

Customer Retention Practices in Micro and Small Food Agro-Processing Enterprises in Tanzania

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37745/ijbmr.2013/vol11n1111>

Published: 21st January 2023

Citation: Nnko E. and John E. (2023) Customer Retention Practices in Micro and Small Food Agro-Processing Enterprises in Tanzania, *International Journal of Business and Management Review*, Vol.11, No. 1, pp.1-11

ABSTRACT: *Customer retention practices are crucial for survival and success especially for micro and small enterprise which have limited resources to engage in continuous marketing activities for attracting new customers. This study was set to investigate the customer retention practices in micro and small food agro-processing firms. The study draws from the Customer Bonding theory examining customer retention practices from market perspective as applied in micro and small food agro-processing firms. The study employed quantitative research approach and a cross-sectional survey design. Data were collected from 302 owner-managers of food agro-processing firms in Dar es Salaam, Morogoro and Arusha. Descriptive analysis was done on the responses of customer retention practices employed by the firms. The paper demonstrates that, food agro-processing MSEs employ customer retention practices. It was established that, they do customer needs assessment, analyze competitors' activities and behaviours and they coordinate internal functions to increase customer value. Likewise, the study established that, employees of these firms portray positive behaviours towards customers and that there are commendable relationships between the firm and the suppliers of raw materials for food processing. The findings add to the existing body of literature on highly demanded knowledge on market focused customer retention practices which are mostly needed in firms operating in competitive business environment like food agro-processing. In addition, customer retention practices are highly recommended in MSEs due to their limited resources to continually recruit new customers. Notably, the investigated customer retention practices can be tested in other firms and sub-sectors with the focus of enhancing customer bonds with the business.*

KEY WORDS: customer retention practices, micro and small enterprises, agro-processing, Tanzania

INTRODUCTION

Customer retention is a strategic tool for the firms operating in a highly competitive business environment (Mishra & Mohanty, 2018). This is because, in a highly dynamic and competitive markets, customers tend to continuously shift tastes and preferences as a result of many available choices in the market. This causes customers to move from one product supplier to another testing different products and looking for superior products that match their expectations. Thus, measuring customer retention practices of a firm is of paramount important. The extant literature indicates that, about 20 % of the retained customers are likely to bring around 80 % of firm's future profitability (Rantšo, 2016; Hawkins & Hoon, 2019).

Retained customers are the key assets for ensuring continous cash flow of sales especially where they have formed strong bond and loyalty with firm's products and service (Alshurideh, 2016). Thus, a lost customer is a lost sales revenue. It has been established that, it costs five times to attract a new customer than to maintain the existing ones (Ang & Buttle, 2005), thus, maintaining customers become advantegenous especially with micro and small firms with limited resources to invest in marketing activities for building a new customer base. Basically, existing customers are more confident with firm's products and services and they tend to attact more customers through positive word of mouth and they tend to become firms's promotion agents (Abd Majid, et al., 2017). Moreover, through re-purchase behaviours and buying of variety of products from the same producers, retained customers act as a firm's buffer against competitive pressures and actions (Anandanataraj, 2019).

Customer retention practices are basic activities that are done by a firm to ensure that customers form sustainable relationships with the firm. The relationship is expected to be beneficial to both parties. With the customers, social bonds with the firms' employees increase customer confidence in the purchasing process while at the same time minimizing purchasing risks for the customers since they are familiar with firm's products, services and processes (Sweeney & Webb, 2007). Markedly, the existing customers tend to substantially influence firm prices and other marketing programmes (Mishra & Mohanty, 2018). Besides, current customers act as a benchmark for projecting future number of customers, sales revenues and profits (Hawkins & Hoon , 2019). Despite of the established importance of customer retention, litle is still known on the appropriate customers retention practices for agro-processing MSEs in Tanzania. Mostly, studies in this area have been in medium and large scale firms in service- related firms and in retails stores

The demand for food agro-processed products in Tanzania is highly dynamic due to high competition, changing food consumption style and changes in purchasing habits of customers (Mazungunye & Punt, 2021). The food agro-processing sub-sector consists of numerous firms ranges from micro, small, medium and large sized firms. On the other hand, there are number of imported agro-processed food products that compete with local produces (Mwang'onda, Mwaseba, & Juma, 2018).The high competition and continous change in customer requirements

call for suitable customer retention practices that can enhance customer attachment with firm while averting them from opting for competing products in the market. However, there is scant empirical evidence documented on the customer retention practices in agro-processing MSEs. Therefore, the current study was set to measure customer retention practices in micro and small enterprises focusing on food agro-processing firms in Tanzania.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Customer retention practices

