

PRODUCT QUALITY STRATEGIES AND PERFORMANCE OF AUTOMOBILE DEALERS IN SOUTH- SOUTH, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated product quality strategies and performance of automobile dealers in South- South, Nigeria. The study adopted the correlational research design to examine the relationship between product quality strategies and the performance of automobile dealers in south-south, Nigeria. The population of this study consists of customers of 197 automobile dealers registered with the Ministry of Commerce and Industry in the six (6) states of South- South, Nigeria 2017/2018 edition. To extract a sample size from the entire population, a sample size determination formula by Taro Yamene was used. The researcher adopted the convenience sampling technique in selecting members of the sample. The customers' of 132 automobile dealers in

Introduction:

Automobile dealers need constant innovativeness, product leadership and the ability to continually provide its customers with satisfactory goods and services in order to enhance their chances of survival. Thus, they need a high level of integration of their strategies, actions, programs, practice, and performance. Majority of the automobile product developments are easily duplicated because of nearly identical features, hence the only distinguishing options left at the disposal of the automobile firms are price, quality and efficient

South-South, Nigeria who must have had buying relationship with the dealers for at least 15 years were accessible for the study. The structured questionnaire was adopted for the study. The questionnaire was divided into 3 sections. Section A consists of 5 items on demographic characteristics of respondents. Section B consists of 12 items which focused on marketing strategies, four questions each on each of the (3) test variables. Section C consists of 4 items which focused on the performance. All items in sections B - C were measured on a four point Likert scales of (Strongly Agree (SA) = 4 Agree (A) =3, Disagree (D) =2, to Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1. The validity of the scale adopted in this study was presented for content and construct validity. To ascertain the authenticity of the instrument, the questionnaire was submitted to the a senior lecturer in the Department of Marketing, University of Uyo, Uyo, and a business consultant. Cronbach Alpha method was used to ascertain the reliability status of the research instrument and obtained .932>.71 which showed that the instrument was highly reliable. The inferential statistics was done using Spearman Rank Correlation with Multi linear regression to test the hypotheses formulated for the study. The hypothesis was tested at 0.05 level of significance with $p < 0.05$ indicating statistical significance. The study concluded that that product quality influenced the metrics of performance of automobile dealers and recommended that automobile dealers should offer customers streams of leading-edge products with unique solutions and superior features beyond the offerings of competitors by effectively and efficiently utilizing available resources at their disposal to satisfy customers.

Keywords: *Product Quality, Automobile firms, South-south Nigeria, Customer*

Services. (Gottschalk and Keller, 2013). Therefore, automobile dealers that want to enhance performance will need to adopt strategies that will enable them to attract and retain profitable customer.

The main aim of every automobile dealer in Nigeria is to identify long term customers and satisfy their needs (Gao, 2016). Satisfied customers are

delighted and later grow to become loyal customers and further turn advocates (Sharma, 2012). The key element of competitiveness include the voice of the customer through current and future demands and the voice of the process through establishing the organizational capability to deliver customers' needs and wants (Bhatia, 2013).

According to Johri (2016) automobile dealers can justify their existence only when they are able to understand consumers' needs and wants so as to satisfy them adequately. With better understanding of consumer's perception, automobile dealers can determine actions required to meet customer's desires as to get them delighted. They can identify their own strategies and weaknesses, where they stand in comparison to their competitors, chart out the path for future progress and improvement. Customers' satisfaction measurement helps to promote increase focus on customer outcomes and stimulate improvements in the processes used within the firm (Johri, 2016).

As the wave of globalization has directly affected automobile industry and the buyer behavior in the automobile market, the study of how marketing strategies influence consumer purchase decision has assumed paramount importance in the automobile sector in Nigeria (Adefulu, 2015). It has thrown open several challenges to the automobile dealers in formulating effective marketing strategies for growth and market acceptance. It also fosters the process of understanding why a consumer make a car purchase. In the automobile sector, customers make choices of cars based on quality of the product (vehicles), convenience, excellent service, value, fuel economy, efficiency. It is imperative for automobile dealers to identify the driving force behind the purchase of car by customers and set priority in line with customer expectations and demand, and be in a better position to gain competitive edge and advantage (Bhatia, 2013).

