

DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGIES AND CUSTOMER FULFILLMENT: AN ASSESSMENT OF THE MODERATING ROLE OF TECHNOLOGICAL ORIENTATION OF AIRLINE OPERATORS IN NIGERIA

¹Nkpurukwe, Obabuike Ikeni, ²N. Gladson Nwokah and ³Obinna, Prince Ikechi

¹Department of Business Administration, Federal University Wukari, Taraba State.

²Department of Marketing, Rivers State University, Port-Harcourt, Rivers State

³Department of Marketing, Ignatius Ajuru university of Education, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria

Email: obason@ymail.com, nwokah.glason@ust.edu.ng, obinnapikechi@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

The study investigated the relationship between digital marketing strategies and customer fulfilment of airlines in Nigeria. The aim was to examine the influence of digital marketing strategies on customer fulfilment. With respect to the theoretical underpinning, this research used Diffusion of Innovation Theory. The paper revealed that digital marketing strategies has influence on customer fulfilment. It was concluded that the dimensions of digital marketing strategies (social media marketing, content marketing, mobile application, search engine optimisation) influence the measures of customer fulfilment (Customer engagement, electronic loyalty, and electronic word-of-mouth). Specifically, social media marketing has been confirmed to be a veritable business tool to not just create followership, but also improve customer engagement and e-loyalty. More so, digital contents on social media and other digital platforms are huge determinants to enhancing e-WOM referral. We therefore, recommends that, owners and managers of airlines in Nigeria should understand and develop a holistic approach of implementing an overall social media programme, as this research has confirmed its strategic importance in improving customer fulfilment. They should also coordinate and synchronise various social media platforms with traditional promotional activities for the purpose of achieving a successful integrated marketing communication. This research has proffered solution to contemporary issues confronting the aviation industry.

Keywords: Digital Marketing Strategies, Customer Fulfilment, Technological Orientation

INTRODUCTION

Fulfilling customers' expectations of service performance is arguably a major accomplishment by airline operators. Though, achieving this goal in post Covid-19 makes it a more herculean task for management. The aviation sector is one of the worst hit by the pandemic in Nigeria and a lot of players therein are making efforts to bounce back strategically. The health crisis was reported to have affected customers' patronage, trust, and fulfilment. Evidently, there is a more than 30% decline of sales largely due to the pandemic, thereby resulting to increasing competition in the sector (Federal Airport Authority of Nigeria; FAAN reports, 2020). This development is however perceived to usher in new business models to effectively outsmart competitors and build competitive advantages. Consequently, a key business model that could help airlines have been reported to be digital marketing by Phillips Consulting (2020). The group suggests that digital marketing technique is a reliable means through which airlines can cushion the

effect of the pandemic and re-build customers' trust while improving e-WOM among passengers. Again, the group reported the problem customer switching behaviour to different airlines thereby reducing customer loyalty to a particular airline. According to them, 62% of passengers of airlines strategies that they switch to other operators due to safety, service quality, and inconsistent ticket pricing issues. While the remaining 38% attribute theirs to time consciousness and effective communication. Issues of this nature resulted to declined patronage and preference of customers (Phillips Consulting, 2017). In view of the above challenges and with reports of possible solutions, this research wants to find out if deploying digital marketing strategies such as social media marketing, content marketing, mobile applications, and search engine optimization; could lead to customer engagement, e-loyalty, and e-WOM, as it affects airlines in Nigeria. In essence intends to examine whether digital marketing strategies could lead to improved customer fulfilment. Hence, this is the thrust of the research.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study was to empirically examine the relationship between digital marketing strategies and customer fulfilment of airline operators in Nigeria. Specifically, the following specific objectives are to:

- i. Determine the extent to which social media marketing relates with customer fulfilment of airline operators in Nigeria.
- ii. Examine the extent to which content marketing relates with customer fulfilment of airline operators in Nigeria.
- iii. Evaluate the extent to which mobile application relates with customer fulfilment of airline operators in Nigeria.
- iv. Explain the extent to which search engine optimisation relates with customer fulfilment of airline operators in Nigeria.
- v. Investigate the extent to which technological orientation moderates the relationship between digital marketing strategies and customer fulfilment of airline operators in Nigeria.

Diffusion of Innovation Theory

This theory was propounded by Rogers in 1962. It is one of the oldest theories in communication that has been successfully applied in the field of social sciences. The theory explains, how and through repeated messages, why some individuals become aware of a message, and how they respond accordingly. As a construct, Rodgers (2003) explain innovation to mean an idea, practice, or object perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption (Rogers, 2003). Thus, the use of diffusion of innovation theory explains how innovation, in this context, new business ideas, products, and services, are communicated through specific channels and in a steady manner to members of a social system. Effective functioning of diffusion of innovation theory is anchored on four cardinal points, which are: the social system, innovation, communication channels, and time (Rogers, 2003). Dearing (2009) suggested the process of diffusion of innovation starts slowly and over time begins to accelerate positive communication. Once business leaders implement an online marketing strategy, they have created a social system, which supports continuous interaction with employees, stakeholders, and consumers.

