to first run a competitive analysis within its industry to determine who their competitors are, without which it can be very difficult to drive marketing efforts for returns on investment. The different methods must be chosen by each company on the basis of their strengths and organizational values. The three types of generic strategies are known as (1) the Cost Leadership Strategy, (2) the Differentiation Strategy, and (3) the Focus Strategy. According to this model, a company can choose how it wants to compete with its competitors (Boohne, & Agvapong, 2012). First, strategies are the directional actionable decisions which are required competitively to achieve the company's purpose. The concept has to do with analyzing the present situation and changing it if necessary to achieve organizational overall objectives.

Therefore, the Cost Leadership Strategy is based on two branches known as low-cost strategy, and best-value strategy. The implication is that a company can choose to compete favorably by reducing costs to increase profit, operating as the cheapest provider of certain services while maintaining the cost of production. While the best-value strategy concentrates on lowering prices to increase market share by providing services to certain range of customers at the best price value available in the market. The Differentiation Strategy requires a company to compete favourably by distinguishing itself from competitors on the basis of quality products or services that make it special in the midst of others. It may be exceptional customer service, quality taste, design and beautiful packaging, added-value product features, etc.

The Focus Strategy emphasizes the need for a company to focus on either cost-leadership or differentiation and exploit a particular segment of the market to become the leader in that market segment.

Essential for explaining the relationship between market penetration strategies and sales performance of small scale firms, the Porter's theory of generic competitive strategies has been adopted by scholars and business organizations for simplicity and having great depth in knowledge. The theory explains that small businesses should compete favourably with the big and mighty rivals in the market by using the cost leadership strategy and differentiation strategy to penetrate the market that is predominantly controlled by the large firms. The further suggestion is the need for small businesses to minimize the cost of production in order to be able to reduce prices of goods and services, which will give rise to increase in sales performance. Thus Michael Porter's Cost Leadership Strategy has evidence of the potentials to optimize sales performance of small firms as long as the management maintains low cost of production without compromising quality. Therefore there is a huge future for small scale businesses that are able to effectively apply Porter's theory of generic competitive strategies, being full of possibility for achieving consistent increase in sales performance (Griffin, A., & Hauser, J. R. 1993).

Empirical Review:

Mbwambo (2019) critically examined the influence of sales promotion on organizational performance - an intermediary's perspective: a case study of Tanzania Portland Cement Limited. The specific objectives of the study were to find out the effects of quantity price discount, to evaluate the effects of rebates, to assess the effects of exhibitions and to examine the effects of credit on sales volume. Conducted on the basis of the push strategy, the pull strategy and the combination theory, study adopted the questionnaires method for data collection, where "Likert" scale fifth choice questionnaires were circulated to 30 Tanzania Portland Cement Company (TPCC) distributors from different zones in Tanzania. The result from the majority of the respondents either agree or strongly agree that quantity price discount (83%), exhibitions (80%), credits (90%) and rebates (83%) as means of promotion lead to an increase of sales in their shops and purchase quantity. The study concluded that if sales promotional tools were to be carefully implemented, the sales of cement producers and intermediaries were to improve definitely.

Situma (2012) empirically examined the effectiveness of tradeshows and exhibitions as organizational marketing tool analysis of selected companies in Mombasa. The objective of the study was to determine organizations' views towards effectiveness of tradeshows and exhibitions as a marketing tool. The study used semi-structured questionnaires to collect primary data, and the target population included marketing managers from the chosen organizations, subjects were selected in such a way that existing sub-groups in the population were fairly but randomly represented within the sample. With an estimation of about 82 (eighty two) serious exhibitors in Mombasa International Show, 60% (sixty) percent were selected and studied using a stratified sampling technique. The descriptive method was adopted for the survey analysis and the qualitative data was analyzed using qualitative analysis while SPSS was used to critically examine the quantitative data. The findings in summary revealed the effectiveness of tradeshows had an average mean response, which implied a fairly important level of agreement with the organization's view. In conclusion the study established that tradeshows and exhibitions were essential factors for enhancing organizational performance.

Tandoh et al., (2015) marked with the tendency to find and call attention to new discoveries, patiently examined the Impact of Sales Promotions on the Performance of

Auto-Mobile Industries in Ghana - a case study of PHC Motors. The objective of the study was to consider in detail the relationship between sales promotion and organizational performance, as well as the effect of sales promotion in the automobile market, and to identify the challenges hindering sales promotions effectiveness. The study adopted descriptive research approach and the data was purely quantitative. The population consisted of thirty (30) respondents made up of employees and customers selected using purposive and random sampling techniques. Data analysis was carried out using SPSS. The study concluded that sales promotion has a very strong impact on organizational performance at PHC Motors, which implied there was a deep and intense relationship between sales promotion and organizational performance. Thus revealed that effective sales promotion increase sales.

Pembi et al., (2017) investigated the impact of sales promotional strategies on organizational performance in Nigeria. The objective was to examine the impact of sales promotional strategies on organizational performance – a case study of Flour Mills Maiduguri, Borno State Nigeria. The study made use of both primary and secondary sources of data collection, with the primary data derived from the staff of the organization, comprising the top, middle and lower level management. Constructed questionnaires were served to twenty (20) respondents using random sampling techniques. And descriptive statistics was adopted such as percentage analysis to critically examine the sample collected. The findings revealed that sales promotional strategies have positive and significant effects on organizational performance. The study concluded that promotional strategies will be made effective and efficient when companies learn to have a planned, organized, directed and controlled sales promotion program that run consistently.

