

Impact of Advancement in Information Technology in Enhancing Relationship Marketing Strategies used by SMEs in the Grocery Sector, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The growth in Information Technology has re defined marketing strategies, leading to the development and the extinction of the old marketing practices. The old marketing practices had always led to many Small to Medium Enterprises (SMEs) fail to prioritise marketing as they deemed it expensive and required many protocols to be followed before implementation of the strategy. The continuous evolution of various information technology systems has of late threatened the existence of a human being in the marketing career as the carrier is swiftly being dominated by electronic devices that can effectively be commanded to interact and respond to consumer queries promptly. To date they are conflicting views on the effect of adopting information technology in the marketing discipline. The researcher seeks to validate whether information technology can enhance the up sage implementation of relationship marketing or it has come to destroy the intimate human relations consumers have with firms in the grocery sector in Zimbabwe. The researcher adopted a survey approach in data gathering and interviews were used, convenience sampling was done mainly on SMEs in Harare selected suburbs in the grocery sector. The study was informed by Hill (2006) customer loyalty stages. The major target sample of SMEs was 25, however upon conducting 19 interviews, data saturation was reached and no further data was collected. The findings from the study indicated that advancement in information technology has created many marketing platforms firms use to embrace relationship marketing although the media has failed to sustainable convert the consumers into advocates and has also led firms to lose some of its old customers who are generally technology laggards. The research recommends blending of both traditional and digital information technology based marketing platforms to ensure sustainable relationships between the company and its customers. This is based on the findings that many firms have of late abandoned traditional relationship marketing platforms only relying on virtual relations where culturally in Zimbabwe a relationship is made concrete when parties meet physically.

Key words-Information technology; relationship marketing; SMEs; customer loyalty

1. Introduction

The current century has seen a rise in the usage of electronic mobile devices to the level that many individuals feel isolated and lonely if not connected to the internet and or using offline mobile phone devices. The current generation has of late despised the traditional linkages between people to a point of even re aligning their business and social lives to suit per setting technological changes. The technological savvy consumer has made many firms to be always ploughing more resources on research and development to adopt the best technological based marketing strategy to effectively ensure relationship marketing (Joensuu-Salo, Sorama, Viljamaa, & Varamäki, 2018; Many researches have been done to discover the impact of information technology on firm performance (Samwel Macharia Chege, Daoping Wang & Shaldon Leparan Suntu, 2019), effect of technology on marketing of services and effect of information technology on firm survival (Singer, 2021;Loki and Bichanga, 2014). To date few has been known as to whether the advancement in information technology that is being upgraded every minute can enhance sustainable customer relations or is there to destroy, replace, modify and or re define the old customer relationships.

Chege, Wang & Suntu (2019) the effectiveness of Information technology to ensure firm performance mainly relies on the level of development the country is at and its internet connectivity not to mention the social Gross Domestic Product per capita of the target market. The level of implementation of Information technology based strategies by a firm are mainly dependent on the innovative state of the firm Yunis, Tarhini, & Kassar, 2018), business environment engulfed by uncertainties Wamuyu, 2015), country's past and present rate of adopting to technological changes in relation to other nations (Kevin, Sonny, Tigineh, & Sriram, 2017). These variations in the uptake of technology have created an uncertain future for various SMEs in Zimbabwe as some have grabbed technology as their back borne to creating and managing customer relationships. The major question the research seeks to address is how effective are technology based marketing tools in delivering customer value in the long run. The answers from the research are relevant based on the fact that various SMEs in developing countries have been trapped to gorges of failure due to their failure to adopt new technology that come its way to enhance their overall performance (KNBS, 2016; Mumbi, 2017).Globally, SMEs produce 60% revenue at a failure rate of 80% (Adeniran & Johnston, 2012).

2. Research objectives

To establish the information technology based marketing platforms used by SMEs in the grocery sector.

To analyse the effects of Information technology advancement on relationship marketing platforms employed by SMEs in the grocery sector.

To assess the challenges faced by SMEs in embracing information technology on their relationship marketing

strategies in the grocery sector.

2.1 Research questions

What is the information technology based marketing platforms used by SMEs in the grocery sector?

What are the effects of advancement in Information technology on relationship marketing platforms employed by SMEs in the grocery sector?

What are the challenges faced by SMEs in embracing information technology on their relationship marketing strategies in the grocery sector.