Regardless of how successful the application of diffusion of innovation theory sounds, Degerli, et al, (2015) explained that individuals differ in their willingness to adopt a new

idea or product. People are hesitant to make a change, and the process of innovation can be challenging to most managers in an organization. Diffusion of innovation can be negative or positive depending on the nature of the innovation (Raynard, 2017). Also, anticipated technological innovation consequences create uncertainty in the minds of potential adopters (Rogers, 2003). Marketers might experience challenges from those not receptive to change when applying the diffusion theory (Rogers, 2003). Yet, those who are innovative and appreciate the process are usually the first to embrace any current innovation (Raynard, 2017). The objectivity of a diffusion model represents the level of an innovative idea among a given set of prospective adopters (Andergassen, et al, 2017). Ideas for innovation are usually communicated over time via channels among multiple members of a precise social system by focusing on informal communication channels (Raynard, 2017). Diffusion theory centers on innovative information across a social system by incorporating time and processes to increase individuals and organizational acceptability (Uddin, 2013).

Altogether, diffusion of innovation theory serves as the best theoretical underpinning for explaining the effect of e-marketing strategies on marketing performance. The stylized facts in the theory lies on four key features, namely: social system, innovation, communication channels, and time (Rogers, 2003). An organization must have something to communicate to their customers at first. Such marketing offering could be innovative or not. When this is identified, the marketing offering(s) is communicated to the targeted customers through a given e-marketing platform or social system. Nevertheless, the impact of such message do not come immediately. It takes effort, integrated marketing efforts, resources, and time. The emphasis on time is premised on the fact that individuals receive various kinds of messages from different firms almost on daily basis. Most of those messages are insignificant, resulting to customers not paying the desired attention to them. Thus, by increasing the frequency as well as improving the contents of such messages overtime, targeted customers could be forced to glance at it someday, which could instantly build their interest for such advertised products and/or services. Hence, the use of diffusion of innovation theory fittingly explains the interplay between e-marketing strategies and marketing performance of most firms.

Concept of Digital Marketing Strategies

Since the dawn of the 21st century, technological innovations have been considered as a boom. The digital revolution has already produced its effects by transforming the world into a modern one characterized by the supremacy of internet connections in every business activity. Businesses and its interactions are no longer confined to data centres. In fact, innovations in technology have already transformed the overall structure of organizations and the relation with their environment. It has driven a new way of managing information, and this represents both a challenge and an immense opportunity for organizations (Berger and Milkman, 2012). Thus, IT, as a key part of technological innovations, has become ubiquitous in business activities, disrupting and affecting all core business operation. When integrated with business processes, it can produce visible impacts, especially on the relationship between the company and its customers, prospects, and partners (Lawal, 2021). They also play a key role in the way companies' processes and operations evolve. To improve productivity and develop new services, organizations will have to rely even more on certain technological innovations such as e-marketing platforms in order to improve their performance.

As a construct, the renowned marketing expert, Kotler (2003), posit that digital marketing is the use of marketing tenets in communicating firms' products and/or services to their customers using the internet. Relatedly, digital marketing strategies could as well be seen as the use of internet or other electronic media platforms in communicating firm's offerings such as products, services, ideas, and information (Li & Calantone, 2000). Conceiving the concept from the interactive functions of digital marketing; the authors contended that digital marketing strategies entails the use of internet facilities to increase the interactive activities between customers and an organization. In another context, Barker, et al, (2013) defined digital marketing as online and off-line marketing interactions using electronic platforms such as digital platforms, electronic mails, websites, and other features of telecommunication technology.

Whatever internet platform that is used, the essence of digital marketing is to increase the marketing interaction between an organization and their customers (John, et al, 2019). The authors are of the view that digital marketing it allows business organizations to strategically align their marketing offerings with the ever-increasing changes noticeable in customers' demands, expectations, and behaviours; and it is also an effective and efficient way of serving firm's large customer based from a one-spot location. Thus, the internet, which serves the basic e-marketing tool, has appreciatively improved over the years, providing all companies with opportunities that were not hitherto available to them (Rotich and Mukhongo, 2015).

