BUILDING LONG-LASTING CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIPS: THE INFLUENCE OF RELATIONSHIP MARKETING ON CUSTOMER LOYALTY IN THE SOLAR POWER INDUSTRY IN EKITI STATE, NIGERIA

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Article Info

Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between relationship marketing and customer loyalty in the solar power industry in Ekiti State, Nigeria. The solar power industry is a market with intense competition, and customers demand more than a competitive price from solar power companies. Thus, it is necessary for companies to offer quality products and services that will attract and retain customers. The aim of the study is to examine how relationship marketing strategies, such as commitment, trust, and complaint handling, influence customer loyalty in the solar power industry in Ekiti. The study uses a survey design and convenience sampling method to collect data from 150 households that use solar power services providers in Ekiti. The findings show that commitment, trust, and complaint handling all have a positive impact on customer loyalty in the solar power industry. The study underscores the importance of relationship marketing in maintaining customer loyalty in the energy industry, especially in developing countries like Nigeria, where the solar power industry is still in its nascent stage.

INTRODUCTION

It is now becoming increasingly necessary for firms to develop and maintain mutually satisfying long term collaborative relationship with their customers (Ravald & Gro¨nroos, 2015). When customers get deeply in company's offerings, then relationship marketing work starts (O'Malley & Tynan, 2000). Customer's positive feelings and attitude can be promoted through quick flow of information between companies and customers that generates more satisfaction and strengthen relationships (Barnes, 1998). Energy is a homogeneous product which means that from a customer's perspective, it has almost identical features, benefits and quality. The customer cannot identify any difference between different types of energy as long as the lights work. This view forces the energy providers to compete with price and availability. Also, there are no monetary switching costs for the customer to change energy provider. This means that the customer can

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change energy provider as often as it pleases them without costing them anything. At the same time, it is ten times more expensive for companies to attract new customers than to maintain existing ones.

Therefore, energy providers have to adapt to this reality and meet other customer needs. Price is something that can change both fast and often, new energy providers can appear at any time and the market could change. Therefore, energy providers, much like any other company need to offer something more to make customers stay, to make them loyal. With high levels of both competition and transparency, customer loyalty is one of the most significant contemporary strategies to ensure long-term customers (Seyyedeh, 2011).

Nowadays, solar power sales have become more competitive and consumers are more willing to look at offers over the internet or for example by calling different solar power companies. Solar power is a difficult product to sell, and the solar power sales company must be certain that the customer knows the costs of the product and how it is produced. Price and trustworthiness are the main issues that concern the customer. The trend is definite that consumers are and also should be more conscious about their environment and the future changes in it. This results in consumers demanding power that is generated by wind power, solar energy, and other forms of renewable energy. Many large solar power companies offer multiple solar power product options to the customer, which can be a good technique to gain environmentally conscious customers. This also can maintain their satisfaction of their decision of buying their solar power from that specific company. Satisfaction is the key element in retaining customers. For many, solar power is unnoticed in daily life, but it is a necessity, and the usage is only observed from the invoices that are usually seen as negative (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner & Gremler, 2002).

Statement of the Problem

In the solar power industry, offering quality products and services is very important to create closer relationship with the entire customers. Quality of products and services has the power to create customer satisfaction. On the other hand, poor quality of services results in customer dissatisfaction, customer defection and brand switching. Several articles abound in the literature on relationship marketing and customers' loyalty. However, the authors of the past studies dwelt on different components of relationship marketing leaving trust, commitment and complaint handling unexplored. Also, the past studies on relationship marketing and customer loyalty have not been extended to solar industry, most especially in Nigeria. This might not be unconnected to the new emergence of the industry owing to the instability of power supply in the country. Thus, the study seeks to investigate the influence of relationship marketing on customers' loyalty among solar power consumers in Ado-Ekiti metropolis in order to fill the discovered vacuum in the literature.

Research Objectives

The broad objective of the study is to analyze the effect of relationship marketing on customers' loyalty among solar-power consumers in Ekiti State.

The specific objectives, however, are to:

i.   determine whether commitment has influence over customers' loyalty among solarpower consumers in Ekiti State;

ii.   determine the influence of trust on customers' loyalty among solar-power consumers in Ekiti State; and to

iii.   Investigate the effect of complaint handling on customers' loyalty among solar-power consumers in Ekiti State.