Product quality means conformance of a product to the expectation of the customer. A product is anything that can be offered to a market for attention, acquisition, use, or consumption that might satisfy a want or a need. A quality product means different things to each consumer. It is a challenge for all firms to set their quality level high and ensure that it meets

the expectations of the target market. Quality is made up of tangible features (such that can be seen) for example, performance, appearance, strength and intangible features such as reputation and exclusivity (Kalu, 2016). However, in all circumstances a product quality should be consistent with other elements of the marketing mix.

Statement of the Problem

It is envisaged that automobile dealers operating in South-South Nigeria ought to be achieving significant success and performance in business due to the fact that the region is one of the major economic hubs in the country. Investors from both within and outside the country are always attracted to do business in the oil rich region. These companies need automobiles (cars) in their day-to-day business activities and this has given most automobile dealers reasons to stay in business.

Surprisingly, it has been observed that most automobile dealers are experiencing abysmal decline in performance in this industry; the automobile industry is not immune to instances of poor performance that characterize product and service deliveries (NBS, 2015). It may not be out of place to suspect that automobile dealers have not enshrined strategies that deliver superior performance which have resulted to the steady decline in customer satisfaction, customer patronage, positive word of mouth and loyalty expected to be experienced by dealers in the industry. Given these uncertainties, this study has a purpose to figure out the product quality strategies on the performance of automobile dealers in South-South, Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to investigate product quality and performance of automobile dealers in South- South, Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

- i. ascertain relationship between product quality and the performance of automobile dealers in South-South, Nigeria.

Research Questions

Based on the objectives of the study, the following research question was raised to guide the study.

- i. To what extent does product quality influence the performance of automobile dealers in South-South, Nigeria?

Research Hypotheses

Based on the objectives of the study, the following hypothesis was formulated.

Ho₁: There is no significant effect of product quality and the performance of automobile dealers in South-South, Nigeria.

Literature Review

Product Quality

Kotler and Armstrong (2014) posited that, a product is anything that can be offered to the market for attention, acquisition, use or consumption that might satisfy a need or want.

Product quality means conformance of a product to the expectation of the consumer (Jain, 2014). A quality product means different things to different consumers. It is a challenge to all firms to set their quality level high, and ensure that their products meets with the expectations of target market (Ebitu, 2016).

Generally speaking, quality is made up of tangible and intangible features that can be seen such as performance, appearance, strength and intangible features such as customers service, reputation and exclusivity. Product quality have a significant impact on organizational performance. In all aspects, product quality should be consistent with other elements of the marketing mix. Most often, quality product is accompanied with a premium price and price is seen as a signal in examining product quality. Morgan and Hunt (2008) observed that there is a positive relationship between price and product's quality.

Psychologically, most customers think that a high price is a function of good quality. The superiority embedded in a product determines the premium

price the company will enjoy. There are many scholarly researchers that have X-rayed that increase in product quality attracts a subsequent increase in price. Hanif (2014), posited that a premium based on pricing strategy will require a quality product to support the price tag. Also, total quality management could serve as a marketing strategy which impacts upon organizational performance.

Ebitu (2014), asserts that total quality management (TQM) is perhaps the leading management approach which firms adopt to improve their product and service quality with the aim of improving typical measures of organizational performance. He noted that consumer perception of quality does not result from an evaluation of the intrinsic quality attribute of the product such as performance, reliability and durability, but is also affected by the marketing mix strategies adopted by the company selling the product. On daily basis the market is constantly being saturated with new products and services as a result of rapid advancement in technology. This development has triggered intense competition, therefore firms must commit themselves to design, manufacture and deliver superior and unique products to the customers beyond the competitors. Successful companies stretch beyond their limits to constantly meet and exceed the desires and expectations of their actual and potential customers. To achieve this objective, the products must be novel, innovative with leading edge attributes in order to penetrate the market.

Product quality means offering customers leading-edge products and services that consistently enhance the customer's use or application of the product, thereby making their rivals' goods obsolete (Treacy and Wiersema, 1995). Treacy (2004) opined that, product leaders align their entire operating model on the company's culture, business process, management systems and technology platform in order to provide customers with superior quality of products and services.

Zineldin and Philipson (2007) stated that, product quality companies entail producing an ongoing stream of cutting edge products or services. Cutting edge products are superior, unique and new in the market, they offers customers exciting features beyond the offering of competitors. Kottler and

Armstrong (2012) proposed that product leaders are open to new ideas, relentlessly pursue new solutions, and work hard to ensure that new products are made available to the market quickly and that they serve customers who want unique state of the art products and services regardless of the cost in terms of price and inconveniences.