METHODOLOGY

Having adopted the correlational research design, this study was carried out to determine the extent of the relationship between personal selling skills and business performance of the boutique owners in Port Harcourt. The population of this study includes sixty (60) registered boutique owners in Port Harcourt. The clothing industry or businesses are spread across various sectors such as retailing, wholesaling, manufacturing, tailoring or fashion designing, etc., and the study adopted a census approach, which provided the researcher with a comprehensive analysis of the entire population of the boutique owners. The main instrument for data collection being the questionnaire was distributed in the order of one (1) copy per boutique owner. A total of sixty (60) respondents were used as the study subjects. The questionnaires were developed in line with the purpose of the study and were finally validated by experts in marketing department. Reliability was measured using test- retest method for its measure of consistency and stability of the instrument and a reliability coefficient of 0.82 was gotten which shows an acceptable level of reliability. Data were analyzed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient (PPMC) with the aid of the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) version 26.

Data Analysis:

Testing of Hypotheses:

Research Question One: What is the relationship between empathy and sales volume growth of boutique owners in Port Harcourt?

Hypothesis One: There is no significant relationship between empathy and sales volume growth of boutique owners in Port Harcourt.

Table 1: Computation of relationship between empathy and sales volume growth of boutique owners in Port Harcourt

Correlations			
		Empathy	Sales Volume Growth
Empathy	Pearson Correlation	1	.667**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	60	60
Sales Volume Growth	Pearson Correlation	.667**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	60	60

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

Source: SPSS Output, 2024.

The analysis of data in table 1, shows the findings of bivariate analysis carried out between empathy and sales volume growth of boutique owners in Port Harcourt. The result indicates that empathy has a strong and positive correlation with sales volume growth of boutique owners in Port Harcourt ($r = .667^{**}$) and this correlation is significant at 0.01 level as indicated by the symbol (**). This implies the null hypothesis (H_{01}) is rejected and the alternate hypothesis is accepted. Thus empathy has a strong, positive and significant relationship with sales volume growth of boutique owners in Port Harcourt.

Research Question Two: What is the relationship between empathy and customer satisfaction of boutique owners in Port Harcourt?

Hypothesis Two: There is no significant relationship between empathy and customer satisfaction of boutique owners in Port Harcourt.

Table 2: Computation of relationship between empathy and customer satisfaction of boutique owners in Port Harcourt

Correlations	
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		Empathy	Customer Satisfaction
Empathy	Pearson Correlation	1	.786**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	60	60
Customer Satisfaction	Pearson Correlation	.786**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	60	60

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

Source: SPSS Output, 2024.

Analysis of data in table 2, displays the findings of bivariate analysis carried out between empathy and customer satisfaction of boutique owners in Port Harcourt. The result indicates that empathy has a strong and positive correlation with customer satisfaction of boutique owners in Port Harcourt ($r = .786^{**}$) and this correlation is significant at 0.01 level as indicated by the symbol (**). By implication, the null hypothesis (H_{02}) is rejected and the alternate hypothesis is accepted. Therefore empathy has a strong, positive and significant relationship with customer satisfaction of boutique owners in Port Harcourt.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the Pearson correlation, conducted to assess the relationship between empathy, sales volume growth and customer satisfaction of boutique owners in Port Harcourt, has significantly crystalized the dynamics of empathic communication / relationship within the boutique retail sector. The strong and positive correlations that existed between empathy and both sales volume growth as well as customer satisfaction of boutique owners emphasized the essential roles these elements play in shaping consumer perceptions and satisfaction.

Firstly, the positive relationship between empathy and sales volume growth suggests that boutique owners who practically engage customers in empathic relationship are better positioned to enhance their service offerings. With empathetic mindset, marketers and customers experience more honest and open communication, which enables asking questions, engaging in direct feedback, and supporting each other in their objectives.

Secondly, the significant correlation between empathy and customer satisfaction highlights the importance of appreciation, negotiation and retention of customers. Empathic service delivery ensures that customer’s feel valued and supported; a factor that substantially contributes to overall customer satisfaction and loyalty.

The results of the overall analysis suggest that leveraging on empathy to enhance the level of business performance is necessary for not only improving competitive positioning within the market, but achieving customer satisfaction of boutique owners in Port Harcourt.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Considering the positive correlation between Empathy, Sales Volume Growth and Customer Satisfaction of boutique owners in Port Harcourt as demonstrated by the Pearson correlation analysis, it is absolutely necessary for boutique owners to strategically

implement personal selling skills that enhance the dimensions of customer relationship management. The following are unique recommendations to the boutique marketers.

1. The management of boutique businesses should establish formal systems for collecting, analyzing, and acting on customer feedback. This could be in the form of digital surveys sent post-purchase, suggestion boxes in-store, or regular engagement on social media platforms where customers can freely express their views.
2. Invest in comprehensive training programs for all employees, focusing on the importance of personal selling skills and customer service excellence. Training should emphasize not only the skills needed but also the attitude of empathy necessary to appreciating the impact of cordial interactions with customers.
3. Engage technologies such as automated response systems, chatbots on websites, and mobile apps that can significantly decrease the time taken to respond to customer inquiries, thus improving the overall business performance.
4. Effective application of the insights gained from customer feedback should be part of the boutique's culture to enable quick continuous adaptation as well as refining of products and services. Not only does this technique build relationships, but it also improves customer satisfaction, builds trust, and helps build brand awareness.

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