Research Hypothesis

The following null hypotheses shall be tested in the study:

i.   **H_0:** Commitment will not significantly affect solar-power customers' loyalty in Ekiti State.

ii.   **H$_0$:** Trust will not significantly affect solar-power customers' loyalty in Ekiti State.

iii.   **H$_0$:** Complaint handling has no positive impact on solar-power customers' loyalty in Ekiti State.

LITERATURE REVIEW Commitment and Customer Loyalty

Commitment is an important component of relational exchanges defined as an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship (Moorman, Zaltman & Deshpandé, 1992) that produces significant benefits for companies (Farrelly & Quester, 2003). High peak relationship bonding and long term relationship is indicated by the existence of commitment among partners (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Shamdasani & Sheth, 1995). Scanzoni (1979) revealed that commitment is the most advanced phase of partners" interdependence. In the relationship marketing literature, the concept of commitment plays a central role, as it is a major characteristic of relationship marketing models (Scanzoni, 1979). It determines the strength of a marketing relationship, and a useful construct for measuring the likelihood of customer loyalty and predicting future purchase frequency (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Commitment is at the core of all successful working relationships, and it is an essential ingredient in successful long-term relationships (Anderson & Weitz, 1989). Committed customers are characterized as partners who want enduring relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Committed customers benefit the partnering organization through both positive attitude and behavior as well as engage in positive and delighted word-of-mouth exchanges with other potential customers. Committed customers are resistant to competitors' attempts to persuade them and likely to be willing to extend their business with the brand, and to evolve their relationship with the brand over a period of time.

Trust and Customer Loyalty

Trust is the ground for relationships. Dwyer, Schurr and Oh (1987) indicated that trust is considered the foundation of strategic partnerships, and it seems to be a mediating or intermediary element in provider-customer relationships. It is considered as a key element in establishing long-term relationships with customers and in maintaining a company's market share. Findings of researches ascertain the fact that trust is one predictor of loyalty and is recognized as a major construct in modeling relationship marketing (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Veloutsou, Saren & Tzokas, 2002; Sirdeshmukh, Singh & Sabol, 2002). Trust is defined as a belief or conviction about the other party's intentions within the relationship. In the context of relationship marketing, trust is defined as the dimension of a business relationship that determines the level to which each party feels they can rely on the integrity of the promise offered by the other (Chattananon & Trimetsoontorn, 2009). In the energy context, trust is customer confidence in the quality and reliability of the services offered by the organization (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999). Trust is a highly valuable non-balance sheet asset that requires investment of considerable resources in creating. It is believed to be a result of excellent and reliable service of an organization. Trust in organizations comes from customers' positive experiences that induce them to continue with the relationship (Vesel & Zabkar, 2010). It exists when one party has confidence in another party's reliability and integrity (Hansen, Nohria & Tierney, 1999).

Customers' Complaint Handling and Customer Loyalty

Conflict, in general, is considered as a harmful, destructive experience by people, but it is more natural. Interactions of service providers with their customers contain complaint handling as an integral part. It may not be practical to achieve service performance without failure at all time; however, conflicts resolved satisfactorily may leave in its wake a happy and loyal customer, but may be minor issues if not handled carefully will result in defection.

Customers' complaint handling was described by Dwyer et al. (1987) as the firm's capability to reduce the harmful outcomes of apparent and possible conflicts. Customers' complaint handling reflects the supplier to avoid any

potential conflict, solve that particular conflict before they create problems and the ability to discuss the solution openly when the problem arises. Proper handling of conflict should be timely and proper. It poses negative impact on credibility and on trust of service provider if viewed by customer as inappropriate and slow handling of complaints (Ganesan, 1994). Organizations will benefit, if complaint is known, accepted and well managed in appropriate approach. The ability of the service provider to handle conflict well influences customer loyalty. Ndubisi and Wah (2005) found a significant relationship between customers' complaint handling and customer loyalty, indirectly through trust and perceived relationship quality. Organizations that encourage disappointed customers to complain and empower employees to remedy the situation on the spot have been shown to achieve higher revenues and greater profits (Kotler & Keller, 2006).

