

EFFECT OF COMMUNICATION AND COMPLAINTS HANDLING STRATEGIES ON CUSTOMER LOYALTY AT ALMASI BEVERAGES LIMITED, KENYA

***Anne Muchai Kinya**

Department of Academic, Research & Student Affairs, Faculty of Academic & Student Affairs, South Eastern Kenya University; P. O. Box 170-90200, Kitui, Kenya

Samuel K. Mutukaa

Department of Finance, Planning & Development, Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences, South Eastern Kenya University; P. O. Box 170-90200, Kitui, Kenya

Beatrice Jemaiyo

Catholic University of Eastern Africa; P. O. Box 908-30100, Eldoret, Kenya

ABSTRACT: *Competition in business has gained a whole new dimension due to global consumerism, rapidly changing consumer buying patterns and high technological innovation. Consequently, the market players have switched focus from customer attraction to customer retention than at any other time in the recent past. Communication and complaints handling has become an area of interest to scholars, marketers and organizations operating in various sectors of the economy from which customer satisfaction and loyalty can be secured. Therefore, customer complaint management and effective communication form the decisive test of organization's customer focus that eventually affects customer satisfaction and loyalty. In spite of the vast literature on the effect of communication and complaint handling strategies on loyalty, exhaustive empirical research has not been directed towards the retail setting in the FMCG industry. The purpose of the study was to determine the effects of communication and complaints-handling strategies on customer loyalty at Almasi Beverages Limited (ABL) in Kenya. The study was guided by the following research questions: What is the effect of communication on customer loyalty at ABL? What is the effect of the complaints-handling strategies on customer loyalty at ABL? A survey research design was employed and the target population was the Coca-Cola retailers who sold through the company-owned Cold Drink Equipment (CDEs) for over a period of three years. The sample size was 369 respondents. Data was collected through the use of structured questionnaires and content validity of the instruments was achieved by incorporating the views and recommendations of marketing experts who assessed the research instruments. Data collected was analysed through quantitative statistics and presented in charts, graphs and frequency tables. The study adopted chi-square to test the hypotheses. The findings established that effective communication and satisfactory complaint-handling strategies are vital in developing and nurturing healthy business relationships that subsequently lead to loyalty. The study concludes that when an effective communication and complaints-handling oriented program is implemented correctly, an organization begins to focus more on managing its customers rather than its products. This enables companies to establish strong performance that lead to long-term profits and increased competitive edge as result of stable partnerships. Evidently, organizations are confronted with complaining customers and despite the precautionary measures taken by an organization to avoid conflict with customers; problems are bound to occur in the relationship. Therefore, the study recommends that companies should focus effective communication and proper*

complaints handling in order to keep the customers delighted. One implication of this study is that companies like ABL need to have in place proper mechanisms for registering and addressing customer complaints.

KEYWORDS: effect, communication, complaints-handling, strategies, customer loyalty, Almasi beverages, Kenya

INTRODUCTION

A company's income is typically tied to two groups of customers: new and repeat customers. Studies have shown that it is substantially more cost-effective to retain the existing customers than to attract new ones. While existing customers have known and distinguished requirements that have been previously fulfilled by the organization's services or products, new and prospective customers pose a difficult task in determining their expectations and behaviours that also require additional costs (Agudze-Tordze, Buame & Narteh, 2014).

According to Christopher, Payne and Ballantyne (2008), to acquire a loyal customer base required a radical departure from the traditional business thinking. This dimension supports the creation of customer value as opposed to profit maximization and shareholder value at the focal point of a business strategy and requires radical changes in business practice. Limo, Koskei, Chenuos, Kenyoru and Tuwey (2014) also add that relationship should not end after the sales transaction is made. It should rather involve long-term customer engagement that keeps the customers satisfied after purchase, encouraging cross-purchasing, determining the customers' satisfaction levels and translating the sales process into a powerful interactive program.

Effective communication serves the role of creating strong, emotional connections with customers that may prompt progressive business, positive word-of-mouth and information from customers that creates leads and ultimately, customer loyalty. To achieve results in a marketing program, it is necessary to encourage timely feedback with customers and effectively manage customer complaints (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Communication is critical to healthy relationships; open and free dialogue requires a communication pipeline through which a company is alerted to issues before they get out of hand. Consistent, dynamic and open two-way dialogue that encourages customer feedback serves to build general trust and confidence in an organization (Gunawan & Huarng, 2015).

Conflict is defined as the pressure and disappointment between at least two social entities that arise out of the contradiction between actual and expected outcomes. Customer complaints may arise due to unmet customer expectations and perceptions on the service of goods. Conflict handling is an opportunity for the organization to exhibit ability to settle disputes and misunderstandings through its readiness to transparently talk about reasons and conceivable acceptable resolutions (Naoui & Zaiem, 2010). The process of complaint management affects how customer justice is evaluated and subsequent satisfaction and loyalty.