Achieving product quality as a generic strategy requires employees to push beyond their limits, discovering and inventing new ideas that will amaze customers and become a source of competitive and product differentiation in the industry. Product differentiators appear to favor intuitive decision making over market research on their product innovation decision making (Valos, *et al.*, 2007).

The generic of differentiation strategy involves creating a market position that is perceived as being unique industry-wise and that is sustainable over the long run (Porter, 2004). Such differentiation can be based upon design or brand image, distribution, and so forth. In particular, differentiator firms create customer value by offering high-quality products supported by good service at premium prices (Walker and Ruekerts, 1987).

Performance

Performance is central to success in today's fast moving competitive markets, and measuring organizational performance is critical to managing it effectively. Performance is a measure of how efficiently and effectively managers use, available resources to satisfy customer and achieve organizational goals. Performance increases in direct proportion to increase in efficiency and effectiveness. *Performance focuses on the measurement of the aggregate effectiveness and efficiency of the organization.* It is a recognized standard that ascertain operational efficiency and external performance of marketing activities as regards automobile dealers (Owonte, 2016).

There are different types of performance measurement. There are monetary and non-monetary organizational performance variables. The monetary variables include market share, sales volume, and profit margin, while the non-monetary include customer satisfaction, positive-word-of-

mouth, customer patronage loyalty and retention Velnampy (2013). Performance is concerned with how metrics are formed and determined to monitor market and performance trend using marketing dash boards to manage organizational performance (Halachinand Bouckart, 2005).

The goal of performance management is to achieve key outcomes and objectives to optimize individual, group or organizational performance. More specifically it focuses on measuring, managing and analyzing organizational performance to maximize effectiveness and optimize Return on Investment (ROI) of marketing. Three elements play a crucial role in managing organizational performance, these include data, analysis and metric (Hooley *et al.*, 2012).

Lebens and Euske (2006) opined that, corporate performance is a set of financial and non-financial indicators which shows the level of success and the degree of achievement of objectives and results. It is the view of many scholars that performance management and measurement systems serve as a watchdog which ensures that all concerned in the firms strive to achieve a common goal. These goals reflect in the organization's mission and strategic decisions.

In order to ascertain the performance of an organization, a set of core performance measures has to be identified even as there is a degree of consensual agreement among theorists and practitioners that problem of corporate performance measurement should be approached from both the financial and the non-financial perspectives. Some researchers (for example, Kaplan and Norton, 2010) argue that firms usually depend merely on financial measures, which are insufficient to capture the overall success factors in a firm; therefore, a combination of both objective and subjective measures of performance is considered most appropriate.

Product Quality and Performance

Companies that market leading edge products gain large benefits, because the products are great means of support to them. If the product fails they can lead to the bankruptcy of the company because it takes much time to reach a mass market. On the contrary if they get successful, they can take

the companies to the heights of success. A high price is significant for a quality product because it gives an idea that the customers place it as a value product by paying high price to buy it. In this way companies can get high profit out of it (Hanif, 2014).

Product quality is a continuous development and launching of new products and services not readily available elsewhere. Tracy and Wiersema (2004), proposed that, companies pursuing product leadership strategy continually pushed their products and services into the realms of the unknown, the untried, or the highly desirable. It is a strategic effort geared towards the invention of novel products and services that will become a trailblazer in the industry.

Product quality means offering customers leading-edge products and services that consistently enhance the customer's use or application of the product, thereby making their rivals' goods obsolete (French, 1995; Gubman, 1995; Teracy and Wiersema, 1993; Zemke, 1993). Despite scholarly investigation into this concept, there is yet no agreement on the drivers of product quality. A study by Hunt and Morgan (2011) determined that positive relationship exist between product quality and competitive advantage in Netherland.

Methodology

The researcher adopted the correlational research design to examine the relationship between product quality strategies and the performance of automobile dealers in south-south, Nigeria. This study covers the automobile dealers in the six (6) states of South-South, Nigeria; namely: Akwa Ibom State, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo and Rivers. The population of this study consists of customers of 197 automobile dealers registered with the Ministry of Commerce and Industry in the six (6) states of South- South, Nigeria 2017/2018 edition. See appendix 3 for list of automobile dealers. To extract a sample size from the entire population, a sample size determination formula by Taro Yamene was used.