Empirical Review

Mohamad, Ari and Dewi (2014) examined the relationship of relational marketing tactics and customer loyalty in retail banks with customer satisfaction and customer trust as the intervening variables in India and using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to analysis the relationship, the study confirms that customer-relationship-centered marketing tactics directly influence customer loyalty.

Suddaby (2010) examined customer relationship marketing in the Nigerian telecommunication industry and its effect on customer loyalty. The research findings depict that customer retention is a major benefit that is accruable to an industry and to firms and can be achieved through better understanding of customer needs and addressing of issues. It further concludes that promotional activities and quick service delivery are the strategies adopted by players in telecommunication industry to facilitate customer loyalty.

Motaher and Nusrat (2013) explored the influence of customer relationship marketing on customer loyalty in the context of Bangladesh. This study focused on six factors such as communication, price structure, value-added service, convenience, sales-promotions and customer service. Both primary and secondary data were collected to test the pre-set hypotheses. Descriptive statistics and simple linear regression were employed to analyse the data. Result shows that five factors: communication, price structure, value-added services, convenience and customer service/care have positive correlations with customer loyalty.

Gummesson (1999) examined how customers' loyalty is influenced by their relationship with organization in New Zealand at two different levels; specific relationship between customers and the sales person; and the overall relationship customers share with the organization. The results of the study showed that the relationships that customers experience with sales people play a vital role in ensuring their long term relationship with the organization. In the study, relationships at both levels were found to impact positively on the probability of customers exhibiting behavioral loyalty.

Filip and Anghel (2009) studied the level of customer loyalty on Romanian retail banking sector. Data were collected through a five points Likert rating scales of questionnaire. A sample of two hundred and thirty (230) customers were surveyed from ten (10) mobile service providing companies. They found out that the level of trust, commitment, satisfaction and bank''s attitude towards its customers had supported the level of customer loyalty.

METHODOLOGY Research Design and Population

This study adopted a systematic survey design and the population for this study comprised all solar power consumers in Ado Ekiti Metropolis. The consumers who are the target population of the study are not determinable a priori because they are scattered all over the area covered by the study.

Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

The researcher adopted convenience method of sampling to achieve the objectives of the study. This is because the population for the study is infinite. Thus, the researcher, through convenience sampling, chose one hundred and fifty (150) households that patronize solar power services providers in Ekiti.

Method of Data Collection

Questionnaire was used to obtain responses from the respondents. The questionnaire was a closed-ended and well-structured questionnaire with a five-point Likert rating scale. The questionnaire was divided into three segments: Sections 'A, B and C' that elicit data on the variables involved.

Reliability of the Instrument

The internal consistency of the instruments was tested by administering the instruments to fifteen (15) solar power consumers outside the originally targeted population but with similar characteristics with the original study sample using Cronbach alpha co-efficient. Reliability was tested on the questionnaire duly completed by fifteen (15) consumers (respondents) who were randomly selected. These respondents were not included in the final study sample in order to control for response biasness. The instrument was measured using Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient (a) between $a = 0.00$ for non-reliability and $a = 1.00$ for perfect reliability.

Table 1: Cronbach Alpha Result

	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
Commitment	12.92	30.99	. 676	.723
Trust	12.29	32.18	.757	.747
Customers' complaint handling	12.43	33.81	.716	.811
Customer Loyalty	12.34	30.78	.716	.784

Source: Author's Computation (2022).

According to Creswell (2014), any instrument within the range of 0.70 and above shows adequate levels of internal consistency. All the items were found to be above the benchmark which signified that all the variable items were reliable.

Model Specification

A model on the effect of relationship marketing on customer loyalty was hypothesized and the values were used to develop the equation for the study as stated below:

$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 COM + \ell$

$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_2 TRT + \ell$

$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_3 CH + \ell$ Where:

COM = Commitment

TRT = Trust

CH = Complaint handling and ℓ = Error term

Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings Table 2: Analysis of Response Rate