Loyalty is characterized as a profoundly held commitment to re-buy a preferred product or service in the future disregarding circumstantial impact and efforts in marketing having the capacity to trigger switching behaviour (Reinartz & Kumar, 2003). It is the customer's preference of a product or service over another. Loyalty is a critical intervening factor in explaining retention and is concerned with likelihood of repeat sales, creating business referrals, positive word-of-mouth and also giving references and publicity (Limo *et al.*, 2014).

The idea of loyalty frequently used in the literature integrates behavioural and attitudinal measures. It fosters a positive attitude and behaviour that leads to repurchase commitment to a particular brand and leads to less price-sensitive customers who may not easily engage a competitor as a result of cost. Customer loyalty increases profit and growth to the extent that increasing the percentage of loyal customers by a margin of 5% can improve productivity by 30% to 85%, based by the organization involved (Chu, 2009). Loyal customers are therefore assumed to be the most critical organizational assets and are assumed to be more understanding when something goes wrong.

Marketers can enact diverse loyalty states in various ways; positive word-of-mouth is often inspired by rewards whereas attitudinal loyalty can be empowered through emotive advertising. Word-of-mouth is generally used to measure loyalty and correlates to organization benefits and growth. According to Limo *et al.* (2014), word-of-mouth may be a robust indicator of loyalty and growth because once customers make referrals to a service-provider they put their reputation on the line.

The Coca-Cola Company that produces and markets carbonated soft drinks has heavily invested in relationship marketing (RM) strategies globally. These strategies include elaborate communication structures and complaint management processes. In the developing economies like Kenya, the company has integrated best practice route-to-market strategies involving the local bottlers and the customers; a strategy that is crucial to the overall efficiency and customer satisfaction. The Company's aggressive marketing campaigns depict the belief of self-expansion whereby better customer experience is achieved. Consequently, Coca-Cola customers may perceive the products not just as a brand of soda but as a friend and a part of who they are through the personalized marketing communications and campaigns that the company has adopted. The company's distributors also use direct store delivery that help them gather essential customer information and resolve complains (Patton, 2014).

Almasi Beverages Limited (ABL) is an unlisted public holding company that was incorporated in 2013 following the merger of the three Coca-Cola bottlers, namely: Rift Valley Bottlers Limited, Kisii Bottlers Limited and Mt. Kenya Bottlers Limited. ABL contributes up to 30 percent of the Coca-Cola beverages volume in the Kenyan market serving at least 25 counties. In the quest to satisfy its customers, ABL engages in one-on-one marketing by linking a specific sales representative to a designated region to communicate, sell the company's products and build relationships with customers through an elaborate route-to-market plan (ABL, 2015). Evidence shows that companies want to enhance personal connections for a thrilling shopping experience and customer communications to enhance customer loyalty (King, 2010).

Statement of the Problem

In the 21st Century, the business environment is characterized by cut-throat competition, high global consumerism, rapidly changing innovation and customer expectations that have made customer loyalty a management struggle. The soft drink industry is not an exception in striving to cope that with these hurdles; the industry situation is worsened by radical changes in consumers' tastes and preferences, health-consciousness and fitness awareness. Therefore, marketers in this industry are faced with the challenge of identifying a profitable path in this seriously altered competitive landscape.

The fierce competition, global economic crunch and agitated campaigns towards healthier lifestyles among other challenges have resulted to market inefficiencies forcing the Coca-Cola bottlers to rethink their strategies in Kenya such as the drastic measures to consolidate the previously independent bottlers ; ABL, KBL and MKBL to form ABL. Considering the benefits that can be obtained from relationship marketing has made it inevitable for ABL to develop and maintain long-term relationships with existing customers so as to secure customer loyalty. A study by Aminu (2012) on the effects of RM on customer loyalty on commercial banks in Nigeria established that relationship marketing adopted by commercial banks was beneficial since it enhanced customer loyalty. He argued that more business entities regardless of the sector have shifted focus from acquiring new customers to retaining existing customers through long-term relational goals.

Evidently, little attention has been paid on the practise of RM and its effect on customer loyalty in the soft drink industry in Kenya. Therefore, this study is aimed at addressing this gap by examining the effects of RM on customer loyalty at ABL.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was done using a survey research design. Its target population was 4732 retailers who have sold Coca-Cola products for more than three years using company-owned Cold Drink Equipment's (CDEs). The study used stratified sampling and random sampling techniques. For the study, the target population was divided into three strata according to the company's outlets classification namely: Gold, Silver and Bronze (ABL, 2018). The sample size was determined through the use of Yamane (1967) formula out of a population of 4732 retail outlets. This formula was used to determine the sample size of the study, which came to 369.