This study focused oncustomers of 132 automobile dealers in the six (6) States of South-South, Nigeria. Two customers who must have had a buying

relationship with the automobile dealers for at least 15 years were selected proportionately from each of the identified dealer because of their direct involvement in purchase related issues. On the whole, information from the customers of the 132 dealers showed a total of 264 customers of automobile organizations in the six (6) States of South-South, Nigeria. The researcher adopted the convenience sampling technique in selecting members of the sample. The customers' of 132 automobile dealers in South-South, Nigeria who must have had buying relationship with the dealers for at least 15 years were accessible for the study.

The structured questionnaire was adopted for the study. The questionnaire was divided into 3 sections. Section A consists of 5 items on demographic characteristics of respondents. Section B consists of 12 items which focused on marketing strategies, four questions each on each of the (3) test variables. Section C consists of 4 items which focused on the performance. All items in sections B - C were measured on a four point Likert scales of (Strongly Agree (SA) = 4 Agree (A) =3, Disagree (D) =2, to Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1

The validity of the scale adopted in this study was presented for content and construct validity. To ascertain the authenticity of the instrument, the questionnaire was submitted to the a senior lecturer in the Department of Marketing, University of Uyo, Uyo, and a business consultant in order to ensure that the questions raised adequately represent the exact view of what it is intended to measure before the final copy of the questionnaire was administered to respondents. A pilot test was administered to selected automobile dealers outside those under study. Cronbach Alpha method was used to ascertain the reliability status of the research instrument. 264 questionnaire were administered to marketing managers and customers care managers of 132 automobile dealers in South-South, Nigeria using a test -retest method.

Data obtained from the respondents were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics such as tables, frequency, graphs, charts, percentage, mean and standard deviation. The inferential statistics was done using Spearman Rank Correlation with Multi linear regression to test the

hypotheses formulated for the study. All hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance with $p < 0.05$ indicating statistical significance. To enhance data analysis, Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, version 22.0) was used to analyze the data

Results

Research Question one: To what extent does product quality influence the performance of automobile dealers in South-South, Nigeria?

Table 2 shows the analysis and interpretation of frequencies on items of product quality as a dimension of marketing strategies.

Table 1 Product Quality as a Dimension of Marketing Strategies (n=200)

S/N	Items	Frequencies / Percentages			
		SD (1)	D (2)	A (3)	SA (4)
1	My dealer consistently provides customers with leading edge products and services not readily available elsewhere.	12	33	60	95
		6%	16.5%	30%	47.5%
		24	99	234	475
2	My dealer provides superior and novel products with exciting features.	10	31	71	85
		5%	15.5%	35.5%	47.5%
		93	93	263	440
3	My dealer gives innovative solutions to customers anywhere anytime	2	44	69	85
		1%	22%	34%	42.5%
		4	132	276	425
4	My dealer stretches beyond limit to constantly meet and exceed the desires of customers	20	44	40	96
		10%	22%	20%	48%
		40	132	133	480

Source: Research Data(2021).

Table 2 shows frequencies of product quality as a dimension of marketing strategies as presented for automobile dealer's customers studied. My dealer consistently provides customers with leading edge products and services not readily available 12(6%) for strongly disagree, 33(16.5%) as disagree, 60(30%) as agree, and 95 (47.5%) as strongly agree. My dealer provides superior and novel products with exciting features, the responses presented 10(5%) for strongly disagree, 31(15.5%), for disagree, 71(35.5%) for agree and 85(43.5%) for strongly agree. The item that concerns my dealer gives innovative solutions to customers anywhere anytime, presented 2 (1%) for strongly disagree, 44(22%) for disagree, 69 (34.5%) for agree, 85(42.5) for strongly agree. The item on my dealer stretches beyond limit to constantly meet and exceed the desires of customers gave 20(10%) for strongly disagree, 44(22%), for disagree, 40 (20%) for agree and 96(48%) for strongly agree. This implies that product quality promotes the objective of marketing strategies in the automobile sector, which is customers satisfaction and by extension long term survival in the market arena.

Performance

Table 2 shows the analysis and interpretation of frequencies on items of Performance.

Table 4.9: Performance (n=200)

S/N	Items	Frequencies/Percentages			
		SD (1)	D (2)	A (3)	SA (4)
1	My dealer's performance has been enhanced by providing customers with reliable products and service at competitive prices with minimal difficulty or inconvenience.	5	11	64	120
		2.5%	5.5%	32%	60%
		10	33	244	600
2	The performance of my dealer is directly related to excellent services offered to customers.	2	55	68	75
		1%	27.5%	34%	37.5%
		2	165	272	375
		4	41	66	89

3	My dealer delivers products and services speedily whenever and wherever they are required by customer.	2%	20.5%	33%	44.5%
		8	123	264	445
4	The quality of my dealer's products and services meets and exceeds customer's expectation.	8	31	59	102
		4%	15.5%	29.5%	51%
		16	93	224	510

Source: Research Data(2021).