Valid/Returned	141	94%
Invalid/Unreturned	9	6%

	Total	150	100%

Source: *Author's Fieldwork Computation, 2020.*

Table 3: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Characteristics	Category	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Gender	Male	107	76.1	76.1
	Female	34	23.9	100.0
Age	18 - 25yrs	12	8.3	8.3
	26 - 40yrs	43	30.5	38.7
	41 - 60yrs	48	33.9	72.6
	Above 60yrs	38	27.4	100.0
Highest Qualification	Primary Secondary	12	2.3	2.3
		50	35.6	37.9
	Tertiary	79	62.1	100.0
Length of Service Experience	Less than 1 yrs	28	20	94.0 96
	1 – 5 yrs	78	55	98
	6 – 15 yrs	28	20	100
	Above 15 years	7	5	

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

The frequency distribution of the respondents' demographic characteristics is presented in table 3 above. The table shows that out of the 141 respondents, 107 (76.1%) are male, while 34 (23.9%) are female. Although, the findings recorded higher number of male customers of the selected households than their female counterpart, but by implication, it can be deduced that the views being expressed in this study are representative of both male and female. Also, the table above captured the statistics on the age distribution of the respondents. From the table, majority of the respondents numbering 48 (33.9%) are within 41-60 age bracket, 43 (30.5%) within 26-40years, 38 (27.4%) were within 61 years and above, and 12 (8.3%) occupies 18 to 25 years. The finding is largely dominated by households between the age brackets of 41-60 years. By implication, this implies that the study has more mature households as respondents.

Lastly, from the table also, majority of the respondents numbering 78 (55%) have been with the solar power provider for between 1 – 5 years, 28 (20%) for those who have been with the company for between less than 1 year and 6 – 15 years while 7 (5%) have been with the firm for more than 15 years. Hence, this by implication indicates that majority of the household sampled have been with their respective solar power provider for reasonable long periods.

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis One HO₁: *Commitment will not significantly affect solar-power customers' loyalty in Ado-Ekiti metropolis*

Simple regression was used to explore the effect of relationship marketing (measured by commitment) on perceived customers' loyalty. Table 5 presents the model summary. It shows that the correlation coefficient r is 0.775 which indicates that there exists a very strong relationship between customer loyalty (dependent variable i.e. the variable being predicted) and Commitment, which is the predictor or independent variable. It is also clear

from the table that the r^2 which is the coefficient of determination is 0.600 that is, 60%. This implies that more than two-third of percentage i.e. 60 % change in customers' loyalty can be explained by the availability strong commitment while the remaining 40% is explained by other factors that are not captured in the model.

Table 5: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Beta Coefficient	Sig
1	.775a	.600	.596	.401	.601	0.000

a. Predictors: (Constant), Commitment

b. Dependent Variable: Customer Loyalty

Source: Author's Computation (2021).

Decision Rule: As depicted on the table above, 1% change in commitment would lead to 60.1% change in customer loyalty. As a result of this, the Null Hypothesis (H_{O1}) is rejected on the basis that the p-value is 0.000 which is less than 0.05 (P<0.05). Hence the alternative hypothesis is accepted, that there is significant influence of commitment on customers' loyalty in AdoEkiti metropolis. This means that when firms are committed to the course of their customers; this tends to significantly affect the loyalty of the customers.

Hypothesis Two HO₂: *Trust will not significantly affect solar-power customers' loyalty in Ado-Ekiti metropolis*
Simple regression was used to explore the effect of relationship marketing (measured by trust) on perceived customers' loyalty. Table 6 presents the model summary. It shows that the correlation coefficient r is 0.822 which indicates that there exists a very strong relationship between customers' loyalty (dependent variable i.e. the variable being predicted) and trust - which is the predictor or independent variable). It is also clear from the table that the r^2 which is the coefficient of determination is 0.675 approximately 68%. This implies that more than two-third of percentage i.e. 68% change in customers' loyalty can be explained by the existence of trust while the remaining 32% is explained by other factors that are not captured in the model.

Table 6: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Coefficient	Sig the
1	.822a	.675	.672	.290	1.166	.009

a. Predictors: (Constant), Trust,

b. Dependent Variable: Customer Loyalty

Source: Author's Computation (2021)

Decision Rule: As depicted on the table above, 1% change in trust would lead to 16.6% change in customer loyalty As a result of this, the Null Hypothesis (H_{O2}) is rejected on the basis that the p-value is 0.009 which is less than 0.05 (P<0.05). Hence the alternative hypothesis is accepted, that trust will significantly affect solar power customers' loyalty in Ado-Ekiti metropolis. This implies that trust helps significantly to encourage customers to be loyal.