Structured questionnaires were used as the instruments for data collection. Before processing the responses, the filled questionnaires were sorted and checked for consistency and completeness. The data was then coded to allow the responses to be grouped into different categories. Data collected were analysed through descriptive statistical techniques. The descriptive analysis utilized SPSS software to compute frequencies and percentages. The data was broken down through frequencies and percentages. The data was presented in pie charts, graphs and frequency tables that demonstrated a breakdown of responses and their percentages.

RESULTS

The study sought to understand the communication effectiveness at ABL. In relation to the level of communication, the study sought to understand whether or not the respondents were aware of their outlet category. Data collected from field indicated that 37.6% of the respondents were aware of their outlet category while 62.4% of the respondents were not aware of their outlet categories. Further, data collected from field indicated that 5.3% of the respondents did not agree that there was information-sharing, 10% were neutral and 83.8% agreed that there was information-sharing in the company as shown in Table 1 below. The finding depicts that the rate at which information flows from the company to the retail outlets plays a major role in achieving sales objectives.

Table 1: Free Sharing of Information

Description	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Disagree	5	1.8
Disagree	11	4.5
Neutral	25	10.0
Agree	142	55.7
Strongly Agree	71	28.1
Total	254	100.0

Source: Field Data (2017)

The study sought to understand if the company sought customers' opinions and if customers were involved in the decision-making process. It was shown that 19.9% disagreed that they were consulted, 15.8% were neutral, 38.9% agreed and 25.3% strongly agreed that their opinions were sought when the company wanted to make adjustments as indicated in Table 2 below. This was strong indication that the company sought their customers' opinions during the major decision-making processes that affected the business. Cumulatively, 64.2% of the customers agreed that they were consulted.

Table 2: Whether Customer Opinions are sought by ABL

Description	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Disagree	28	10.9
Disagree	23	9.0
Neutral	40	15.8
Agree	99	38.9
Strongly Agree	64	25.3
Total	254	100.0

Source: Field Data (2017)

The study sought to establish the mostly widely used means of communication between the outlets and the company. The responses to this item were as shown in Table 3 below. Face-to-face approach had 44.8%, mobile phones usage was indicated at 25.8%, written forms of

communication was indicated at 9% and a mixture, i.e. utilization of mobile phones and face-to-face, was at 20.4%. The most widely used means was face-to-face communication, which was as a result of daily outlet visitations done by the sales team across the region.

Table 4: Common Mode of Communication Used by ABL

Description	Frequency	Percent
Face-to-face	114	44.8
Mobile phones	66	25.8
Written	23	9.0
Mixed	51	20.4
Total	254	100.0

Source: Field Data (2017)

The study sought to understand the level of effectiveness of the communication mode used at ABL. The data collected from field indicated that 8.1% of the respondents stated that it was ineffective, 19% were neutral on the issue, 44.3% indicated that it was effective and 28.5% indicated that it was very effective. This showed that the communication mode used by the company was effective at 72.8% as indicated in Table 5 below.

Table 5: Effectiveness of Communication Mode Used

Description	Frequency	Percent
Ineffective	21	8.1
Neutral	48	19.0
Effective	113	44.3
Very Effective	72	28.5
Total	254	100.0

Source: Field Data (2017)

In relation to communication, the study sought to understand the barriers to communication experienced between the outlets and the company. Cumulatively, 10% disagreed that the barriers were minimal, 18.1% were neutral and 71.9% agreed that the barriers were minimal as indicated in Table 6 below.

Table 6: Existence of Communication barriers with Customers

Description	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Disagree	9	3.6
Disagree	16	6.3
Neutral	46	18.1
Agree	125	49.3
Strongly Agree	58	22.7
Total	254	100.0

Source: Field Data (2017)

On the level of openness and interactiveness of the communication process at ABL, 7.2% disagreed that it was interactive, 24.4% were neutral and 68.3% agreed that the communication process is open and interactive, as shown in Table 7 below.

Table 7: Nature of the Communication Process

Description	Frequency	Percent
Disagree	18	7.2
Neutral	62	24.4
Agree	98	38.5
Strongly Agree	76	29.9
Total	254	100.0

Source: Field Data (2017)

The findings show that the company gives feedback on issues arising from the market, this was justified by 70.6% of the respondents who agreed that they received feedback, 15.8% were neutral and 13.6% disagreed that they received any feedback on issues arising from the market as indicated in the Table 8 below.