The present study was built from the customer bonding theory which present structural bonding and social bonding to customers as firm practices that enhance customer relationship with a firm (Turnbull & Wilson, 1989). According to Turnbull and Wilson, structural bonding as are the marketing activities and practices targeted to create customer value and fill their expectations better than do competitors. Structural bonding activities are related to marketing practices related to the process of identify needs of customers, coordinate functional activities and appropriately provide for the needs with a purpose of ensuring high customer satisfaction (Kotler & Keller, 2016). On the other hand, formation of social bonding is a result of social activities and interpersonal relationships between firm's employees and customers (Turnbull & Wilson, 1989; Udayana, Farida, Lukitaningsih, Tjahjono, & Nuryakin, 2021).

Firm's interest of understanding both expressed and hidden needs of the customers through routine communications and customer contacts provide a room for involving customers in firm's decisions in designing products and services (Dursun & Kilic , 2017). Customers needs are considered the priority in the firms' operations to enhance creation of customers values and strong attachment to the business. This goes hand-in hand with the analysis of competing offers in the market to determine the available opportunities and unserved market segments (Ayakwah, Sepulveda, & Lyon, 2018). That is to say, firms that can analyse competitor's actions and behaviours, resources and marketing programmes are in a better position to provide for the required needs of the customers (Madina, 2021).

Likewise, the processes and coordination of tasks and functional areas increases efficiency which in turn affects the quality of products and services delivered to the final customers. This goes parallel with the behaviours of employees in ensuring that they deliver what is expected by the customers. Promptness, trust and caring of employees help to build positive customer experience resulting into strong attachment to the business and its products. Notably, the relationship between the producers of agro-products and the suppliers of raw material for production is of crucial importance. This is because the production of the final products required by the customers depends much on the quality of material supplied, quantity and timeliness of material delivery. That is to say, reputable business-supplier relationship has a huge role to play in ensuring that customers' expectations are met.

Empirical literature indicates that, customer retention is beneficial to customers since it improves social ties, trust and it helps to minimize customers' time to look for and try new products (Sweeney & Webb, 2007; Alshurideh, 2016). On the other hand, retained customers are likely to decrease purchasing risk because of sufficient information they have on producers processes, products, prices and the distribution schedules (Mishra & Mohanty, 2018). Thus, different customer retention evaluation factors have been used in past studies. These include the quality of services, relationship management, loyalty programmes, price, processes and distribution efficiency are regarded as customer retention practices that influence consumer repurchase and positive recommendation behaviours in both small and large scale firms (Sharmeela-Banu, Gengeswari, & Padmashantini, 2013; Mugambi & Kagiri, 2015). Similarly, knowledge of the customers, management of resources and employees' behaviour towards customers are some of the customer retention practices which have been examined in different firms (Arnold, Fang, & Palmatier, 2011).

On the other hand, such business practices of managing customer complaints, satisfying customers, responding to the needs of the customers and support from top management have been regarded as practices aimed at maintaining long term relationships with the customers (Domi, Capelleras, & Musabelliu, 2020). Thus, relative to the past studies, customer retention practices in the current study were measured as a composite of market oriented activities of a firm involving assessment of the needs of the customers, analysis of competitors, response to the needs, coordination of functional activities, employees' behavioural practices and business-supplier relational practices (Kotler & Keller, 2016; Dursun & Kilic, 2017; Sisay, 2017) as practiced in micro and small agro-processing firms.

Measurement of Customer Retention Practices

Customer retention practices of assessment of customer needs, analysis of competitors, inter-functional coordination and response to customers were measured using market-oriented (MKTOR) scale established by Narver and Slater (1990). Moreover, employees' behavioural practices were measured using a scale adopted from the study by Narteh, Agbemabiese, Kodua and Braimah (2013) while business-suppliers relational practices scale was adopted from Sisay (2017) and La Roccaa, Perna, Snehota & Ciabuschi (2019). The study employed 1-5 scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree whereas 3 was taken as mid value and all values below 3 were considered negative and all values above 3 were considered positive.

METHODS

Study settings

The study was conducted in three regions; Dar es Salaam, Morogoro and Arusha. The three regions have high concentration of food agro-processing firms in the country resulting into high movement of customers from one producer to another. This situation necessitates the use of appropriate customer retention practices. Data were collected in urban areas and town centers of the selected regions with an understanding that most agro-processing firms are found in these locations because

of the available good infrastructure and easy access to markets than in rural places (Kamuzora, 2013;Tisimia, 2014).