Table 2 shows frequencies of performance as presented by automobile dealer's customers studied. My dealer's performance has been enhanced by providing customers with reliable products and service at competitive prices with minimal difficulty or inconvenience. 5(10%) as strongly disagree, 11 (5.5%) as disagree, 64 (32%) as agree, and 120 (60%) as strongly agree. The performance of my dealer is directly related to excellent services offered to customers. Strongly disagree presented 2(1%) for strongly disagree 55 (27.5%), for disagree, 68 (34%) for agree and 75 (37.5%) for strongly agree. The item on my dealer delivers products and services speedily whenever and wherever they are required by customer presented 4 (2%) for strongly disagree, 41(20.5%) for disagree, 66 (33%) for agree, and 89(44.5%) for strongly agree. The item on the quality of my dealer's products and service meets and exceed customer's expectation gave 8 (4%) for strongly disagree, 31(15.5%), for disagree, 55 (27.5%) for agree and 102 (51%) for strongly agree. This implies that the automobile dealers records high performance in South-South, Nigeria. This is because the automobile dealers provide their customers with products and services that carry the highest customers' value at competitive prices.

Test of Hypotheses

Decision Rule

Significant/probability value (Pv) < 0.05 (level of significance = conclude significant influence.

Significant probability value (Pv) > 0.05 (level of significant = conclude insignificant influence.

Hypothesis One

Effect of Product Quality on Performance

Ho₁: There is no significant effect of product quality on performance of automobile dealers in South-South, Nigeria.

Table 4.16: Effect of product quality on performance (N=200).

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the estimate
1	.983	.963	.963	2.6751

a. Predictors: (Constant), Product quality

b. Dependent Variable: performance

Source: *Researcher's Computation (2021).*

The sum of performance was regressed with the sum of product quality. The value of R is 0.983. The R² value of 0.963% represents the correlation between product quality and performance. It represents a very strong correlation between product quality and performance. The R² is 0.963. This means that 96% of the change in performance is spelt out by the independent variable. It shows that product quality makes a contribution of 96% to every change in performance, while 4% of the changes are not spelt out.

Since for hypothesis two, the significant is .000 which is less than 0.05; there is a significant, effect of product quality on performance.

Discussions of Findings

The findings of the study are hereunder discussed:

Relationship between Product Quality and Performance

The study revealed that 77.5% of automobile dealers consistently provide customers with leading edge products not readily available elsewhere, 83% provide superior and novel products with exciting features, 76.5% provide innovative solutions to customers anytime, anywhere. The

respondents established that offering customers streams of cutting edge products with unique features give them competitive edge over their rivals. The third hypothesis sought to determine the influence of product quality on performance using the multiple regression analysis. Statistical evidence provide that the relationship between the variables are significant and positive thus, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis and the acceptance of the alternative hypothesis. Therefore, it is possible to argue that, product quality springs up as a marketing strategy that recognize the propensity of companies to offer customers leading-edge products and services that consistently enhance the customer's use or application of the product at optimal satisfaction, thereby leading to optimal performance. This evidence is consistent with Hunt and Morgan (2011) who established a positive relationship between product leadership and competitive advantage in Netherland and Davey and Sanders (2012) who found a significant relationship between product leadership (product portfolio mix) and competitive advantage (market share growth, financial returns). This explains the fact that continuous product development and innovation will positively impact on organizational performance.

Conclusion

The study was on the product quality strategies and performance of automobile dealers in South-South, Nigeria. The results of this study showed that product quality influenced the metrics of performance of automobile dealers. The results implies that when product quality is adequately implemented and improved upon, it will enhance customers satisfaction, loyalty, retention, patronage and more specifically, long term financial performance for the automobile dealers.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, we proffer the following recommendations

- i. Automobile dealers should offer customers streams of leading-edge products with unique solutions and superior features

beyond the offerings of competitors by effectively and efficiently utilizing available resources at their disposal to satisfy customers. This strategy will enable them to push beyond limits to discover and invent new ideas that will amaze customers and become a source of competitive product differentiation in the industry.

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