Table 8: Ability to Generate Feedback

Description	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Disagree	18	7.2
Disagree	16	6.3
Neutral	40	15.8
Agree	142	55.7
Strongly Agree	38	14.9
Total	254	100.0

Source: Field Data (2017)

On the willingness to disseminate information in a personalized manner, the study findings indicated that 10.8% disagreed, 26.2% were neutral while 62.9% agreed that the company disseminates information to outlets in a personalized manner as indicated in Figure 1 below.

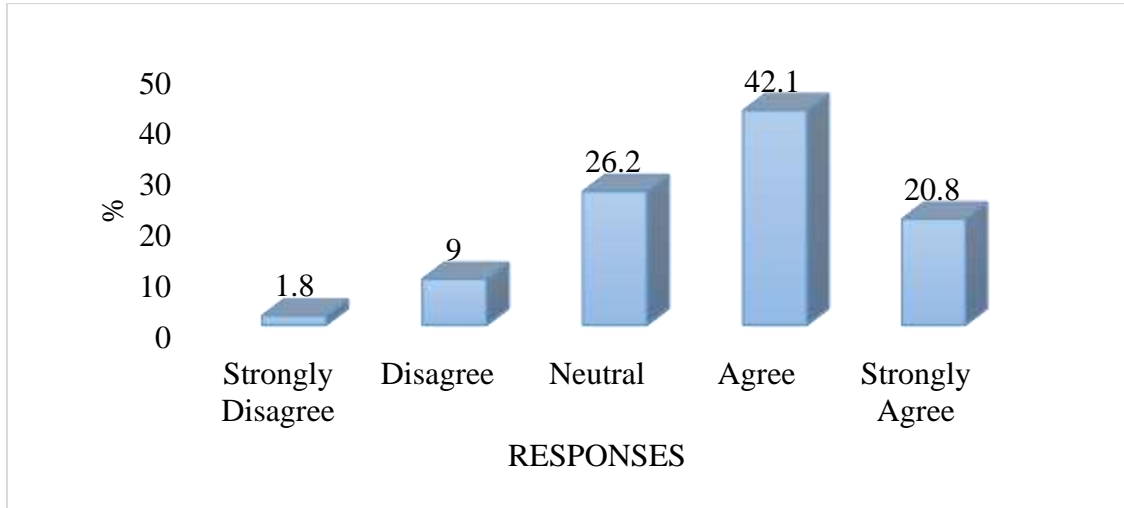


Figure 1: Ability to disseminate information in a personalized manner
 Source: Field Data (2017)

Table 9: Responsiveness of the ABL sales Representatives

Description	Frequency	Percent
Neutral	30	11.8
Agree	148	58.4
Strongly Agree	76	29.9
Total	254	100.0

Source: Field Data (2017)

On whether ABL sales representatives were responsive to the customers’ business needs, the findings showed that 11.8% of the respondents were neutral, 58.4% agreed while 29.9% strongly agreed that the company sales representatives were responsive to their business needs as shown in Table 9 above.

Table 10: Customers perceived the Company to operate with Customers’ best Interests

Description	Frequency	Percent
Neutral	30	11.8
Agree	173	68.3
Strongly Agree	51	19.9
Total	254	100.0

Source: Field Data (2017)

The research findings on whether the ABL company representatives have the customers’ best interest, 11.8% of the respondents were neutral, 68.3% agreed, while 19.9% strongly agreed to the statement as presented in Table 10 above. This implies that the retailers had trust in the company and the company employees.

Table 11: Willingness to Respond to Customer Concerns

Description	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Disagree	14	5.4
Disagree	14	5.4
Neutral	16	6.3
Agree	168	66.1
Strongly Agree	42	16.7
Total	254	100.0

Source: Field Data (2017)

The study sought to understand whether the company employees willingly responded to customer concerns and offered solutions to improve customer business performance. As indicated in Table 11 above, 10.9% disagreed, 6.3% were neutral and cumulatively 82.8% agreed to the statement. This indicates that the employees help customers resolve issues and offer suggestions to customers on how to improve their businesses.

Conflict Handling

In relation to conflict handling, the study sought to know if the respondents had ever lodged a complaint on the company's products and services offered. From the findings, 22.6% of the respondents had never lodged a complaint while 77.4% have ever lodged a complaint. The findings showed that the company had made complaining easy for customers by putting in place a complaints channel where customers can lodge their concerns.

On the nature of the complaints lodged, 13.1% indicated that customers had lodged complaints ranging from faulty coolers, delayed cooler repairs, delayed delivery, expired stocks, missing brands, non-conforming products, pricing, brand shortage, product knowledge and wrong orders, not accessing promotional materials, price changes, staff behaviour among others. These findings were as shown in Table 12 below. This indicates that complaints are somewhat inevitable and it is healthy to recognize complaints as basic and necessary parts of the overall business environment.