2.2 Literature Review

Information technology marketing platforms

The rapid advancement in technology has shifted the way companies mould the relationships they build with their consumers. Many firms have drastically introduced information based contracts without even meeting the consumer face to face (Robertson et al., 2016), while some firms have adopted to information technology based platforms that have human nature where the employees have been intentionally removed in the system of interaction with consumers such as the use of ATMs in a banking sector (Wang, Lin, & Liao, 2012). In developed nations, most deliveries are now done by robots whose usage was increased by COVID 19 pandemic (Demaitre, 2020) The most prevalent media in marketing that has been embraced by many firms is social media marketing, because it was created as a social interaction for consumers the manipulations done by companies to use it for marketing has erupted many advantages and disadvantages with the most disadvantage being that influx of company messages in the media that tend to irritate consumers who sometimes lose track of company events in quest to regain their social affiliations. Social media platforms have risen to be hard to control by many firms especially the brand backlash by customers on the Adidas brand (Buck and Storbeck, 2020) that almost saw the extinction of the brand in the market. The main advantages to social media marketing include, customer to customer built relationships, freedom of expression by a customer on the quality of a product and the usage of opinion leader voice box to encourage following that is linked to the product line (Phan and Godes, 2018; Achen, 2016). The second platform dominating the marketing field is the e-commerce and the m-commerce platforms which include usage of mobile phone, tablets, computers and communicating platforms such as websites and use of electronic mails (Sleiman, Cai, Lan, Lei, & Liu, 2021).

Recent companies in developed countries have invested into artificial intelligence technologies that have been designed to emulate human behaviour traits such as chat bots, virtual assistants and even service robots (Saad & Abida, 2016). These have been recently noticeable to be effective in building relationships than

humans as they are quick in solving consumer queries and they have huge memory than consumers and they are always ready to save customers anytime and anywhere creating borderless and boundary free relationship (van Doorn et al., 2017), although some consumers still feel these machines lack a human touch to sustainable deliver the company promise (Castelo et al., 2018).

Effects of advancement in Information technology on relationship marketing platforms

The overall costs of developing new relationships in business have proven to be five times expensive that keeping the existing relationships (Teich, 1997) and satisfaction lead to loyal relations (Abdul-Mauhmin, 2002).

Intensive investment on online relationships with customers usually make sales agents de-motivated as they feel their jobs are radically being replaced leading to reduced motivation even in building and sustaining the long existing relationships that depend on them (Sharma et al., 2010) as their jobs are taken over by self service technologies (Robertson et al., 2016).

Many consumers have made an influx on technologies that are easy to navigate and shunned complex technologies (Klier et al., 2016). Many relationships have been built by advancement in technology (Collier & Sherrell, 2010) while on the other side some relationships are being lost as firms move to self service technology (Klier et al., 2016).

It has been noted that adding online platforms to existing traditional platforms help to ensure synthesis of relationship between the organisation and its customers, it helps organisations understand customer values, beliefs that can be trapped for new sales, also it aids in reducing impulse consumer buying behaviour leading to routine relationship based purchases (Wallace et al., 2004; de Haan et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2015; Adeniran & Johnston, 2012)

Some firms have of late invested into Big data analysis back up by Adobe, Google, IBM, Microsoft, Oracle, Sales force, giving firms the capacity to track and monitor consumer buyer behaviour in turn ensuring long term built relationships. However this is possible to firms who have the capacity to subscribe to these software developers to allow customer tracking online.

Challenges faced by firms in embracing information technology on their relationship marketing strategies

Firms have been left in a Pandora box of whether to migrate its entire customer data base to electronic base so as to reduce costs of maintaining relationships through the traditional physical facial sphere. On the other hand, the migration to the electronic level also requires customer consent where some customers will be prepared to sacrifice the relationship than to continue the relations electronically. In addition, a firm that seeks

to manage customer relations electronically should be prepared to intensively invest in data analytics backed up by various information technology softwares to track customer behaviour. E-commerce, m-commerce and social media platforms have also emanated as expensive and technical forms that need huge investment to start and maintain (Gensler et al., 2012; de Haan et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2015; Adeniran & Johnston, 2012) Information technology cannot work in isolation of human asset, to that fact, a company has to invest in Information Technology technician to monitor the system so as to ensure better transitions of relationships from the traditional zone (Gensler et al., 2012; de Haan et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2015; Phan and Godes, 2018; Achen, 2016)

Customer Loyalty

The development and growth of the relationship marketing concept is pinned on the effectiveness of the company's communication strategies with its customers. The increasing virtual and physical communication has led to the development of multiple bonds between the firm and its customers. These bonds range from social, emotional and financial bonds (Stroud, 2008). The rapid changes in information technology (Szmigin et al., 2005) have led to the development of social networks where companies have been given the platform to instantly communicate with relevant customers to fully understand their needs and wants. The continued communication based on the loyalty ladder should lead a prospective customer to a lead member or company evangelists (Pitta & Fowler, 2005). Marketers have been of late challenged to re define their jobs and act like data analysts and collect customer behaviour that can lead to development of a concrete relationship (Harridge-March & Quinton, 2009) According to Hill (2006) the major stages of converting a customer to become an advocate include levels from being a suspects to partners which is the highest level of relationship synergy.