Concept of Customer Fulfilment

Literature on customer fulfilment is few, however, the concept is gaining momentum in recent years. The concept of customer fulfilment relates generally to consumer behavioural constructs, which measures the degree to which a customer feels satisfied about service delivery. According to Gartner (2019), airline operators strive to ensure that customer expectations are met, and service propositions are effectively combined and delivered better than competitors. The author further stated that to achieve customer fulfilment, alert airlines apply digital technologies in communicating with customers. In this way, it is expected that resources be utilize in delivering superior service faster and better than competitors; hence improving customers' experience.

In addition, Tarn (2005) stated that customer fulfilment is a measure of how well customer need expectations are met or exceeded. Customer fulfilment is best explaining where actual service performance is equal to/exceeds expected service performance. Giese and Cote (2000) describe the concept from a value co-creation point of view. To this author, customer fulfilling is a business strategy that is anchored on creation of value for customers by determining, managing their expectations, and demonstrate the willingness and ability to satisfy their needs. Airline operators that are able to meet customer expectations of service performance improve profit than those that do not meet customer satisfaction. It is pertinent to mention that this research measured customer fulfilment with customer engagement and E-WOM.

Technology Capability

Technology capability could improve supply chain performance by providing timely, accurate and reliable information. Despite integrated technology capability implementation becoming widespread among organizations, the direct positive effect on financial performance remains elusive. More recently, resource-based view represents a potential

framework that enhances and improves the conceptual analysis of integrated information technology's effects on a firm's performance, which connects and relates organization performance to resources and skills (Barney, 1986; Barney, 1991). In general, it is argued that organizations can achieve many benefits through integrative technology capability processes. Integrated technology capability offers an appropriate tool that has significant effects on improving the level of prices, reducing the cost of production processes, increasing the speed of achievement, and quality improvement, which leads to increasing the competitiveness of organizations and achieving its goals in survival, development, and expansion in its work performance. However, mixed results have been reached by many empirical studies that have investigated the relationship between integrated technology capability and performance of a firm. For example, some scholars found a positive and significant relationship between integrated technology capability and a firm's performance; more specifically, integrated technology capability enhanced processes (Mukhopadhyay, Rajiv, and Srinivasan, 1997; Hendricks and Singhal 2003; Dehning, Richardson, & Zmud, 2007) and improved efficiency in different firm activities (Stank, Crum, & Arango, 1999). However, a few empirical studies showed ambiguous and equivocal results for the impact of information technology on performance (Weill, 1992; Hitt & Brynjolfsson, 1996). Based on the theory of resource-based view, it is suggested that technology capability presents the characteristics of rarity, appropriability, non-reproducibility, and non-substitutability; can lead to competitive advantage (Wade & Hulland, 2004). According to Cepeda & Arias-Pérez (2019), technology capability is an organization's ability to find, implement and developing, and reconfigure technology resources in order to achieve competitive advantage. technology capability is an organization's ability to effectively manage technology resources, as this is an important aspect in achieving business value, business strategies and improving service delivery quality (Ravichandran, Lertwongsatien & Lertwongsatien, 2018). Rai & Tang (2014) defined technology capability as the management of a firm's digital network of information to create, control, and execute inter-firm transactions, as well as the capacity to control technology-related costs; to deliver systems when required; and to affect firm objectives through technology capability implementation (Chen & Tsou, 2012). Organizations with superior technology capability have an advantage over their competitors based on their ability to provide valid and timely information to manage efficiently and to make informed decisions (Akram, Goraya, Malik, & Aljarallah, 2018).

Digital Marketing Strategies and Customer Fulfilment

Many researchers have investigated the nexus between digital marketing strategies and customer fulfilment in the past. Adede, et al (2017) examined digital marketing practices, competitive environment and performance of telecommunications companies in Kenya. The objective of the study was to ascertain the effect of e-marketing practices on the performance of telecommunications companies in Kenya. The population of the study was 408, while 205 was used as sampling using Krejcie and Morgan sample size determination technique. Both primary and secondary data were used for the study. The generated data were analyzed using multiple regression. Results from the analysis showed that there is a significant relationship between digital marketing practices and the performance of the studied organizations. Based on the findings, the researchers recommended that infrastructural-related policies should be initiated in the organization as this will help will

not only enhance the scope of the business operations, but will equally facilitate rapid growth of the companies.

Mathenge (2017) carried out a study on Effect of online marketing strategies on customer loyalty of telecommunication companies: A case of Safaricom Limited. The objective of the study was to determine the effect of promotion and product development on performance of Safaricom Limited. Survey research design was adopted in the study, while content analysis was equally applied in the study. The target population was staff from both the marketing and IT department. Results from the study showed that promotion in online marketing influences customer loyalty of telecommunication companies, while product development was found to be one of the most significant factors that enhanced performance of the studied telecommunication companies. The researcher concluded that online marketing strategies had significant effects on the performance of the studied telecommunication companies. Based on these findings, it was recommended, among others that, the studied telecommunications companies should strive to maximize the potentials of promotion and product development through online marketing strategies.