The study focused on firms which have been in operation for at least three years, with an understanding that, three years period is sufficient for the firm to ascertain its business practices in the market (Kiwia, Bengesi, & Ndyetabula, 2019). On the other hand, in order to avoid high diversity of responses, the study focused on MSEs with capital investment of TZS 3.5 m to TZS 50 m and 1 to 20 employees. However, in cases where information on capital and the number of employees in a firm overlapped then capital level preceded in defining the firm size. This was based from the SMEs definition by Ministry of Industry and Trade in Tanzania (MIT (2003) which indicates that where the two dimensions (capital size and number of employees) overlap, then the level of capital investment in business should be used to define the size of the firm.

Research approach and design

The study employed quantitative research approach whereby structured questionnaire were used to collect data from the respondents. The use of structured questionnaires allowed collection of objective data from widely dispersed population within a reasonable timeframe (John, Mwakalobo, & Bengesi, 2019). Besides, structured questionnaires enhanced control of alternative explanations which could introduce bias in data collection process (Adam, 2016). Moreover, the descriptive cross-sectional design was used whereby descriptive data were collected at one point in time. This design allowed a deep study of the food agro-processing MSEs. Moreover, the collection of data at one point in time allowed the control of different explanations that could arise as a result of time differences during data collection period (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2016).

Sample size and sampling procedures

Stratified sampling procedure was used to select a study sample whereby a proportionate number of food agro-processing MSEs were picked from the three regions followed with proportionate picking of agro-processing activities namely cereal milling, bakeries, fruit processing, honey processing, milk processing, peanut butter and spices processing. Based on the statistics provided by SIDO and Municipal councils in respective region, Dar es Salaam region was found to have 800 micro and small food agro-processing firms: Bakeries (70), Spices (115), Cereal Milling (280), Honey Processing (55), Fruits processing (115), Milk processing (45) and Peanut butter (120). In Morogoro region was found to have 468 firms; Milk processing (37), Cereal Milling (122), Bakeries (49), Peanut butter (63), Fruits processing (68), Spices (85) and Honey Processing (44) while in Arusha region 422 firms were identified: Cereal Milling (117), Fruits processing (62), Bakeries (48), Honey Processing (38), Peanut butter (40), Milk processing (49) and Spices (68). The study employed Yamane (1967)'s formula to calculate sample size for the study whereas a total of 323 firms were picked. A proportionate number was picked from each category of agro-processing MSEs from respective regions. This followed that, a total of 153 firms were picked from Dar es Salaam: Cereal milling 54 (10 micro, 44 small), bakeries 13 (4 micro, 9 small), fruits processing 22 (14 micro, 8 small), honey processing 10 (6 micro, 4 small), milk processing 9 (3 micro, 6 small), peanut butter 23 (6 micro, 17 small) and the last stratum was spice processing

firms whereby 22 were picked (14 micro and 8 small). Likewise, a total of 89 firms were picked from Morogoro region: 23 cereal milling (9 micro, 14 small), 9 bakeries (2 micro,7 small), 13 fruit processing MSEs (9 micro, 4 small), 9 honey processing (5 micro, 4 small), 7 milk processing (2 micro, 5 small), 12 peanut butter processing firms (5 micro,7 small) and 16 spice making firms whereby 9 were micro and 7 were small firms. Besides, a total of 81 MSEs were picked from Arusha region of which 23 were cereal milling (6 micro, 17 small), 9 bakeries (4 micro, 5 small), 12 fruit processing firms(8 micro, 4 small), 7 honey processing (2 micro, 5small), milk processing firms were 9 (3 micro, 6 small), peanut butter 8 (3 micro, 5 small) and spice processing 13 firms (8 micro and 5 small).

Data collection and analysis.

Data were collected using structured questionnaires from owner-managers of food agro-processing firms. A total of 323 questionnaires were distributed whereas 302 of them were received and processed. Descriptive analysis was done on collected data using SPSS version 21.

RESULTS

The mean values and standard deviation, kurtosis and skewness of the responses for each customer retention practices were captured and the overall values were calculated as presented herewith.