3. Research Methodology

The researcher adopted a qualitative research methodology using Radical qualitative studies phase, with the view to gather different opinions (objective facts) from participants on their view towards digital marketing platforms from an organisational perspective. Structured interviews were used to ensure respondents remain relevant in articulating the questions asked (Cropley, 2022; Riessman, 1993). Convenience and stratified sampling was used as the researcher used participants she could easily reach that owned grocery outlets. The main participants were former students who attended Zimbabwe Open University short Courses in Partnership with Angel of Hope foundation. The participants encompassed interviews in Kuwadzana, Horpely, Dzivarasekwa, Mbare, Highfields and Mabvuku surburbs using participants who had tuck shops and general

dealer stores in the areas indicated. The researcher took the opportunity to discover findings while facilitating short courses trainings in the areas mentioned. In analysing responses, triangulation theory was used, which entails use of same respondents' profile, same research design and same researcher ethics to interpret research findings (Hussy, Schreier & Echterhoff, 2013). Thematic data analysis was also used by the researcher where findings are structured into themes and analysed separately to answer research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

4.4 Discussion of findings

The first question related to Information technology marketing platforms, frequency of use and grocery items usually sold using noted platforms.

Table 4.4 Information technology based marketing platforms

Customer	IT marketing based platform used	Frequency of use	Grocery items usually sold
	1. Websites, social media	2. Daily	3. Convenient goods such as salt, sugar, cooking oil, bread, sanitary pads
	4. Social media	5. Anytime	6. Basic commodities
	7. YouTube	8. Daily	9. Toiletry products
	10. Mobile marketing	11. Weekly	12. Horticulture produce mainly tomatoes, fruits and potatoes
	13. Email marketing	14. Weekly	15. Dairy products
	16. Social media mainly WhasApp	17. Daily	18. Snacks such as Maputi, chocolate, buns biscuits, sweets, yoghurts.
	19. website	20. Anytime	21. All grocery items
	22. Social media mainly facebook, whatsapp	23. Anytime	24. All items from the kitchen to the bathroom to the bedroom

25. Social media such as Instagram,WhatsApp, facebook	26. Anytime, as long have data	27. Food items only
28. Social media, mainly WhatApp	29. Always online	30. Detergents and insect killer products
31. Social media such as WhatsApp and facebook	32. Every minute usually on new stock arrivals or promotions	33. Horticulture and traditional foods
34. Social media	35. monthly	36. Grocery products
37. Social media	38. Once in a while especially when they are new items	39. Snacks and basic commodities
40. Social media	41. Anytime	42. Convenient and few shopping goods
43. Tele marketing	44. Once in three months	45. Unsought goods such as condoms and shopping goods
46. Tele marketing	47. Anytime, as long as funds to purchase airtime or subscribe to my Telone land line	48. Stationery goods

The above responses indicate that most of the SMEs use social media in marketing their grocery items; many of them order these items from wholesalers in town, while others from the agricultural markets and some outside the country as imports. The mostly prominent social media platform used is WhatsApp as they noted that they only need social media data to do their marketing. The least used platform indicated is company websites, this is based on the limited resources these entrepreneurs have and lack of skill to manage company websites compared to social media networks. Because social media is user friendly, most of the SMEs market their products daily while some whenever they order new stock or wish to clear stock that is close to expiring. WhatsApp is deemed to have a large customer audience than other platforms as links can be easily shared to prospective consumers.

4.5 Effects of Information technology advancement on relationship marketing platforms employed by SMEs in the grocery sector

Most SMEs noted that information technology has the ability to ensure relationship marketing only to consumers who also love to be technologically connected. Most of the customers under study reside in high density suburbs where data is luxury and this reduces the effectiveness of digital based relationship marketing. The responses from firms did not differ much and the major derived themes from the responses were as follows:

SME 1

'May consumers are usually offline and when you send messages some prefer to read text and they do not down load pictures which makes them order wrong products'.

From the above theme it can be noted that firms have the drive to ensure electronic based relationships but consumers lack capacity to sustain those relationships. This is based on the assertion that information technology based marketing requires financial investment.