Hypothesis Three HO₃: *Complaint handling has no positive impact on solar-power customers' loyalty in Ado-Ekiti metropolis*
Simple regression was used to explore the impact of relationship marketing (measured by Customers' complaint handling) on perceived customers' loyalty. Table 7 presents the model summary. It shows that the correlation

coefficient r is 0.956 which indicates that there exists a very strong relationship between customer loyalty (dependent variable i.e. the variable being predicted) and Customers' complaint handling which is the predictor or independent variable. It is also clear from the table that the r^2 which is the coefficient of determination is 0.913 approximately 91%. This implies that more than two-third of percentage i.e. 91% change in customers' loyalty can be explained by the effective handling of conflict while the remaining 9% is explained by other factors that are not captured in the model.

Table 7: Model Summary

Model R		R Square	Adjusted Square	R Std. Error of the Estimate	Coefficient	Sig
1	.956ᵃ	.913	.912	.178	.167	.000

a.   Predictors: (Constant), Customers' complaint handling
b.   Dependent Variable: Customer Loyalty

Source: Author's Computation (2021)

Decision Rule: As depicted on the table above, 1% change in Customers' complaint handling would lead to 16.7% change in customer loyalty. As a result of this, the Null Hypothesis (H_{O3}) is rejected on the basis that the p-value is 0.000 which is less than 0.05 (P<0.05). Hence the alternative hypothesis is accepted that is, Customers' complaint handling has significant effect on solar power loyalty in Ado-Ekiti metropolis.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

From the analysis and test of hypothesis one, it was evident that commitment affects customers' loyalty. An appropriate assessment of the commitment of a firm can lead to fulfillment of consumers' expectations, thus, leading to loyalty. The finding of significant relationship is consistent with extant studies by Brown and Swartz (1989), and Metters, King-Metters and Pullman (2003), who submitted that companies with high commitment are preferred and valued by customers to the ones with less commitment. Commitment is a significant differentiator and one of the powerful competitive weapons which all the product or service organizations want to possess. The results of the study also demonstrate that the higher the level of commitment shown, the higher the level of expectations and loyalty. Therefore, firms must ensure that the ultimate goal of commitment measures up with the requirements set by customers thereby resulting in customers' loyalty.

To test hypothesis II, "trust will not significantly affect solar-power customers' loyalty", regression analysis was adopted and the result revealed that the coefficient point of 1.116 suggests that there exists a moderate positive relationship between trust and customers' loyalty. In addition, the probability value of .009 further suggests that the relationship between trust and customers' loyalty is significant since alpha level of 0.05 is greater than the p-value. The conclusion therefore is that improvement in trust is a major contributor to customers' loyalty. This is evident in Loomba (1998) which found that the main objective of the trust is to keep or retain customer through trust, credibility and sense of security conveyed by the organization, and building lasting relationships that contribute to increased performance for sustainable results. Also, the study hypothesized, "Customers' complaint handling has no positive impact on solarpower customers' loyalty". The result of computation showed that the regression coefficient of 0.167 which indicates that there exists an influence of customers' complaint handling on customers' loyalty in Ado-Ekiti metropolis. In addition, the probability value of .000 further suggests that the relationship between customers' complaint handling and customer loyalty is significant since alpha level of .05 is greater than the p-value. The conclusion therefore is that improvement in Customers' complaint handling is a major contributor to customer loyalty. This is evident in the study of Duncan and Moriarty (2015) who see customers' complaint handling as a process for managing customer relationships that drives customers' loyalty.

CONCLUSION

From the study, it was deduced that relationship marketing is a process that integrates management of customer groups, management heads of an organization and managing business in an effective way. Relationship marketing acts as tool to facilitate the business and thereby improving customer relationship with the organizations. Finally, after conducting this study and validating it through various data and quantitative analysis, it can be effectively stated that relationship marketing is needed in optimizing solar power patronage among consumers in Ado-Ekiti The study therefore recommends that solar power firms need to maintain a definite strategic plan to maintain customers' trust, commitment and company's Customers' complaint handling system as well as show more care and concern when relating to their customers as all these give the consumers sense of assurance and belonging.

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