Table 12: Nature of the Complaints

Description	Frequency	Percent
Cooler defects	36	14.0
Lack of brands	53	20.8
Non-conforming products	33	13.1
Non resolved complaints	54	21.3
Pricing	9	3.6
Product Deliveries	45	17.6
Product Expiry	17	6.8
Product Knowledge	7	2.7
Total	254	100.0

Source: Field Data (2017)

The study sought to establish the length of time or the duration it took for the company to resolve the complaints. The results indicated that some complaints were resolved immediately. Others

were resolved 1 day, 1-2 days, 3-4 days, a week, more than a week, 3 weeks and more than a month after they were lodged. Still others were not solved at all, as shown in Figure 2 below.

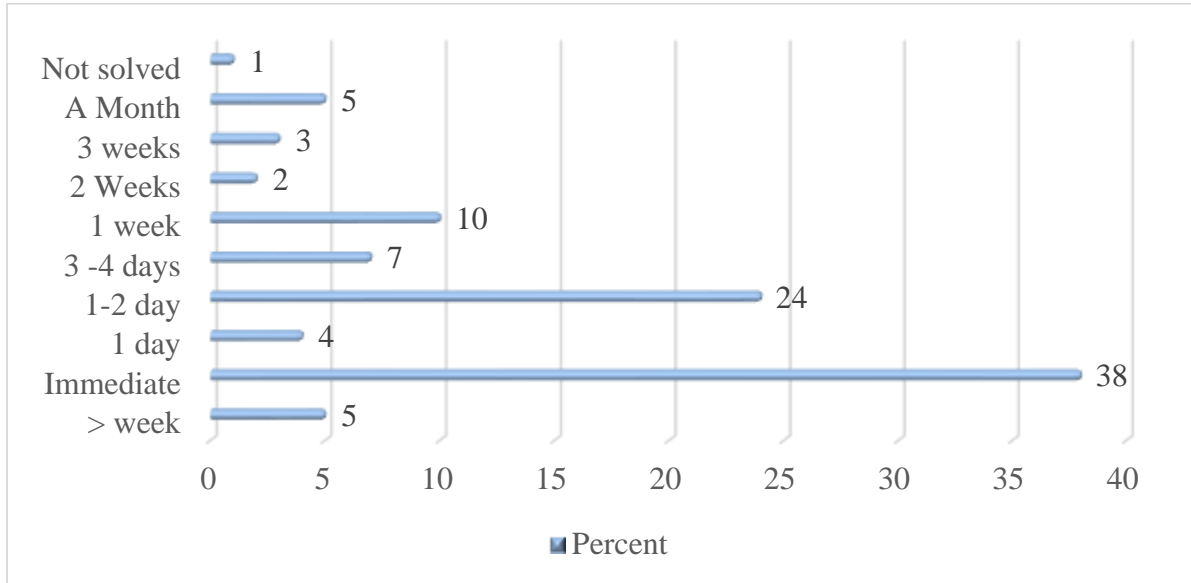


Figure 2: Duration taken to solve customer complaint

Source: Field Data (2017)

The study further sought to know whether the customers were satisfied with the complaint resolution, as indicated in Figure 3 below. 28.8% strongly agreed, 48.4% agreed that they were satisfied, 12.0% were neutral, 6.5% disagreed and 4.3% strongly disagreed that they were satisfied with how their complaints were handled. This is an indication that complaints were relatively well handled since cumulatively 77.2% agreed that they were satisfied with the way the company handled customer complaint.

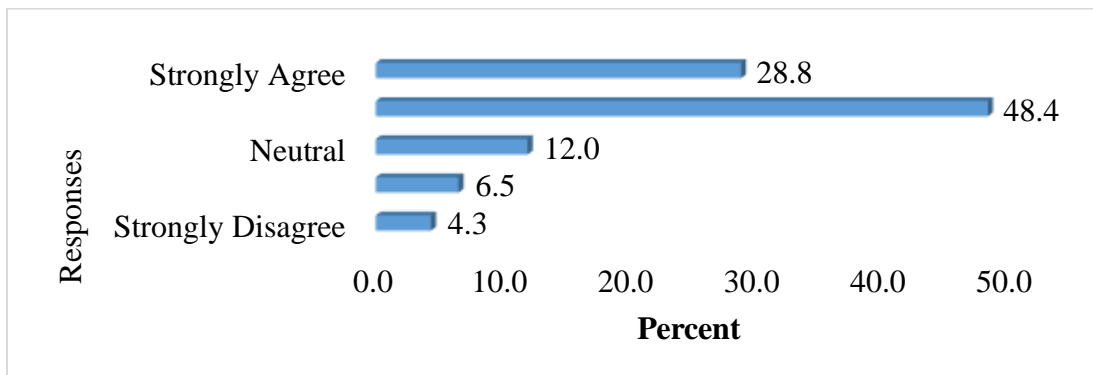


Figure 3: Satisfaction on complaint resolution

Source: Field Data (2017)

When a complaint is raised the customer is satisfied to know that it is taken seriously by the company. As shown in Figure 4 below, cumulatively 10% of the respondents disagreed that they were taken seriously, 4.5% were neutral and cumulatively 86.4% agreed that the company employees take their complaints seriously and act upon promptly.