Table 1: Description analysis for Customer retention Practices

Customer retention practice	Skewness	Kurtosis	Mean	Standard Deviation
Assessment of customer needs	-1.131	4.932	4.38	0.6
Analysis of competitors	-0.656	0.85	4.16	0.68
Response to customer needs	-0.792	1.198	3.81	0.49
Inter-functional coordination practices	-0.072	0.608	3.94	0.52
Employees' behavioural practices	-0.027	-0.976	4.38	0.54
Business-supplier relational practices	-0.625	2.441	4.09	0.58

Source: Survey data 2022

The overall results indicate that, the owner- managers of micro and small agro-processing firms have a tendency to assess and find out the needs of the target customers. Customer needs assessment practice was found to have an overall mean score of 4.38. The managers were asked whether they have regular discussions with customers to identify their needs, whether they strive to understand both expressed and hidden needs of customers, they quickly get information about the changing needs of the customers and whether they conduct some discussions to find out future expectations of customers. Basically, close follow up on customers helps the firm to get their views about the business, wishes and expectations. Accordingly, Keller and Brexendorf

(2019) affirmed that, businesses that can actively spot changing needs of the customers are in a better position to build customer value and a strong brand equity in the minds of the customers.

On the same note, competitor analysis received an overall mean score of 4.16 indicating that, owner-managers strongly agree that they watch and make close follow up on the activities and behaviours of their rivals. On this construct, the respondents were required to identify whether they have a practice to monitor the product quality and prices of key competitors. Likewise, they evaluate strong and weak points and market coverage of their rivals and whether they have business forums where they meet their competitors to learn from them and help capture the available opportunities. The findings provide an implication that, firms do not work in isolation with competitive forces in the market rather they pay keen attention on every move of their rivals.

Regarding response to the needs of the customers, the item scored the overall mean of 3.8. This implies that, the agro-processing MSEs have a practice of responding to the needs of the customers. The success of a firm depends much on how efficient the coordination of activities and processes is. Thus, the inter-functional coordination received an overall mean value of 3.94 signifying that there is high coordination of functional activities within the surveyed firms. Inter-functional coordination puts emphasis on collaboration between sections and processing units with the purpose of attaining optimal outputs. According to Tomaskova (2018) well-coordinated inter-functions increase customer value. The findings show that, owners of agro-processing MSEs are in a position to integrate activities and processes. This could be highly facilitated by the smallness nature of these firms whereby activities are done under one roof in teams and there are no much silos among the sections.

Employee's behavioural practices towards customers attained an overall mean score of 4.38. The findings provide an indication that, employees practice these behaviours to a large extent and that they proactively show commitment in serving customers and responding to their needs. These practices help to build customer trust, confidence and satisfaction. Principally, customers would like to deal with the employees who can build customer confidence through sufficient knowledge of the products and services offered in the firm (Sancho, Martínez-Martínez, Jorge, & Madueño, 2018). Thus, appealing employee's behaviours can improve social ties between customers and the workers resulting into positive customer experience with the firm. Regarding business-supplier relational practices, the overall mean value of 4.09. This implies that, in the surveyed firms there are positive practices that facilitate strong relationships between the parties. Such practices as timely delivery of raw material and timely payment of suppliers and delivery of sufficient quantities of the required qualities are among the key issues which were found to be positively practiced by the food agro-processing MSEs.

Notably, the overall skewness and kurtosis values of all constructs of customer retention practices were found to lie within the acceptable ranges whereas skewness was found to lie between -0.027 to -1.131 while kurtosis was found to lie between -0.976 to 4.9. According to Kline (2005)

skewness values between -3 to + 3 are considered acceptable while kurtosis values below + 10 are acceptable.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that, food agro-processing MSEs do need assessment for customers, they analyze competitor' actions and behaviours, they highly coordinate their internal functions and activities to ensure that they positively respond to both hidden and expressed needs of the customers. On the other hand, the results indicate that, the MSEs manage employees behaviours towards customers to ensure that their employees are committed in fulfilling customer expectation and that they tend to develop positive customers experience ensuring trust and confidence with the firms. Moreover, the analyzed MSEs indicated that, they positively manage their relationship with raw material suppliers to ensure timely deliveries in the required qualities and quantities.

The results bring an indication that, customer retention practices that are market oriented are of paramount importance especially in a highly competitive business environment where customers taste and preferences change from time to time resulting into movement of customers from one producer to another fetching for the products that match their requirements. Thus, firms which need to maintain their customers should ensure that they capitalize on the described business practices and ensure that they serve their customers better than their rivals. The study adds knowledge with evaluation of customer retention practices transformed from market orientation scale (MKTOR) which is a new contribution to the existing literature.

Limitations and recommendations for further studies

The study focused on micro and small food agro-processing firms in Tanzania, the context which may limit generalizability of results in other industries and business settings due to differences in operating characteristics. Thus, future studies can be conducted in firms in other industries in either large firms or micro and small-scale firms. Besides, data were collected at one point in time, further studies can consider longitudinal study design to ascertain whether the results may change due to time differences during data collection.

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