SME 2

'Information technology marketing is only effective in a market where network is good and electricity always available to connect digitally. Currently many of our customers are usually offline due to electricity load shedding and high data tariffs. This time customers prefer to come and knock at your business to seal a deal physically. Basically, we are going back to building relationships face to face than electronically'.

From the above theme it can be noted that the effectiveness of using digital marketing as a relationship marketing tool relies on befitting social, economic and geographical factors within a country

SME 3

'Information technology based marketing especially WhatsApp is good if you create your own group as the grocery seller and spell out the code of ethics expected from your customers to avoid unnecessary clutter of jokes and natural medicines promotions, same with Facebook pages where the owner of the page controlled posts to be hidden or seen by other consumers to limit negative viral consumer to consumer marketing'.

From the above theme, it is evident that effectiveness of social media platforms is based on the administration and technical skills of the marketer or SME.

SME 4

'Information technology marketing especially through WhatsApp is a temporal relationship builder as consumer information kept is only numbers and when you require more details from these consumers they exit the group or block you which makes it difficult to use it as a relationship marketing tool'.

The theme indicated above shows that information technology alone cannot substantiate concrete customer relationship.

SME 5

'Information technology marketing is ideal as a relationship marketing tool for firms who have good updated mobile phones to store customer information in terms of WhatsApp and going on facebook and instagram and most of us do not have such mobile phones as SMEs.

The theme indicates that the effectiveness of relationship marketing should be supported by effective, efficient, updated technological devices'.

SME 6

'Relationship marketing is reciprocal, customers feel irritated when approached through whatsApp by firms, they prefer building relationships through referral, and as a result, without positive reviews on any platforms, it's impossible to sustain any relationships in the global space'.

The above theme notes that the effectiveness of relationship marketing using information technology can only be effective if the media used supports consumer to consumer comments reviews.

4.5 Challenges faced by SMEs in embracing information technology on their relationship marketing strategies in the grocery sector.

The challenges faced by SMEs vary from each business to the other; the major responses were as follows:

SME 1

'We face many challenges which include limited skills to embrace all digital based marketing platforms. Some of us finished school when the mobile phones were very few and tablets were in scarcity. When technology knocked at our business doors we thought is only for the millennial age group known as "ama 2000"'

SME 2

'Lack of financial resources to higher experienced marketers and invest in terms of computers to use information technology in the marketing of groceries'.

SME 3

'Most of our customers have phones that are less advanced and many prefer mobile telemarketing than other platforms as they feel it is the obligation of the company to maintain relationships'.

SME 4

'Most of the information technology platforms require money for effectiveness, which means is its whatsapp platform, facebook, twitter , I should always be online to address customer orders yet I also run out of money to buy data and sometimes will be offline due to electricity challenges'.

Most challenges highlighted included lack of technical knowledge, lack of financial resources and lack of adequate marketing research on the effective information technology platforms before commercial usage.

5. Recommendations

From the above findings, Following are the recommendations for grocery SMEs to ensure effective relationship marketing digitally:

- SMEs need to be educated on how to manage customer databases electronically as most indicated lack of technical knowledge of managing other platforms such as websites, facebook and data analytics.
- SMEs need to blend both traditional and digital marketing platforms to ensure that consumers who are not connected digitally also remain served.
- SMEs should draw up digital marketing campaign budgets as marketing is the only department that generates revenue, to this fact, SMEs should prioritise marketing expenses and ensure consumers can reach them electronically whenever they want to place orders.
- To overcome the challenge of lack of skills, SMEs should attend digital marketing short courses as information technology driven marketing is unavoidable in this current century.
- SMes are also required to market products in the groups where they are the administrators especially on WhatsApp where they will have the capacity to control information, can delete misleading posts or restrict entry of competitors and or set group code of conduct for consumers.
- SMEs are also encouraged to carry out marketing research on the trends in information technology development and implement strategies that most of the target customers can access.

6. Conclusions

From the above findings, it can be concluded that information technology driven marketing is unavoidable in the marketing of groceries and in maintaining relationships to ensure effective consumer buyer behaviour monitoring. From the study many SMEs indicated use of social media as their relationship marketing tool although relationships created were not sustainable due to challenges such as lack of skills, knowledge and

internet connectivity. Major recommendations was creation of a digital marketing budget, drawing up a code of conduct for social media controlled platforms and ensuring SMEs gets digital marketing training at the same time blending traditional and digital marketing platforms. In addition prior marketing research on the effective technology based marketing platforms is also recommended before implementation.

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