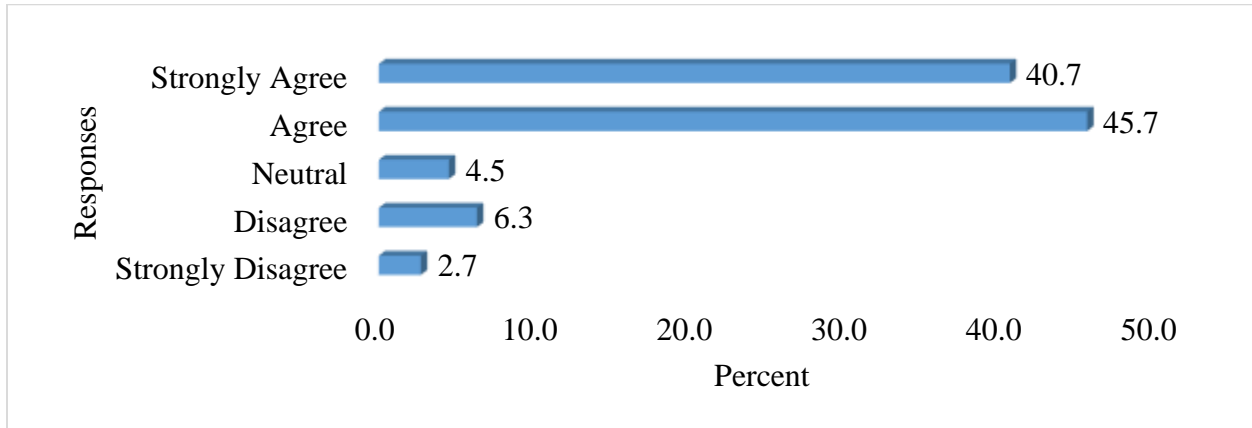


Figure 4: Whether employees take customer complaints seriously

Source: Field Data (2017)

On whether feedback on the issues under redress is given, data collected from field indicated that 1.8% strongly disagreed, 8.1% disagreed, 10% were neutral on feedback, 59.3% agreed and 20.8% strongly agreed that the company provides feedback and responds efficiently to customer queries and complaints, as shown in Figure 5 below.

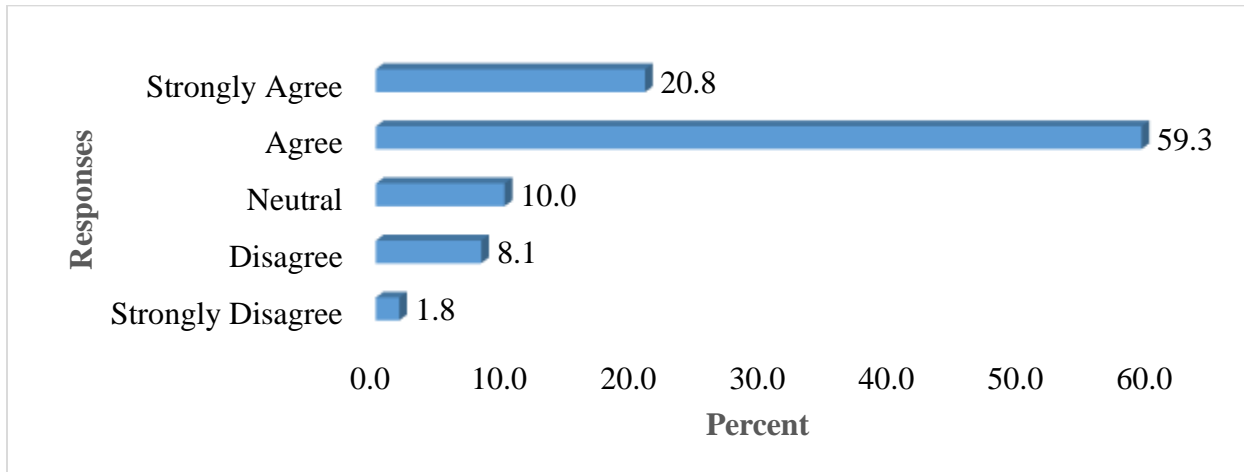


Figure 5: Efficient feedback and responses to customers

Source: Field Data (2017)

Complaints are well handled at ABL and the company ensured the problem does not recur, This was affirmed by the fact that 1.8% disagreed that problems keep recurring, 14.5% were neutral but 51% agreed and 32.1% strongly agreed that the company employees made sure that problems do not keep recurring in business relationships.