Lawal, et al, (2021) investigating digital marketing technologies usage extent in the Nigerian telecommunications industry: A Study from the Consumers Perspective. The objective of the study was to assess the types of digital marketing technologies available in the telecommunications industry in Nigeria, and determined the extent of usage of the technologies. The study employed a survey method. Since the population of the study was infinite, Cochran formula was used to calculate an ideal sample size. Thus, 500 respondents were used as sample size for the study. Self-structured questionnaire was used in generating the needed primary data. Results from the study showed, among others that, social media marketing was the most commonly used digital marketing technology by the studied telecommunication firms. The researchers concluded that majority of the respondents feel closer to their chosen telecommunications service providers through their usage of digital platforms. It was recommended that the studied telecommunication firms should invest meaningfully on digital marketing so as to publicize their products to their consumers and as a means of communicating consumers' views and opinions.

Moderating Effect of Technological Orientation on Digital Marketing Strategies and Customer Fulfilment

The multiple-dimensional nature of the concept of technology has contributed to the existence of various definitions of technology by the extant studies. The discussion on the concept of technology is pertinent to have a clear understanding of the nature of technology. In this line of thought, existing literature on technology revealed that defining the concept of technology is not easy (Reddy and Zhoa, 1990); therefore, technology has been defined from different perspectives. According to Kumar et. al (1999) technology consists of two primary components; physical and information components. While the former comprises of items such as products, tooling, equipments, blueprints, techniques, and processes; the latter involves technical know-how in management, marketing, production, quality control, reliability, skilled labour in various organizational functional areas. For Rodasevic (1999), technology is defined as the intangible assets of an organization rooted in its processes and routines, and in which it is not easy to transfer due to the gradual learning process and higher cost associated with transferring tacit knowledge. Also, Lin (2003) defined technology as organization-specific information

concerning the characteristics and performance properties of project processes and product designs; therefore, technology is tacit and cumulative in nature.

Burgelman et al. (1996) refer technology as the theoretical and practical knowledge, skills, and artifacts that can be used to develop products and services as well as their production and delivery systems. Technology is also embodied in people, materials, cognitive and physical processes, facilities, machines and tools (Lin, 2003). Based on the above definitions, it could be argued that technology and knowledge are inseparable simply because when a technological product is transferred or diffused, the knowledge upon which its composition is based is also diffused. The physical entity cannot be put to use without the existence of its knowledge-base which is inherent and not ancillary.

In addition, MacKenzie and Wajcman (1985) define technology in terms of three elements, which include; the integration of physical objects or artifacts, the process of making the objects, and the meaning associated with the physical objects. These three elements can hardly be separated in conceptualizing technology. In defining the term technology, all the three elements must be understood as being inter-connected to each other and a change in one element may affect the other two. Maskus (2003) offered a more encompassing definition of technology. To this author, technology is defined as the information necessary to achieve a certain project (or production) outcome from a specific means of combining or processing selected inputs which include production processes, intra-firm organizational structures, management techniques, and means of finance, marketing methods or any of its combination. Tepstra and David (1985) saw technology from a cultural and system-based perspective. According to these authors, technology is a cultural system concerned with the relationships between individuals and their environment. Similarly, Afriyie (1988) defined technology as encompassing the basic knowledge sub-system; the technical support system (software); and the capital-embodied technology (hardware). This perspective views that technology recognizes the need to identify the different elements of a particular country's technology that are complementary and mutually reinforcing.

CONCLUSIONS

Digital-driven technologies have come to stay based on our findings. Therefore, organisations that want to remain competitive may need to key into the trend and outsmart others. Specifically, social media marketing has been confirmed to be a veritable business tool to not just create followership, but also improve customer engagement and e-loyalty. More so, digital contents on social media and other digital platforms are huge determinants to enhancing e-WOM referral.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the conclusions of this study, the following recommendations were made available for customers/passengers of airline in Nigeria for effective implementation.

1. Owners and Managers of airlines in Nigeria should understand and develop a holistic approach of implementing an overall social media programme, as this research has confirmed its strategic importance in improving customer fulfilment.
2. Secondly, management should coordinate and synchronise various social media platforms with traditional promotional activities for the purpose of achieving a successful integrated marketing communication.

3. Managers should encourage the development of a culture that fosters technology innovation that will drive all digital strategies and processes that bring about increase in e-loyalty and e-WOM.
4. Strategists of airline firms should pay adequate attention to digital content creation and deployment especially on all digital fonts. This study has made us understand the strategic prowess of digital contents in impacting on customer engagement.

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