Customer Loyalty

The study sought to find out the duration which the respondents have stocked Coca-Cola products. From Table 4.16 below it is shown that 53.4% of the respondents had stocked Coca-Cola products for duration between 3 and 5 years, 24.9% had stocked Coca-Cola products between 6-10 years, 8.6% had stocked between 11-15 years and 13.1% had stocked Coca-Cola products for duration of over 16 years and above

Table 13: Duration of Time Customers have stocked Coca-Cola Products

Description	Frequency	Percent
3-5 Years	136	53.4
6-10 Years	63	24.9
11-15 Years	22	8.6
Over 16 Years	33	13.1
Total	254	100.0

Source: Field Data (2017)

In order to understand the respondents' loyalty levels, the study sought to understand whether the outlets interviewed intend to continue stocking Coca-Cola products, data collected showed that as indicated in Table 14 below that 2.7% were neutral on continuing to stock the company products while most respondents 97.3% indicated that they intend to continue stocking Coca-Cola products.

Table 14: Intention to Continue Stocking Coca-Cola Products

Description	Frequency	Percent
Neutral	7	2.7
Agree	146	57.5
Strongly agreed	101	39.8
Total	254	100.0

Source: Field Data (2017)

Table 15: Restocking Frequency

Description	Frequency	Percent
Very Often	84	38.0
Often	133	60.2
Not Often	4	1.8
Total	254	100.0

Source: Field Data (2017)

From Table 15 above, the findings indicates that 1.8% of the respondents do not restock often, 60.2% often restock while 38% restock very often Coca-Cola products. Data collected from field indicate that 5.4% of the respondents were neutral in reference to preference of coca cola products, 56.6% indicated that they preferred coca cola products and 38% indicated that Coca-Cola products are very preferable brands over that of competitors, as shown in Table 16 below.

Table 16: Preference to Competitors' Product

Description	Frequency	Percent
Neutral	14	5.4
Preferable	144	56.6
Very preferable	97	38.0
Total	254	100.0

Source: Field Data (2017)

About the likely to switch to another brand if the alternative is cheap, 19.9% indicated that it is very unlikely, 25.3% are unlikely to switch 16.3% of the respondents were neutral, 24.4% were likely to switch and 14% very likely to switch as shown in Table 17 below. This shows that cumulatively 45.2% of the respondents are not likely to switch to a cheaper brand but 38.4% of the respondents are likely to switch to brands or alternatives, which are cheaper. This indicates that the level of customer loyalty could be declining.

Table 17: Switch to Alternative Products if Cheaper

Description	Frequency	Percent
Very Unlikely	51	19.9
Unlikely	64	25.3
Neutral	41	16.3
Likely	62	24.4
Very Likely	36	14.0
Total	254	100.0

Source: Field Data (2017)

Table 18: Overall Satisfaction with Service Delivery at ABL

Description	Frequency	Percent
Dissatisfied	5	1.8
Neutral	28	10.9
Satisfied	140	55.2
Very Satisfied	82	32.1
Total	254	100.0

Source: Field Data (2017)

As indicated in Table 18 above, 1.8% of the respondents were dissatisfied, 10.9% were neutral, 55.2% were satisfied and 32.1% of the customers were very satisfied with ABL. This is a clear indication that the overall satisfaction to customers has a good rating.

Hypothesis Testing

The study adopted Chi-square to test the hypotheses. The first hypothesis stated that communication strategies do not affect customer loyalty at ABL. The results from the chi-square

test show that the significance level was 0.000, which is an indication that the communication strategy affects customer loyalty. Therefore, the study adopted the alternative hypothesis and rejected the null hypothesis. The second hypothesis stated that the customer complaint-handling strategies do not influence customer loyalty at ABL. The chi-square results further showed that the significance level at 0.001. The null hypothesis was thus rejected and the alternative was adopted. This was confirmed by the study findings, which depicted that customer complaint-handling strategies affected customer loyalty at ABL.

DISCUSSION

The study findings established that communication is a pertinent component in successful relationships with customers and subsequent loyalty. ABL provides accurate, timely and reliable information to its customers. This has enhanced trust and nurtured loyalty as well as helping to resolve conflicts in a manner that eliminates unnecessary loss and inconvenience to customers. On the same note, a study by Kinoti and Kibeh (2015) has revealed that effective communication between a consumer and a service provider influences trust and this can be reinforced by providing open and honest information on what an organization is doing about existing problems and possible measures to forestall potential ones. The study shows that there is high level of trust between the retailers and the company employees as is evident from the honest information-sharing among the retailers and the company employees.

Consistent with this study's findings is that of Keshvari and Zare (2012), who assert that trust exists if a customer views an organization to operate with high of integrity and is reliable. Customers also tend to be loyal to organizations that handle conflicts and customer complains in a satisfactory manner. Extant literature suggests that there is significant effect of customer complaints-handling on customer loyalty. Dissatisfied customers tend to complain, spread negative word-of-mouth or even cease to buy products from the company. If a customer is satisfied with the complaint handling process, then their loyalty may be reinforced (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011). Poor service recovery may also result in negative effect on an organization image and performance.

Research Implications

This study is instrumental to marketers in formulating rational strategies aimed not only at attracting but retaining customers. Most organizations in their marketing efforts attempt too many things to numerous customers. Without an intimate knowledge of one's customers, a marketer may not correctly identify their needs. Therefore, this study enhances a better understanding of communication and complaint-handling strategies and their contribution to loyalty levels at ABL.

This study not only helps marketers to simply work beyond increasing the market share of customers and retaining them in order to capture their lifetime value, but also to achieve this through the adoption of workable communication and complaint-handling strategies that may affect overall customer satisfaction and loyalty.

The study assistd organizations to identify training needs for their employees in order to equip them with customer-oriented interaction styles that may enhance perceived fairness in complaint-

handling. The employees will also be empowered to provide generous redress and fair compensation to customers through the indoctrination of shared values and norms. The training will also motivate employees' perception of role clarity and customers' perception of equity.

The findings from the study are beneficial to marketing scholars and future researchers since it adds to the existing body of knowledge and literature on communication and complaints handling strategies and their effect on customer loyalty.

CONCLUSION

The study findings show that communication effectiveness is vital not only to retaining, improving and establishing a strong relationship with customers but also to creating partnerships from it. It is helpful in building trust, showing commitment and creating a positive attitude in business relationships. As a result, effective communication prevents customers from switching to competitors' market offerings if good marketing strategies are implemented. Findings from the study show that ABL encourages dialogue with customers by communicating with them and receiving feedback.

The ABL company takes complaints raised by customers seriously. ABL also has an effective feedback system for customers. The employees also ensure that the problems do not arise. Besides, the company employees avoid conflict and misunderstanding with customers by observing best-selling practices. The company has a dedicated team for solving customer problems as they arise and has continually conducted customer satisfaction and market surveys and actively responds to them. Moreover, ABL has an established route-to-market plan that the sales representatives use in their daily interactions with customers. The company has recognized the need to manage the whole process of going to the market by focusing attention on the efficient product delivery system that would improve availability in the retail outlets. This move ensures efficiency in service delivery thereby reducing customer complains.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that communication can be improved between the company and the retailers and complaints should be seen as opportunities for quality improvement, enhancement of customer satisfaction and positive word of mouth. This is why it is necessary to handle every complaint with care and to take customer communications seriously. Companies must strive to adopt innovative information systems to constantly update and maintain a customer database that provides an opportunity to serve customers better.

The study further recommends that the company needs to create outlet awareness for customers for them to understand the segment category that they fall into to achieve the sales objectives and maintain high levels of customer loyalty. Relationship marketing is potentially a very revealing way of segmenting markets. Micro-segmentation by focusing on the most profitable customers, products and channels enable a company to achieve profitable growth capturing a more significant share of customer expenditure by building high customer loyalty.

Relationship marketing is a long-term continuous series of transactions between parties, which occur when there is trust to deal fairly, reliably and helpfully. Therefore, the study recommends that companies must focus on those attributes of trust like effective communication, honest dealings with customers, fair pricing and promotional offers, among other factors that help build confidence and encourage impartiality. The study further recommends that the soft drink companies should emphasize on developing a positive brand image to meet customers' expectation and offer more benefits to the customer. Additionally, the study recommends that to increase customer loyalty, it is essential for companies to manage their customers' price perceptions. Most retailers are interested in the profit margins of the products that companies offer to them. There is a threat of the company losing some customers to competition. There is need to change the price perceptions to discourage customers from turning to competitors who offer cheaper brands in the market.

There is also a great need for ABL to focus on their complaint handling systems and endorse measures which are valid to trace customer satisfaction and loyalty. The study recommends that the company needs to address complaint handling procedures and the duration to solve customer complaints need to be discussed with the sense of urgency. Consequently, the turnaround time for complaint resolution should be discussed and measures put in place to ensure that all the complaints are resolved. When a customer is dissatisfied with the complaint-handling procedure, the company runs a risk of losing all future revenue streams that could be generated through repeat business by the customer. The best thing a company can do to save the situation is to make it easy to complain. Listening to customers is not enough a company should respond quickly and constructively to any complaint raised.

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